Measuring Public Opinion

Inquire: How Can We Track Public Opinion?

Overview

Public opinion polls: in our society, we live and die by the results of public opinion polls. We need to know whether a movie, a TV show, or a clothing line is popular, and certainly, whether politicians and political parties are popular during elections. All are driven by the polls. What do the people want? Who do the people want? What can the candidate, the party, or the politician do to increase their popularity — or to overcome a lack of popularity?

From the sound bites to the clothes to the hair to the positions they take… it can all be driven by public opinion. But, how do we measure public opinion? And, how reliable are the polls?

Big Question: Are public opinion polls trustworthy?

Watch: The 2016 Election - What Happened to the Polls?

The 2016 election was a complete shock to many people — and even to many in the media. As the election returns came in and the numbers slid toward Donald Trump instead of Hillary Clinton, a look of shock and despair overwhelmed the faces of the analysts and anchors on CNN and the more liberal media outlets. The analysts and anchors on Fox News and the conservative media outlets had the same look of shock, but with a touch of surprise and ultimately elation.

Hillary Clinton was supposed to win the election; she had been ahead in the polls. The famous, trustworthy polls — relied on by the media and the campaigns — were showing that Clinton would win. The media outlets, whether liberal or conservative, were predicting a Clinton win.

The polls were wrong, although not as wrong as the Literary Digest poll that incorrectly picked Republican Alf Landon to beat the incumbent Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1936 by double digits. Trying to get as many responses as possible, the magazine used the largest mailing lists available — automobile registrations and the phone book. Even though the Literary Digest obtained a staggering 2,376,000 responses for the poll, it underestimated FDR’s percentage of the vote by over 19% because the polling methods were badly flawed.

1936 was amid the Great Depression, and only 40% of people had phones, while even fewer had cars. More importantly, the people FDR was attempting to help with his New Deal policies were the people who did not have cars or phones, and the poll missed them entirely.
A poll’s reliability does not rest with the number of responses — as evidenced by the *Literary Digest* — but instead is based on certain scientific factors that, if ignored, will give false results. These include the identification of the universe, the correct way to choose a sample, drafting questions that are fair and do not suggest an answer or the position of the poll taker, and the interpretation of the answers. A failure in any of these areas can easily invalidate poll results.

So… what happened in 2016? That’s a good question. We will take what we learn in this lesson and see if we can find the answer.

**Read: The Growth and Validity of Public Opinion Polls**

**Overview**

Polls: the tools politicians and political operatives use to determine what will be the results of an upcoming election, or to try to understand election results. The art — and science — of drafting questions, identifying groups, and acquiring and interpreting answers to produce the accurate information desired has grown more sophisticated over the years. Yet, there are still limitations which must not be ignored.

**History and Variety in Polling**

Polling has changed over the years. The first opinion poll was taken in 1824; it asked voters how they voted as they left their polling places. Informal polls are called *straw polls*, and they informally collect opinions of a non-random population or group. Newspapers and social media continue the tradition of unofficial polls, mainly because interested readers want to know how elections will end. Facebook and online newspapers often offer informal, pop-up quizzes that ask a single question about politics or an event. The poll is not meant to be formal, but it provides a general idea of what the readership thinks.

Modern public opinion polling is relatively new, only 80 years old. These polls are far more sophisticated than straw polls and are carefully designed to probe what we think, want, and value. The information they gather may be shared with politicians or newspapers, and is analyzed by statisticians and social scientists. As the media and politicians pay more attention to polls, an increasing number of public opinion polls are put in the field every week.

**Goals of Polling and Steps Taken to Reach these Goals**

Most public opinion polls aim to be accurate, but this is not an easy task. Political polling is a science. From design to implementation, polls are complex and require planning and care. Our history is littered with examples of polling companies producing results that incorrectly predicted public opinion due to poor survey design or bad polling methods, many of which were in play in the 2016 election.

