

The Voter's Guide to Election Polls

Sixth Edition

Michael W. Traugott
University of Michigan

Paul J. Lavrakas
*Retired Professor, Northwestern
University and Ohio State University*

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD
Lanham • Boulder • New York • London

Executive Acquisitions Editor: Michael Kerns
Assistant Editor: Elizabeth Von Buhr
Sales and Marketing Inquiries: textbooks@rowman.com

Credits and acknowledgments for material borrowed from other sources, and reproduced with permission, appear on the appropriate pages within the text.

Published by Rowman & Littlefield
An imprint of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706
www.rowman.com

86-90 Paul Street, London EC2A 4NE

Copyright © 2024 by The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
Third edition 2004. Fourth edition 2008.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote passages in a review.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Traugott, Michael W., author. | Lavrakas, Paul J., author.
Title: The voter's guide to election polls / Michael W. Traugott, Paul J. Lavrakas.
Description: Sixth edition. | Lanham, Maryland : Rowman & Littlefield, 2024. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2023038414 (print) | LCCN 2023038415 (ebook) | ISBN 9781538187388 (cloth) | ISBN 9781538187395 (paperback) | ISBN 9781538187401 (epub)
Subjects: LCSH: Public opinion—United States. | Public opinion polls—United States. | Election forecasting—United States. | Press and politics—United States.
Classification: LCC HN90.P8 T73 2024 (print) | LCC HN90.P8 (ebook) | DDC 303.3/80973—dc23/eng/20231018
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023038414>
LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023038415>



The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Contents

Introduction	1
Polling, the News Media, and Politics	3
The Organization of This Book	8
What Is New in This Edition	9
Concluding Comments	10
Chapter 1: What Are Polls and Surveys and Why Are They Conducted?	13
What Is a Survey?	13
How Does a Poll Differ from a Survey?	14
How Many Different Kinds of Surveys Are There?	14
How Well Do Polls Measure Public Opinion?	16
Are There Other Ways to Obtain People's Opinions?	17
When Is a "Survey" Not a Survey?	17
Why Not Just Count Everyone?	18
Why Is Time Such an Important Factor in Polls Conducted for Media?	19
Who Sponsors Surveys?	20
Who Conducts Polls?	20
Do Polls Have an Impact on Those Who Are Exposed to Them?	20
Chapter 2: What Are Election Polls? How Are They Conducted?	23
What Is an Election Poll?	24
How Many Kinds of Election Polls Are There?	25
How Have Exit Polls Changed?	25
How Do Media Organizations Use Election Polls?	26
Are Current Pre-Election Polls Better than Those Conducted in the Past?	26

Are There Special Problems in Conducting Pre-Election Polls?	28
What Is the Appropriate Population to Sample for Pre-Election Polls?	30
How Do Polls Measure Voting Intention?	30
How Do Polls Measure Candidate Support?	31
What Happens to People Who Have Not Decided Yet?	31
What Are Tracking Polls?	32
Are There Special Problems in Conducting Tracking Polls?	33
How Do Tracking Polls Compare to Other Pre-Election Polls?	34
Are There Other Trends in the Reporting of Pre-Election Polls?	35
How Did Bias Appear in Some State Polls?	35
Can the Publication of Poll Results Affect Whether or How Citizens Vote?	36
What Is the Chance that a Pre-Election Poll Will Produce an Incorrect Projection of an Election Outcome?	36
What Are Exit Polls, and What Are They Used For?	39
Who Conducts the Exit Polls?	40
Have There Been Any Special Problems in Conducting and Interpreting Exit Polls to Project Election Winners?	41
What Is the Chance That an Exit Poll Can Produce an Incorrect Projection of an Election Outcome?	44
Are Pre-election Polls Well Suited to Estimating the Outcome of the Electoral College Vote?	45
Do Election Night Broadcasts of Projections Affect Voting?	46
Are Americans Concerned about the Effects of Election Polls?	46
Can the U.S. Government Regulate How Media Organizations Conduct and Disseminate Their Poll Results?	47
What Options Are Available to Learn More about How Polls Are Conducted?	48
 Chapter 3: How Do Political Candidates and Organizations Use Poll Data?	 51
How Do Candidates Use Polls?	52
When Do Candidates Use Polls?	52
Are Polls the Only Research Technique for Collecting Information During a Campaign?	54
Do the Results of Campaign Polls Depend on When They Are Conducted?	55
Do the Results of Campaign Polls Depend on How They Are Conducted?	55
Do Candidates Use Poll Results in Strategic Ways?	56

