

How to understand public opinion polls and surveys

It is widely accepted that newsrooms are confronted with a bewildering profusion of opinion poll and survey data from a variety of sources of greater and lesser transparency and reliability.

While scientifically conducted polls can certainly help to give an insight into public views and attitudes, there are many ways in which polls can offer misleading and slanted information that is unhelpful to serious journalists. Basic issues on sample size and selection, the phrasing of the question, the context in which the questions are posed and the ways in which the results are recorded all need to be asked.

Publications:

BBC Editorial Guidelines on the use and reporting of opinion polls offer a useful critique and overview: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/page/guidance-polls-surveys-full>

20 Questions Journalists Should Ask About Poll Results, By Sheldon R. Gawiser, Ph.D. and G. Evans Witt, (US) Public Agenda website, <http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/20-questions-journalists-should-ask-about-poll-results>

A British equivalent (with only 13 questions) by Peter Kellner for the market research organisation Esomar is available <http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/questions.html>

Sources:

The (US) National Council on Public Polls has more resources to help put polling data in context <http://www.ncpp.org/>