

# A Conversation with W. Allen Wallis

Ingram Olkin

*Abstract.* Wilson Allen Wallis was born on November 5, 1912 in Philadelphia. He was an undergraduate at the University of Minnesota and continued graduate studies there, at the University of Chicago, and at Columbia University. He held faculty positions at Yale University, Stanford University, and the University of Chicago and administrative positions at Columbia University, the University of Chicago and the University of Rochester, where he was President or Chancellor from 1962 until 1982, when he became Under Secretary for Economic Affairs in the U.S. Department of State, a position he held until 1989. He is now a Resident Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research in Washington.

He held appointments of a year or two each at the U.S. National Resources Committee, the National Bureau of Economic Research, Inc., the Ford Foundation, the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences and The White House, where he was Special Assistant to President Eisenhower from 1959 to 1961. He has been a member of numerous government and foundation panels and advisory committees and a trustee or director of many business, educational and eleemosynary institutions.

He was Editor of the *Journal of the American Statistical Association* from 1950 to 1959, was President of the American Statistical Association in 1965, received the Association's Wilks Memorial Medal in 1980 and was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1964.

The following conversation took place in his office at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research in Washington, D.C.

## STATISTICS AT AGE 6

**Olkin:** Allen, thank you very much for agreeing to be interviewed. You've had an illustrious career as statistician, as university teacher and administrator, as a corporation director and as government servant, and I thought that we might divide these areas in our discussion. Perhaps we can start with your background and with the statistical part and how you came into the field of statistics.

**Wallis:** I never came directly into the field of statistics. It has always been a sideline for me, a secondary interest. I got into it because something else I was interested in brought me to statistics.

I remember several incidents when I was quite young. When I was six or seven years old and lived in Fresno, California, I noticed that Ghirardelli chocolate had two versions, one with sugar and one without, and the one with sugar added was cheaper than the one without. I remember puzzling about

why it would cost less with something added, and finally figuring out something about weighted averages. To keep the weight constant, when you add sugar you delete cocoa and cocoa is more expensive than sugar.

Still later—I must have been about 10 years old—I had a newspaper route in Portland, Oregon. They gave a prize for expanding your subscriptions, and I had one of the biggest jumps in the city. My route covered the Reed College area, East Moreland, which was sparsely populated in those days. Most of the subscriptions came from the College students and faculty and the base for this contest was in August. I had about 20 subscriptions then. When the college opened, I had about 80, so I had a big percentage gain. It really meant nothing about my salesmanship, but was a reflection of the poor measure they were using. Anyway, I won a turkey—live.

When I was about 12, Richard Scammon, who has become prominent in election statistics and was director of the Census for a few years, lived three doors from me in Minneapolis. We used to

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