Advancing State-Level Survey Research:
Challenges, Innovations, and Pathways Forward

Summary of the AAPOR State Research Idea Group

Conducted May 12, 2026, at the 81st Annual National Conference of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR)

July 13, 2026

Prepared by:

Susan Sherr, PhD, Executive Vice President, Health Policy Division at SSRS
Director of the SSRS Center for Innovation in State Research (SCISR)

Kristen Conrad, Senior Vice President, Policy & Polling Division at SSRS
Associate Director of the SSRS Center for Innovation in State Research (SCISR)

Arina Goyle, PhD, Research Methodologist, Health Policy Division at SSRS
Methodologist of the SSRS Center for Innovation in State Research (SCISR)

Disclaimer: This document was prepared independently by the authors and reflects their interpretation of discussions and ideas generated through the State Research Idea Group. It has not been developed, reviewed, approved, or endorsed by the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR). The views and recommendations expressed herein are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of AAPOR.

Table of Contents

Introduction **1**
The Challenges Facing the State Research Landscape **2**
Funding 2
Decline of Traditional Infrastructure 2
Reaching Rural and Underrepresented Populations 3
Declining Response Rates and Rising Costs 3
Institutional and Bureaucratic Constraints 3
Methodological Approaches in State Research **3**
Use of Administrative and Auxiliary Data 3
Non-Probability Panels 4
Probability-Based Panels 4
Mixed-Mode Data Collection 4
State-Level Panels: Structure and Operations **5**
Panel Development Models 5
Panel Management and Potential Funding 5
Panel Size and Composition 6
Panel Maintenance 6
Models for Using a State Panel: Omnibus 7
Considerations for State Panel Viability **7**
Funding and Sustainability Models 7
Collaboration and Partnerships 7
Media as Strategic Partners 8
The Power of Marketing 8
Need for a Centralized Knowledge Hub 9
Conclusion **9**

Introduction

State-level survey research occupies a critical and evolving space within the broader research ecosystem. It serves diverse stakeholders—including state government agencies, academic institutions, private firms, advocacy organizations, and media—each with distinct goals, constraints, and expectations. With access to federal data infrastructure diminishing, state research can play an even more crucial role in providing information about public opinion, behavior, and attitudes among residents of a particular state, region, or local area.

At the same time, mounting challenges like low response rates and increased costs impact state researchers just like they do for all levels of public opinion research. To explore the state-level and sub-state-level research landscape and consider concrete steps to support and promote this community in its work, several members of the American Association for Opinion Research (AAPOR) community came together at the 81st national AAPOR conference on May 12, 2026, in Los Angeles, CA in a State Research Idea Group designed to:

- Understand needs for research at the state level
- Explore what entities conduct state-level research
- Enlighten one another about how practitioners, academics, and other interested parties are approaching state-level research
- Determine what survey design and data collection options are currently available for state-level research
- Examine the challenges confronting state-level research and researchers
- Brainstorm possible solutions to these research challenges

This report summarizes insights from the 2026 AAPOR conference Idea Group. The discussion brought together 19 individuals involved in state-based research from private, governmental, media, and educational institutions to identify best practices, explore emerging methodologies, connect researchers to existing resources, and generate actionable recommendations. In sharing the results of the conversation with the broader research community, we hope to inform a more sustainable, rigorous, and collaborative future for state-level data collection.

The Challenges Facing the State Research Landscape

The community of researchers at the state level is diverse and includes state government agencies, academic survey research centers, faculty members, private research firms, media organizations, election pollsters, as well as numerous nonprofits and advocacy groups.

While the scope of research conducted at the state level certainly produces a range of goals and challenges across interested parties, the group members agreed that, where possible, they want to strive for the highest quality data. With each entity's individual goals in mind, there are common challenges faced across these sectors in conducting high-quality state research.

Funding

The level of funding needed to conduct probability-based surveys of state populations that adequately represent distinct regions and subpopulations is beyond the scope of what many researchers and organizations can afford. Even with well-funded studies, increasing costs and declining response rates can make achieving desired targets challenging. In some cases, especially for regional research, researchers consider Address-Based Sampling (ABS) the best method for reaching respondents in a probabilistic way, but it can be prohibitively expensive.