Most polling companies employ statisticians and methodologists trained in conducting polls and analyzing data. A number of criteria must be met if a poll is to be completed scientifically. First, the methodologists identify the desired population, or group, of respondents they want to interview. For example, if the goal is to project who will win the presidency, citizens from across the United States should be interviewed. If we wish to understand how voters in Colorado will vote on a proposition, the population of respondents should only be Colorado residents. When surveying on elections or policy matters, many polling houses will interview only respondents who have a history of voting in previous elections, because these voters are more likely to go to the polls on Election Day. Politicians are more likely to be influenced by the opinions of proven voters than of everyday citizens. Once the desired population has been identified, the researchers will begin to build a sample that is both random and representative.
A random sample consists of a limited number of people from the overall population selected in such a way that each has an equal chance of being chosen. In the early years of polling, telephone numbers of potential respondents were arbitrarily selected from various areas to avoid regional bias. While landline phones allow polls to try to obtain randomness, the increasing use of cell phones makes this process difficult. Cell phones, and their numbers, are portable and move with the owner. To prevent errors, polls that include known cellular numbers may screen for zip codes and other geographic indicators to prevent regional bias. A representative sample consists of a group whose demographic distribution is similar to that of the overall population. For example, nearly 51 percent of the U.S. population is female, so a representative sample would also be around 51 percent female.

Pollsters try to interview a set number of citizens to create a reasonable sample of the population. This sample size will vary based on the size of the population being interviewed and the level of accuracy the pollster wishes to reach. If the poll is trying to reveal the opinion of a state or group, such as the opinion of Wisconsin voters about changes to the education system, the sample size may vary from 500 to 1,000 respondents and produce results with relatively low error. For a poll to predict what Americans think nationally, such as about the White House's policy on greenhouse gases, the sample size should be larger.

The sample size varies with each organization and institution due to the way the data are processed. Gallup often interviews only 500 respondents, while Rasmussen Reports and Pew Research often interview 1,000 to 1,500 respondents.

When the sample represents the actual population, the poll's accuracy will be reflected in a lower margin of error. The margin of error is a number that states how far the poll results may be from the actual opinion of the total population of citizens.

Determining Validity

With many polls out there, how do you know whether a poll is good and whether it accurately predicts what a group believes? First, look at the numbers. Polling companies include the margin of error, polling dates, number of respondents, and population sampled to show their scientific reliability. Was the poll recently taken? Is the question clear and unbiased? Was the number of respondents high enough to predict the population? Is the margin of error small? It is worth looking for this valuable information when you interpret poll results. While most polling agencies strive to create quality polls, other organizations want fast results and may prioritize immediate numbers over random and representative samples. For example, instant polling is often used by news networks to quickly assess how well candidates are performing in a debate.

Validity is important, and a well done, scientific poll has validity within certain parameters. However, it is vital to understand these parameters. Each of these requirements creates a foundation of trust in the results. However, even the best scientific polls have margins of error, as discussed above. As such, no poll can be counted on as infallible. Unfortunately, many people — and many politicians — take poll results as truth. Then, they move forward confident of their position only to have the actual results differ from the polls, as in 2016.
Reflect: Do You Trust Public Opinion Polls?

Poll

Public opinion polls are everywhere, evaluating political elections, movies, popular songs, and innumerable other items, events, and things. But, do you trust them?

Do you trust public opinion polls when you see them?
- Yes
- No

Expand: George Gallup and the Beginning of Polling

Overview

Too often, the public is handed a poll, told what it means, and assured it is accurate, all without any discussion of the poll’s elements. A poll is only as good as the pieces that make it up. A poll’s validity and veracity — from the very first poll through the most recent — are tied to a pollster having the right universe, the right sample, the right questions, the right information collected using the proper method, and a fair and unbiased interpretation.

George Gallup - the Founder of Modern Polling

It all started in 1932 when a man’s mother-in-law ran for public office in Iowa. She was running against a popular incumbent, and everyone except the man thought her candidacy was a lost cause. He polled her constituency, told her she could win, and gave her some advice. Hers was only the first of many elections he would correctly predict.

His name was George Gallup — the founder of modern polling.

Since then, polling organizations have proliferated, so that they now play a vital role in American politics. They are able to measure public opinion so accurately because they have carefully developed some very precise methods.

Polls generally start when someone wants a political question answered. For example, a candidate may wonder, "How many people in my district know who I am and what I do?" Polls can give some answers to him or her plan a campaign for office. In another example, a newspaper may want to know, "How do people in this country feel about big tobacco companies?" The publisher can commission a poll and a reporter can base a story on the research findings.

