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SPEEDING ON WISCONSIN HIGHWAYS
by G. Donald Ferree, Jr.

Wisconsin drivers continue to have a relatively high regard for themselves compared to others. When it comes to the issue of speeding they perceive this as a moderate problem for the state, and there is little groundswell for treating speeding more seriously, nor all that much optimism that slowing traffic would substantially increase the safety of the state's highways. These are among the findings of the most recent Badger Poll™, conducted by the University of Wisconsin Survey Center, which interviewed 514 randomly chosen state residents between January 7 and 15th inclusive.

The vast bulk of Wisconsin residents (95%) say they have a current driver's license. As would be expected, this proportion is slightly lower among those sixty and older, and those under thirty. Less foreseeably perhaps, claiming to hold a driver's license is a bit less universal among women than men.

If one asks respondents with licenses to compare their driving skills to those of "most people", half (50%) claim to be better drivers than most. About as many (48%) see themselves as typical, and only a handful (some 2%) admit to being worse drivers than most in their own estimation. (When this question was asked in June 2002, results were quite similar, with 45% then calling themselves better than most, 53% about the same, and 3% worse).

Six men out of ten consider themselves better drivers than average. Among women, the comparable figure is four in ten, although in neither group does a substantial proportion think of themselves as worse. The three younger age groups (eighteen to twenty-nine, thirty to forty-four, forty-five to fifty-nine) show very similar profiles to one another. Those sixty or older are a bit less rosy in self assessment in absolute terms, with four in ten claiming to be above average. Self-described Independents have the highest praise for their own driving, Republicans next, and Democrats least, although, since the proportion saying they are above average ranges from six in ten to more than four in ten, all groups are "optimistic".

Respondents were also asked to characterize themselves in terms of how fast they drive on freeways. Here, two thirds (67%) say they tend to drive about the same speed as most. Those who see themselves as atypical break about two to one (20%-11%) to saying they drive SLOWER than most others. Those who consider themselves better drivers do not differ much from the overall population (67% say they are typical in speed, 8% faster than most, 23% slower).

As groups, men and women differ scarcely at all. The proportion seeing themselves as typical is a bit higher among those sixty and older than among the other age groups. The "balance", however, if respondents see themselves as distinct from "most drivers" shifts some as one moves up the first three categories, beginning with a tendency to see oneself as a faster driver, moving to rough balance, and then becoming more likely to say one drives slower than most people. ,pp Only one driver in six (16%) admits to having gotten a speeding ticket in Wisconsin within the past five years. Those calling themselves better drivers once again do not differ much from the population at large -- 14% of this group admit to a relatively recent ticket. Three quarters (78%) of those who reported a ticket said they felt they deserved it. Granted the small numbers encountered here (one is speaking about three fourths of one sixth of the overall sample, or about 45 people), the small fluctuations from group to group show little evidence of any clear systematic differences among them in the population. Once again, thinking of oneself as a better driver than average did NOT relate to clear distinctions on this item, three quarters of this group felt they deserved a ticket, having gotten one.

A short series of questions were put to all respondents, regardless of whether or not they claimed to have driver's licenses. To begin with, two thirds of state residents felt that speeding is either a very serious problem (26%) or somewhat serious problem (40%) right now in Wisconsin. This contrasts with the roughly one in three who afford it a lower importance (27% not very serious, 7% not serious at all). (Those calling themselves better drivers than average were essentially identical in profile to the population overall: 24% very serious; 42% somewhat so; 26% not very serious; 8% not serious at all).

Men and women as groups were quite similar to one another. Age, however, tells a different story, with the proportion labeling speeding at least as somewhat serious starting out at under half (44%) among the youngest group, becoming a majority among the next, falling just under three in four, and just under nine in ten among the two older groups. This is not an issue that divides respondents on self-described partisan lines.

While there is a sense that speeding is a problem, this does not necessarily translate into any clear mandate for policy change. Indeed, when respondents were asked to characterize the present Wisconsin laws on speeding, three in four (75%) said they were just about right. There was only a very modest edge (15%-9%) in terms of feeling existing laws were too lenient as opposed to too strict. ("Better drivers" look almost exactly like respondents in general on this item too, 75% calling the laws about right, 15% too lenient, and 10% too strict.)

Women were very slightly less likely to voice contentment and a bit less evenly divided on the direction they would change the laws than were men. Partisan differences are hard to come by. While all age groups tend to agree (by proportions ranging only from 71% to 78%) that the present legal situation is appropriate, there is some modest distinction when it comes to what direction, if any, the law should be modified. Younger groups were more likely to feel the present law was too strict if anything, while the opposite (subject to the fact that relatively few complain in either direction) was true for older respondents.

For many laws, a distinction must be drawn between what is on the books and what is actually enforced. Just over six in ten said "enforcement of the laws that are on the books" was just about right. The one in three who had qualms broke a bit more than two to one overall in the direction of finding enforcement too lenient. (It will probably be little surprise that self-described "better

drivers" are once again almost indistinguishable from respondents in general, differing by no more than a point or so for any category: 8% too strict, 24% too lenient, 62% about right).

