20 Questions Journalists Should Ask About Poll Results

Taken from Public Agenda <http://www.publicagenda.org/polling/polling_20q.cfm>. The authors, Sheldon R. Gawiser, Ph.D. and G. Evans Witt, were the cofounders of the Associated Press/ NBC News Poll. This is a publication of the National Council on Public Polls in keeping with its mission to help educate journalists on the use of public opinion polls.

For journalists and for pollsters, questions are the most frequently used tool for gathering information. Here are 20 questions for the journalist to ask the pollster before reporting poll results. This publication is designed to help the working journalist do a thorough, professional job covering polls; it is not a primer on how to conduct a public opinion survey.

This work is about polls that are "scientific." A number of the questions will help you decide whether or not a poll is a scientific — one worthy of coverage — or an unscientific survey that may be entertaining but meaningless.

Of the scientific polls, the Gallup Poll is probably the best known and one of the oldest. There are many other excellent surveys conducted by reputable firms, as well.

The unscientific surveys are less well known, if quite widespread. There are 900-number call-in polls, man-on-the-street surveys, shopping mall polls, and even the classic toilet tissue poll featuring pictures of the candidates on each sheet.

The major distinguishing difference between scientific and unscientific polls is who picks the respondents for the survey. In a scientific poll, the pollster identifies and seeks out the people to be interviewed. In an unscientific poll, the respondents usually "volunteer" their opinions, selecting themselves for the poll.

The results of the well-conducted scientific poll can provide a reliable guide to the opinions of many people in addition to those interviewed — even the opinions of all Americans. The results of an unscientific poll tell you nothing more than simply what those respondents say.
With these 20 questions in hand, the journalist can seek the facts to decide just how to handle every poll that comes across the news desk each day.

1. Who did the poll?
What polling firm, research house, political campaign, corporation, or other group conducted the poll? This is always the first question to ask.

If you don't know who did the poll, you can't get the answers to all the other questions listed here. And if the person providing poll results can't or won't tell you who did it, serious questions must be raised about the reliability and truthfulness of the results being presented.

In most cases, reputable polling firms will provide you with the information you need to evaluate the survey. And because reputation is important to a quality firm, a professionally conducted poll will avoid many errors.

2. Who paid for the poll and why was it done?
You must know who paid for the survey. because that tells you — and your audience — who thought these topics were important enough to spend money finding out what people think. And that goes to the whole issue of why the poll was done.

Polls usually are not conducted for the good of the world. They are conducted for a reason — either to gain

helpful information or to advance a particular cause.

It may be the news organization wants to develop a good story. It may be the politician wants to be re-elected. It may be that the corporation is trying to push sales of its new product. Or a special interest group may be trying to prove that its views are the views of the entire country.

All are legitimate reasons for doing a poll.

The important issue for you as a journalist is whether the motive for doing the poll creates such serious doubts about the validity of the poll results that the results should not be publicized.

An example of suspect polls are private polls conducted by a political campaign. These polls are conducted solely to help the candidate win — and for no other reason. The poll may have terrifically slanted questions or a strange sampling methodology, all with a tactical campaign purpose. For example, the campaign may be testing out new slogans or a new stance on a key issue or a new attack on the opponent.

But since accurately gauging the general public's sentiments is not the goal of the candidate's poll, the results should be reported with great care.

Likewise, reporting on a survey by a special interest group is tricky. For example, an environmental group trumpets a poll saying the American people support strong measures to protect the environment. That may be true, but the poll may have been conducted for a group with definite views. That may have swayed the question wording, the timing of the poll, the group interviewed, and the order of the questions. You should examine the poll to be certain that it accurately samples public opinion — and does not simply push a single viewpoint.

3. How many people were interviewed for the survey?
This is another basic piece of information you should have. Because polls give approximate answers, the more people interviewed in a scientific poll, the smaller the error due to the size of the sample, all other things being equal.

However, a common trap to avoid is that "more is automatically better." It is absolutely true that the more people interviewed in a reliable survey, the smaller the sampling error — all other things being equal. But, other factors may be more important in judging the quality of a survey.