Can Candidate Polls Be Misleading?	57
Can Media Poll Results Help a Candidate?	58
Can Media Poll Results Hurt a Candidate?	58
How Do Political Parties Use Polls?	58
Why Do Special-Interest Groups Use Polls?	59
Are There Problems with Some Polls Conducted by Special-Interest Groups?	60
Do Elected Officials Pay Attention to Polls?	61
Chapter 4: How Do News Organizations Collect and Report Poll Data?	63
Why Do Media Organizations Conduct Polls?	64
How Can Polls Contribute to Good Journalism?	65
Why Do Media Organizations Collaborate on Polling?	66
How Have Business Conditions Affected Media Polling?	66
Are There Special Pressures that Affect Media Polls?	67
What Are the Standard Data Collection Methods Used in Media Polling?	68
Can the Methodology of Media Polls Have an Impact on The Results?	69
How Are Media Polls Analyzed and Disseminated?	70
Do Reports of Poll Results Differ When Presented on Television or in Newspapers?	71
Can Media Polls Conducted by Different News Organizations Produce Different Results?	71
Why Are There So Many Polls Reported in the Media?	73
Chapter 5: Why Do Pollsters Use Samples?	75
What Is Sampling?	76
What Is Involved in a Sample Design?	76
What Is the Target Population for an Election Poll?	77
What Is a Sampling Frame?	79
Do Telephone Directories Make a Good Sampling Frame for Election Polls?	80
Do Lists of Email Addresses Make a Good Sampling Frame for Election Polls?	80
What Is the Sampling Frame for a Typical Pre-Election Internet Poll?	81
What is Registration-Based Sampling (RBS)?	82
What Is the Sampling Frame for the Typical Exit Poll?	82
How Large Does a Sample Need to Be?	83

What Is the Margin of Sampling Error (MOSE) for a Particular Sample?	84
How Does Sample Size Affect the Precision of a Poll's Estimates?	86
Why Are Some Sample Designs Preferable to Others?	87
What Is a Probability Sample?	88
Why and How Do Pollsters Choose Only One Person within a Household to Interview?	90
What Is a Nonprobability Sample?	91
Are Nonprobability Samples Ever Combined with Probability Samples?	92
What Is a Random Sample?	93
What Is a Systematic Sample?	93
What Is a Stratified Sample?	94
Do You Need a Larger Sample Size with a National Poll than You Do in a Statewide or Citywide Poll?	94
What Is the Response Rate to a Survey?	95
How Does the Nonresponse Affect Survey Accuracy?	97
Do the News Media Acknowledge the Issue of Nonresponse in Poll Accuracy?	98
What Does It Mean When Poll Data Are Weighted?	100
Why Haven't I Ever Been Interviewed in an Election Poll?	101
Chapter 6: How Are Questionnaires Put Together?	103
Does a Questionnaire Follow a Particular Order and Format?	103
Do Different Survey Questions Serve Different Purposes?	104
Is There More Than One Kind of Format for Survey Question?	105
Are There Other Differences between Open-Ended and Closed-Ended Questions?	107
What Is an Unbalanced Question?	108
Does the Wording of a Question Make a Difference in the Responses a Respondent Provides?	109
What Is the Problem of Complex Language in a Poll Question?	110
What Is a Double Negative in a Question?	111
What Is a Double-Barreled Question?	112
What Is the Effect of a Leading Phrase in a Question?	113
Are Responses to Questions on Sensitive Topics Affected by How They Are Worded?	113
Can the Wording of a Question Be Manipulated to Produce a Certain Result?	114
Do the Response Alternatives in a Closed-Ended Question Make a Difference in the Responses They Elicit?	115

