



DON'T BE FOOLED BY... PUBLIC OPINION POLLS

In the heat of the Clinton impeachment hearings, angry conservative Republicans could not believe the polls: over 65 percent of Americans still approved of the job the president was doing and did not want to see him removed from office. Their conclusion? The polls were simply wrong. “The polls are targeted to get a certain answer,” said one Floridian. “There are even T-shirts in South Florida that say ‘I haven’t been polled.’”¹

Do we need to know people personally who have been polled in order to trust poll results? Of course not. But there are lots of polls out there, not only those done carefully and responsibly by reputable polling organizations but also polls done for marketing and overtly political purposes—polls with an agenda, we might say. How are we, as good scholars and citizens, to know which results are reliable indications of what the public thinks, and which are not? One thing we can do is bring our critical thinking skills to bear by asking some questions about the polls reported in the media.

WHAT TO WATCH OUT FOR²

- **Who is the poll’s sponsor?** Even if the poll was conducted by a professional polling company, it may still have been commissioned on behalf of a candidate or company. Does the sponsor have an agenda? How might that agenda influence the poll, the question wording, or the sponsor’s interpretation of events?
- **Is the sample representative?** That is, were proper sampling techniques followed? What is the margin of error?
- **From what population was the sample taken?** There is a big difference, for instance, between the preference of the general public for a presidential candidate and the preference of likely voters, especially if one is interested in predicting the election’s outcome! Read the fine print. Sometimes a polling organization will weight responses according to the likelihood that

the respondent will actually vote in order to come up with a better prediction of the election result. Some polls survey only the members of one party, or the readers of a particular magazine, or people of a certain age, depending on the information they are seeking to discover. Be sure the sample is not self-selected. Always check the population being sampled, and do not assume it is the general public.

- **How are the questions worded?** Are loaded, problematic, or vague terms used? Could the questions be confusing to the average citizen? Are the questions available with the poll results? If not, why not? Do the questions seem to lead you to respond one way or the other? Do they oversimplify issues or complicate them? If the survey claims to have detected change over time, be sure the same questions were used consistently. All these things could change the way people respond.
- **Are the survey topics ones that people are likely to have information and opinions about?** Respondents rarely admit that they don’t know how to answer a question, so responses on obscure or technical topics are likely to be more suspect than others.
- **What is the poll’s response rate?** A lot of “don’t knows,” “no opinions,” or refusals to answer can have a decided effect on the results.
- **Do the poll results differ from those of other polls, and if so, why?** Check out elections.huffingtonpost.com/pollster, www.fivethirtyeight.com, or www.realclearpolitics.com for some context. Don’t necessarily assume that a change in individual poll numbers means that public opinion has changed. What is it about this poll that might have caused the discrepancy?
- **What do the results mean?** Who is doing the interpreting? What are that person’s motives? For instance, pollsters who work for the Democratic Party will have an interpretation of the results that is favorable to Democrats, and a Republican interpretation will favor Republicans. Try interpreting the results yourself.

1. Melinda Henneberger, “Where G.O.P. Gathers, Frustration Does Too,” *New York Times*, February 1, 1999, 3.
2. Some of these questions are based in part on similar advice given to poll watchers in Herbert Asher, *Polling and the Public: What Every Citizen Should Know*, 7th ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2007), 206–209.