The availability of somewhat lower-cost probability panels of the type that exist at the national level is inconsistent across states. Where they do exist, they are not always of sufficient size to fulfill research objectives for interviewing underrepresented populations and covering specific areas within a state. Furthermore, when panels are established, organizations can be challenged to sustain them and provide adequate survey opportunities for panel members without a stable funding source.

While these challenges can seem daunting, the Idea Group discussion suggested that opportunities for collaboration – such as multiple funders for research with a collective goal – are under-explored and that possibilities for supporting such research may exist but require centralized information and communication to bring potential coalitions together.

Decline of Traditional Infrastructure

Participants reported that there has been a decline in the infrastructure that once supported high-quality survey research in many states. The closing of numerous academic survey centers that focused on research for their local populations has negatively impacted the potential for state-level and regional research. The robust networks of university-based polling organizations that existed several decades ago have diminished due to reduced funding, shifts in methodology (e.g., away from telephone), and lack of institutional support.
This has led to gaps in coverage of certain geographies as well as a reduction in collaboration among researchers doing similar work in different states.

Reaching Rural and Underrepresented Populations

Even with the existence of state panels and new methodologies like texting cell phones, it is still very difficult to reach rural, elderly, and underserved populations. Obstacles to connecting with these populations include limited internet access, lower participation in digital modes, and geographic dispersion. Address-based samples and mail outreach, while potentially effective for these groups, are costly and logistically complex.

Declining Response Rates and Rising Costs

As in all facets of public-opinion research, declining response rates across all modes makes the already difficult work of collecting data at the state level even more challenging. Costs per complete continue to go up, while there is a greater need for complex statistical work in modeling and weighting and a constant pressure to turn to lower-cost alternatives by stakeholders.

Institutional and Bureaucratic Constraints

Although consortia and collaborations that include academic and government institutions appear to hold promise, rules and regulations in these environments can create additional barriers such as:

- IRB processes that take too long and may reduce flexibility, even though they can be managed with expertise
- Lack of marketing and sales capacity within nonprofit and governmental organizations
- Limited staffing and infrastructure

Methodological Approaches in State Research

Use of Administrative and Auxiliary Data

A number of methods for making state-level data collection more efficient and cost-effective while maintaining high standards for research quality emerged in the Idea Group discussion.

- **RBS (Registration Based Sampling):** One potential sample frame that can be used is a registration-based sample or voter files. These files provide access to registered voters and contain detailed contact information. This sample can be used for modeling and other sampling efficiencies when the desired population is registered voters.
- **Demographic Data Appending:** Appending demographic and behavioral data to address-based or telephone sample can also provide more efficient sampling for a statewide study where specific demographics within the state are of interest.
- **State Administrative Datasets:** Depending on the research topic and access, state administrative datasets can be incorporated into a sampling plan.

Non-Probability Panels

While widely used due to cost advantages, participants generally did not favor non-probability panels as an exclusive data collection method.

There are considerable quality concerns around non-probability panels, with representation of the population being only one – i.e., that these panels have questionable "representativeness". The increasing infiltration of bots into the samples and other types of fraud result in serious reservations about these sample sources. There is also limited transparency from many of the panel vendors and a lack of data validation.

Nonetheless, there is increasing reliance on non-probability resources due to lack of funding in all sectors as the "affordable" means of obtaining data about the populations of interest.

Options for using non-probability samples as supplements for larger probability samples is seen as a potential compromise between cost and quality.

Probability-Based Panels

The recruiting and utilization of probability panels became a central focus of the conversation, with emphasis on how rigorous state-level research can be carried out within reasonable cost parameters. There were several representatives in the group who either manage or use state panels who provided examples of the range of structures where this can work and the advantages they provide.

State probability panels have the advantage of using address-based sampling (ABS), RDD, voter files, or other probabilistic frames to recruit panelists. They also provide the opportunity for repeated data collection over time with the same respondents and superior data quality and representativeness relative to non-probability panel alternatives.