4. How were those people chosen?
The key reason that some polls reflect public opinion accurately and other polls are unscientific junk is how the people were chosen to be interviewed.

In scientific polls, the pollster uses a specific method for picking respondents. In unscientific polls. the person picks himself to participate.

The method pollsters use to pick interviewees relies on the bedrock of mathematical reality: when the chance of selecting each person in the target population is known. then and only then do the results of the sample survey reflect the entire population. This is called a random sample or a probability sample. This is the reason that interviews with 1000 American adults can accurately reflect the opinions of more than 185 million American adults.

Most scientific samples use special techniques to be economically feasible. For example, some sampling methods for telephone interviewing do not just pick randomly generated telephone numbers. Only telephone exchanges that are known to contain working residential numbers are selected — to reduce the number of wasted calls.

But even a random sample cannot be purely random in practice since some people don't have phones, refuse to answer, or aren't home.

5. What area: nation, state, or region — or what group: teachers, lawyers, Democratic voters, etc.— were these people chosen from?
Although the results of probability samples can be projected to represent the larger population from which they were selected, the characteristics of the larger population must be specified. For example, you should know if a sample represents all people in the United States or just those in one state or one city. In another example, the case of telephone samples, the population is that of people living in households with telephones. For most purposes, telephone households may be similar to the general population. But, if you were reporting a poll on what it was like to be poor or homeless, this would not be the appropriate sample. Remember, the use of a scientific sampling technique does not mean that the correct population was interviewed.

It is absolutely critical to know from which group the interviewees were chosen.

For example, a survey of business people can reflect the opinions of business people — but not of all adults. Only if the interviewees were chosen from among all American adults can the poll reflect the opinions of all American adults.

Political polls are especially sensitive to this issue.

In pre-primary and preelection polls, how the people are chosen as the base for poll results is critical. A poll of all adults, for example, is not very useful on a primary race where only 25 percent of the registered voters actually turn out. So look for polls based on registered voters, "likely voters," previous primary voters, and such. These distinctions are important and should be included in the story.

One of the most variable aspects of polling is trying to figure out who actually is going to vote.

6. Are the results based on the answers of all the people interviewed?
One of the easiest ways to misrepresent the results of a poll is to report the answers of only a subgroup. For example, there is usually a substantial difference between the opinions of Democrats and Republicans on campaign-related matters. Reporting the opinions of only Democrats in a poll purported to be of all adults would substantially misrepresent the results.

Poll results based on Democrats must be identified as such and should be reported as representing only Democratic opinions.

Of course, reporting on just one subgroup can be exactly the right course. In polling on a Republican primary contest, it is the opinions of the Republicans who can vote in the primary that count — not those of Democrats who cannot vote in that GOP contest.

7. Who should have been interviewed and was not?
You ought to know how many people refused to answer the survey or were never contacted.

The non-response rate is the percentage of people contacted who should have been interviewed, but were not. They may have refused attempts to interview them. Or interviews may not have been attempted if people were not home when the interviewer called.

The results of a survey should be judged very differently if the 100 convention delegates interviewed were a random sample of 1000 delegates as compared to their being the only 100 out of the 1000 willing to participate. The same potential for distorted results occurs if some of the delegates who were in the sample were never actually contacted.

8. When was the poll done?
Events have a dramatic impact on poll results. Your interpretation of a poll should depend on when it was conducted relative to key events. Even the freshest poll results can be overtaken by subsequent events. The President may have given a stirring speech to the nation, the stock market may have crashed or an oil tanker may have sunk, spilling millions of gallons of crude on beautiful beaches.

Poll results that are several weeks or months old may be perfectly valid as history, but are not always newsworthy.

9. How were the interviews conducted?
There are three main possibilities: in person at home, by telephone, or by mail.

Most surveys are now conducted by telephone, with the calls made from a central interviewing center. However, some surveys are still conducted by sending interviewers into people's homes to conduct the interviews.

