

MRS Guidance note

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WHAT ARE OPINION POLLS?

MRS guidance on how
to read opinion polls



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What are opinion polls?

1.1 MRS guidance on how to read opinion polls

- + An **opinion poll** is a survey of public opinion obtained by questioning a **representative sample** of individuals selected from a clearly defined target audience or population. For example, it may be a survey of c. 1,000 UK (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) adults aged 18 years and over. When conducted appropriately, opinion polls can add value to the national debate on topics of interest.
- + Typically, **individuals or organisations** commission a research organisation to undertake an opinion poll. The results to an opinion poll are either carried out for **private use** or for **publication**.

1.2 What is Sampling?

- + Opinion polls are carried out among a **sub-set** of a given target audience or population, and this sub-set is called a **sample**.
- + Whilst the number included in a sample may differ, opinion poll samples are typically between c. **1,000 and 2,000** participants.
- + When a sample is selected from a clearly defined target audience or population, the possibility of a **sampling error** is introduced. This is because the demographic profile of the sub-sample selected may not be identical to the profile of the target audience / population.

1.3 How are samples representative?

- + Opinion polls try, as best they can, to be as **representative** as possible of a target audience / population.
- + The extent to which samples are truly representative of a given target audience or population is based upon the attention and preparation that has gone into the set up and design of the opinion poll, and the care and attention that has been placed on the sample design and selection.
- + A sample which is not truly representative of a target audience / population is sometimes described as being **biased** and therefore not representative. If the bias is known (for example, including too few males and too many females in the sample) it is sometimes possible to correct for the known bias by **weighting** the survey data to reflect the true target audience or population proportions.
- + There are **confidence levels** that apply to representative samples – this is the probability that the sample accurately reflect opinions of that target audience / population. Opinion poll findings are a snapshot of opinion of the population at a given time that hold that opinion which can be extrapolated to the population as a whole.
- + As only a sample of a target audience / population is typically researched, particular **levels of significance** apply to the results of opinion polls, and these reflect probabilities that opinion poll findings are a true reflection of the target audience / population characteristics being sampled.
- + The **confidence intervals** are also reflective of the degree of approximation in opinion poll findings. Confidence intervals are an attempt to place mathematical limits to any error which may have occurred in a sample for the opinion poll.
- + To provide an example, a typical opinion poll will present the findings as a percentage – and in a hypothetical example, 85% of UK adults 18+ say they are either “very satisfied” (45%) or “fairly satisfied” (40%) with a particular Local Authority service, with a 5% level of significance with a confidence interval of, for example +/- 3%, means we can be 95% confident that the true estimate of opinion poll results can range from 82% - 88% (i.e. 85% +/- 3%).

1.4 How are samples selected?

- + There are a number of different ways in which participants can be selected for an opinion poll sample and this depends on the target audience / population under scrutiny, the ease with which those in the target audience / population can be identified, selected and interviewed as well as the timing and budget available for the opinion poll.
- + Broadly speaking, there are typically two types of sample selection used for opinion polls: **Probability** and **Non-probability samples**. Currently, the majority of opinion polls use non-probability sampling as these are more cost-effective.
- + **Probability samples:** Probability samples are also known as “**random samples**”, and this is a method of selecting a sample whereby every member of a target audience / population has an equal chance of being selected to the sample. This is the purest and most robust type of sample and minimises the likelihood of bias. Random sampling draws on actual addresses, telephone numbers, etc. and unlike **Quota sampling** (see overleaf under non-probability sampling). For random samples interviewers (if interviewers are being used to administer interviews) have to make call-backs to, for example, specific household addresses or telephone numbers until interviews are achieved – with each subsequent call being made at different times of the day and at different days of the week – until an outcome is recorded (i.e. where an interview is achieved, a refusal is given or where no contact has been made after a minimum of a given number of call-backs). Repeated attempts to contact research participants makes this approach more expensive and the fieldwork time consuming, however it does provide a more accurate reflection of the target audience / population under scrutiny.
- + **Non probability samples:** For opinion polls these typically take the form of **Quota sampling** when profiles of target audiences / populations are known (e.g. UK Adults 18+ in age). Quotas are set to reflect the socio-demographic profile of those in target audiences / populations and are usually determined on characteristics such as age, gender, geographic area residence, work status and education. As a result, samples will reflect the target audience / population on these key characteristics. The survey data are then weighted to the

true population proportions of the target audience (to correct for any under or over-representation on these key characteristics). This is typical for opinion polls as it is an effective, efficient and a more cost-effective method of data collection from participants.