What If a Respondent Is Undecided, Uncertain, or Doesn't Have an Opinion on a Question?	116
What If a Respondent Gives a "Don't Know" Response to a Question?	117
Does the Order in Which Questions Are Asked Make a Difference in the Responses Elicited?	118
Are Some Questions Typically Asked Early in a Questionnaire and Others Later?	120
What Is the Problem of a "Socially Desirable" Response to a Survey Question?	121
How Do Researchers Know Whether Questions Are Biased?	122
Are There Other Ways to Test for Bias in a Questionnaire?	123
Chapter 7: How Are Data Gathered for Election Polls?	127
What Is the Most Common Form of Data Collection in Election Polls?	128
What Other Forms of Data Collection Are There?	130
What Are the Advantages and Disadvantages of Face-To-Face Data Collection?	131
What Are the Advantages and Disadvantages of Video-Assisted Data Collection?	132
What Are the Advantages and Disadvantages of Telephone Data Collection?	132
What Are the Advantages and Disadvantages of Self-Administered Mail and Internet Questionnaires?	134
What Are the Advantages and Disadvantages of Self-Administered IVR Questionnaires?	135
What is Mixed-Mode Data Collection?	137
What Do Pollsters Do about "Missing Data"?	137
Are There Other Non-Survey Methods for Producing Estimates of What Public Opinion Is on a Particular Topic?	138
Who Gets to Be an Interviewer?	139
How Are Interviewers Trained and Monitored?	140
How Does Contact with a Respondent Take Place?	141
How Long Do Election Poll Questionnaires Take to Complete?	143
Can Interviewers Affect the Kinds of Answers Respondents Give?	145
What Happens If Initial Contact with a Respondent Is Unsuccessful?	146
How Does Information from a Respondent Get Recorded into a Computer?	148

Do Respondents Have to Give Their Names When They Are Interviewed?	149
Chapter 8: How Do Media Organizations Analyze Polls?	151
What Is a Variable?	152
How Is a Poll Analyzed?	152
What Are the Frequencies?	153
What Is an Estimate?	153
What Is a Relationship Between Two or More Variables?	154
How Do the Media Typically Present Poll Results?	155
What Are Marginals and Can Their Presentation Be Misleading?	157
What Is a Trend?	157
How Are Trends Analyzed?	158
How Can Surveys Measure Change?	159
What Does It Mean that Public Opinion Has Changed?	160
Is It Possible to Compare Data Collected in Different Polls?	160
Chapter 9: How Can I Evaluate Published Poll Results?	163
What Do I Need to Know to Understand and Interpret Poll Results?	163
Are There Any Standards for Reporting Poll Results?	164
Why Should I Want to Know Who Sponsored the Poll?	165
Why Should I Want to Know Who Conducted the Poll?	166
Why Should I Want to Know What Mode of Data Collection Was Used?	166
Why Should I Want to Know What Kind of Sample Was Used?	167
Why Should I Want to Know What the Sample Size Was?	168
Why Should I Want to Know if the Responses of Important Subgroups Were Analyzed Separately?	169
Why Should I Want to Know What the Response Rate Was?	169
Why Should I Want to Know When the Data Were Gathered?	170
Why Should I Want to Know the Exact Question Wordings, Including the Response Categories?	171
Why Should I Want to Know the Question Order?	171
Why Should I Want to Know Whether There Are References to Other Polls on the Same Topic?	172
Does the Analysis Suggest that Changes in Opinion Have Occurred, and Are Such Interpretations Justified?	172
Chapter 10: What Are Some Common Problems and Complaints about Polls and the Media's Use of Them?	175

Do Polls Measure “Real” Attitudes?	176
Can Polls Be Designed to Find Whatever the Sponsor Wants?	178
When Is a Survey Not a Survey?	179
What Is an Audience Call-In Poll?	180
What Is an Internet Log-In Poll?	181
How Should I Treat Polls That Are Mailed to My Home or Poll Invitations I Receive Via E-Mail?	182
How Accurate Are Insert Polls in Magazines or Newspapers?	183
How Accurate Are Internet Pop-Up Polls?	184
If I Receive a Telephone Call to Be Interviewed, Should I Participate?	185
Suppose I Am Called at a Bad Time, Like When I Am Sitting Down to Dinner or on My Cell Phone While Driving?	186
How Do I Know if a Poll Is Being Conducted by a Reputable Survey Organization?	186
What Can I Do if I Am Contacted by a Pseudo Poll?	187
What Assurances Should an Interviewer Give that Nothing Bad Will Happen to Me if I Participate in a Poll?	187
Epilogue	189
Appendix A: Standards for Disclosing Information about the Methodology of Public Polls	191
Appendix B: Sample Tolerances (Sampling Errors) for Samples of Different Sizes	197
Glossary	199
Selected References	237
The History and Role of Polls in the Media and Democracy	237
How Polls are Conducted	239
Sampling	240
Information about Election and Policy Polls	241
Polls and Political Candidates	242
Presidential Polling, the Media, and Democracy	242
Questionnaire Design	243
Data Collection and Analysis	244
Data Analysis	245
How to Evaluate Polls	246
What Are Some Common Problems and Complaints about Polls?	247

Index	249
About the Authors	259