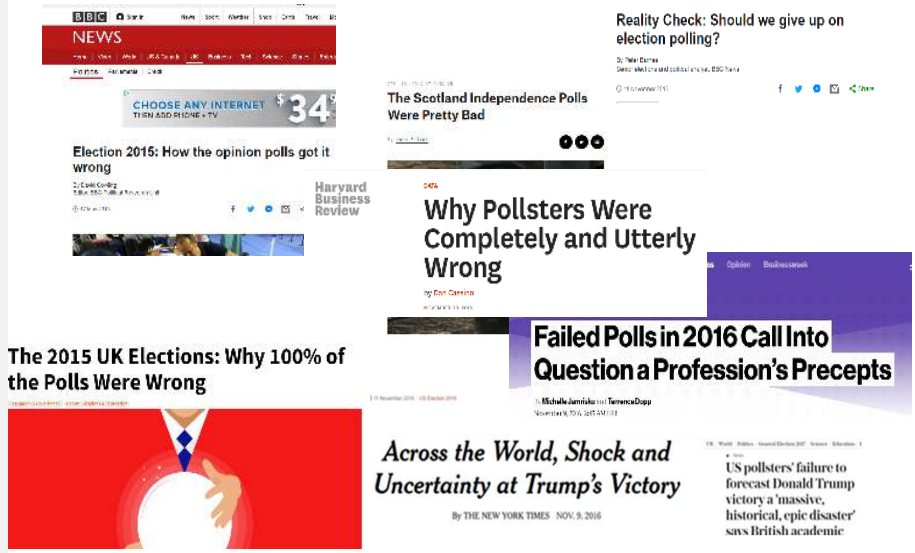
Pew Research Center

AAPOR Webinar for Journalists
January 15, 2020

Accuracy in election polling

Courtney Kennedy
Director of Survey Research

NARRATIVE: 2016 PROVED POLLING IS BROKEN



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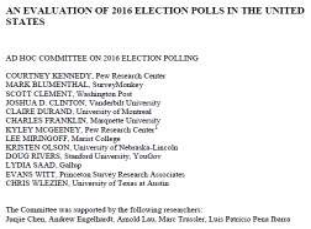
The facts about 2016 polling

- 2016 proved that many state-level polls, which are often underfunded and poorly conducted, did not work.
- Rigorous national polls, by contrast, were very accurate by historical standards.
- One of the primary reasons that the state polls were off is fixable.

  (Reporters are part of the solution for getting pollsters to make that fix!)


AN EVALUATION OF 2016 ELECTION POLLS IN THE UNITED STATES

AD HOC COMMITTEE ON 2016 ELECTION POLLING

COURTNEY KENNEDY, Pew Research Center
MARK BLUMENTHAL, SurveyMonkey
SCOTT CLEMENT, Washington Post
JOSHUA D. CLINTON, Vanderbilt University
CLAIRE DURAND, University of Montreal
CHARLES FRANKLIN, Marquette University
KYLEY MCGEENEY, Pew Research Center
LEE MIRINGOFF, Marist College
KRISTEN OLSON, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
DOUG RIVERS, Stanford University, YouGov
LYDIA SAAD, Gallup
EVANS WITT, Princeton Survey Research Associates
CHRIS WLEZIEN, University of Texas at Austin

The Committee was supported by the following researchers:
Jaqiie Chen, Andrew Engelhardt, Arnold Lau, Marc Trussler, Luis Patricio Pena Bueno

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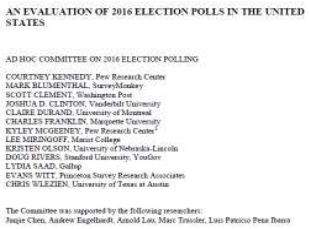
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Exhaustive post-mortem on 2016 election polls
Available at: https://www.aapor.org/Education-Resources/Reports/An-Evaluation-of-2016-Election-Polls-in-the-U-S.aspx

The national polls in 2016 were quite accurate

- Polls, on average, came within about 1 percentage point of the national popular vote margin

