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AUTOMOBILE TRAVEL AND THE PROBLEM OF DRUNK DRIVING
by G. Donald Ferree, Jr.

For many Wisconsin residents, driving is a pleasurable activity as well as simply a means of transportation. State drivers tend to have a good impression of themselves, even as they have some doubts about particular groups, but there is evidence of concern for overall driver skills. Drunk driving is seen as a real problem which may well warrant stricter legal treatment in a variety of ways. These are among the findings of the most recent Badger Poll™, conducted by the University of Wisconsin (Madison) Survey Center which surveyed 524 randomly chosen state residents by telephone between June 8-17, inclusive. The survey was supported by private funds made available by the UW-Madison Chancellor's Office and University Communications. The Capital Times was media sponsor.

The Wisconsin public seems divided on whether driving is purely instrumental or something enjoyable in itself. Overall, just under half (48%) said that driving was a pleasure for them. Almost as many (44%) said that for them it was "just a way to get where you're going". As a group, men are somewhat more positive about driving than are women, who narrowly say it is just a way to get places.

Enthusiasm for driving is markedly higher among the youngest respondents, almost two thirds of whom call it a pleasure. Opinion is divided pretty evenly in the other groups, although the proportion volunteering that it was both, perhaps reflecting independence as well as convenience, was notably high among the oldest group. Self-described Democrats narrowly tend to say driving is instrument, both Republicans and Independents narrowly come down on the other side.

The next question offered respondents a choice -- if money were no object -- among four travel modes. Naturally, for any real trip special considerations (time, distance, cost, urgency, and so on) would come into play, but this taps a general stance on the various modes. Overall, only the private car (44%) and the airplane (43%) receive frequent mentions.

Neither gender nor partisanship differentiates residents strongly on this question. Age, however, is a different factor. Among the youngest group, cars are preferred three to two over planes. The next oldest splits evenly, while the car declines further among those between forty-five and fifty-nine. Among the oldest group, the car is once again favored, albeit less strongly than was the case for the youngest.

Generally positive views of the car do not necessarily extend to appreciation of the driving skills of others. Almost two thirds (63%) think that all in all drivers are getting worse. One in three (33%) believes they are staying about the same, and only a handful (4%) think they are getting better. Men and women are equally pessimistic. Partisanship is not a major factor either. All age groups are similar in having a majority feeling that things are worse. This is most onesided among those between forty-five and fifty-nine, with the group immediately younger least onesided, but the group-related differences are quite modest.

Of course, comparisons along dimensions other than time are also possible. Today's drivers are seen as not measuring up to those earlier, but Wisconsin drivers as a group compare favorably in the eyes of Badger State residents to those from the "Land of Lincoln" to the south. Specifically just over half (54%) say Wisconsin drivers are better than Illinois drivers. About one in three (31%) think they are the same. One in fourteen (7%) believe Illinois drivers are better. This sentiment holds across gender and partisan groups, with and Republicans (very slightly) more likely to favor Wisconsin drivers as a group. Sentiment about local superiority is strongest among the youngest, two thirds of whom think Wisconsin drivers are better than their Illinois counterparts.

The stereotype of gender differences finds only limited support from Badger Poll respondents, or at least they do not tend to voice any belief about systematic differences between the genders. Two thirds (64%) say women drivers, as a group, are about the same as men taken as a group. Moreover, those saying women are better than men (17%) is at least as large as those who feel women are worse (15%). Partisan groups are very similar. Women comparatively are judged least positively by the youngest drivers, but most positively by those immediately older. But in all age groups, by far the most commonly voiced view is that there is no real difference, and the balance is always pretty close among the one in three or so who do see a difference. Gender itself shows a pattern which is probably not entirely unsuspected. Almost two thirds of each group see no difference. Men split two to one, if they DO think the genders differ in seeing men as better. A similar breakdown, but in the opposite direction holds for women.

The vast bulk of state residents (95%) have valid licenses. When they were asked to rate themselves compared to "most people", almost half (45%) said they were better drivers, almost all the remainder (53%) called themselves about the same, leaving just a handful conceding they were worse (3%). So, the average Wisconsin driver considers himself or herself better than average.

