

## POLLS & POLLING

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### INTRODUCTION

- Polling is a critical aspect of contemporary politics
  - The media plays an important role by conveying this information to the public and political leaders
  - It is consequential. Some examples:
    - o Media coverage of the president changes dramatically & becomes more negative when his approval rating dips below 50%
    - o Public opposition to war can embolden opposition groups and the government to talk of a change in foreign policy strategy.
- As journalists you need to know when a poll is accurate and reliable.

### INFORMATION NEEDED TO EVALUATE A POLL – THE BASICS

1. Who conducted the poll? This information can be used to separate a poll conducted by a partisan or self-interested organization (e.g., the Republican Party or a specific political candidate) from one that is unbiased and collected by a reputable survey research organization.
  - Name of organization collecting the poll data (e.g., Gallup, Princeton Research Associates, Stony Brook University Center for Survey Research).
  - Name of organization sponsoring the poll (New York Times, ABC/Washington Post).
2. Who is interviewed? This information is needed to help determine poll accuracy and interpret the polls findings.
  - Geographic Area – national, state, local region (United States, NY state, Long Island)

- Entire population or a specific subpopulation – e.g., blacks, whites, U.S. citizens, working age people, etc.
- Random selection? The typical method for telephone is RDD (random-digit-dial) in which a computer generates numbers. This is needed because phone books are out of date. Sometimes polls are conducted with volunteer samples – e.g., a call-in poll, or self-selected web respondents. Only a random selection method is considered accurate.
- Number of people interviewed. Samples typically include 800 individuals; smaller samples are considered unreliable.
- Margin of Error for entire sample: Polls usually indicate the margin of error. In a typical poll of 1,000 people the margin of error is  $\pm 3$  percent. This means that if a poll indicates that 50% support candidate X, the true population value is between 47% and 53% (too close to predict an election outcome). This level of error is unacceptable to most pollsters. The margin of error for a sample of 500 people is 4.5, which is considered increasingly inaccurate.
- Margin of Error for subpopulations: Often poll findings are broken down by subpopulations including race, gender, education levels. The accuracy of the poll findings for subgroups is always lower than for the poll overall. For example, blacks make up roughly 12% of the US population. This means there will be 120 blacks in a poll of 1,000 Americans with a margin of error of  $\pm 9$  percent.

3. How are the Questions Worded? Question wording can have a powerful influence on poll response, especially when the issue is unfamiliar. There are a number of basic rules by which to evaluate questions.

- Simple Language: Do not use words that require a college degree to be understood.
- Questions need to be short, especially on the phone.
- Do not ask double barreled or double negatives. There is a classic example concerning the holocaust. “Does it seem impossible that the Nazi extermination never happened?” Roughly 30% said it was not impossible which lead to concern over education about the holocaust. This was an artifact of a confusing question.
- Use simple concepts. Even percentages can be misunderstood. In a classic example, when asked to list the percentage of Americans who were black, Jewish, Hispanic and so on, the total exceeded 240%.
- Avoid biased or leading questions. “There are always some people whose ideas are considered bad or dangerous. For instance, somebody who is against all churches and religions. If such a person wanted to make a speech in your city, should he be allowed to speak, or not?”