

# **Community Congress II: Cross-Tabulations and Suggestions for Improved Data Gathering**

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## **Abstract**

This paper analyzes data gathered by American Speaks for the Unified New Orleans Plan's Community Congress II. The discussion is divided into two sections. First, some technical issues relevant to data gathering and analysis are discussed, along with proposed improvements for the next Congress or for other, future events. The second section describes some interesting demographic cross-tabulations performed using the raw data collected at the event. The most striking result found is that Asian-Americans living in New Orleans, particularly those living in Planning District 10 (Village de L'est), had views that differed strongly from the majority of Congress participants on many topics.

This paper does not assess or consider all the data gathered, but, rather, suggests the most cogent and interesting differences between demographic groups, particularly as relevant to the more controversial topics discussed. Because the data points can easily be correlated with the demographics of participants, much more analysis can and should be performed in the future.

## **Background**

On December 2, 2006, approximately 2,300 New Orleanians participated in the second Community Congress, organized as part of the Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP) and facilitated by American Speaks, a non-profit that specializes in democratic decision making. The event was intended to engage both current city residents and members of the Diaspora on the difficult questions relevant to New Orleans' rebirth.

The audience, spread over the five cities of New Orleans, Atlanta, Baton Rouge, Houston, and Dallas, had demographic characteristics that approximately mirrored those of pre-Katrina New Orleans<sup>1</sup>. Thanks in part to a successful media and organizing campaign, the large number of participants generated a wealth of data on their hopes, opinions, and concerns. This paper is a preliminary analysis of some of those results, going beyond the aggregated results presented on the Unified New Orleans Plan's website<sup>2</sup>. This discussion is not meant to replace the data publicly available through UNOP but, rather, should serve as a supplement for researchers or practitioners involved in future events.

### **Issues Relevant to Data Gathering and Proposed Improvements**

The following section identifies problems with the data gathered and suggests ways in which survey techniques could be improved in future participatory events.

#### **Issue #1: Use of the Term "Greatest Need"**

Two of the questions presented during the event (numbers 17 and 40) asked participants whether certain services ("roads, transit, and utilities" and "other public services," respectively) should return to "areas of greatest need" in the city. Because of the ambiguity inherent in the phrase "of greatest need," these questions could be interpreted in two very opposite ways. Thus, the data gathered for these questions is likely flawed and should be discounted for statistical purposes. Anecdotally, participants who discussed their opinions on these questions seemed confused about the phrase, choosing to interpret it as meaning either areas with the greatest devastation or those most likely to return quickly. A close reading of the event packet suggests that its organizers intended the latter, but this intent was not clearly conveyed to the audience.

Question 36, which presented a nearly identical scenario for the re-opening of educational and health services, substituted the phrase "based on repopulation and recovery rates" for "areas of greatest need." This is an easier-to-understand way of phrasing the same concept, and question 36 presents a better model for wording future inquiries.

#### **Issue #2: Technical Difficulties with the Transponders**

As seen in the following chart, ten of the questions asked during the event included a significant number of invalid data points (i.e. answers that were outside of the range of correct responses).

With the exception of Question 5, the error-prone questions can be grouped into two sets, which

asked participants to rank their preferred scenarios on the topics of “affordable housing” (Questions 31-34) and “other public services,” (Questions 43-47) respectively. Because of the large number of options presented under these two topics, participants were asked to rank items presented in lists of more than nine choices, entering two digits into their transponders per question. It appears that the transponders were not capable of filtering incorrect responses on these types of questions. This is a technical question that should be resolved by America Speaks’ staff before the next event.

### **Issue #3: Meeting Fatigue and Lower Response Rates for Individual Questions**

While America Speaks should be commended for maintaining the interest of an audience during a seven hour event, a number of participants left or stopped answering questions over the course of the day. Overall, participation dropped from approximately 1,750 at the beginning of the event to around 1,300 during the last few questions. (Also note that attendance at the event was estimated at around 2,300. There are two possible reasons for this discrepancy: not all audience members were participating, or their transponders were not working).

A few interesting trends can be seen in the above chart. The first is that America Speaks did an excellent job of maintaining interest during the lunch break (occurring between Questions 20 and 21). The second is that drops in response rate for individual questions were not entirely systematic and, instead, several questions (Question 5, for example, which asked residents what district they lived in pre-Katrina, and which may have confused some participants and did not apply to non-Orleans Parish residents) elicited lower responses for reasons unrelated to the length of the meeting. A full discussion of this effect is not presented here but it should be considered in future survey designs.

### **Issue #4: Non-rational or Indifferent Answers**

The unstated goal of the event was to engage residents on a number of difficult questions, encouraging them to think about the tough choices faced by the city. Ostensibly, this was done by presenting clearly defined and mutually exclusive options for ranking. On all of the topics discussed, a number of participants either supported or rejected all of the options presented, and others expressed no preference. The most problematic of these cases is the first – residents who support all types of redevelopment clearly did not understand the range of options presented.

Of the six topics discussed, “flood protection” and “education and health services” had the highest instances of this type of response (17% and 12%, respectively), suggesting that more work needs to be done to educate future participants about these topics and that questions should be better developed to elicit feedback about the tradeoffs necessary in recovery planning.