	Polling Average
Hillary Clinton	45.5%
Donald Trump	42.2%
	Clinton +3.3

Source: Real Clear Politics

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	Polling Average	Election Result
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Donald Trump	42.2%	46.1%
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In 2016 national polls were not broken

Source: Real Clear Politics

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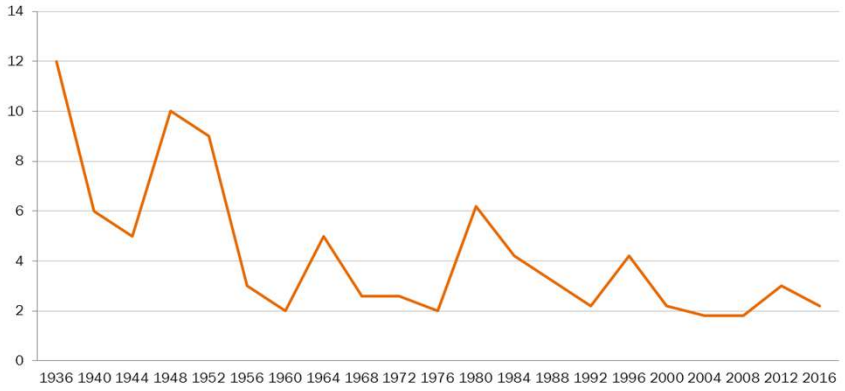
Error in national polls was historically low in 2016

Average absolute error in national election polls



Source: National Council on Public Polls

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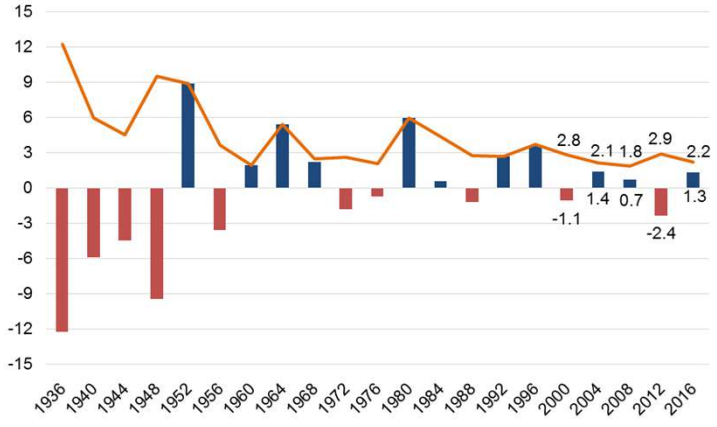
Some years polls over-estimate GOP support; other years they over-estimate Democratic support

Average absolute error in national election polls



Source: National Council on Public Polls

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You may be thinking…

That's fine, but polling led everyone to believe Trump would lose. So what gives?

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You may be thinking…

That's fine, but polling led everyone to believe Trump would lose. So what gives?

1) **The Electoral College.** National polls can be accurate *and* point to the wrong winner
2) **State polling truly had a bad year in 2016.**

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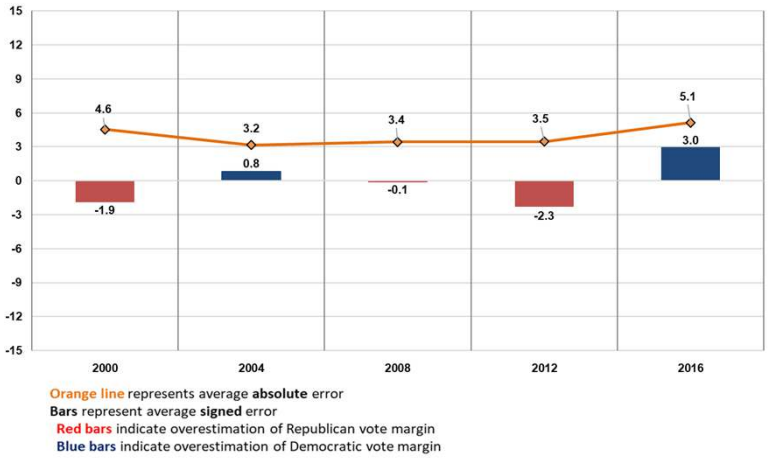
In 2016 state polls did have an historically bad year



Source: AAPOR Evaluation of 2016 U.S. Election Polls

Why did state polls do poorly in 2016?

