

THE STANDARD SERIES



مَعْدُ القِيَادَاتِ النِّسَائِيَّةِ العَرَبِيَّةِ
ARAB WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

Volume Four: Understanding Political Survey Research

Expert Advice for the Arab World's Next Experts
Written by Women for Women

Because the path toward a democratic Arab World is only possible with the integral political and social participation of women.



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INTRODUCTION

In 2008, the International Republican Institute (IRI) established the Arab Women's Leadership Institute (AWLI), a political skills building training program for women throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) based in Amman, Jordan. Led by an executive board of prominent Arab and American women leaders, AWLI recruits and trains countless numbers of emerging women leaders throughout the MENA region.

Through trainings at its headquarters in Amman, Jordan, and elsewhere throughout the region, AWLI is taking advantage of these turbulent times by focusing programs on discussing relevant policy topics and current issues facing women in the region. AWLI prides itself on teaching the skills needed to be effective leaders, creating relationships across boarders and cultivating new and innovative ideas for Arab women to not only enter, but also increasingly lead in the public and political arena throughout the region.

AWLI's support of its participants extends beyond AWLI training programs. AWLI mentors its members, establishing individual short and long-term goals as they relate to their respective organizations and country's needs, and assists them in conducting programs of their own. With support from the National Endowment for Democracy, the Middle East Partnership Initiative, and the Canadian Foreign Ministry, AWLI's membership has grown to include women from Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, the West Bank and Yemen.

The multidimensional approach of AWLI provides women with the support, educational opportunities and resources needed to advance democratic governance as elected or appointed officials, play a meaningful part within civil society, and serve as community leaders. With practical skills-building training, a platform for dialogue and sustained mentorship, AWLI is increasing the number of Arab women leaders.

The Standards Series: Volume Four – Understanding Political Survey Research

MISSION STATEMENT

The Arab Women's Leadership Institute (AWLI) seeks to empower women and strengthen their leadership role in the Arab region. AWLI roots its foundation in the belief that the implementation of democracy in the Arab world is only possible with the integral participation of women in all sectors, including cultural, economic, political, and social.

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Across the Arab World, women have experienced small, yet significant gains in political life. In the past few years more women in the MENA region were appointed or elected as members of parliament and to local offices, held ministerial positions, acted as civil servants, and lead successful civil society organizations than ever before. While there are still challenges, particularly in countries undergoing transition, Arab women endeavor to influence the direction of their countries and communities in ways that were only imaginable just a decade ago. As these trends continue, so do the opportunities for women to set standards of democracy and good governance in the Arab world.

The mission of AWLI is to assist women in the Arab world who are already in, or aspire to be in, positions of leadership in their governments and community. Supporting this endeavor, AWLI has developed The Standards Series, a collection of volumes written by women for women in the MENA region working in the political, governmental, and civil society sectors. The series will provide expert advice on understanding political survey research to the Arab world's next experts.

The purpose of this Standard Series is to make understanding political survey research accessible to a non-expert. This document is neither a statistical textbook, nor a systematic primer on public opinion research.

The emergence of independent political polling research has contributed to the development of democratic institutions by soliciting feedback from citizens and analyzing this feedback. Public opinion polls can provide timely, reliable and explanatory information on a variety different issues effecting a society. Public opinion polling can be used for many different purposes to inform different groups of people including average citizens, political parties, NGOs and the media. Public opinion polling also gives a voice to the people, opening debate and mobilizing populations to participate in public life. Lastly, public opinion research help us understand attitudes, prejudices and stereotypes amongst a population.

There are many ways we use opinion polls to promote the democratic political process, including preparing election communication strategies, positioning political parties, targeting and maximizing political resources, identifying target groups and analyzing the social and political climate of a country.

This Standards Series– Understanding Political Survey Research, was developed following an AWLI training in Amman, Jordan, from March 14-18, 2013. The training brought together approximately 20 women political and civic leaders from several Middle East Countries to Amman, Jordan to learn about political survey research. The training drew on experiences from the Middle East, North Africa and Canada to review the development, implementation and analysis of political polling and focus groups. Sessions focused on the science of fielding credible public opinion research including drafting questionnaires, sampling methodology, data collection and analysis, as well as an overview of qualitative (focus group) research. The training also included a series of exercises, allowing participants to draft questionnaires and analyze actual polling data.