While men and women were roughly equally likely to be licensed, and so to have been asked the question (percentages for which in the detailed listings reflect only the numbers asked the question), men had a rather more positive view of their skills than did women. Specifically, more than half (51%) of men drivers called themselves better than most which perception is shared by only a bit over one in three (38%) female drivers. The oldest age group (sixty and above) views itself with the least rose-colored glasses. Only one third of this group claims to be better than average, while the proportion hovers around one in two for other groups. Confidence about one's own driving seems modestly to rise as one moves across the partisan spectrum. In vain, however, does one look to any group for a substantial proportion willing to concede they might be worse than average.

If they view themselves, on balance, positively, Wisconsin residents are perhaps not quite so confident about the driving skills of others. Just about

eight in ten (79%) say they favor "the periodic re-testing of all drivers to make sure they are still safe to drive". Only one in five opposes this principle. Support is high across all groups examined. Women are a bit more likely to favor it than men, BOTH younger drivers and older drivers (those whose skills are most often questioned in common folklore) are at least as supportive as the middle two age groups, but the range from high to low in proportion favoring this idea in principle runs only from 76% to 85%. This is not a partisan issue, although Democrats are very modestly more onesided in support.

The overall results are similar when one focuses in on one age group, specifically those over sixty-five. Asked to contemplate a program "where drivers over a certain age -- say 65 -- had to pass a driving test to make sure they are still safe to drive", just shy of eight in ten (79%) favored it, 19% opposed it.

These figures are virtually the same as was found for the previous question, but overall results can conceal individual differences, or group patterns. Women favored age-based testing a bit more than men. Support was (quite measuredly) a bit higher among Republicans. But it is age which shows the clearest pattern. The fraction favoring re-tests of (just) older drivers, begins at more than nine in ten among the youngest. It drops as one moves up, until those sixty and over are least clearly in support, but still back the notion by two to one. For men and women, the marginal backing for each of these ideas is similar. Democrats are quite modestly more likely to favor the former, Republicans the latter, but both differences are small enough that most or all of the distinction could easily be due to the luck of the draw in who happened to be interviewed rather than systematic differences in the wider population. Younger respondents favor age-based testing a bit more. Broad-based re-testing is more popular among those sixty and older than is an age-focused program.

One particular aspect of driving is the unfortunate fact that some drivers will get behind the wheel when they have been drinking too much to be safe. Half (51%) of all respondents label "drunk driving" as being a "very serious problem" right now in Wisconsin. Adding in those who call it "somewhat serious" accounts for nine residents in every ten.

Women as a group are more likely than men to call this very serious, as are Democrats than either Independents or Republicans. Sentiment is clear across age groups that this problem is at least somewhat serious in this state, although there are some very limited fluctuations in the proportion calling it very serious. In no group, however, do more than a few define drunk driving either as "not very serious" or as "not a problem at all".

Going along with this, there appears to be some openness to tightening up the legal treatment of driving under the influence. When respondents were asked "In general, do you think the laws on drunk driving in Wisconsin are too strict, too lenient, or just about right", half (50%) said they were about right. But a substantial group (42%) felt they were too lenient, far outnumbering the relative few (6%) who called the laws now too strict.

Women as a group were at least as willing to see a tightening (that is, at least as likely to say the laws are now too lenient) as men. Democrats and Independents are similar as groups, Republicans only slightly less open to stricter laws. Both the youngest and oldest age groups are more likely to favor toughening than those in the middle; indeed, it is only among those under thirty where the largest single group says the laws are now too lenient, elsewhere the single most common answer was that the present situation is about right.

By two to one (61%-30%), Wisconsin residents say they favor a law "taking away the driver's license of anyone convicted of drunk driving". Support is higher among men than women and higher among Democrats and to a lesser extent Republicans than Independents. Backing is most evident among the youngest respondents, and weakest among those in the next age group, jumps among those forty-five to fifty-nine and then falls off again. But the smallest margin found (among men and those thirty to forty-four), still finds about a three to two backing in principle for losing one's license.

