

POLLING THE PEOPLE

Public opinion polls involve taking a small to medium part of the population and attempting to gauge support or interest on a certain candidate/issue. There are a number of ways to conduct this gauging:

1. **BENCHMARK POLLS.** Often used before a campaign or declaring that you are running, these are used to know what people care about and how much support a prospective public official may receive.
2. **TRACKING POLLS.** Often used during campaigns to track the issues that people care about and gauging support.
3. **ENTRY AND EXIT POLLS.** Conducted near election sites. In contrast to the other two types, these are used to gauge demographics, attempt to figure out what factors lead to a person voting one way, report on the election, etc.

APPROVAL RATING

An approval rating is what percentage of a sample pool approves of the President's job performance. Presidents usually have a high rating during the first few months (honeymoon period), national media outlets report positively on the President, and there is increased bipartisanship in Congress.

Once a president starts setting out issues and taking lots of action however, that is more room for controversy and thus hits to approval rating.

RIGHT-TRACK MEASURE

Like approval rating, but its "do you approve of where the nation is going?", which indirectly reflects on the President's prior actions.

GENERIC PARTY BALLOT

Simply asks "which party are you voting for?"

FOCUS GROUPS

A subset of polling, these consist of 10-40 people and are more thorough, with follow up questions, examination of body language and deep thought on answers. At one point Romney found out that he is approved at a higher rate if he wears jeans, which he did.

METHODS OF CONDUCTING

FAIRNESS in QUESTIONING

- no emotionally or politically charged wording
- same set to every person
- framed consistently and fairly (i.e. "should abortion be legal" is not widely supported but if you say "should abortion be legal in cases of rape or incest" you'll get more support.

FAIRNESS in SAMPLE POOL

- Taking a **representative sample**; a small subset of the **universe** that would represent the population (i.e. if 50% of the sample pool say yes to something, around 50% of the general non polled population would say the same)
- When building a sample pool, be completely random and use **random sampling**. This means every person in the **universe** has an equal chance of being polled.
- If 16% of the population is a part of X demographic and the other 84% Y demographic, the samples need to about equal that. If 42% of respondents were X demographic, that would not be representative of the universe. This is known as **weighting / stratification**.
- This a problem on the Internet: the fact you can fill out a survey more than once, the fact that the respondents tend to be of certain demographics, the fact that the respondent may not even be in the same country all complicate online polling systems.

FAIRNESS IN DATA

- **Margins of error / sampling errors:** if 55% of people say YES one time and 83% the next time, its obvious there are problems with the polling system. The larger the sample pool the smaller the MOE. Usually expressed as +/- X%.
- **Non-attitudes, ignorance, and indifferences:** sometimes what politicians and journalists will care about do not apply to the people actually being polled. Furthermore, some people are not the most informed meaning what they say may not be an informed and final answer. This is usually counteracted by asking questions such as "Are you going to vote?", and if the answer is NO the response is thrown out.
- **Human bias:** how interviews and thus polling have an impact. The person who is conducting the interview influences the respondent, either involuntarily (i.e. African American phone pollsters receive different responses than white phone pollsters when drawing from the same pool).
- **Not an attempt to persuade: push polling** involves someone talking smack about something else but posing it as a poll, and either using that misleading data or just using the "poll" guise to push an agenda. Sometimes, polling will just be asks for funds for campaigns.