Topic 3.4: Political Impacts of Public Opinion Polls

Public Opinion Polls have become an prominent feature of American politics. A **poll** is a survey given to a small sample of chosen respondents as a way to reveal what larger numbers of people think about a political issue or election candidate.


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Poll results are often widely reported in both print and online media. They are meant to provide information about people and politics that

would not be readily available in other ways.

As a matter of media literacy, it is important to understand what polls can and cannot tell us about what people want from government or who people want to elect to public office. There are two important factors to keep in mind.

First, ideally polls support democracy. The information they provide contributes to everyone's knowledge and understanding of politics and policy. As the Pew Research Center crucially noted, "in nations without robust polling, the head of government can simply *decree* citizens' wants and needs instead" ([Key Things to Know about Election Polling in the United States](#), August 5, 2020, para. 1).

Second, in reality polls have limitations and shortcomings. Any poll is just a snapshot in time and may not reflect people's changing attitudes or behaviors. For example, a person may complete a poll saying they intend to vote in an election and then decide not to. Or, a person may not answer a poll honestly, saying they voted for one candidate when in fact they voted for another candidate instead. For these reasons, polls may miss the levels of support or opposition for issues or candidates actually present in society.
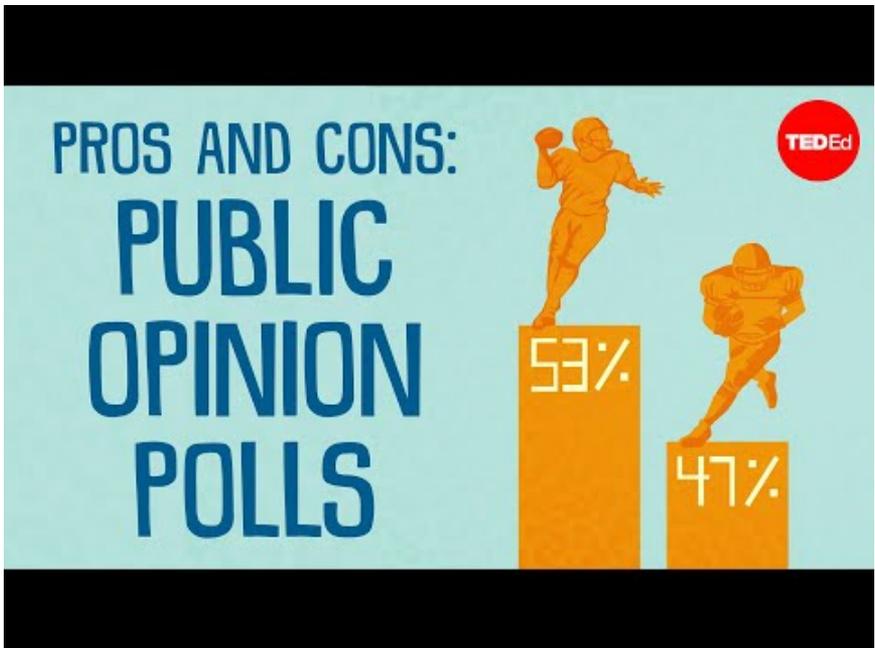
In the following activities, you will gain firsthand experience in conducting and reporting public opinion polls and then you will explore what happens when public opinion polls do not represent the opinion of the public.

Activity 1: Conduct an Opinion Poll on an Issue of Interest

- Design a list of questions to collect data about how people plan vote in an upcoming election or whether people support a currently elected political candidate of your choosing.
  - Explore the Pew Research Center's Methods 101 Series: [How do you write survey questions that accurately measure public opinion?](#)

- Here is an example prompt for election voting:
    - Who do you plan to vote for... [insert political position; president, state senate]?
- Here are some example prompts and potential responses for polls about a political candidate:
    - Do you approve or disapprove of [insert person's name]?
    - Do you support [insert person's name] policy about ...? Yes/No
- Create a list of survey questions to collect data about people's opinions of the issue you have chosen.
    - Explore the Pew Research Center's Methods 101 Series: [How do you write survey questions that accurately measure public opinion?](#)
    - Here are some example prompts and potential responses:
        - Do you support ...? Yes/No
        - Do you favor or oppose...? Favor/Oppose
        - Do you agree or disagree with the following statement...? Agree/Disagree
- Embed your questions into a [Google Form](#).
- Then, share the link to your Google Form with your family, classmates, friends, teachers, neighbors, and/or community members.
- Use the "[show summary of responses](#)" feature to analyze your results.
- Compare and contrast your responses to available state and national polls on your selected topic (e.g., here is a poll on [mask wearing during the pandemic](#) from National Geographic).
- Ask those who completed your poll what they think of public opinion polls and how reliable they are.
- **Create a newspaper article or blog post** to present your findings. Include visuals, such as graphs and charts.