If an accident is involved, there is openness to greater sanctions. Specifically, two thirds (68%) would favor requiring "a jail sentence for anyone convicted of drunk driving that caused an accident". One if five (21%) would oppose this, small groups volunteered a qualification, such as favoring this only if there were injuries (5%) or saying it depended on the amount of jail time (3%).

Demographic differences related to gender or partisanship are quite small. When it comes to age, the most draconian are those under thirty, almost nine in ten of whom favor mandatory jail time. This falls off to about two thirds for the other groups, But the real key is that opinion is onesided among all such groups.

Both of these measures have in common that they would apply only to those convicted of drunk driving. If one speaks of trying to get drunk drivers off the road via measures which might impact others, the situation is a little less clear. For instance, reminded that some states have spot checks (defined as "where cars are stopped at random and the drivers are checked to be sure that they are not under the influence") opinion splits evenly (49% for, and 49% against) such a system here in Wisconsin.

Women are half again as likely as men to favor this. Republicans and Democrats are close to being evenly split, but Independents are against it by three to two. Youngest respondents, who were most in favor of punishment, are least in favor of spot checks, opposing the idea by about two to one. Opinion is split among the two middle age groups, and three to two in favor among those sixty and older.

Overall, opinion is also split on changing the blood alcohol threshold (from .10 to .08), which defines legal intoxication. Some 46% said they favored this change, 49% opposed it.

Women and men come down on different sides: men modestly against, women (more modestly) in favor. The three partisan groups show only small differences, and the age groups are notable for their similarity. So this issue tends to split most groups pretty evenly.

A final question, which on its face broadened the focus to "traffic laws" rather than exclusively those related to drinking and driving, asked about the fairness of police in enforcing the laws on the street. To be sure, six in ten (61%) say that the police are "fair in how they enforce the traffic laws". But one in three (33%) think they "unfairly stop some people while letting others get by", without specifying any exact pattern. A majority of all groups finds the police generally fair, but there is some difference when it comes to the size of this majority (or, looked at differently, in the size of the sceptical group). Among women, one finds more doubters than men. Republicans are especially likely to find the police fair. Scepticism is strongest (or confidence weakest) among those under thirty. As has been the case on some other questions, the distinction between this group and the next older one is

especially strong, for it is the thirty to forty-four year olds who are most believing in police fairness, followed closely by those sixty and older.

Statewide Marginals and Percentages for Key Groups

What follows is the exact question wording for each of the items referred to in the release. The first column is the percentage of the entire sample giving each response. The second and third reports the percentages for men and women separately. The fourth, fifth, and sixth columns show self-described Democrats, Independents, and Republicans. Columns seven through ten group respondents by their age group (calculated from year of birth: 18-29; 30-44; 45-59; sixty and older.) The final two columns depict those who reported they were licensed drivers in Wisconsin and (for completeness) those who did not. Interpretation of the final column must be cautious because of the low number of individuals represented, since the bulk of respondent's are licensed.

Q01. INTERVIEWER: (DO NOT ASK) Enter respondent's gender

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS				DRIVER	
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+	YES	NO
MALE	49%	100%	--%	40%	60%	54%	45%	55%	43%	52%	49%	42%
FEMALE	51	--	100	60	40	46	55	45	57	48	51	58

DRIVE01: On another subject... Would you say driving is a pleasure for you, or just a way to get where you're going?

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS				DRIVER	
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+	YES	NO
PLEASURE	48%	54%	42%	41%	50%	50%	63%	46%	47%	42%	49%	29%
JUST WAY TO GET THERE	44	38	49	50	40	43	31	49	47	41	44	41
DEPENDS (VOLUNTEERED)	3	2	3	2	4	2	2	3	3	2	3	--
BOTH (VOL.)	4	5	3	6	4	4	5	1	3	10	5	--
DON'T KNOW	2	1	2	2	2	1	--	*	1	4	*	28
REFUSED	*	--	*	--	--	--	--	--	--	*	--	2

DRIVE02: If money were no object, would you prefer to travel by bus, private car, train, or airplane?