It also became clear that knowledge about existing state panels needs to be more effectively disseminated so that researchers within states know that this resource is available to them. While the existence of state panels may not solve every problem, particularly where specific subpopulations are of interest, even the use of some relevant panel sample can help address budgetary concerns. In addition to adding tools to the researchers' toolkit, more widespread knowledge about state panel availability has the potential to both help sustain these panels and potentially allow them to expand and diversify.

Mixed-Mode Data Collection

Of course, panels that offer exclusively online interviewing and/or with limited panel size will not fully meet the needs of all researchers. Given diverse populations and differences in

technological access, mixed-mode designs are still believed to be essential for a range of studies. Dual- or multi-mode approaches were consistently identified as important for improving coverage—especially for rural, older, and other traditionally underrepresented populations. Interviewing and recruiting modes discussed as being important components of participants' research methodologies included web-based instruments (including text-to-web), mail questionnaires (especially for rural or older populations), phone (still necessary to reach certain groups), and, while less common, in-person interviewing.

And these methods can also be used as part of panel recruitment to improve representation.

Participants also discussed the potential to build panels off of existing, funded, methodologically rigorous studies. This reduces start-up costs and targets already responsive individuals for recruitment. Respondents can be asked to join a panel at the conclusion of their interview and rerouted into a recruitment survey or recontacted at a later time. For this to be effective, it is key for resources to exist to manage and maintain the panel after initial recruitment.

State-Level Panels: Structure and Operations

As a deeper dive into the possibilities around state-level panels – particularly probability-based panels, participants discussed the opportunities and challenges with state-level panels and then split into three groups to brainstorm more deeply about panel creation, maintenance, funding, and stakeholders.

Panel Development Models

In considering whether and how to build a state panel, participants discussed a number of potential recruitment methods including ABS mailings, text-based outreach using phone samples and TCPA-compliant manual texting and leveraging existing surveys to recruit probability samples.

Additionally, those managing state panels should have state-level and sub-state/local expertise and understanding of the people in that state, including understanding community dynamics, especially when it comes to engaging indigenous, minority, and other specialized populations.

Panel Management and Potential Funding

Several options for panel management are available depending on interest and commitment of stakeholders within the state. These include:

- Academic-led initiatives through university survey centers or other academic centers, institutes, and departments
- Public-private partnerships (e.g., academic or foundation and vendor collaboration)

- Vendor-led with academic collaboration
- Foundation or grant-funded initiatives

However, while funding and management partnerships may be possible, those exploring these possibilities should be mindful of considerations, such as the need for some organizations and vendors to maintain firm non-partisan portfolios even when there is potential support and interest from partisan firms or groups.

Panel Size and Composition

Panel sizes can vary widely, but state panels tend to be quite a bit smaller than national panels. This makes sense in terms of resources and utilization but can be limiting in reaching very low incidence groups within the state and/or traditionally underrepresented populations.

The group discussed ideal numbers of panelists depending on state size with some suggestions for what might be reasonable guidelines for ranges:

- Small states[1]: 1,500–3,000 panelists
- Medium states: 5,000–10,000 panelists
- Large states: potentially 10,000+ panelists

The need for larger sample sizes also depends on the relative homogeneity or heterogeneity of a particular state. Adequacy of size and scope of a panel may depend on the need for population diversity, the overall analytical goals of panel users, and the need for substate estimates by researchers of specific geographies or demographic groups.

Panel Maintenance

A key challenge of sustaining a panel once recruited is having sufficient numbers of surveys to engage panelists and counter attrition. This requires a management team dedicated to regular engagement (e.g., monthly or bi-monthly surveys), topic diversity, and careful management of contact frequency.

It also requires commitment to finding users for the panel when the initial recruiting organization does not have sufficient work. These challenges are not unique to state panels but getting the word out about panel availability in a state environment may be more difficult than at a national level.

[1] *The participants did not discuss what defined a "small", "medium", or "large" state per se but were able to discuss them conceptually using this framework.*

Models for Using a State Panel: Omnibus

One potential use for state panels discussed by the Idea Group was to host omnibus surveys where multiple clients from the state contribute questions to a single survey administration, sharing costs among multiple funders. An omnibus model can be especially valuable for generating revenue, maintaining panelist engagement, and broadening access for smaller clients.