Group patterns parallel those earlier noted. Men and women are strikingly similar in their views of enforcement. This holds as well for Democrats and Republicans, albeit Independents are very slightly more likely to be happy with existing enforcement, and also a bit more likely on balance to hope for more strict enforcement, if they are critical at all.

One reason for the lack of a groundswell for doing much more either with statutory provisions or enforcement may come from the fact that there is not too much which residents think would be gained. Specifically, "if the average speed on Wisconsin highways was brought closer to the official 65 MPH speed limit", only one in eight (12%) felt that would make the highways "a lot" safer. Another one in four (25%) felt that it would make them "somewhat safer", and six in ten (61%) expected it "would not make much difference at all". ("Better drivers" were no more confident of a substantial impact than respondents overall: 13% a lot safer; 23% somewhat safer; 62% not much difference).

Men and women as groups agree quite closely. Partisanship makes little or no difference. Once again, however, age distinctions seem more substantial. As one moves up the age ladder, the proportion expecting no difference falls (from three in four to four in ten at the opposite ends of the spectrum, with the middle two groups quite similar to one another). Correspondingly the proportion expecting things to get a lot safer if traffic were on average slowed to the official limit increases from a handful (fewer than one in twenty among the youngest) to one in four among those sixty and older. This is still a measured impact, but this item is one more where there seems an growing concern with increasing age.

The first two of these speeding items were asked, with a reference to drunk driving, on the June 2002 Badger Poll™. Comparing the results makes clear that driving too fast pales relative to drunk driving in importance in the view of Wisconsinites. Specifically, the June survey found half of all respondent (51%) labeling drunk driving a very serious problem, twice as many as chose the same label for speeding. While two thirds now call speeding at least a somewhat serious problem, nine in ten applied this description to drunk driving last summer.

A consistent result was found for reaction to the laws on the books. Last June, when the focus was the laws on drunk driving, to be sure, half felt existing legislation was about right (lower than the current three in four for speeding laws). But those who voiced discontent broke rather more clearly as well. Just over four in ten (42%) in June said that existing laws on driving drunk were "too lenient", about three times as many as now take this position about speeding. Moreover, the group (6%) which felt present laws on that subject were too strict is smaller absolutely than the corresponding group on speeding, and relatively represents a smaller proportion of those who are discontent. Put another way, if respondents favored a change in the drunk driving laws, they were seven times as likely to think they should be made more strict when it came to drunk driving, but less than twice as likely to take this position when it came to speeding. Overall then, while both are viewed with some degree of seriousness, the results from this survey suggest that concern about speeding is rather less acute than was the case for drunk driving.

Comparison of January 2003 and June 2002

	JAN	JUNE
Have a valid license		
YES	95%	95%
NO	5	5
DON'T KNOW	--	--
REFUSED	--	--
Comparing self to most drivers		
BETTER	50%	45%
WORSE	2	3
ABOUT AS GOOD	48	53
DON'T KNOW	*	*
REFUSED	--	*
Seriousness of problem*		
VERY SERIOUS	26%	51%
SOMEWHAT SERIOUS	40	39
NOT VERY SERIOUS	27	8
NOT A PROBLEM AT ALL	7	2
DON'T KNOW	*	2
REFUSED	--	--
View of laws on books*		
TOO STRICT	9%	6%
TOO LENIENT	15	42
JUST ABOUT RIGHT	75	50
DON'T KNOW	1	2
REFUSED	--	--

*In June 2002, the "problem" identified was drunk driving, in January 2003 it was speeding

Statewide Marginals and Percentages for Key Groups

What follows is the exact question wording for each of the items referred to in the release. All results shown are for the basic sample of state residents. 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 age.

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

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
MALE	49%	100%	--%	43%	58%	55%	38%	52%	56%	44%
FEMALE	51	--	100	57	42	45	62	48	44	56

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

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
Democrat	30%	26%	34%	100%	--%	--%	34%	26%	35%	26%
Republican	26	29	23	--	--	100	19	28	23	32
Independent	24	29	20	--	100	--	22	24	25	26
Other	13	11	14	--	--	--	23	11	14	5
None	3	3	3	--	--	--	--	7	1	5
DON'T KNOW	2	*	3	--	--	--	1	4	*	1
REFUSED	3	1	4	--	--	--	2	2	2	5

QD11. In what year were you born? (ENTER FOUR-DIGIT YEAR) (Calculated and grouped as below)

	TOT	GENDER		PARTISANSHIP			AGE IN YEARS			
		M	F	DEM	IND	REP	<30	<45	<60	60+
18-29	18%	14%	21%	20%	16%	13%	100%	--%	--%	--%
30-44	26	28	25	22	25	28	--	100	--	--
45-59	32	37	28	38	33	29	--	--	100	--
60 and over	23	21	25	20	24	28	--	--	--	100
DK/REFUSED	2	1	2	1	2	2	--	--	--	--

* 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. The media sponsors of the survey are the (Madison) Capital Times, and the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel. 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 514 randomly chosen state residents were interviewed for this survey by telephone between January 7 and 15th, 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 resident 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".