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS				DRIVER	
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+	YES	NO
BUS	3%	1%	4%	4%	4%	2%	--%	2%	2%	6%	3%	8%
CAR	44	45	44	42	38	46	57	45	36	48	44	47
TRAIN	7	7	6	8	9	4	6	5	9	4	6	13
PLANE	43	44	43	45	44	45	37	45	50	36	44	27
OTHER (VOLUNTEERED)	2	2	2	1	3	2	--	2	1	4	2	3
DON'T KNOW	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	--	1	1	1	3
REFUSED	*	*	--	--	1	--	--	--	*	--	*	--

DRIVE08: All in all, do you think drivers are getting better, getting worse, or staying about the same?

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS				DRIVER	
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+	YES	NO
BETTER	4%	4%	4%	4%	5%	4%	4%	3%	5%	4%	--%	
WORSE	63	63	62	64	58	66	61	58	66	63	64	44
STAYING ABOUT SAME	33	33	33	32	36	29	35	38	30	32	33	52
DON'T KNOW	*	--	*	--	1	--	--	--	1	--	--	4
REFUSED	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

DRIVE09: In general, would you say Wisconsin drivers are better, worse, or about as good as Illinois drivers?

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS				DRIVER	
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+	YES	NO
WISCONSIN BETTER	54%	52%	55%	52%	49%	58%	65%	53%	52%	50%	54%	50%
WISCONSIN WORSE	7	9	6	9	8	6	10	9	6	6	8	--
SAME	31	34	29	30	32	33	24	33	35	28	31	35
DON'T KNOW	7	5	9	9	10	3	1	5	6	15	7	15
REFUSED	*	*	*	--	2	--	--	--	*	1	*	--

DRIVE10: And in general, would you say women drivers in Wisconsin as a group, are better, worse, or about as good as men drivers as a group?

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS				DRIVER	
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+	YES	NO
WOMEN BETTER	17%	11%	23%	18%	15%	15%	11%	20%	19%	16%	17%	13%
WOMEN WORSE	15	22	9	15	16	17	24	11	16	13	16	3
SAME	64	63	65	64	67	64	64	67	63	64	63	82
DON'T KNOW	2	2	3	2	--	2	--	2	1	6	2	2
REFUSED	1	2	*	1	2	2	1	1	1	2	1	--

LICEN01: Do you have a valid driver's license?

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS				DRIVER	
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+	YES	NO
YES	95%	96%	95%	96%	97%	96%	94%	98%	97%	92%	100%	--%
NO	5	4	5	5	3	4	6	2	3	8	--	100
DON'T KNOW	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
REFUSED	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

LICEN02: (IF HAVE LICENSE) Would you say you are a better driver than most people, a worse driver, or about as good?

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS				DRIVER	
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+	YES	NO
BETTER	45%	51%	38%	36%	45%	53%	48%	46%	49%	34%	45%	--%
WORSE	3	2	3	2	3	3	5	2	3	2	3	--
ABOUT AS GOOD	53	47	59	62	51	44	47	52	49	64	53	--
DON'T KNOW	*	--	*	--	1	--	--	--	--	*	*	--
REFUSED	*	*	--	*	--	--	--	--	--	1	*	--

DRINK04: How about a law that required a jail sentence for anyone convicted of drunk driving that caused an accident?

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS				DRIVER	
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+	YES	NO
FOR	68%	65%	70%	68%	64%	67%	89%	65%	63%	67%	68%	70%
AGAINST	21	23	19	18	24	26	6	22	26	20	22	4
ONLY IF INJURED (VOL)	5	5	4	9	4	2	5	5	4	4	5	4
DEPENDS HOW LONG (VOL)	3	4	2	3	1	2	--	2	3	4	2	17
DON'T KNOW	4	3	6	2	6	4	--	6	4	4	4	4
REFUSED	*	1	--	--	1	--	--	--	--	1	*	--

DRINK05: Some states have "spot checks", where cars are stopped at random and the drivers are checked to be sure that they are not under the influence. Would you be for or against such a system in Wisconsin?