1. In key states late-deciding voters broke heavily for Trump
2. Most state polls were not weighted properly

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In key states late-deciding voters broke heavily for Trump

	% Voters who decided in final week	Vote choice among voters deciding in final week		Vote choice among voters deciding earlier		Estimated Trump gain from late deciders	Election (%Trump-%Clinton)
		Trump	Clinton	Trump	Clinton		
Florida	11%	55%	38%	48%	49%	2.0%	1.2%
Michigan	13%	50%	39%	48%	48%	1.4%	0.2%
Pennsylvania	15%	54%	37%	50%	48%	2.3%	1.2%
Wisconsin	14%	59%	30%	47%	49%	4.3%	0.8%
National	13%	45%	42%	46%	49%	0.8%	-2.1%

- Late-deciding voters in FL, MI, PA, WI broke for Trump by double-digit margins.
- Polls in September, October were conducted too early to detect this

Source: Analysis from Aaron Blake (2016) using NEP exit poll data

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Many state polls didn't even ask about education, and those that did had 10 to 20 points too many college grads

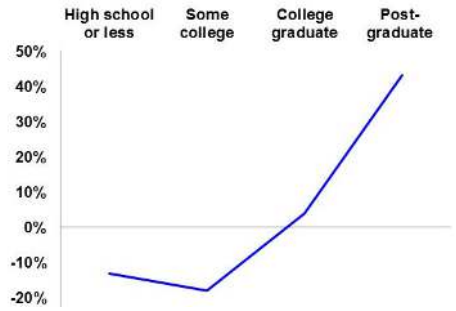
% College graduate – actual 2016 voters versus IVR polls

Michigan		Pennsylvania		Wisconsin	
CPS benchmark	38%	CPS benchmark	36%	CPS benchmark	37%
Gravis	53%	Gravis	57%	Emerson	48%
Emerson College	48%	Emerson College	54%	Mitchell	N/A
Mitchell Research	N/A	Harper	54%	Trafalgar	N/A
Trafalgar Group	N/A	Trafalgar Group	N/A	PPP	N/A
EPIC/MRA	N/A	PPP	N/A		
PPP	N/A				

Source: AAPOR Evaluation of 2016 U.S. Election Polls

Most state polls were not weighted properly

Democratic margin in 2016 Wisconsin vote



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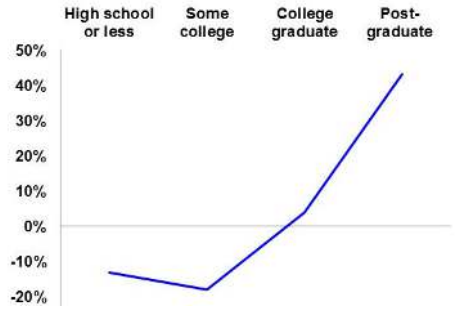

- College graduates are more likely to take surveys than less educated adults. This has been true for decades.
- Most national pollsters adjust ("weight") for this issue, but most state pollsters do not.
- In 2016 college grads broke for Clinton and less educated broke for Trump.

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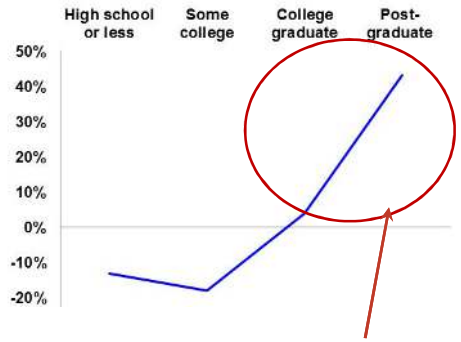
Democratic margin in 2016 Wisconsin vote



Put simply, most state polls had too many of these people responding, and they did not fix it. This led them to systematically over-state Clinton's support.