Activity 2: Conduct an Opinion Poll on Election Voting or a Political Candidate

- Design a list of questions to collect data about how people plan vote in an upcoming election or whether people support a political candidate of your choosing.
    - Explore the Pew Research Center's Methods 101 Series: [How do you write survey questions that accurately measure public opinion?](#)
    - Here is an example prompt for election voting data:
        - Who do you plan to vote for... [insert political position; president, state senate]?
    - Here are some example prompts and potential responses for polls about a political candidate:
        - Do you approve or disapprove of [insert person's name]?
        - Do you support [insert person's name] policy about ...? Yes/No
- Embed your questions into a [Google Form](#).
- Then, share the link to your Google Form with your family, classmates, friends, teachers, neighbors, and/or community members.
- Use the "[show summary of responses](#)" feature to analyze your results.
- Compare and contrast your responses to available state and national polls (e.g., [Biden Approval Rating](#)).
- Ask those who completed your poll what they think of public opinion polls and how reliable they are.
- **Create your own television news report** based on your findings. Make sure to include visuals.

Activity 3: Evaluate how Election Polls can be Misleading

- Review the following resources:
  - [How Did the Media — How Did We — Get This Wrong?](#)
  - [When the media gets a close election wrong](#)
  - [The Polling Crisis is a Catastrophe for American Democracy](#)
- Then, **create a video, [podcast](#), or sketchnote** about why many people felt mislead by the media after reading the 2016 election polls.
- Bonus: Propose a way to change public opinion polling about elections so that it is more accurate.

Designing for Learning: Student-Created Activity Example

[Political Impacts of Public Opinion Polls Podcast](#)

Additional Resources

- [Q&A: After misses in 2016 and 2020, does polling need to be fixed again? What our survey experts say](#)
- [What Are Public Opinion Polls?](#) *American Historical Association*
- LEARNING PLAN: [Polling Pitfalls](#), PBS Newshour

Connecting to the eBook

Building Democracy for All: Is It Time to Adopt Instant Runoff/Ranked Choice Voting?

Connecting to the Standards

- Massachusetts Civics & Government Standards
    - *Explain the process of elections in the legislative and executive branches and the process of nomination/confirmation of individuals in the judicial and executive branches* (Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for History and Social Science) [8.T3.4]
- ISTE Standards
    - Knowledge Constructor
        - 3b: Students evaluate the accuracy, perspective, credibility and relevance of information, media, data, or other resources.
        - 3d: Students build knowledge by actively exploring real-world issues and problems, developing ideas and theories and pursuing answers and solutions.
    - Computational Thinker
        - 5b. Students collect data or identify relevant data sets, use digital tools to analyze them, and represent data in various ways to facilitate problem-solving and decision-making.
    - Creative Communicator
        - 6a: Students choose the appropriate platforms and tools for meeting the desired objectives of their creation or communication.
        - 6b: Students create original works or responsibly repurpose or remix digital resources into new creations.

- 6d: Students publish or present content that customizes the message and medium for the intended audiences.
- [DLCS Standards](#)
  - Interpersonal and Societal Impact (CAS.c)
  - Digital Tools (DTC.a)
  - Collaboration and Communication (DTC.b)
  - Research (DTC.c)
- [English Language Arts > History/Social Studies Common Core Standards](#)
  - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7
  - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.8
  - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.7
  - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.8
  - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7
  - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.8
  - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9
- [English/Language Arts Common Core Standards](#)
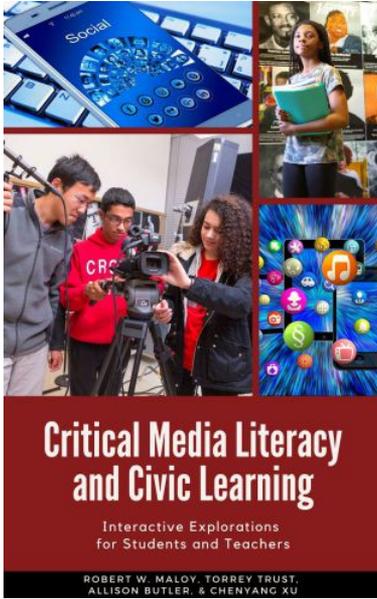
Maloy, R. W., Trust, T., , & Xu, C. (2021). *Critical Media Literacy and Civic Learning.* Equity Press. https://equitypress.org/mediaandciviclearning