



What are opinion polls?

MRS guidance on how to read opinion polls

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MRS Guidance Note: How to read opinion polls

MRS has produced this Guidance Note to help individuals evaluate, understand and interpret Opinion Polls. This guidance is primarily for non-researchers who commission and/or use opinion polls.

Researchers can use this guidance to support their understanding of the reporting rules contained within the MRS Code of Conduct.

Opinion Polls – The Essential Points

What is an Opinion Poll?

- 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 adults aged 16 years and over. When conducted appropriately, opinion polls can add value to the national debate on topics of interest, including voting intentions.
- 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**.

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 given 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.

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 preparation of an 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 known bias by **weighting** data to reflect the true target audience or population proportions.
- There are **confidence levels** that apply to samples – this is the probability that the sample accurately reflects opinions of that target audience / population. Opinion poll findings are a snapshot of opinion of the population that holds 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 determine mathematical limits to any error which may have occurred in a sample opinion poll. Technically speaking, one can only calculate confidence intervals from simple random samples, and that it is only really for reasons of convenience that they are applied to the kinds of samples used on opinion polls.
- To provide an example, a typical opinion poll will present the findings as a percentage. For instance, in a hypothetical example, 85% of UK adults 16+ 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%).

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**.
- **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., unlike **Quota sampling** (see below under Non-probability sampling) only people at very specific addresses or telephone numbers can be invited to participate, as these individuals have been scientifically selected. Probability/random opinion polls are normally conducted by an interviewer and require the interviewer to randomly select one individual from a selected household, and only that specific individual may be

interviewed. If the selected individual does not want to participate, no other individual in a household will be allowed to substitute them.

For random samples interviewers have to call-back selected household addresses or telephone numbers repeatedly – 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 make this approach more expensive and the fieldwork time consuming, however it does provide a more accurate reflection of the target audience / population under scrutiny. Opinion polls can be undertaken via this method, particularly by telephone.

- **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 16+ 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 and work status. As a result, samples will reflect the target audience / population. This is more typical for opinion polls as it is a more cost effective method of interviewing participants, and is better suited to meeting tight deadlines, for example as required by the media organisations which commission and publish many of the findings of political opinion polls.

How are opinion polls conducted?

- There are a variety of ways in which research participants can be interviewed – either **interviewer administered** (face-to-face or telephone with interviewers asking questions) or **self-completion** (an online or postal questionnaire where no interviewers are involved).
- 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 fieldwork 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 the opinion polling results.

Checklist - Ten Questions to Ask when Evaluating Opinion Polls

1. Who has commissioned the opinion poll?

- 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 balance of the entire exercise.

2. 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 suitably 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 Statement of Disclosure which requires that relevant information is disclosed concerning the polling methods that were 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.

3. Has the opinion poll been carried out among the appropriate target audience / population? Are there any groups missing?

- Evaluate target audiences / populations of interest in totality and see if any groups are missing and if it is the appropriate audience.

4. Is the methodological approach appropriate?

- For results of an opinion poll to have value, they 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, as well as the steps taken to ensure the results are representative. If this information is not provided ask for it. When you have this information you will be able to make a judgement on the quality of the opinion poll.

- 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.

5. Is the sample representative of the target audience / population, or not?

- Is the sample truly representative of the target audience or population under scrutiny, or not?
- 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 UK adults 16 years and over and 48% of those in the population are female then 48% of the sample should also be female. In particular, check the profile of all the key demographic characteristics such as age, gender, geographic region and work status (and particularly those upon which any quotas have been for a quota sample).

6. 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?
 - Are the questions clear and appropriate for the target audience / population and written in plain English?
 - 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 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 e.g. *Do you like tea and coffee? Yes or No.*)
 - Are the questions asked in an appropriate order and is there any likelihood of order bias?

7. 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 North East of England, etc., it is possible to weight opinion polling data to reflect the 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?

8. Are the data tables accurate and, if published, is there a Technical Note?

- 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 were 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:
 - Name of the client which commissioned an opinion poll
 - The target audience / population of interest (e.g. all adults, voters, parents, drivers etc.)
 - Dates of data collection
 - Method/s of obtaining research participant responses (e.g. face-to-face, telephone, online, panel)
 - Method of sample selection (e.g. quota sample) and if weighted, what weights were applied to samples
 - The percentages upon which any reported conclusions are based
 - Size of samples and geographic coverage
 - Wording of questions used for any published results

9. Is the commentary on the results accurate?

- Have opinion poll results been reported in an accurate, balanced and unambiguous way, to ensure reports are a true reflection of opinion poll results? Are any of the results reported based on sub-samples that are too small to be able to draw accurate and robust conclusions?
- When comparing opinion polling results, are the results statistically significantly different, or is it possible that the difference is due to sampling error?

10. 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 2014](#)

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

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](#)