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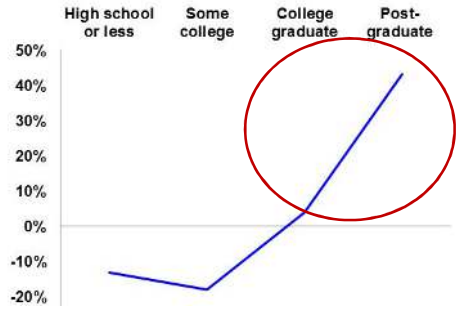
Most state polls were not weighted properly

Democratic margin in 2016 Wisconsin vote



* A plea to reporters *
Only report on polls that adjust for this (i.e., weight on education). You are a key audience for public pollsters

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Most state polls were not weighted properly

Share of Pollsters That Adjusted on Education in Weighting

Type of Poll	Share of polls that weighted for education	Number of final polls
Michigan polls	18%	11
Wisconsin polls	27%	11
North Carolina polls	29%	14
Florida polls	31%	16
Pennsylvania polls	33%	18
Ohio polls	36%	11
National polls	52%	21

Source: AAPOR Evaluation of 2016 U.S. Election Polls

What about the "Shy Trump" effect?

- Do some people, some times lie to pollsters? Yes, but five different tests indicate that this was at best a minor contributor to polling errors in 2016.
- There is little to no empirical support for the Shy Trump phenomenon.
- Speculation that "Trump voters must feel the need to lie to pollsters" perhaps says more about the biases of pundits than actual Trump voters.

Test 1. Was support for Trump higher in polls without interviewers?
No. Trump's support was similar for telephone and online polls.

Test 2. Were people more likely to report being undecided in interviewer polls?
No. Undecided rates were higher in online polls (with no interviewer)

Test 3. In randomized experiments, was Trump support higher in online polls?
Not statistically significant, though in the expected direction.

Test 4. Was the error in Trump support larger that GOP Senate support?
No. Those error levels were almost identical.

Test 5. Did white male phone interviewers elicit higher support for Trump?
No compelling evidence that interviewer gender or race affected responses.

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HOW DID POLLING DO IN 2018?

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In 2018 midterm election polls performed well in general

- National polling of the U.S. House vote was very accurate

	Polling Average
House Dem. candidate	49.7%
House Rep. candidate	42.4%
	Dem +7.3

Source: Real Clear Politics

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In 2018 midterm election polls performed well in general

- National polling of the U.S. House vote was very accurate

	Polling Average	Election Result
House Dem. candidate	49.7%	53.3%
House Rep. candidate	42.4%	44.9%
	Dem +7.3	*Dem +8.4*

Source: Real Clear Politics

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Source: Real Clear Politics

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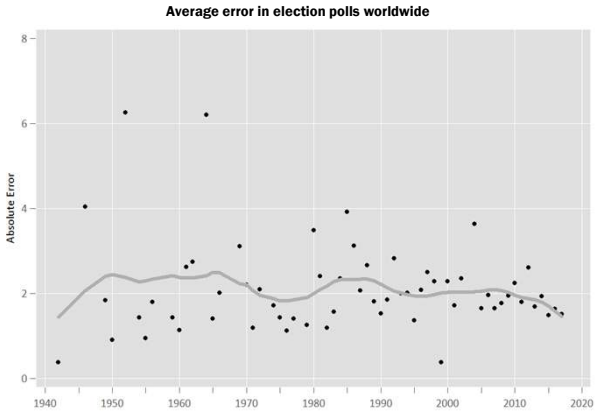
Polling accuracy over time around the world (45 countries)



Source: Jennings and Wlezien (2018)

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Takeaways

- The record clear: polling writ large is not broken
- In 2016 state pollsters had an historically bad year, but national pollsters did not
- The mix of state level pollsters is different from – only partially overlapping – with the mix of national pollsters
- State pollsters in general often have fewer resources
- Pollsters in general, also did well in 2018
- Some pollsters appear to have learned the lessons from 2016. Others have not and continue to release results based on samples that substantially over-represent college graduates

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Questions?