Some surveys are conducted by mail. In scientific polls, the pollster picks the people to receive the mail questionnaires. The respondent fills out the questionnaire and returns it.

Mail surveys can be excellent sources of information, but it takes weeks to do a mail survey, meaning that the results cannot be as timely as a telephone survey. And mail surveys can be subject to other kinds of errors, particularly low response rates. In many mail surveys, more people fail to participate than do. This makes the results suspect.

Surveys done in shopping malls, in stores or restaurants or on the sidewalk may have their uses for their sponsors, but publishing the results in the media is not among them. These "man in the street" approaches may yield interesting human interest stories, but they should never be treated as if they represent a public opinion poll.

10. Is this a dial-in poll, a mail-in poll, or a subscriber coupon poll?
If the poll you are looking at is a dial-in. mail-in, or coupon poll, don't report the results because the respondents are self-selected. These pseudo-polls have no validity. Remember, the purpose of a poll is to draw conclusions about the population, not about the sample. In these pseudo-polls there is no way to project the results to any larger group. Scientific polls usually show different results than pseudo-polls.

The 900-number dial-in polls may be fine for deciding whether or not Larry the Lobster should be cooked on Saturday Night Live or even for dedicated fans to express their opinions on who is the greatest quarterback in the National Football League, but they have only entertainment value. There is no way to tell who actually called in, how old they are, or how many times each person called.

Never be fooled by the number of responses. In some cases a few people call in thousands of times. Even if 500,000 calls are tallied, no one has any real knowledge of what the results mean. If big numbers impress you, remember that the Literary Digest's non-scientific sample of 12,000,000 people said Landon would beat Roosevelt.

The subscriber coupon polls are just as bad. In these cases, the magazine or newspaper includes a coupon to be mailed in with the answers to the questions. Again, there is no way to know who responded and how many times. These results are not projectable even to the subscribers of the publication that includes the coupon.

11. What is the sampling error for the poll results?
Interviews with a scientific sample of 1000 adults can accurately reflect the opinions of more than 185 million American adults. That means interviews attempted with all 185 million adults—if such were possible—would

give approximately the same results as a well-conducted survey.

But what happens if another carefully done poll of 1000 adults gives slightly different results from the first survey? Neither of the polls is "wrong." This range of results is called the error due to sampling, often called the margin of error.

This is not an "error" in the sense of making a mistake. Rather, it is a measure of the possible range of approximation in the results because a sample was used.

Pollsters express the size of the uncertainty caused by using a sample at a "confidence level." This means a sample is likely to be within so many points of the results one would have gotten if an interview was attempted with the entire target population. They usually say this with 95% confidence.

Thus, for example, a "3 percentage point margin of error" in a national poll means that if the attempt was made to interview every adult in the nation with the same questions in the same way at about the same time as the poll was taken, the poll's answers would fall within plus or minus 3 percentage points of the complete count result 95% of the time.

Please note that this does not address the issue of whether or not people cooperate with the survey, or if the questions are understood, or if any other methodological issue exists. The sampling error is only the portion of the potential error in a survey introduced by using a sample rather than the entire population. Sampling error tells us nothing about the refusals or those consistently unavailable for interview; it also tells us nothing about the biasing effects of a particular question wording or the bias a particular interviewer may inject into the interview situation.

Remember that the sampling error margin applies to each figure in the results—it is at least 3 percentage points plus or minus for each one. Thus, in a pool question matching two candidates for President, both figures are subject to sampling error.

This raises one of the thorniest problems in the presentation of poll results. For a horse- race poll, when is one candidate really ahead of the other?

Certainly, when the gap between the two candidates is more than twice the error margin— 6 percentage points in our example—you can say with confidence that the poll says Candidate A is leading Candidate B.

And just as certainly, if the gap between the two candidates is less than error margin then you should not say that one candidate is ahead of the other. Then, the race is "close", the race is "roughly even"; or there is "little difference between the candidates."

And bear in mind that when subgroup results are reported—women or blacks, or young people—the sampling error margin for those figures is greater than for results based on the survey as a whole.