### **Issue #5: Non-Mutually Exclusive and Redundant Community-Generated Options**

As described above, some participants did not support any of the options presented in a given option group. America Speaks’ dealt with this type of response by allowing new options to be

submitted by individuals at each table and presented these new options in real time along with the original options for a Congress-wide vote. While this had the benefit of generating new recovery ideas, it did not allow time for adequate survey design and careful wording.

Because of this, many of the options presented were not mutually exclusive and, in some cases, multiple options could be implemented simultaneously. Participants were no longer required to make tradeoffs by choosing between clearly defined and distinct outcomes. Some of the options were simply minor amendments to existing options, and others were broad policies which could be implemented along with the existing choices.

Another problem with the community designed options was that many were similar to each other or dealt with the same issues (for example, participants were asked to choose between “cleaning or repairing existing public housing” and “funding moderate- and low-income public housing”). This is problematic when participants are asked to vote on their top three choices. Some participants might have voted on all the options from their top issue even if they were nearly identical, while others might have spread their votes among separate issues they were concerned with. Because users could have taken either of these approaches, the user-generated data is less valid for analytical purposes.

The questions relevant to community-generated options present a broader host of issues that are beyond the scope of this paper, and the data gathered for those questions is not discussed here.

### **Demographic Trends and Interesting Cross-Tabulations**

The remainder of this discussion describes some demographic trends that become evident when the data are closely examined. The information presented here represents the responses of participants to five particular options described across a variety of recovery-related topics. In each case, respondents were asked to rate their relative support for each option on a scale of one to five, and the average response of participants across different demographic sub-groups was determined. Relatively controversial topic areas were chosen for detailed analysis, and only those which proved to contain statistically significant differences among demographic groups are presented here.

Following a brief discussion of each question, charts are presented which show average responses for all demographic groups discussed. All cross-tabulations performed are also presented in table form in the Appendix.

In general, statistically significant results are given at the 0.001 level, with the exception of the results from the third neighborhood stability option, which are significant at the 0.01 level.

**Neighborhood Stability 1: “Homeowners make their own rebuilding decisions with the best available information.”**

Overall, 62% of respondents expressed a high or very high level of support for this option. However, a plurality of West Bank respondents (44.4%) indicated a low or very low level of support while only 40% ranked this choice “high” or “very high”. This question diverged along

racial lines with 47.5% of Caucasians choosing low or very low support while only 39.4% were high or very highly supportive.

**Neighborhood Stability 3: “Set and enforce standards for homeowners to rebuild near one another.”**

Citywide, 58.6% gave this option a low or very low level of support. A plurality of respondents from planning districts which received no flooding (43.4%) indicated a high or very high level of support. Only 27.9% of respondents from completely flooded districts highly supported this option.

**Rental and Affordable Housing 4: “Fund the development of low- and moderate-income public housing.”**

Overall, 53% of participants gave this option a high or very high level of support. An overwhelming majority of Asian American respondents gave this option a very low level of support (71.9%, with 78.1% indicating low or very low support) while only 6.3% of this group approved. Of Asian American participants, those residing in District 10 (Eastern New Orleans East) had an even lower level of support with 87% indicating a very low level of support, and zero percent selecting either a high or very high level of support. At the same time, a plurality of Caucasian respondents (48%) indicated low or very low support, with 40.4% choosing a high or very high level of support.

**Education and Health Services 3: “Combine facilities to reduce costs.”**

Again, Asian Americans provide a dissenting voice on the idea of combining other public services. Congress-wide, 68.3% of respondents offered a high or very high level of support for this option, with 23.1% indicating a low or very low level of support. Exactly half of Asian Americans chose a very low level of support for this option while 60% of Asian Americans residing in District 10 chose a very low level of support.

**Other Public Services 3: “Combine facilities to reduce costs.”**

The answer to this option, which is similar to Option 3 from the education and public services section, gave similar results. In aggregate, 65% of participants selected this option with either a high or very high level of support. Only 18.1% offered a very low level of support. Among Asian Americans, 69.2% selected a very low level of support, and among Asian Americans from District 10, 82.8% selected a very low level of support. 0% of Asian Americans in district 10 indicated a high or very high level of support.

**Appendix – Cross-Tabulations Performed**

Table 1: Neighborhood Stability Option 1 by Flood Basin

Table 2: Neighborhood Stability Option 1 by Race

Table 3: Neighborhood Stability Option 3 by Flood Status

Table 4: Rental and Affordable Housing Option 4 by Race

Table 5: Rental and Affordable Housing Option 4 by Asian American in District 10

Table 6: Education and Public Services Option 3 by Race

Table 7: Education and Public Services Option 3 by Asian American in District 10

Table 8: Other Public Services Option 3 by Race

Table 9: Other Public Services Option 3 by Asian American in District 10

1 With the exception of income distribution.

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[http://www.unifiedneworleansplan.com/uploads/UNOP\\_Prelim\\_COMPLETE\\_LowRes-16593.pdf](http://www.unifiedneworleansplan.com/uploads/UNOP_Prelim_COMPLETE_LowRes-16593.pdf)