



## What is a Public Opinion Polling and Why is it Important?

GALLUP  **WORLD Poll**

Methodological Design  
Sampling  
Statistical Validity

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## What's a public opinion poll?

A scientific, non-biased public opinion poll is a type of survey or inquiry designed to measure what the public's views are regarding a particular topic or series of topics. Questions are asked by trained interviewers to 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 portion of a population has a specific view point. They do not explain why they 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 very 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 that public opinion polls are conducted include: telephone and/or face-to-face interviews. Other methods include mail, on-line and self-administered surveys. How are face-to-face samples selected?

Face-to-face 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 responses. At times the interviewer may hand a card to the respondent for him/her to select 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% 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 27-33% to say they like ice-cream.

## How are scientific polls different from other polls?

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