Background Information

Polling is a statistical science that goes back 200 years, and over the years methodologies have evolved to include new technologies. A good pollster knows how to utilize the available methodologies to consistently to produce the most accurate and trusted polls by calibrating their sample size, margin of error and confidence level. These days pollsters are ranked in a systematic way by organizations like FiveThirtyEight which is now a part of the Walt Disney conglomerate. Since founded by famous pollster Nate Silver in 2008[1], FiveThirtyEight has been for political news, poll analysis and pollster ranking.

To answer the questions of what characteristics, make the best pollsters I have analyzed pollster data directly from FiveThirtyEight politics[2]. Included in the data is enough data to derive important insights from and provide recommendations to an up-and-coming pollster on what they would need to do to give them the best chance of becoming an elite rated pollster. The analysis will include looking at the current top rated (Grade A) pollsters to see what qualities they have and the methodologies they use to give them their success.

The first instinct would lead me to believe that the pollsters with the highest accuracy would have the highest rank and grade, but I will use a deep dive analysis to confirm that theory.

Relevant Analysis

Before beginning the red meat of the analysis it is important to keep in mind that in measurement of polling accuracy a difference of a few percentage points can make a world of difference so even small differences that may see irrelevant should be respected in the context of analyzing pollster data.

First, let's take a look at who are the top 10 out of 493 ranked pollsters by FiveThirtyEighty

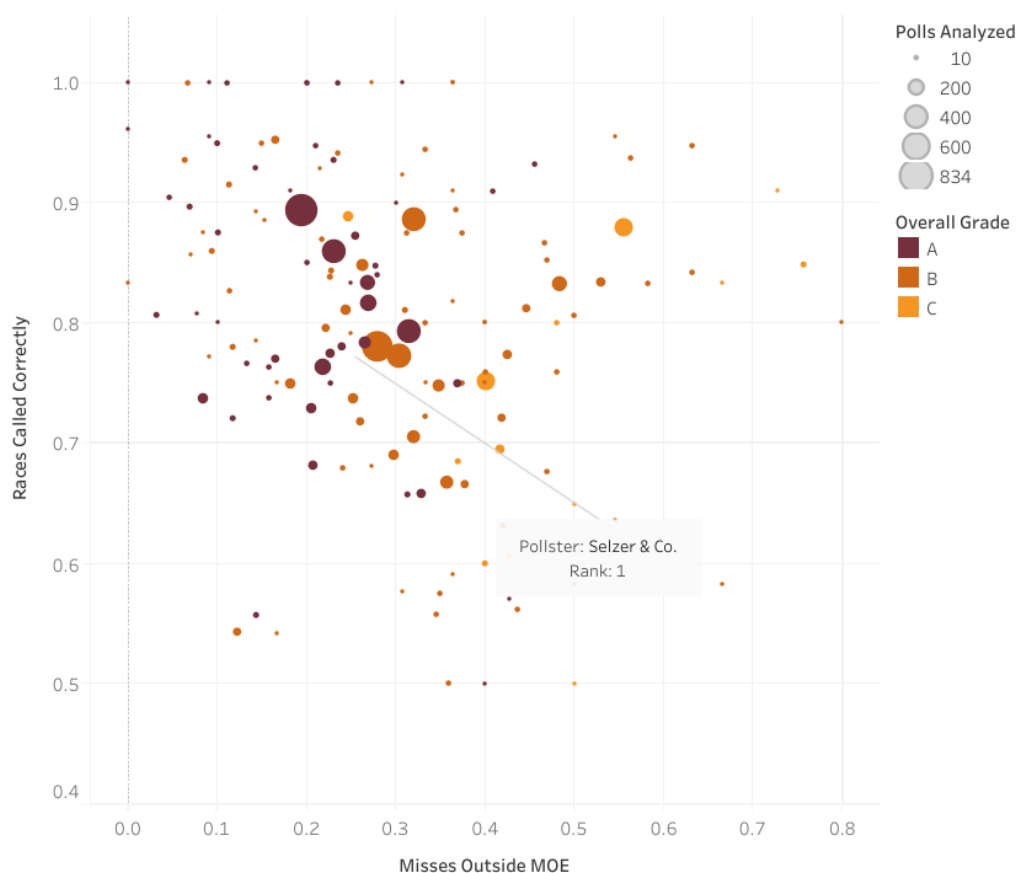| Rank	Pollster
1	Selzer & Co.
2	ABC News/The Washington Post
3	Siena College/The New York Times Upshot
4	IBD/TIPP
5	Field Research Corp. (Field Poll)
6	SurveyUSA
7	Marquette University Law School
8	Siena College
9	Landmark Communications
10	Research & Polling Inc.