1.5 How are opinion polls conducted?

- + There are a variety of ways in which research participants can be interviewed – either interviewer administered (telephone or face-to-face with interviewers asking questions) or self-completion (an online survey). Currently, most opinion polls are undertaken online where interviews are carried out among participants that are part of an online panel.
- + Research participants are asked (if interviewer administered) or presented (if self-completion) a series of questions contained within a questionnaire. It is important that questions asked as part of opinion polls are credible and fit for the purpose intended – any questions asked need to be accurate, balanced, and unambiguous and must not lead research participants to a particular point of view.
- + Once the data collection is complete and any resultant data analysed results from opinion polls should be **reported in an accurate and balanced way**, to ensure that any reporting is a true reflection of opinion polling results.

1.6 Multilevel Regression and Post-stratification for local area opinion polls

- + Some Opinion Polls use Multilevel Regression and Post-stratification (MRP). MRP is a statistical method that uses large national surveys (often with 6,000 to 100,000 people) to produce estimates of public opinion for small local areas, like political constituencies. The process works in a few key steps. First, a statistical model is constructed that summarises how public opinion or voting intention differs depending on the characteristics of (i) individual survey participants and (ii) the area in which they live. This model is then used to generate estimates of the balance of opinion or vote intentions among different types of

people living in different areas (e.g. vote intention among 55–64-year-old men who voted Conservative at the last election and who have a university degree or higher qualification).

- + Using external data, for example, the Census to know how many people from each sub-group live in a particular area, the predictions are weighted and combined to create an overall opinion estimate for that specific locality. However, MRP is not universally applicable. Its success depends entirely on a strong link between the characteristics used in the model and the opinion being measured. For example, it's very effective for predicting voting intention because past voting is a strong predictor of future voting. The technique also requires that the same questions are being asked and are relevant in all areas. When evaluating results from an MRP analysis, practitioners should ask similar questions as for other opinion polls.

Checklist

Ten Questions to Ask when Evaluating Opinion Polls

Who has commissioned the opinion poll?

- + Consider who has commissioned an opinion poll and do they have a particular interest in the outcome?
- + Look at the way in which an opinion poll has been carried out and reported as this will help you to make a judgement about the accuracy and balance of the entire exercise.

Who has undertaken the opinion poll research?

- + Check the credentials of an organisation and/or individuals who have undertaken an opinion poll to help determine whether they are suitable qualified. Are they reputable and/or members of a recognised and reputable organisation and/or professional association?
- + MRS members and MRS Company Partners are regulated by the Market Research Society (MRS) and its Code of Conduct which covers all of research, including polling, and contains rules on research design, implementation and reporting. This includes an obligation to comply with reasonable requests to make available to anyone the information necessary to assess the validity of any published findings.
- + Organisations that are members of the British Polling Council (BPC) adhere to the BPC Rules which requires that relevant information is disclosed concerning the polling methods that are used.

- + Other countries have polling organisations that practitioners may belong to including: the World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR), American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR), ESOMAR, etc.
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Has the opinion poll been carried out among the appropriate and clearly defined target audience / population? Are there any groups missing?

- + Evaluate target audiences / populations of interest in totality and see if any groups are under or overrepresented or missing, and if it is the appropriate audience.
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Is the methodological approach appropriate?

- + For results of an opinion poll to have value samples must be representative of a clearly defined target audience or population. Opinion polls should provide contextual information setting out a definition on the target audience, how samples were selected and how opinions were gathered and analysed, and the steps taken to ensure samples are representative, the questions asked accurate and in an appropriate way, and the results reported upon in an accurate way. If this information is not provided ask for it. Once this information is available a judgement on the quality of the opinion poll can be made.
 - + Evaluate the methods of data collection and the way in which samples have been selected.
 - + Take care to ensure opinion polls are not **straw poll/voodoo poll**, which are unrepresentative polls with little or no value.
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Is the sample representative of the target audience / population, or not?