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SECTION I: AN INTRODUCTION TO POLITICAL SURVEY RESEARCH

Understanding public opinion allows government, non-governmental organizations, community leaders and political activists to gain a better picture of what the citizens of their countries are thinking and feeling. By collecting data on the public's thoughts and feelings through public opinion research, we are better able to gauge current public issues of concern. The data obtained through public opinion research comes is extremely useful when trying to advocate and lobby an issue to governments and stakeholders, to cut through media hype to get opinions heard, and to change the way decision-makers think and react on certain policy decisions.

Public opinion polling is a measurement tool. While public opinion polling can be used for explicative, manipulative or for communication purposes, each poll or survey must be conducted in an unbiased and strategic manner. Public opinion polls provide significant level of information in comparison to one-on-one interviews.

Public Opinion Polls measure:

- Opinions
- Attitudes
- Knowledge
- Behavior

Opinions are one of the most important things measured by polls. Opinions outline beliefs of a population and are an outlet for an individual to express themselves. When opinions are measured on a regular basis, repeating the same questions over a period of time, the change in opinions can be tracked and analyzed. Opinions are not cast in stone and can sometimes change faster than what can be measured through polling.

Attitudes are less malleable than opinions when it comes to survey research. Attitudes are a manner of acting, feeling, or thinking regarding a certain topic. The attitudes of a population can be measured and can be influenced, although it take time and effort to change an attitude.

Understanding knowledge is crucial to forming initiatives that focus on changing opinions or attitudes and is the main goal of any poll or survey. Political campaigns rely heavily on the measurement of knowledge to prepare policy and advertising campaigns.

Behaviors are difficult to predict. It is far easier to measure past and current behavior than future behavior.

Depending on which of the above data sets we wish to achieve, we have to choose the best method of data collection. This Standard Series will look at two methods, focus groups and standardized questionnaires. These two methods collect two different data sets: quantitative data and qualitative data.

QUANTITATIVE DATA

This type of research is best for capturing a snapshot of a moment in time. Quantitative research is based on scientific methods and firm numbers and is usually represented as a survey questionnaire (poll). As accuracy is integral to this type of data collection, a clear plan and set goals needs to be laid out in advance. Any results have to be backed up by accurate numbers which is where using a standardized questionnaire is considered best practice.

QUALITATIVE DATA

How much do we really know about what our citizens want and desire? Do we really know what they are feeling? In order to gain this type of qualitative measurement, it is best to conduct focus group sessions and in-depth interviews. By using this type of data collection, you can capture the spirit of participants. While using qualitative research methods may lack the firm statistics of quantitative research methods, it captures something deeper. It provides real voices, faces, and language that bring life to your research, often validating firm numbers acquired through quantitative research. The responses collected in a focus group or in-depth interview are of particularly interesting to politicians, journalists, and activists.

Credibility, Ethics and International Standards

If you stick to producing a well-planned, strategically thought-out and transparent polling methodology, you will not lose credibility, regardless of the outcome of a poll. Two factors are crucial to achieving credibility in both your research and communications of research: fieldwork and moral standards.

The quality of fieldwork conducted sets credible pollsters apart from amateurs. Do not fall into the trap of altering responses in your research so that your facts say something that is more impressive to governments, the public or stakeholders. It takes time and effort to plan and produce a good questionnaire for your research. It takes time and effort to correctly pick your sample size and make-up. The more time and effort put into drafting your questionnaire and correctly selecting your sample size at the front-end of a poll, the more credible the results of the research will be. When analyzing survey results always read the methodology first to ensure you understand the margin of error and sample sizes of the research. In order to clearly understand the full scope of the data, you must know how the methodology was implemented and if the results are effected in any way. Never sell a poll, or speak about a poll, if the research is flawed or else you risk your credibility as a pollster. These will be explained further in the manual, but keeping in mind ethics, credibility and standards from the get-go will ensure it is firmly planted in your head as we carry on through the exercises.

High-level of standard will help build credibility as a researcher. Even when relying on qualitative data, keep all processes open and transparent. Never sacrifice professional

procedures for any reason, regardless if you are short on time, are lacking resources, or don't see a need for them. Never allow a journalist or a politician to add input into questionnaires. Rather than looking for unbiased opinions, journalists and politicians will lean towards gathering information that backs up their story or the message they are trying to send to the public.

Surveys should begin with a baseline (a previously done survey), with a proper sample size that is appropriate to the type of survey you are completing.