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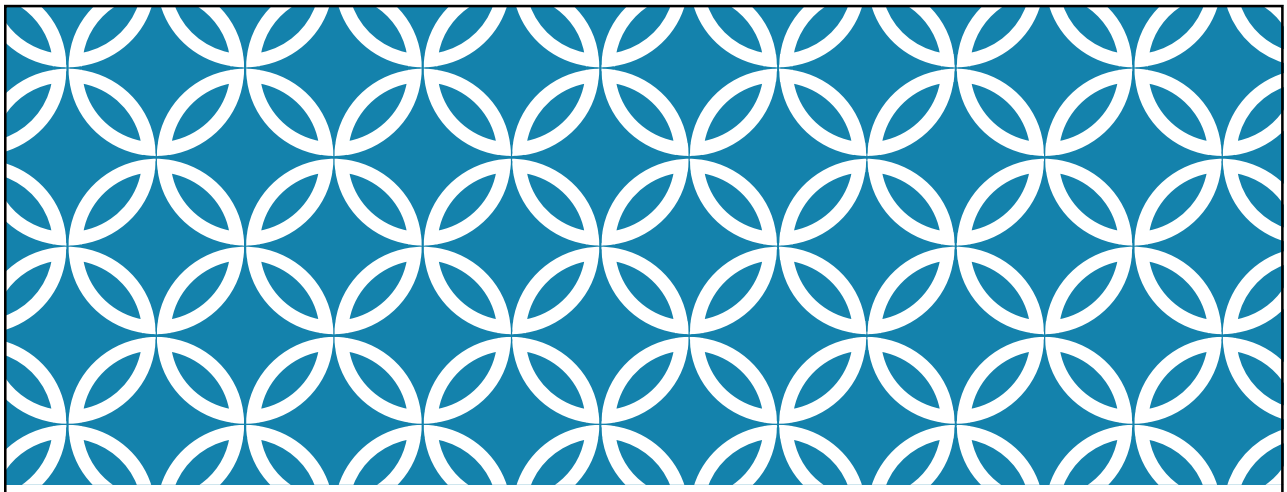


