

# Activity - Opinion Polling

## Overview

- ▶ Students will examine and discuss polls published before and throughout the election campaign, as well as during previous elections.
- ▶ Students will learn about the importance of polls in the election process, including how polling affects a campaign outcome, how politicians use polls to calculate their campaign strategy, who makes the polls, and how they are made.

## Background

With the advancement of technology, **polling** has become easier, faster and less expensive over recent years. During an election campaign today, it is common to see at least one per week from various media and government sources. Traditionally, polls were conducted by telephone, or by sending actual interviewers onto the street to talk to people. With the advent of the internet, polls are just a mouse click away. However, these polls can be hard to judge accurately, as they are completely random and only include internet users who read the webpage the poll is produced on.

A poll is a question, or a series of questions, asked to a certain group of people, or a sample, in order to find a **general pattern** in a certain larger population, or a demographic. In the case of this election, the demographic would be all citizens of British Columbia of voting age. The sample would ideally be comprised of British Columbians ranging in age, electoral district they live in, race, gender, etc.

There are two main types of polling used in elections. Preference Polls (sometimes called Horse Race Polls) and Issue Polls. Preference Polls report about which leader, party, or candidate is ahead, while Issue Polls target important issues of the campaign.

In order to achieve a representative sample, the people, or respondents, must be scientifically selected from the population (e.g. appropriately selected). There are many different factors to keep in mind when judging how representative a poll is and how accurate the poll will be. A poll can never be 100% accurate, and there are many aspects that affect the validity of the poll. Here are three key aspects to consider when judging if a poll can be regarded as an accurate representation.

### Polling Sponsor - Who paid for the poll?

Remember to always find out who paid for the poll. Make sure that the poll has come from a reputable pollster, who is experienced and practices valid research and reporting methods. Beware of polls from a specific political party or activist group, where the results may be slanted. It is the law to inform people who sponsored the poll.

### Sample Size - How many people participated?

The sample size determines the margin of error, a statistic representing the accuracy of the poll, using mathematical rules. Generally, the larger the sample size, the more accurate the results. For example, the sampling error of 1,500 people would be plus or minus 2.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. Whereas a poll of 500 people would have a sampling error of plus or minus 4.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

What this would mean is that 19 times out of 20, the poll's data is within 2.5% of the actual statistic. If 35 people out of 100 choose a firm pillow over a soft pillow, there is a 19 out of 20 chance that 32.5-37.5 respondents actually prefer a firm pillow.

### Representative Sample - How were the respondents selected?

It is important to know how the respondents were chosen. In order for a poll to be accurate the sample must be chosen randomly and be representative of the population that is being assessed. For example, polls taken in only one electoral district may not reflect the attitudes of the entire province.

There are many other factors that can affect the margin of error such as the wording of a question, the time when respondents are surveyed, and even the attitude of the person asking the questions.

One thing to remember is that polls are only how people feel about a certain topic at a certain time. People can, and often do, change their minds about an issue or candidate before an election happens. Polls are useful to see how people react to events during elections, but are not guaranteed to match the outcome. Sometimes, media sources will conduct an exit poll to try to get an idea of the election outcome before it is over. This is done by asking voters how they cast their ballot immediately after they've left the polling station.

### **Terms to Know**

- ▶ Horse Race Poll
- ▶ Issue Poll
- ▶ Representative Sample
- ▶ Exit poll
- ▶ Pollster
- ▶ Respondent
- ▶ Polling Sponsor
- ▶ Margin of error
- ▶ Validity
- ▶ Demographic

### **Activity**

#### **Beginning of election:**

1. Conduct an informal poll and then discuss results and influences. Introduce terms and types of polls and explain the determinants of validity.
2. As a class, review a non-election poll and discuss how it was collected, who was the sponsor, the timing and the respondents chosen (Suggestion: movie critics about an upcoming movie, i.e. online entertainment poll or an awards show).
3. Brainstorm using a mind map, the current/potential issues for this campaign. Discuss their relevance to a poll, as well as their regional relevance. How do they influence the party and/or the candidate?
4. Prepare a bulletin board to track poll results from selected sources. The board should also include an 'other' section for blogs, online polls, etc.

#### **During the Election:**

5. Ask students to track polls on a bulletin board and extrapolate trends from the data. Have any events (both regionally and provincially) during the campaign influenced/affected the results?
6. Discuss similarities and differences from different polling sources. Students keep a personal log of election result predictions based on the polls throughout the election. They should explain if and why their predictions change. This can be written into an opinion article and handed in the last day of campaigning. The predictions can be anything from Premier to the winner of their local electoral district.
7. Compare the current polls to previous election polls (see <http://www.nodice.ca/elections/britishcolumbia/polls.php> for past polls back to the 2005 provincial election). Students can also use this as basis for their predictions.

#### **Post Election**

8. Have a round table discussion of student and poll predictions. How accurate were they? How did the media influence the predictions? Did polls influence the election? How?

### **Extension Activities**

Ask the Math Department join this lesson and integrate or team teach polls and data analysis.

Compare traditional polls to Internet polls. How do they differ? Which is the more accurate reflection of the average British Columbian and their views?

Are online polls replacing traditional polls? Are more Canadians using the Internet for their election coverage and therefore looking more to online polls than polls from specifically selected sample respondents to help them make their decision? Discuss the pros and cons of online polling versus traditional opinion polls (e.g. a poll on a blog would disseminate information rather than just provide data; blogs are a personal forum and would be considered to be an opinion, whereas voters may consider polls more scientific and, therefore, accurate).

**Resources:**

Ispos-Reid - [www.ispos.ca](http://www.ispos.ca)

Environics - <http://erg.environics.net>

Strategic Council - [www.thestrategiccounsel.com](http://www.thestrategiccounsel.com)

Polls Canada - [www.canadawebpages.com](http://www.canadawebpages.com)

Political Blogs - [www.blogscanada.ca/politics.default.aspx](http://www.blogscanada.ca/politics.default.aspx)

Nodice: <http://www.nodice.ca/elections/britishcolumbia/polls.php>