Considerations for State Panel Viability

The participants also delved into how best to create panel viability financially and institutionally. Collaboration and effective marketing continued to emerge as key themes for future sustainability.

Funding and Sustainability Models

Strategies for overcoming obstacles to state research generally revolved around effective coalition building and securing funding from state organizations and institutions. The Idea Group recommended seeking out multiple funding sources within the state to reduce reliance on any single funder.

Potential funding streams include:

- State agency contracts
- Legislative support
- Grants from foundations and other organizations
- Academic funding
- Private clients

Collaboration and Partnerships

Coalition-Building Within States

Participants generally felt that sustainable panels require coalition building. Stakeholders that could become collaborators include universities, state agencies, chambers of commerce, nonprofits, and media organizations.

Public-Private Partnerships

As noted earlier, joining forces across these entities could also offer expanded opportunities for a state-level panel. Participants concurred that shared ownership and participation improve long-term viability. For example, collaboration between academia and private firms provides greater possibilities to take advantage of the partner organizations' collective technical

expertise, operational scale (with each partner contributing their strengths), and shared costs to enable a broader usage of a state panel at a lower burden to each partner.

Collaboration Across States and with National Panels

While the focus has been on state and sub-state research, some participants also noted that collaboration across states or a regional panel (e.g., New England, Upper Midwest, etc.) may also create some opportunity and sustainability by broadening the overall geographic area and encouraging collaboration across multiple states for regional needs.

Another source of collaboration is to pair state probability panels with national probability panels (comprised of all states) to increase feasibility within a given state.

Media as Strategic Partners

Other potential partners in the arena of state opinion research are local media organizations. Opinion research has long been a source of news coverage and information and an important contributor to informing the public. It is, therefore, thought to be mutually beneficial for news organizations to help support rigorous data-gathering with the populations they serve. While not always able to be major funders, media organizations do provide key elements like visibility and dissemination, validation and credibility for findings, and a feedback loop with the public. And in particular, when a journalistic need arises (e.g., understanding swing state voter attitudes and behavior), they also can be a viable source of funding and resources. Participants discussed the opportunities for media partnerships not only with large, well-known national media organizations, but also local media organizations, who can amplify the research for their audiences at a more focused regional or state level.

The Power of Marketing

Investing in marketing and educating targeting potential stakeholders are key components to build momentum for interest in state-level probability panels. Organizations with these panels and/or those who wish to create a state-level panel need effective marketing strategies to overcome the current lack of awareness of such state-level probability panels.

Some of the things that should be highlighted in a marketing campaign include:

- Demonstrating the value of probability sampling, including its superior data quality. This would involve revealing differences in data quality in a meaningful way so stakeholders understand the differences between probability panels and other data sources that lack the same methodological rigor and quality

- Developing stronger outreach tools, sales capabilities, and effective marketing plans among those managing state-level panels to help build awareness and interest in the panel
- Showcasing special benefits of the state-level panel, such as Small Area Estimation solutions or the ability to target harder-to-reach groups

Highlighting the benefits of probability sampling, clearly demonstrating its superior data quality, and strengthening outreach and promotional efforts can position the panel as a trusted, high-impact resource.

Need for a Centralized Knowledge Hub

Participants in the Idea Group also pointed to the need for a centralized hub of knowledge about state research and the panels and other resources that already exist. A recurring recommendation was the creation of: (1) a repository of existing state panels; (2) documentation of best practices; and (3) a platform for collaboration.

Such initiatives would reduce duplication and improve awareness of available resources. An affinity group within AAPOR and SSRS's Center for Innovation in State Research (SCISR) were discussed in this context as potential loci of information.

Conclusion

State-level survey research stands at a critical juncture. While demand for localized, high-quality data is increasing, the systems required to produce it are under strain. The emergence of probability-based panels offers a promising path forward, but their sustainability depends on coordinated action.

The insights summarized here highlight a clear path: **collaboration, diversification of funding, methodological rigor, and strategic investment in infrastructure and outreach**. By treating state-level panels as shared public goods and building cross-sector partnerships, the research community can ensure that reliable, representative state data remains available in an increasingly complex information environment.