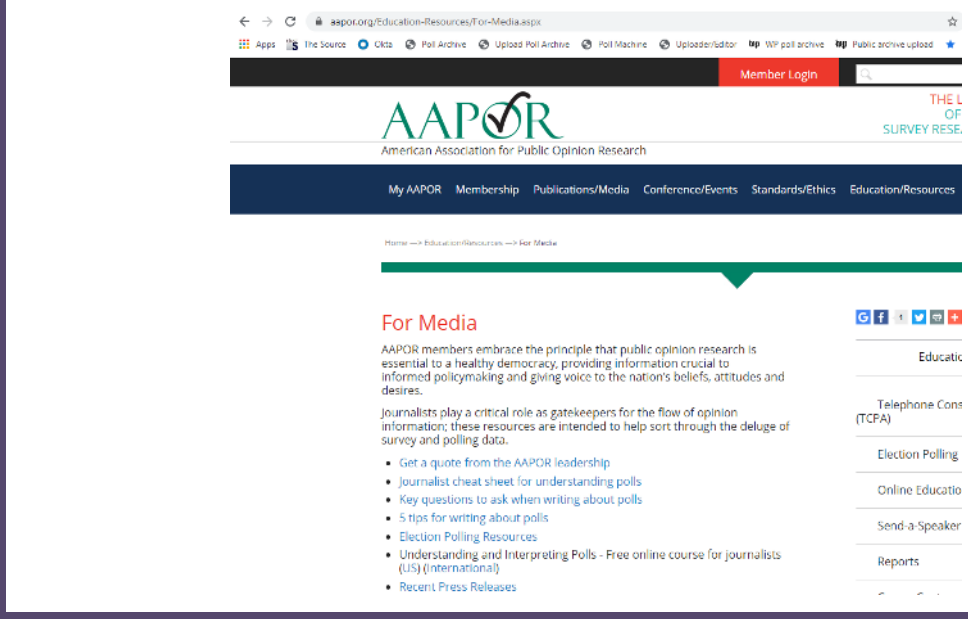
AAPOR TOOLS FOR JOURNALISTS

Presented by Emily Guskin
AAPOR Journalist Education Chair

TOOLS FOR JOURNALISTS

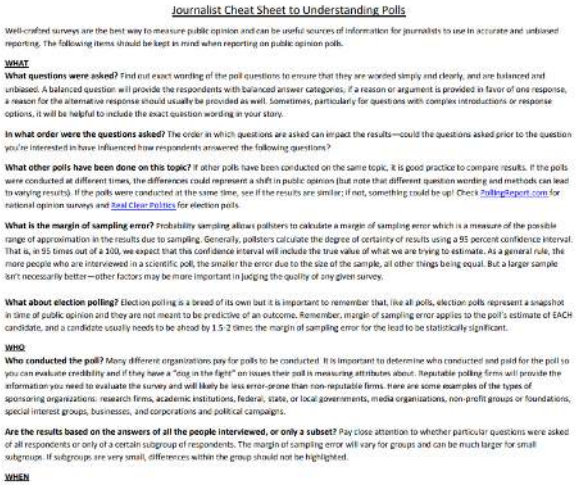
- Help you to decide whether a poll is quality or not
- Guidance on what to look for in a poll
- Tips on writing about polling
- Specifics for election polling
- Free online course for reporting on polling
- Access to AAPOR leadership for quotes in poll stories

https://www.aapor.org/Education-Resources/For-Media.aspx



JOURNALIST CHEAT SHEET

- Lists items to keep in mind when reporting on public polls
- One sheet to print out
- Links for finding polls
- Clear guidance on what to do



Journalist Cheat Sheet to Understanding Polls

Well-crafted surveys are the best way to measure public opinion and can be useful sources of information for journalists to use in accurate and unbiased reporting. The following items should be kept in mind when reporting on public opinion polls.

WHAT

What questions were asked? Find out exact wording of the poll questions to ensure that they are worded simply and clearly, and are balanced and unbiased. A balanced question will provide the respondents with balanced answer categories. If a reason or argument is provided in favor of one response, a reason for the alternative response should usually be provided as well. Sometimes, particularly for questions with complex introductions or response options, it will be helpful to include the exact question wording in your story.

In what order were the questions asked? The order in which questions are asked can impact the results—could the questions asked prior to the question you're interested in have influenced how respondents answered the following questions?

What other polls have been done on this topic? If other polls have been conducted on the same topic, it is good practice to compare results. If the polls were conducted at different times, the differences could represent a shift in public opinion (but note that different question wording and methods can lead to varying results). If the polls were conducted at the same time, see if the results are similar; if not, something could be up! Check PollingReport.com for national opinion surveys and Real Clear Politics for election polls.

What is the margin of sampling error? Probability sampling allows pollsters to calculate a margin of sampling error which is a measure of the possible range of approximation in the results due to sampling. Generally, pollsters calculate the degree of certainty of results using a 95 percent confidence interval. That is, in 95 times out of a 100, we expect that this confidence interval will include the true value of what we are trying to estimate. As a general rule, the more people who are interviewed in a scientific poll, the smaller the error due to the size of the sample, all other things being equal. But a larger sample isn't necessarily better—other factors may be more important in judging the quality of any given survey.

What about election polling? Election polling is a breed of its own but it is important to remember that, like all polls, election polls represent a snapshot in time of public opinion and they are not meant to be predictive of an outcome. Remember, margin of sampling error applies to the poll's estimate of EACH candidate, and a candidate usually needs to be ahead by 1.5-2 times the margin of sampling error for the lead to be statistically significant.

WHO

Who conducted the poll? Many different organizations pay for polls to be conducted. It is important to determine who conducted and paid for the poll so you can evaluate credibility and if they have a "dog in the fight" on issues their poll is measuring attributes about. Reputable polling firms will provide the information you need to evaluate the survey and will likely be less error-prone than non-reputable firms. Here are some examples of the types of sponsoring organizations: research firms, academic institutions, federal, state, or local governments, media organizations, non-profit groups or foundations, special interest groups, businesses, and corporations and political campaigns.

Are the results based on the answers of all the people interviewed, or only a subset? Pay close attention to whether particular questions were asked of all respondents or only of a certain subgroup of respondents. The margin of sampling error will vary for groups and can be much larger for small subgroups. If subgroups are very small, differences within the group should not be highlighted.

