



What Is Public Opinion Polling and Why Is It Important?

GALLUP  **WORLD Poll**

Methodological Design
Sampling
Statistical Validity



What's a public opinion poll?

A scientific, nonbiased public opinion poll is a type of survey or inquiry designed to measure the public's views regarding a particular topic or series of topics. Trained interviewers ask questions of people chosen at random from the population being measured. Responses are given, and interpretations are made based on the results. It is important in a random sample that everyone in the population being studied has an equal chance of participating. Otherwise, the results could be biased and, therefore, not representative of the population. Representative samples are chosen in order to make generalizations about a particular population being studied.

Why are opinion polls important? *Helping regular people be heard*

Polls tell us what proportion of a population has a specific viewpoint. They do not explain why respondents believe as they do or how to change their minds. This is the work of social scientists and scholars. Polls are simply a measurement tool that tells us how a population thinks and feels about any given topic.

This can be useful in helping different cultures understand one another because it gives the people a chance to speak for themselves instead of letting only vocal media stars speak on behalf of all. Opinion polling gives people who do not usually have access to the media an opportunity to be heard.

How are the surveys conducted?

Two of the most common ways in which public opinion polls are conducted are telephone and face-to-face interviews. Other methods include mail, online, and self-administered surveys.

How are face-to-face samples selected?

Such surveys, also known as "in-person" interviews, are conducted with the interviewer and the interviewee next to each other. The interviewer reads material from

the questionnaire and records the interviewee's responses. At times the interviewer may hand a card to the respondent for him/her to select a response(s).

Scientific face-to-face surveys are normally conducted using geographic-area probability sampling. Some refer to this as "block sampling." This is done by dividing a given population into blocks of roughly equal population density. Each block is further divided into blocks until a single household is chosen at random, and then a single respondent is randomly chosen from the household.

How does one read opinion polls?

Percentages in an opinion poll reflect the proportion of a given population that has a particular response. If the results of a scientific poll claiming a 3-point margin of error say that 30% of Americans like ice cream, this means that if we asked all Americans this question, we would expect between 27% and 33% to say they like ice cream.

How are scientific polls different from other polls?

When a radio or TV station asks its listeners to call in to vote on a particular issue, the results of this activity are not scientific because the sample is not representative. The sample reflects only the people who happen to be watching or listening to the show and are motivated to call in. This cannot be generalized to represent the whole population because the respondents were not randomly selected, and therefore, they are not representative.

For more information, contact Eric Nielsen, Senior Director of Media Strategies, The Gallup Organization, at eric_nielsen@gallup.com. Mr. Nielsen will handle your inquiries for more detailed information or any questions regarding the methods used in the Gallup World Poll.