*For an understanding of the FiveThirtyEight grading system and Methodology codes please see the accompanying appendix.

The first and most obvious metric I will look at is the percentage of *Races Called Correctly* by it's FiveThirtyEight grade. Grades do fluctuate year over year usually within a range of their general letter grade so for our examples in this case study I have recategorized pollsters into their general grade (A,B,C) by their most recent grades from 2021.

For conducting the analysis on the characteristics of the best pollsters the focus will be on the attributes that pollsters have the closest direct control over and with the highest correlated coefficients to the *Races Called Correctly* which in my perspective is still the principal metric of success for a pollster.

From a pivot table analysis, a corelated coefficient comparison and from the variables that the pollster would have most control over the variables that will be focussed on are *Misses outside of MOE*(Margin of Error), *Advanced Plus-Min* and *# of Polls Analyzed* in relation to the grades given by FiveThirtyEight to each pollster.
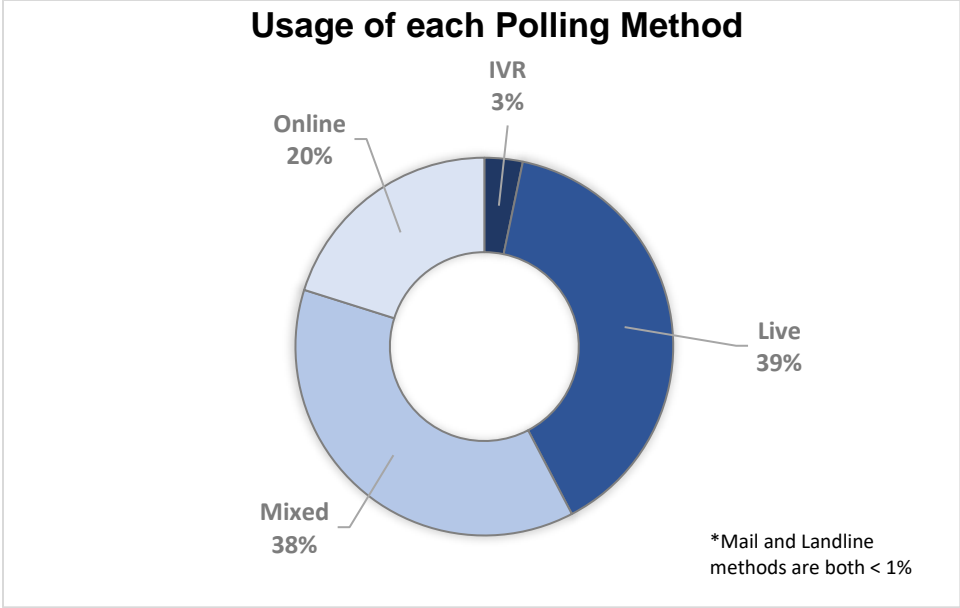

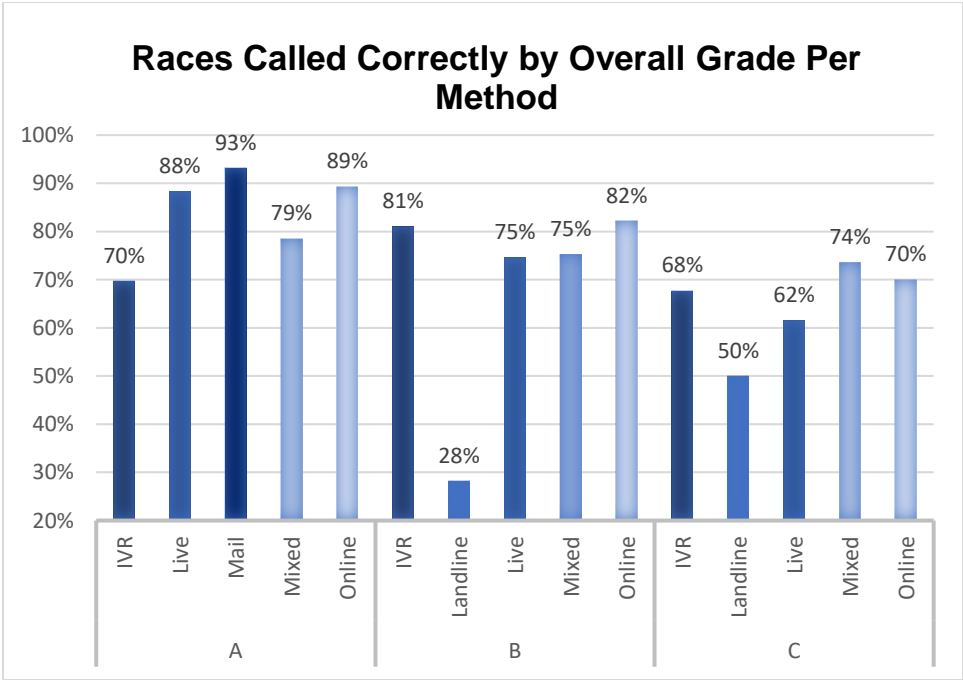
Races Called Correctly vs. Misses Outside MOE per Pollster