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS				DRIVER	
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+	YES	NO
FOR	49%	40%	57%	51%	40%	51%	32%	49%	51%	58%	49%	59%
AGAINST	49	59	40	48	58	48	67	50	48	41	50	41
IF DRIVING SHOWS (V)	1	--	2	1	1	--	--	1	1	1	1	--
DON'T KNOW	1	1	1	--	2	1	2	1	--	*	1	--
REFUSED	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

DRINK06: Would you favor or oppose lowering the blood alcohol level for being legally drunk in Wisconsin from .10 ("point one oh") to .08 ("point oh eight")?

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS				DRIVER	
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+	YES	NO
FAVOR	46%	40%	51%	47%	48%	44%	45%	46%	46%	45%	45%	54%
OPPOSE	49	56	42	47	46	52	48	49	49	49	49	40
DON'T KNOW	5	4	7	5	5	4	7	4	5	7	5	7
REFUSED	*	*	1	1	1	--	--	--	1	--	*	--

DRINK07: In general do you think the police are fair in how they enforce the traffic laws, or do they unfairly stop some people while letting others get by?

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS				DRIVER	
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+	YES	NO
GENERALLY FAIR	61%	67%	56%	55%	56%	73%	53%	69%	58%	64%	62%	35%
NOT FAIR	33	30	35	40	38	21	48	28	33	28	32	58
DON'T KNOW	6	3	9	5	6	6	--	3	9	8	6	7
REFUSED	*	1	--	*	1	--	--	*	--	1	*	--

QD05: Generally speaking, do you consider yourself a Democrat, a Republican, an Independent, or something else?

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS				DRIVER	
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+	YES	NO
DEMOCRAT	31%	26%	37%	100%	--%	--%	39%	29%	30%	32%	31%	30%
REPUBLICAN	31	34	28	--	--	100	22	36	29	35	31	26
INDEPENDENT	20	24	15	--	100	--	16	16	24	20	20	13
OTHER	10	8	11	--	--	--	12	13	9	5	9	24
NONE	6	5	6	--	--	--	10	4	5	6	6	2
DON'T KNOW	1	1	2	--	--	--	1	2	1	1	1	--
REFUSED	2	2	2	--	--	--	--	*	3	2	2	5

QD11: In what year were you born? (ENTER FOUR-DIGIT YEAR)

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS				DRIVER	
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+	YES	NO
18-29	14%	13%	15%	18%	12%	10%	100%	--%	--%	--%	14%	18%
30-44	26	29	22	24	21	30	--	100	--	--	26	9
45-59	35	31	39	33	43	32	--	--	100	--	35	24
60 and over	24	26	23	24	24	27	--	--	--	100	23	44
DK/REFUSED	1	1	1	1	--	1	--	--	--	--	1	5

* denotes less than .5%

-- denotes 0%

HOW THE POLL WAS DONE

This BADGER POLL™ was conducted by the University of Wisconsin Survey Center as part of its ongoing program of research designed to benefit the research community and the people of Wisconsin, under the direction of G. Donald Ferree, Jr., Associate Director for Public Opinion Research of the Center. This Badger Poll™ was funded with private funds made available through the UW-Madison Chancellor's Office and University Communications. The media sponsor of the survey was the Capital Times newspaper of Madison. The BADGER POLL™ is intended to be a "poll of record" for the state, investigating matters of concern to Wisconsinites including politics, culture, and their daily lives, adhering to the highest standards of polling methodology and rigorous independence.

A total of 524 randomly selected adult residents of Wisconsin were interviewed over the telephone from June 8-17, inclusive. Telephone numbers were generated by computer in proportion to the number of adults living in each area of the state. Theoretically, results from this survey have a "margin of error" of a little over +/- 4%. This means that, had we asked every eligible adult in Wisconsin, exactly these questions at the time the survey was conducted, there is only a one in twenty chance that the answers would differ by more than that in either direction from what we report here. There could be differences because of changes in question wording, events occurring in the meantime, or any of the practical difficulties involved in taking a scientific survey. Results based on subgroups are subject to a larger "margin of error".