- + Is the sample representative of a clearly defined target audience or population under scrutiny, or not?
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- + Evaluate the demographic profile of the entire target audience / population and see if the proportions represented in the sample reflect those in the population as a whole. For example, if an opinion poll is being carried out among GB adults 18 years and over and 52% of those in the population are female then 52% of the sample should also be female. In particular, check the profile of all the key demographic characteristics such as age, gender, geographic region, work status and education (and particularly those upon which any quotas have been for a quota sample).

Are the questions asked appropriate, accurate, balanced and unambiguous?

- + Scrutinise questionnaires and evaluate the introductions as well as questions being asked to see if they are accurate, balanced and unambiguous and fit for the purpose intended.
- + Particularly evaluate the following:
- + Is the introduction appropriate and not leading research participants to a particular view or opinion?
- + Have the right / appropriate questions been asked and cover what needs to be covered?
- + Are the questions clear, specific and easy for the participants to understand?
- + Are the questions appropriate for the target audience / population, avoid jargon and written in plain English?
- + Are the questions not too long or complicated?
- + Are the questions asked in a sensitive way so not to offend or be insensitive in nature to participants?
- + Do the questions contain information that is accurate?
- + Are research participants able to provide information in a way that reflects the view they want to express, including don't know / prefer not to say, where appropriate?
- + Are the questions being asked balanced or are research participants being led towards a particular point of view?

- + Have the questions avoided multiple concepts (i.e. asking a question where the answer could relate to only part of the question)?
- + Are the questions asked in an appropriate order which minimises the risk of order bias?

Have the survey data been weighted and is the weighting accurate?

- + If an opinion polling sample is biased, and under- or over-represents particular characteristics, for example, too few young participants, too many from the Northeast of England, etc. it is possible to weight opinion polling data to reflect the true target audience / population proportions.
- + If opinion polling data has been weighted, has the weighting been carried out in an accurate and appropriate way? Does the demographic profile (on key demographics) of the final sample match that of the target audience / population?

Are the data tables / analysis accurate and, if published, is there a Technical Note accompanying the tables / analysis?

- + A Technical Note should accompany opinion poll results outlining the way in which research participants are selected, the profile and composition of samples, and what, if any, weights are applied to opinion polling data. Scrutinise the technical details, the profile of samples and evaluate whether or not samples reflect demographic profiles of target audiences / populations.
- + If data tables have not been published, ask for a copy.
- + Published opinion polls should include sufficient background and contextual information to enable users of opinion polls to interpret the information. The background and contextual information should include:
 - + Research agency conducting the Opinion Poll
 - + Name of the client which commissioned an opinion poll

- + The target audience / population of interest (e.g. UK adults 18+ etc.)
- + Whether or not the sample is representative of the target audience / population of interest.
 - + Dates of data collection
 - + Method/s of data collection / obtaining research participant responses (e.g. online, face-to-face, telephone)
 - + Method of sample selection (e.g. quota sample) and whether the data were weighted
 - + The percentages upon which any reported conclusions are based
 - + Size of the overall sample and any sub-samples reported upon
 - + Geographic area of coverage (e.g. UK/GB)
 - + Wording of questions used for any published results
 - + Anything idiosyncratic that is important for the audience to know

Is the commentary on the results accurate?

- + Are opinion poll results being reported in an accurate, balanced and unambiguous way, to ensure reports are a true reflection of opinion poll results?
- + Are the results clearly and adequately supported by the data?
- + Do the results clearly distinguish between facts, opinion, and interpretation?
- + Are any of the results reported based on a sub-sample group and, if so, is the sub-sample group sufficiently robust to be able to draw accurate conclusions?
- + When comparing opinion polling results, are the results statistically significantly different, or is it possible that the difference is due to sampling error?

Full details of the Opinion Poll

Can you obtain complete survey and methodological details?

Is there a web address or reference to where additional information and data tables / full results / actual questions asked can be found?

Useful Information Sources

[MRS](#)

[MRS Code of Conduct 2023](#)

[CIPR/MRS/RSS Best Practice Guide for using statistics in communications](#)

[MRS Polling Hub](#)

Other

[AAPOR Election Polling Resources](#)

[BBC: Editorial Guidelines – Opinion Polls, Surveys and Votes](#)

[British Polling Council: A Journalist's Guide to Opinion Polls](#)

[ESOMAR/WAPOR Guideline on Opinion Polls & Published Surveys](#)