WHEN

QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN WRITING ABOUT POLLS

- 12 questions to ask before deciding to report on a poll
- Examples:

1. Who paid for the poll and why was it done?
2. Who did the poll?
3. How was the poll conducted?
4. How many people were interviewed and what's the margin of sampling error?

Etc.

5 TIPS FOR WRITING ABOUT POLLS

- Medium post by Pew's John Gramlich
- Tips include explanations of why each is important
- Including:
- Always be clear about who was surveyed
- Pay attention to margins of error
- It's good to provide context, but it's dangerous to ascribe causality
- Etc.

ELECTION POLLING RESOURCES

- Explanation of likely voters
- Sampling methods
- Automated polls
- Online panels
- More on margin of error
- Nonresponse effects
- Exit polls
- Etc.

UNDERSTANDING AND INTERPRETING POLLS COURSE

- US and international versions of *free* and self-directed online course to help you cover polls
- Will help you:
  - identify elements of a valid poll
  - understand the methods box
  - analyze the quality of questions
  - understand weighting
  - and more!

FAQ

One place to go to find answers to questions you might have about surveys and polling with simple explanations written in plain English

Poll & Survey FAQ

The information here is designed to help you wade through the massive amount of data presented in the news and on the Web as polls and surveys. Learn how to tell if research is valid. Find out what information every story about polls should contain. Can't find what you need here? Send your question to FAQ request.

- Election Polling Resources
- What is a "Push" Poll?
- Do Response Rates Matter?
- What is a Random Sample?
- Why Different Election Polls Sometimes Have Different Results
- Is Survey Research Covered by the Do Not Call Rules?
- What Information Should Survey Researchers Disclose?

Other Key Issues

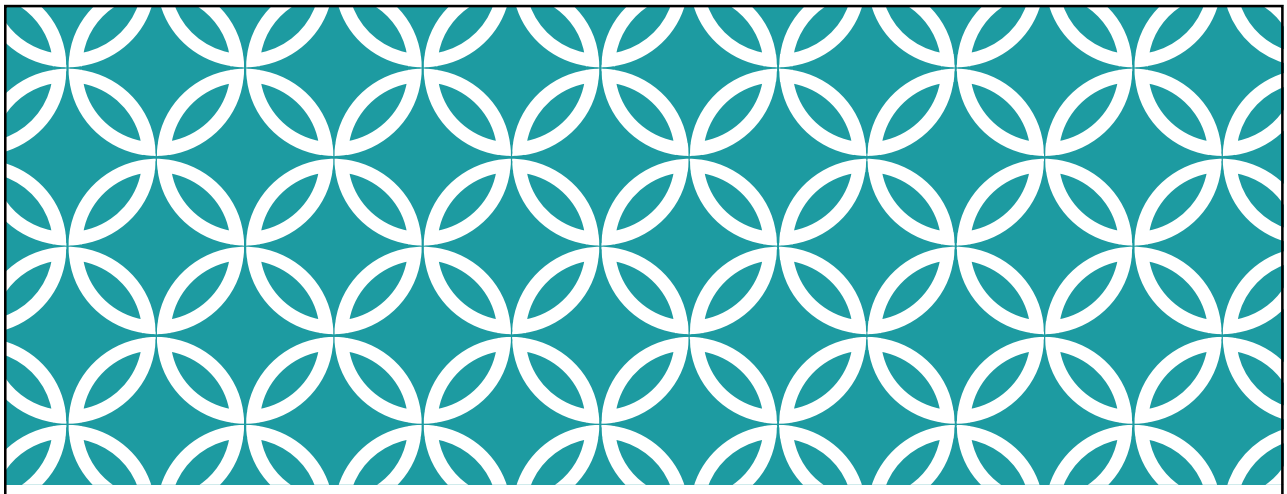
- Question Wording
- AAPOR Standards & Ethics

Learn More About Polling

- Roper Center
- Polling Columns and Commentary

CONTACT AAPOR

- Need a quote?
- Need more explanation?
- Reach out to someone from AAPOR by emailing experts@aapor.org



THANKS FOR LISTENING!

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