SECTION II: SURVEY RESEARCH VERSUS FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH

POLITICAL OPINION SURVEYS

Standardized questionnaires can be applied to:

- Face-to-face (or personal) interviewing
- Telephone interviewing
- Self-completed questionnaires
- Online questionnaires

Face-to-face interviewing is more personal in nature. Often these types of interviews are conducted at a participant's home or in a public location. This type of data collection is usually associated with quota sampling (see glossary).

Telephone interviewing, while convenient as the interviewer is in a central location, but depends on how many telephone lines/telephones are actually in the area that is being researched. People living in rural or remote communities may not have universal access to telephones, meaning it is more difficult to contact and poll these individuals. Using specific sample groups can make telephone interviewing more effective. To note, new developments in communication cause new challenges in designing samples (to be discussed later in this section). Handset gadgets like answering machines and call-display devices increase the non-contact ratio (see glossary).

Self-Completion interviews require participants to complete a standardized questionnaire themselves without the help of a researcher. This type of data collection causes some restrictions as all questions and answers must be incredibly clear and legible if hand written. Most questionnaires of this type are distributed by mail or in central locations like schools, universities or companies. This type of questionnaire, delivered by mail, often results in a low-return ratio (see glossary) and is not highly recommended by most credible polling agencies. A special usage of self-completion interviews is usually seen during exit polls (see glossary), where they are highly recommended because the need for confidentiality and because they reproduce the process of voting.

Online questionnaires do not mean placing a questionnaire on a webpage. Companies specialized in online questionnaires rely on large databases of potential participants to

draw samples. This is also a difficult way to collect information with the advent of anti-spam legislation in some countries, which does not allow commercial messages to be target to individuals without their consent.

FOCUS GROUPS

Imagine the information you could collect if you could sit down with every citizen of your country, every night, and listen to his or her thoughts and opinions. You would always know what people were thinking and would be able to mark changes in attitudes as they happen. You would be able to track major public concerns and how those concerns are addressed over time. Most importantly, you are able to learn how public issues affect the individual directly.

Focus group research is the closest you will ever get to the above scenario. A focus group is a moderated discussion on a specific topic, which the research has chosen. These discussions are recorded for ease of analyzing. Recording not only the responses the participants, but their body language and non-verbal answers as well are important. Focus groups are helpful particularly when preparing speeches or election campaign products as they allow for testing of campaign slogans or potential policy initiatives in a small controlled group. This is why political parties in democracies all over the world often use focus groups to understand the attitudes and opinions of the general public.

Focus groups can be effective for studying either a small population or across a large population including an entire country. However, the greater the size of the population you are studying, the more focus groups you will need to conduct in order to have an accurate assessment. You generally decide on how many focus groups will be necessary based on how much your project can afford to make the research worthwhile.

A general rule of thumb is three to five focus groups per municipality or locality. A successful comprehensive nationwide study will probably require more. By conducting both quantitative research and focus groups, will you gain a full picture of the public opinion in any given location.

In order to get the most information possible out of a focus group session, you need to remember that you do not know everything and that participants in the group have knowledge and experiences that you are unfamiliar with. Begin all focus group sessions with an open mind and a desire to listen. Participants will be more open and talkative if you allow them to talk freely about the topic at hand. One of the benefits of a focus group is that it will challenge your own biases and opinions. Focus groups will reveal the priorities of a population, some of which may come as a surprise.

Regardless of which survey style you choose (opinion surveys or focus groups) it is impossible to survey every single person in a population. For this reason, pollsters need to rely on samples to extrapolate their research findings. In the next section of this manual, we will review the process of designing a survey group to achieve the best results possible.

SAMPLING THEORY AND DESIGN

Before beginning any survey, poll, or focus group, much thought needs to go into sample size and research design.

Representative samples are the best way to ensure that your survey is reaching a segment of the population that is reflective of an entire population. A representative sample reproduces the characteristics of a population. The goal is to find the best estimate for the number of people sharing the same opinions.

For example, if you have an adult population that is 52 percent women (according to the most recent census done in your country), if you were to collect responses from a thousand individuals, 520 of them would be expected to be women. If your group does not contain 52 percent women, your claims of a representative sample can be disputed.

So how do we create a representative sample?

Be aware of whom you are picking to be a part of your representative sample. Participants, and interviewers will have preferences concerning whom they wish to speak with, or not. In countries and regions with ethnic minorities, a participant may be unwilling to talk with a person from a minority. Stereotypes will become evident in the results and the interactions between participants and the interviewer. The consequence of this is that you will have under-represented a minority group in the sample size. Also be aware of the opposite situation where researchers might prefer to speak with more educated participants or participants of the same ethnicity/cultural background. This may slant the sample towards urban areas or a specific segment of the population that has more education. In this case, you will be under-representing rural or lesser educated members of a population.