12. What other kinds of mistakes can skew poll results?

The margin of sampling error is just one source of inaccuracy in a poll and not necessarily the greatest source of error; we use it because it's the only one that can be quantified. Question phrasing and ordering are also a likely source of flaws. That's why you need to examine poll questions for bias.

You should always ask if the poll results have been "weighted." This process is usually used to account for unequal probabilities of selection and to correct demographics in the sample. However, you should be aware that a poll can also be unduly manipulated by weighting to produce some desired result.

And there are other possible sources of error. These include issues such as inadequate interviewer training and

supervision, data processing errors, and other operational problems. Professional polling operations are less subject to these problems than volunteer-conducted polls, which are usually less trustworthy.

13. What questions were asked?
You must find out the exact wording of the poll questions. Why? Because the very wording of questions can make major differences in the results.

Perhaps the best test of any poll question is your reaction to it. On the face of it, does the question seem fair and unbiased? Does it present a balanced set of choices? Would people you know be able to answer the question?

On sensitive questions—such as abortion—the complete wording of the question should probably be included in your story. But at the very least, you must have the exact wording as you are preparing the story.

It may well be worthwhile to compare the results of several different polls from different organizations on these sensitive questions. In that case, you should be careful to compare both the results and the exact wording of the questions.

14. In what order were the questions asked?
Sometimes the very order of the questions can have an impact on the results. Often that impact is intentional; sometimes, it is not. The impact of order can often be subtle.

During troubled economic times, for example, if people are asked what they think of the economy before they are asked their opinion of the president, the presidential popularity rating will probably be lower than if you had reversed the questions. And in good economic times, the opposite is true.

In political polls, campaign consultants often ask a series of questions about various issue positions of the candidates—or various things that could be said about the candidates. After these questions are asked, the horse-race question is asked, usually for the second time in the poll. This second horserace question is then examined to see if the questions about issues and positions swayed any opinions. This may be a good way to test issues. It is a poor way to test the candidates' true standings in the public's mind.

What is important here is whether the questions that went before the important question affect the results. If the poll asks questions about abortion just before a question about an abortion ballot measure, those previous questions could sway the results.

15. What other polls have been done on this topic? Do they say the same thing? If they are different, why are they different?
Results of other polls—a candidate's opponent, public polls, media polls, or whatever— should be used to check and contrast poll results you have in hand.

If the polls differ, first check the timing of when the interviewing was done. The different poll results may demonstrate a swing in public opinion.

If the polls were done about the same time, and no other factor seems to explain the disagreement, go to each poll sponsor and ask for an explanation of the differences. Conflicting polls often make good stories.

16. So, the poll says the race is all over. What now?
No matter how good the poll, no matter how wide the margin, no matter how big the sample, a pre-election poll does not show that one candidate has the race "locked up." Things change—often and dramatically in politics.

17. Was the poll part of a fund-raising effort?
This is another example of a pseudo-poll. An organization sends out a survey form to a large list of people. The

last question usually asks for a contribution from the respondent. He or she is expected to send money to support the organization or pay for tabulating the survey.

The people who respond to these types of surveys are likely to be those who agree with the organization's goals. Also, the questions are usually loaded and the results, meaningless.

This technique is used by a wide variety of organizations from political parties and special-interest groups to charitable organizations. Again, if the poll in question is part of a fund-raising pitch, pitch it—in the waste basket.

18. So I've asked all the questions. The answers sound good. The poll is correct, right?
Usually, yes. However, remember that the laws of chance alone say that the results of one poll out of 20 may be skewed away from the public's real views just because of sampling error.

19. With all these potential problems, should we ever report poll results?
Yes. Because reputable polling organizations consistently do good work. In spite of the difficulties, the public opinion survey, correctly conducted, is still the best objective measure of the state of the views of the public.

20. Is this poll worth reporting?
If the poll was conducted correctly, and you have been able to obtain the information outlined here, your news judgment and that of your editors should be applied to polls, as it is to every other element of a story.