Races Called Correctly vs. Advanced Plus-Minus per Pollster
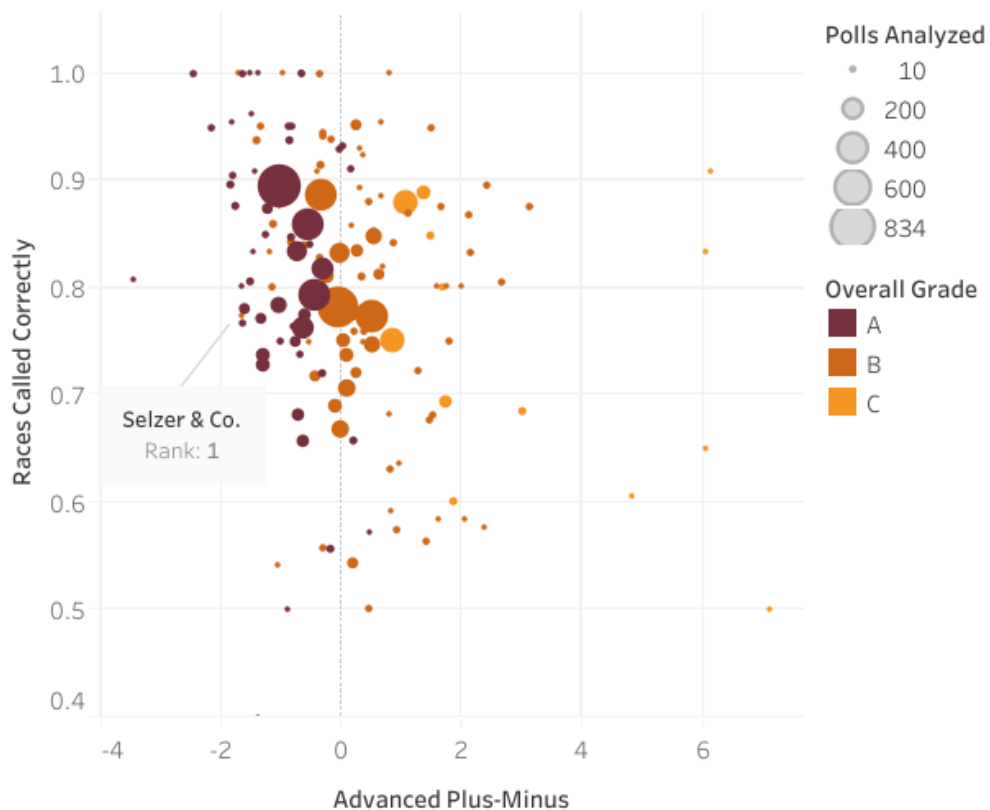
Considering the above charts the current #1 ranked pollster Selzer & Co. is annotated to each chart and there is a noticeable zone where the highest grade pollsters generally plot on the chart. But also, noticeably that #1 Ranked Selzer & Co. does not occupy the area of where the maximum points of *Races Called Correctly* is. From studying further, in FiveThirtyEight's ranking system there is a noticeable emphasis that FiveThirtyEight puts on methodology above the metrics from this analysis.

Usage of each Polling Method

IVR
3%

Online
20%

Live
39%

Mixed
38%

*Mail and Landline methods are both < 1%

The methodologies used by pollsters vary from very cost effective, far and fast reaching methods such as online surveys, text messages, IVR's(robocalls) to more costly and less scalable methods such as live phone calls to cellphones/landlines and by mail. Over one third of all pollsters used a mixed methodology and a close second is Live calling to cellphones.