A good rule of thumb while putting together a representative sample is to think of it in terms of democracy. In a democratic system, each person has an equal voice and an opportunity to share their opinions and points of view. This is how your representative sample should be designed, as unbiased as possible.

Another way to create a sample size is through random sampling, which as the name suggests, is completely random. To prepare a random sample, you will first select the constituency you are going to poll and pick respondents through a set interval. Generally, this is done by gathering a list of households in the area you are polling and start selecting households by choosing through in random intervals. For example, if you pick a neighborhood in an urban area you will start anywhere on the list of addresses and contact each fourth household. What you have to keep in mind is that no other selection criteria are being applied to selection of participants. Using random sampling to create a group of survey participants does have the benefit of being less expensive and easier to execute, but is not necessarily representative of a whole population.

Sample design pitfalls

Sampling errors will always exist. Try to make the margin of error as small as possible while still maintaining a representative sample. Ideally, the bigger your sample size, the smaller the sampling error will be.

Keep in mind that the term sampling error does not mean there is a mistake in the survey or in the sample size. Because a representative sample is an approximation of the actual population, it can never completely show a perfect data set.

The statistical theory (see glossary) provides us with a maximum of plus or minus three percent error for a 1,067 person sample size with a 0.95 probability. This means that for a sample size, a plus or minus three error, is the worst that can be expected. It also means that if the same poll were held again 100 times with different participants, your responses would remain within three percent of the original poll.

Designing your focus group study

Focus groups may look simple and informal, but there is a real science to designing a useful study. If you are interested in obtaining good information, you cannot simply gather ten to twelve individuals in a room, talk to them for two hours, and consider that a focus group. You must first assess 1) whom you are going to invite, and 2) what discussion topics to discuss that will reveal the information that you need.

Participants

You probably have a good idea as to which geographic region you are conducting your focus group in, but keep in mind, as with surveys, you are merely collecting a representative sample. One focus group will not give you an entire picture of what the population is thinking. As focus groups are generally smaller than surveys, you must remember that this is a narrow approach to collecting data on opinions and attitudes. Ideally, you will examine the entire region you are surveying and have broken focus groups up in a logical way. Understanding that focus groups are expensive to hold, a good plan will once again help you gather the best data possible.

As we learned in representative and random sample sizes, you need to make sure your focus groups meet the demographic distribution of the population. First off, make sure the gender split reflects the national population numbers; this can generally be found from the most recent census of the population. From there you will need to look at ethnic and religious splits, as well as any other factors. If there is no census data available, you are at a bit of a disadvantage, but some basic Internet research should help you make an educated guess. For instance, it is generally understood that women make up 52 percent of the population globally.

When designing a survey project, make the same type of distinctions on race and ethnic grounds. You must know how these distinctions affect the demographics of your

population. Your focus group will need to represent all race/ethnicity breakdowns or be as close as possible.

Another demographic issue you must consider is age. Two of the hardest age groups to obtain participants for focus groups are ages 18-24 and those over 70. The younger set tends to not communicate well in the group and will not contribute to the overall discussion. Older generations tend to communicate, sometimes too much, and dominate the discussion.

There is no set strategy to how many groups or how large the groups need to be. As with polling and surveys the more participants and the more data you have, the better. Never rely on one focus group session to ensure a cross section of results.

Focus groups are susceptible to a number of flaws and difficulties. You can have one strong person in the group who overwhelms the discussion or it could simply be a bad day and there is not much participation across the board. By having more than one focus group you can manage these outside influences and gather more pertinent information.

Always be aware of the length of a focus group session. Participants are taking time out of their day to help you and you need to be respectful of this. When discussing particularly intense issues, exhaustion can set in quickly. Try to keep your focus group session between 90 minutes and two hours.

Lastly, when holding a focus group session, be prepared. Before starting the focus group, ensure the moderator has a clear outline of the issues you wish to cover and the goals you wish to achieve. You need to have a list of questions that need to be answered, but allow for fluidity in the conversation. It is best to start with general questions and then move the conversation towards more specific issues that need to be discussed. A moderator should be flexible with the conversation while keeping the overall goal in mind.

