

Understanding Public Opinion Polls in New Zealand

A Quick Guide

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How to cite this document:

Satherley N, Greaves L, Sporle A. (2023). *Understanding public opinion polls in New Zealand - A Quick Guide*. Auckland. iNZight Analytics Ltd. Available from <https://www.inzight.co.nz/apps/quick-polling-guide>

Date: August 2023

ISBN: 978-0-473-68716-8

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Public opinion polling is an important tool for understanding how a population feels about a particular issue, or which political parties they would vote for. But which details about a poll matter, and why?

This is a brief overview of what information to look out for about a poll, and why this information should be transparent. Journalists reporting on a poll should report information on each of these features as they give important information to evaluate the reliability of the poll results.

If you'd like more information about each of these points, and political polling in the New Zealand context, please consult the accompanying detailed guide, accessible at inzight.co.nz/apps/polling-guide



10 key features that impact the reliability of poll results

If information on one or several aspects of these qualities have not been provided by the pollster (or other reporting organisation), the results should be treated with greater caution until further information can be obtained.

1 The sample size

Larger samples lead to smaller margins of error (less random variation in the results), but are more expensive to collect. Importantly, a large sample does *not* make up for a poorly designed or conducted poll. If a poll is designed and conducted well, then good quality results about the New Zealand population can be obtained from polls with as few as 500 – 1000 participants.

2 The target population

Readers need to know which group or groups of people the poll results are about. Polls should be conducted with a defined target population in mind (very often voting-eligible adults) and a clearly described process for engaging with members of that population group. If results are reported about sub-groups within this population, they should be treated much more cautiously, as they will be based on much smaller sample sizes, and therefore carry larger margins of error.

3 The sampling method

Polls can't involve everybody in the population, so a sample of the population is selected to be invited to participate. That sampling should involve some element of random sampling (such as simple random sampling or stratified sampling) as they achieve the best representation of the diversity within the population of interest. Polls that allow for self-selection, or do not control who can participate, will end up over-representing some groups in the population and under-representing others, leading to a sample that does not match the target population. Methods of contacting people, such as through landlines, mobiles, and online panels, also matter, as different methods may produce samples that are more or less representative. A sample that isn't representative of the population is likely to produce biased, inaccurate results.



4 The sample weighting

Samples rarely match the characteristics of the target population perfectly, despite the best efforts of pollsters. Important characteristics such as the proportion of women, the age distribution, or geographic locations, may differ between the target population and the poll respondents. When these characteristics are known for both the population and the poll respondents, the poll responses can be weighted to better match the population of interest. Information on whether and how the responses were weighted provides greater assurance of the representativeness of the poll sample.

5 The poll commissioner or agency

Polls are not cheap, and they have to be paid for. It is important to know who has commissioned the poll as well as who has conducted it – which is often a polling agency. Where an organisation or group with a vested interest in the result has commissioned a poll, the poll process and results require additional scrutiny to assess their reliability. It is possible poll results will be released selectively (e.g. those indicating results favourable to the organization) or with a hidden agenda (e.g. timing the release around particular events). Knowing the polling agency can provide additional confidence in the underlying poll design and results if the agency has a strong track record of conducting good quality polls with reliable results.

6 The time the poll was conducted

Poll results apply to the time the data was collected. They reflect an assessment of public opinion at that particular point in time, and aren't intended to predict an outcome at a later date. The results may be influenced by events happening around the time of data collection. Providing the date of the poll enables a reader to assess the impact of current or recent events on the poll result.

7 The margin of error

The margin of error is an indication of uncertainty in a poll result. It is a measure of variability in the result that occurs as a consequence of taking a sample, instead of polling the entire population. The “true” underlying population value can be anywhere within the bounds of the poll result plus and minus the margin of error. Smaller results (such as intended votes for minor parties, who may be close to the 5% threshold for entering parliament) have smaller margins of error. Margins of error are also an important tool for assessing if one result can be considered different from another result - if the margins of error overlap, then the results are unlikely to be different. However, the margin of error is determined by the sample size and it does not account for other sources of error in poll results including those arising from poor sampling methods or poorly worded questions.

8 The exact question wording as asked in the poll

People can respond differently to different questions depending on how they are worded, even if they are about the same issue. Knowing the exact wording of the question used in the poll should leave little ambiguity as to what exactly the poll results mean. This is especially important when comparing results between polls or over time, as any valid comparison requires that the questions are also the same or very similar.

9 The percentage of “don’t knows” and “undecideds”

Poll questions often have the option for a poll participant to state that they “Don’t know” or are “Undecided”. Readers need to know how many or what proportion of poll participants responded “Don’t know” or were undecided on a particular poll question, and whether these responses were included or excluded from the result calculations. Knowing this can influence the interpretation of the results, especially if there are differences between different types of respondents. Large percentages of such responses can also indicate questions that are difficult to answer or understand, or topics that participants aren’t well informed on.

10 The relationship to the electoral context

Political polls include an assessment of respondents’ intended party vote, and therefore describe the percentage of the party vote each party could receive at an election. However, the composition of parliament following an election is also determined by both general and Māori electorate votes. Particular attention should be paid to the Māori electorates, where polls are more difficult to conduct, yet those results may be very consequential for potential coalition arrangements. To reiterate, the smaller proportions of votes received by minor parties make differences in the margins of error particularly important, especially when considering potential coalition structures.

Additional resources

iNZight Analytics Full Polling Guide →

Our full guide expands on this booklet, outlining how polls work, aspects of polls that speak to their quality, including sample size, error, and sampling methods, and how political polling relates to actual party representation in New Zealand parliament.

Research Association New Zealand (RANZ) →

Best practice guides on political polling in New Zealand, including aspects of poll design, reporting, and media reporting. The code also provides an exemplar template for media reporting of the key details of a political poll.

British Polling Council →

A similar quick guide on the use and reporting of opinion polls.

ESOMAR and WAPOR →

The World Association for Social, Opinion and Market Research (ESOMAR) and the World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR) provide joint guidelines on opinion poll and survey conduct, although generally aimed specifically at researchers.

American Association for Public Opinion Research →

The American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) provides various resources aimed at journalists and members of the media for understanding and reporting on polls.

Pew Research Centre →

The Pew Research Centre provides an extensive collection of resources on topics in public opinion polling in the United States, including a general overview of polling basics.

Market Research Society →

The Market Research Society also has multiple guides on understanding and reporting on polling in general.



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