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Stats 696

Should we trust polls?

Most media outlets do not have reliable reporters who can report on numbers. According to Crompton and Flanders, most people get their share of statistics from the news. Furthermore, reporters and journalists do not like numbers and figures. How can I trust people to deliver accurate statistics if they, themselves do not understand it. It is not that the journalists and new reporters completely shun numbers and figures, but they simply do not have the time to understand them. Crompton and Flanders also state that having formal training for those reporters simply is not feasible for them.

I am a cynic and a critic by nature so naturally I say I cannot trust the new media outlets with their polls because there’s many considerations that were overlooked. Many of the polls do not understand the effect of nonresponse and what to do with the polls or surveys when nonresponses happen. I also do not know how the questions were phrased and asked since there is a bias when people are answering loaded questions.

I personally do not use the polls and policy polling on tv as the be all and end all. I would use those statistics I see from periodic and other mediums as a frame of reference. Then I deduce a ballpark estimate from what I have seen like a confidence interval. The problem with numbers in the media is that they are all point estimate with no standard error. It would be hard to just estimate a parameter with a single number and expect it to be correct. With an interval or a number band, we can deduce that the true mean or parameter is within those intervals.

It seems like most statistics are reported as probabilities and percentages. Frequencies are hardly ever used according to Hoffrage. Even though, those methods may be easier to understand, it is easier for people to misunderstand them too and misrepresent them. Counselors and doctors apparently use probabilities and percentages more frequently than frequencies. Possibly, people should learn more about probabilities or find out a way to present them better. Statistics is generally taught as p-values, percentages, and probabilities at the lower levels without really considering frequencies.

According to Denis, humans are intuitively statisticians. Which makes me wonder how much someone without a statistical background really understands about probabilities and statistics. The juries in court are biased because a type I error may occur if they do not have “beyond reasonable doubt” to incarcerate someone. But without basic statistics nor probability knowledge it continues to vex statistically illiterate people when the time come to use it.

In another country, Sally Clark was sent to prison due to her babies dying. The courtroom did not know that the statistics were inaccurate in forensic science case. Thus, the court put Sally in jail, a type I error. That kind of negligence puts people’s lives in danger. If I cannot trust the courtroom and common people to understand statistics, then how can I trust reporters on poll numbers?