EXERCISE 1 – DETERMINING SAMPLE SIZE AND MAKE-UP

For this exercise you will need to collect a group of people - if you do this in a classroom setting, use *everyone* available including interpreters or aides.

Take a look at the group you have assembled. From this group, form a representative sample of seven to 12 individuals that could be interviewed for a public opinion poll. You will need to make sure that each demographic present in the room is present in your sample group. Does your sample have the appropriate gender split? Are all age ranges represented? Once you have formed the sample group, discuss which demographics you are unable to represent and why. Take the time to notice flaws in the sample and how you could potentially overcome these flaws.

SECTION III: DRAFTING POLITICAL RESEARCH SURVEYS AND FOCUS GROUP SCRIPTS

Glossary

Quota Sampling – This is a method for selection of participants by first separating a population into subgroups. For example, choosing only participants from a university campus. This is useful when time is limited but does not reflect an entire population.

Non-Contact Ratio – Regardless of how well you plan and design your sample sizes, there will always be people you will not be able to contact. This should be represented as a percentage point, as in .04 percent of the participants could not be contacted for opinion.

Low-Return Ratio – Similar to non-contact ratio, this ratio is found when doing a self-completion interview. By allowing a participant to complete the questionnaire themselves, you stand the risk of them forgetting or not filling out the questionnaire. If your low-return ratio is large, your sample size will be affected.

Exit Polls – This is a poll taken as voters leave polling stations during an election. An exit poll will ask voters exactly whom they voted for, giving an early indication of the outcome of the election.

Statistical Theory – This is the basis for techniques in the study, design and analysis of statistics.

Drafting Questionnaires

A public opinion poll, as its very name suggests, provides a picture of opinion about reality, not the reality itself. Perception of reality is sensitive to the influence of numerous circumstances, both internal (psychological) or external. The goal of the questionnaire is to try to and find a clear and concise manner to ask a question and getting a definitive response. There are a few items to keep in mind while drafting a questionnaire:

Clear Objectives – Plan ahead. A clear set of goals should be outlined prior to drafting the questionnaire. As participants will answer the survey with their own biases, every question should be leading towards a data set you can measure and analyze.

Question the Questions – Are your questions biased? By leading the participant towards a certain answer, you are diminishing the credibility of your poll. For example, by asking “The Government has been criticized for its handling of the recent downturn in the economy, do you agree or disagree?” This is considered a leading question. In pointing out a bias against the government, you have already set the participants’ mindsets towards answering in a negative manner. A better way to phrase this question would be, “How do you feel about how the Government has handled the recent downturn in the economy?”

Clarity – All questions must be easy to understand. The person managing the survey should not have to explain terminology or phrases to participants. Simple language, easy to understand phrasing will make your questionnaire clear and easily absorbed by participants.

Objectivity – This is a nuance that you must be aware of. Look at the following two questions, which is the most objective, “Do you support women’s participation in the electoral process?” versus “Do you support or oppose women’s participation in the electoral process?” Questions need to be written in a very precise manner.

Timeliness – Participants have their own lives, their own concerns and their own worries. By keeping your poll on a relevant topic or current issue you will generally get better responses. Polling on an issue that is not at the top of the mind for the average person and is not receiving media attention, risks the chance that you may lose the interest of your participants in responding fully to your questions.

Drafting Questions for Focus Groups

The same qualities used to draft a political opinion poll should be applied to a focus group questionnaire. The difference in the two are the use of open-ended questions. You want the participants to expand upon their answers, encouraging discussion and debate during a focus group.

Questionnaires should begin with impersonal questions. Personal or sensitive questions such as those pertaining to religion or income should be asked later on in the focus group when participants are more comfortable with the session, moderator and each other.

EXERCISE 2 – CREATE A QUESTIONNAIRE AND A SCRIPT FOR A FOCUS GROUP SESSION

Creating a Questionnaire: For this exercise, create ten questions to use as a questionnaire on the subject of post-secondary education for women. The goal of the questionnaire is to determine if women in your country feel there are enough opportunities for them to attend post-secondary institutions. Remember to keep your questions unbiased and to have clear and concise responses.

Creating a Script: Using the same scenario as above, prepare a script for a focus group session. The same goal applies; you want to determine if women in your country feel there are enough opportunities for them to attend post-secondary institutions. For your script, remember you want to gauge and seek deeper opinions and information; and, your questions should be open-ended, allowing for participants to explore their own attitudes.