Races Called Correctly by Overall Grade Per Method

|	A					B					C				
	IVR	Live	Mail	Mixed	Online	IVR	Landline	Live	Mixed	Online	IVR	Landline	Live	Mixed	Online
	70%	88%	93%	79%	89%	81%	28%	75%	75%	82%	68%	50%	62%	74%	70%

Now let's look at the relationship between *Methodology* and *Races Called Correctly*. At first look at the raw data it appears that the methodologies of Online and Live calling are only separated by 4

percentage points (Online 82%, Live 78%) but on a deeper dive we see a more interesting relationship when you break down the methodology also by *Overall Grade*.

The accuracy of the Online and Live method of *Races called Correctly* varies by the *Overall Grade*. Those pollsters with an *Overall Grade* of A have a noticeable higher level of success in *Races Called Correctly* by the Online and Live Cellphone calling method then those pollsters with an *Overall Grade* of B and C.

The quantity of *# of Polls Analyzed* has an impact of the *Overall Grade* as well. Pollsters with an A and B grade have conducted a significantly higher number of polls than those with an *Overall Grade* of C or F.

Polls Analyzed by Overall Grade

| Grade	# of Polls Analyzed
A	3913
B	5339
C	924
F	600
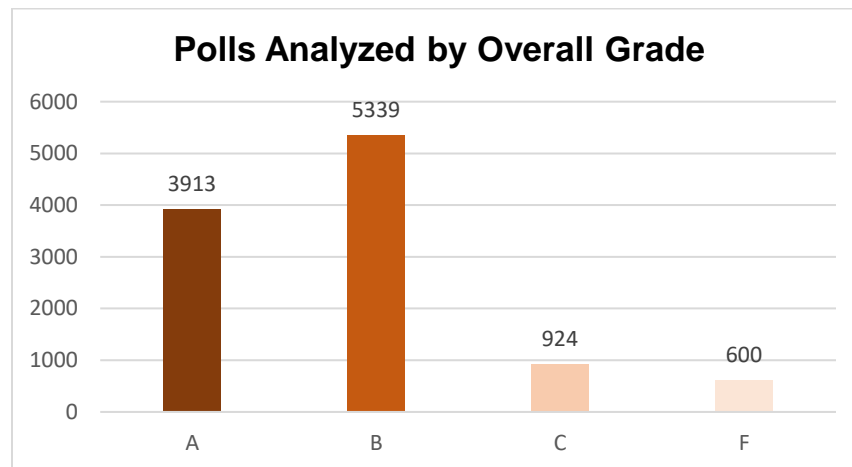
The B's have the higher *# of Polls Analyzed* but this could be due to an effect of reversion to the mean meaning that the more polls conducted leaves more opportunity for error that over time brings down the pollsters rating. This is also illustrated in the graphs from earlier by viewing the size of the circles representative of each pollster and the size representing how many polls have been conducted.

Pollsters with the grade F may have relatively decent statistics but due to questionable polling practices they have been given their F grade for reasons that FiveThirtyEight finds unreliable and untrustworthy. This again highlights the weight of FiveThirtyEight's puts on methodologies for their grading system so let's look at methodologies data further for insights.

Perecentage of Live Calling by Grade
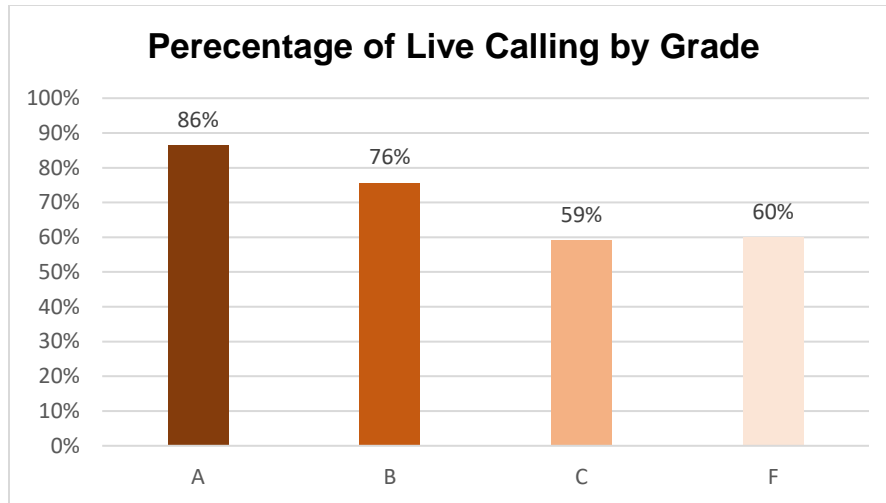
Polling methods appear to be the real driver for how FiveThirtyEight assigns their ratings and the Live method seems to be their most favored method.

Average of Races Called Correctly by Methodology
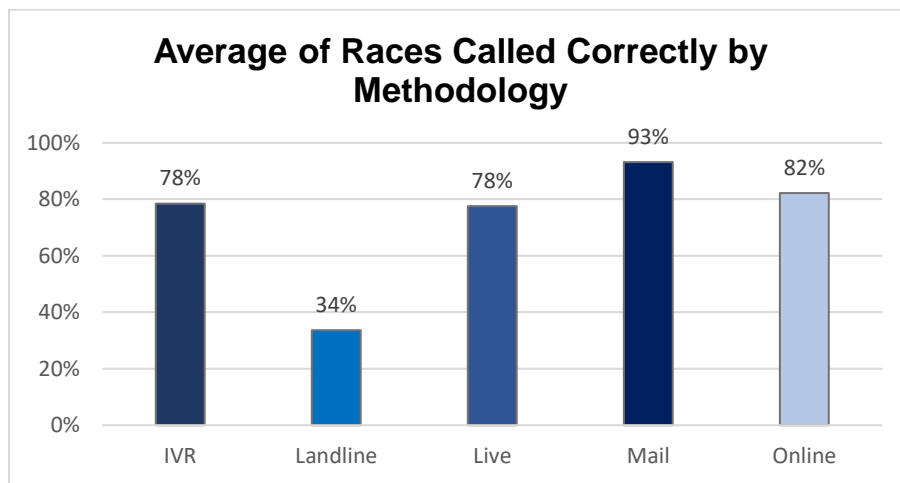
By a significant amount, A rated pollsters are conducting polling used Live Cellphone calling data. However, on further analysis this does not equate with Live Cellphone data having more accurate polling results. Based on this comparison, the question now becomes what benefit is there to conduct Live Cellphone polling?

Live Data Polling by Average of Misses Outside MOE and Average of Advanced Plus-Minus
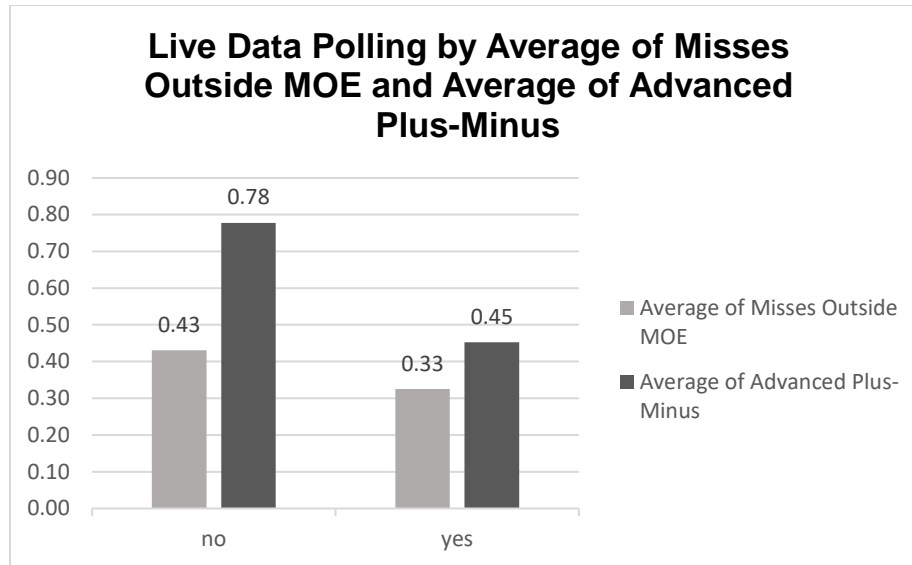
Going back to the original variables we looked at above we see that Live Cellphone calling does produce more favorable numbers for Average *Misses outside of MOE* and a better Average of *Advance plus-minus*.

Findings and Insight

With the analysis above it would be a fair conclusion to make that FiveThirtyEight does not weigh the percentage of *Races Called Correctly* as the most important metric, rather they are more interested in consistency and reliability that comes from the way a pollster conducts polling through it's methodology.

Pollsters who integrate Live Calling into their methodology are favored by FiveThirtyEight by being more likely to have an A grade. This is because Live Cellphone calling is directly correlated to pollsters having a better score in *Misses outside of the MOE* and an *Advanced Plus-Minus*.

Live Cellphone calling polling on average brings a -10 point score on the *Misses out of MOE*, based on the data we have the MOE seems to have an equalizing effect to other polling methods that could bring about bias results. Live Cellphone calling appears to be less random and gives the pollster more control of which segment of the population they would like to target. For example; If the sample population is made up of 50% women a pollster could target the appropriate percentage of women through Live Cellphone calling that they wouldn't be able to control with methods such as online or text polling. IVR's would also be able target demographic segments of a population but there seems to be a high level of robocall fatigue in the United States making people more likely to hang up as soon as an incoming call is identified to be an IVR.

Since Live calling can be solicited in such a standard way it would make sense for pollsters to generate similar results as each other based on data derived from this methodology. The only variables pollsters could control is the time of the call compared to online polling where a pollster can control which websites to advertise their poll.

Calling races correctly certainly is a positive for any pollster but FiveThirtyEight recognizes that pollsters can get lucky or unlucky in any random poll that could skew the results favorably or unfavourably giving the pollster a rating more leveraged to an individual result rather than it's consistency.

Recommendations to an Up-and-Coming Pollster

Based on the insights derived from the analysis we have come up with 4 actionable items for an up-and-coming pollster to have the best chances for success in this field and achieving the highest possible grade with the maximum trust.

Be Consistent and Play the Long Game

We have seen above the best pollsters conduct more polls, therefore a proven methodological model and achieving consistent results through a consistent process is what pollsters should work towards. FiveThirtyEight rewards seasoned and consistent pollsters with higher grades once they have proven themselves. If by 20 polls, a pollster has not achieved their desired grade they should review their methodology.

Focus on the Metrics that are within Control

The most correlated variables that are in control of the pollste r are the *Missed Outside MOE* and the *Advanced Plus-Minus* and pollsters should do what is necessary to keep them in a favourable range. A lower *Missed Outside MOE* can be achieved by allowing a higher MOE in your polls. For a pollster it may seem obvious to aim for a lower MOE but doing that gives the pollster a lesser cushion in calling their races.

Having a low *Advanced Plus-Minus* comes from falling in line with other successful pollsters therefore an up-and-coming pollster should study the methodologies of other top pollsters and try to replicate their proven methods. For example; if a successful A graded pollster uses a mixed methodology of Online and Live Cellphone calling the up and coming pollster can try to replicate this methodology to keep their *Advanced Plus-Minus* low.

Use a Mixed Methodology and Include Live Cellphone Calling

The analysis shows that even though scalable methodologies like Online and IVR polling are most cost efficient and accurate to ratings agencies like FiveThirtyEight this is not favored. An up-and-coming pollster should take caution with Online polling by placing their online polls on websites and sources that would reach their desired sample size. Also avoid placing online polls behind walled or paid content that would probably just annoy those being polled and would not achieve an accurate result.

FiveThirtyEight overwhelmingly rewards pollsters with higher grades who conduct Live cellphone polling therefore Live Cellphone calling should definitely be incorporated into an up-and-coming pollsters methodology even though it is more costly and not proven to be more

accurate in terms of calling races correctly. Also from the analysis Landline calling should be avoided and offers no value in terms of *Races Called Correctly* or the FiveThirtyEight grade.

Join a Professional Organization such as AAPOR

A professional membership from AAPOR(American Association Public Opinion Research)[3] would be a feasible and worthwhile expense for an up-and-coming pollster. A graded pollsters by almost 80% belong to a professional membership organization for pollsters while only 10% of B rated pollsters do. An AAPOR membership costs about $200 per annum which could make the difference from a pollster being graded an A instead of a B. I do not recommend and NCPP(National Council of Public Polls)[4] membership as their website is down so there is no available information on the mission. Roper[5] seems like a very credible organization for pollsters but also quite costly in the thousands of dollars per annum.

References

1. ^https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/FiveThirtyEight
2. ^https://github.com/fivethirtyeight/data/tree/master/pollster-ratings
3. ^ https://www.aapor.org/Membership/Join-AAPOR/Membership-Options.aspx
4. ^ http://www.ncpp.org/cgi-sys/suspendedpage.cgi
5. ^ https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/membership/become-member