Elements of a Valid Poll

To produce a valid poll, pollsters must follow several important steps in gathering accurate statistics:

1. Questions must be carefully and objectively worded:
   a. For example, consider a question such as, "How much do you resent the deceptiveness of big tobacco companies?" You could hardly expect an accurate answer. Sometimes the slightest shift in how a question is worded can bring very different results.
2. The Universe and the Sample:
   a. First, pollsters determine the universe, or the entire group whose attitudes they wish to measure.
   b. Since it is generally impossible to question everyone, they must use random sampling, a method of selection that gives each potential member of the universe the same chance of being selected.

3. Respondents must be contacted in a cost efficient way, but one which provides authentic responses:
   a. Accuracy and authenticity cannot be sacrificed to efficiency. For example, a straw poll that asks television viewers to call in with their opinions is generally not very accurate. After all, the people that call in usually feel very strongly about the issue. And some of them call in more than once. Internet polls also give no control over who is answering.
   b. Telephone polls are probably used most commonly today, partly because of the capability of random-digit dialing. However, even these are suspect for actual proof of who is being interviewed.
   c. The best contact is face-to-face, though this is usually unrealistic.

4. The results must be accurately and unbiasedly reviewed and reported:
   a. Poll results must be carefully and accurately compiled and reported. This is not always an easy task, especially for tracking polls that are measuring changing public opinion.
   b. A good example is an election poll. Statistics that are a week old are not usually very reliable when trying to predict a close presidential race.

Waffling or the Will of the People

Should politicians monitor the polls? Candidates have been criticized for "waffling" — shifting their positions based on the results of public opinion polls. But, if politicians are supposed to represent the true will of the people, shouldn't public opinion be highly regarded? Americans have different opinions about whether a leader is expected to use his or her own judgment or reflect the viewpoints of his or her constituency.

Margin of Error

Polls can never be completely accurate; a sample cannot replicate the universe exactly. Pollsters allow for this slight chance of inaccuracy with a margin of error. Standard samples of about 1,000 to 1,500 individuals can usually represent a universe of millions of people with only a small amount of error. A typical margin of error — a measure of the accuracy of a public opinion poll — is about 3%. In a poll that says that 52% of the respondents favor Janet Smith for mayor, somewhere between 49% (-3) and 55% (+3) of the voters actually do support her. You can see how predicting a close election can be very difficult.

Given the challenges of accurately polling public opinion, it is amazing that polls that do follow the right steps almost always make the right predictions. They've come a long way since George Gallup helped his mother-in-law win her election in 1932.
Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Public Opinion: Crash Course Government and Politics #33
- A Crash Course video on public opinion
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJLDgb8m3K0&t=182s

Shaping Public Opinion: Crash Course Government and Politics #34
- A Crash Course video talking about shaping public opinion
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NfULVECAFQ&t=66s

Pros and cons of public opinion polls - Jason Robert Jaffe
- A video explaining public opinion polls
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ubR8rEgSZSU

Lesson Glossary

**margin of error**: an amount that dictates how far the poll results may be from the actual opinion of the total population of citizens

**public opinion polls**: a ballot of a population’s opinion on a specific subject, issue, or person

**random sample**: a limited number of people from the overall population, who are selected in such a way that each has an equal chance of being chosen

**representative sample**: a group whose demographic distribution is similar to that of the overall population

**sample size**: a set number of people polled, which varies based on the size of the population being interviewed and the level of accuracy the pollster wishes to reach

**straw polls**: an informal ballot of a non-random population or group conducted as a test of opinion

**universe**: the entire group or population whose attitudes pollsters wish to measure

Check Your Knowledge

1. Public opinion polls are informal ballots of a non-random population or group conducted as a test of opinion.
   - A. True
   - B. False

2. Most polling companies employ statisticians and methodologists trained in conducting polls and analyzing data.
   - A. True
   - B. False

3. To know whether a poll accurately predicts a group’s beliefs, you must first look at the numbers.
   - A. True
   - B. False
Answer Key:

Citations

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