SECTION IV: ANALYZING DATA

There is a tremendous amount of information found in both qualitative and quantitative research. This information can be combined for a fulsome picture, deepening your knowledge, giving context and making your arguments much more effective. There is no right or wrong way to combine this information, but doing so will give power to your results and increase your knowledge of the issues facing a population.

Option 1: Start with a qualitative survey. By interviewing focus groups first you are exposed to the opinions and attitudes of the population you are surveying. The outcomes of the focus groups can pinpoint certain aspects of the issue you are studying. Focus groups can further help create questionnaires for a standardized poll - using opinions offered in designing a questionnaire. By starting with a focus group, you can quantify how those responses are represented in a population.

Option 2: Start with a quantitative survey. By doing a standardized poll from the outset, it becomes easier to identify the segments of the population you should be interviewing during a focus group. For example, if a political opinion poll shows that many young women voters are not inclined to become part of a political party, you can tailor a focus group discussion to target young female voters and gain their opinions on how to better involve them in the electoral process.

How to analyze data

Only polls that have been carried out in an ethical and scientifically based manner should be released to the public. In order to interpret the data correctly, all relevant information surrounding a poll or survey needs to be known.

That being said, the detailed facts – crucial for analysts, decision makers, political parties, and government – are not always interesting to the general public. Journalists are often the bridge between these two groups of people, but they most likely will not complete a critical analysis of the data sets on their own, instead relying on catchy headlines. Most commonly, when media reports on a poll, the typical statement is “X percentage of respondents says...” But this is not all a poll says and critical analysis will prove this.

Interpreting poll results

Interpreting the results of polls represents a possible pitfall for both pollsters and poll users. Even when conducting all phases of survey research with equal effort, we often forget to conduct the last phase, interpreting poll results, with enough care. We all think it is the simplest phase, requiring no particular wisdom. However, this phase is often where the largest errors occur.

The main reason behind so many errors in interpreting and implementing poll results lies in two fundamental, interconnected facts. First, poll users (journalists, politicians, and political party officials) in most cases are not adequately educated in the basic principle for

interpreting poll results. Second, poll users are in general biased with regard to the results. In other words, they do not interpret results objectively, but treat them as political tools that can be used for achieving political goals. Alternatively, they can see polls as a threat and strive to invalidate them.

Sample Error

The problem of sample error is particularly noticeable in interpreting ratings of political parties and individual politicians. These ratings are the most interesting part of any public opinion research. It is a key piece of information politicians look for before anything else and which they absorb with greatest attention. The face of politicians is often reflected in their personal or party rating, so their enormous interest in this piece of information is understandable. Individual politicians form their opinion about the quality of research based on the sampling error. If politicians like the information they, will claim the research valid, and if not, vice-versa.

As a consequence of high interest in their ratings, politicians tend to interpret numbers in absolute terms and their eagerness for precision is infinite. They usually ask for ratings to be expressed in two decimals. It is exactly this eagerness for precision that causes neglect of the standard sample error (see page X).

The standard sample error makes it impossible to hold poll results as absolutely accurate to the last digit. Results obtained using a sample, when the sample error is known, indicate the range in which the actual results lie, but in no case does it indicate the actual result. Non-familiarity of this fact combined with infinite eagerness for precision of ratings often leads to errors in interpreting poll results. This error is best noticeable in drawing conclusions about shifts in ratings of parties between two polls.

Errors of this type are present every day in the media. They are made even by journalists and politicians who use poll results in their writing and public appearances relatively frequently. This 'sinful habit' is largely 'sponsored' by researchers as we, while presenting poll results, rarely emphasize the extent of the sample error in those polls. Even when we do mention it, we only do it in the introduction. Almost always omit it when presenting the rating of a party or politicians. Researchers often behave like they are trying to hide the sample error or they are ashamed of it. This shame is a consequence of an unreasonable acceptance of the requirement of exactness imposed upon by politicians and journalists.

Comparing the results of two polls

Monitoring trends in public opinion research is of enormous importance. Only by monitoring the changes in a certain indicator over a period of time can we correctly assess what is happening with certain phenomena.

For trends to have validity, it is important that we form them based on polls that were conducted using the same methodology. It is known that poll results depend to a certain degree on individual elements of research methodology. As a rule, oscillations of results

that happen as consequence of difference in research methodology are usually not large, but can be very significant for monitoring trends because they can lead us to wrong conclusions.

To estimate if polls are comparable, the following questions must be considered:

- Was the same method of data collection used in both polls?
- Were the same question wording and response scale used in both polls?
- