

Journalist Cheat Sheet to Understanding Polls

Well-crafted surveys are the best way to measure public opinion and can be useful sources of information for journalists to use in accurate and unbiased reporting. The following items should be kept in mind when reporting on public opinion polls.

WHAT

What questions were asked? Find out exact wording of the poll questions to ensure that they are worded simply and clearly, and are balanced and unbiased. A balanced question will provide the respondents with balanced answer categories; if a reason or argument is provided in favor of one response, a reason for the alternative response should usually be provided as well. Sometimes, particularly for questions with complex introductions or response options, it will be helpful to include the exact question wording in your story.

In what order were the questions asked? The order in which questions are asked can impact the results—could the questions asked prior to the question you’re interested in have influenced how respondents answered the following questions?

What other polls have been done on this topic? If other polls have been conducted on the same topic, it is good practice to compare results. If the polls were conducted at different times, the differences could represent a shift in public opinion (but note that different question wording and methods can lead to varying results). If the polls were conducted at the same time, see if the results are similar; if not, something could be up! Check PollingReport.com for national opinion surveys and [Real Clear Politics](http://RealClearPolitics) for election polls.

What is the margin of sampling error? Probability sampling allows pollsters to calculate a margin of sampling error which is a measure of the possible range of approximation in the results due to sampling. Generally, pollsters calculate the degree of certainty of results using a 95 percent confidence interval. That is, in 95 times out of a 100, we expect that this confidence interval will include the true value of what we are trying to estimate. As a general rule, the more people who are interviewed in a scientific poll, the smaller the error due to the size of the sample, all other things being equal. But a larger sample isn’t necessarily better—other factors may be more important in judging the quality of any given survey.

What about election polling? Election polling is a breed of its own but it is important to remember that, like all polls, election polls represent a snapshot in time of public opinion and they are not meant to be predictive of an outcome. Remember, margin of sampling error applies to the poll’s estimate of EACH candidate, and a candidate usually needs to be ahead by 1.5-2 times the margin of sampling error for the lead to be statistically significant.

WHO

Who conducted the poll? Many different organizations pay for polls to be conducted. It is important to determine who conducted and paid for the poll so you can evaluate credibility and if they have a “dog in the fight” on issues their poll is measuring attributes about. Reputable polling firms will provide the information you need to evaluate the survey and will likely be less error-prone than non-reputable firms. Here are some examples of the types of sponsoring organizations: research firms, academic institutions, federal, state, or local governments, media organizations, non-profit groups or foundations, special interest groups, businesses, and corporations and political campaigns.

Are the results based on the answers of all the people interviewed, or only a subset? Pay close attention to whether particular questions were asked of all respondents or only of a certain subgroup of respondents. The margin of sampling error will vary for groups and can be much larger for small subgroups. If subgroups are very small, differences within the group should not be highlighted.

WHEN

When were the interviews conducted? It is important to pay attention to when the poll was conducted relative to recent events—opinions on gun control, for instance, may be different immediately following a mass shooting than they would be otherwise.

HOW

How was the poll conducted? When the chance of selecting each person in the target population is known, the results of the survey are representative of the population. This is a **probability sample**. A common method to conduct probability-based sampling is telephone surveys. When a sample is chosen without identifying the target population and without known probabilities of selecting each person, it is a **non-probability sample**. One common method of non-probability sampling is online surveys using internet-based panels. Error margin should not be reported for non-probability samples. Both probability and non-probability approaches must rely on **weighting** to try to correct for any relevant ways in which the sample might be unrepresentative of the population. It’s also important to note that there are different ways or **modes** (phone, web, in-person) to conduct surveys, and that can result in different results. This is known as “mode effect.” You could ask the same question to the same respondent and get different responses over the phone or online.

How is a poll weighted? Weighting accounts for unequal probabilities of selection and adjusts the poll data to ensure that the sample more accurately reflects the characteristics of the population from which it was drawn. Weighting can be used to adjust aspects of the sample that are mostly constant, such as demographics. Some demographic groups are more or less likely to respond to a survey, meaning they tend to be over-represented or under-represented in a given sample, so the weighting adjusts demographic variables to match known characteristics of the population obtained from an external source, such as the U.S. Census Bureau. In vetting a survey, it’s important to examine whether the SOURCES of weighting benchmarks are appropriately aligned to the sample that was drawn; for instance, weighting to recent national Census data is generally appropriate for a national sample of adults.

Sources:

[National Council on Public Polls—20 Questions A Journalist Should Ask About](#)
[Poynter News University Course: Understanding and Interpreting Polls](#)
[Questions to Ask When Writing About Polls](#)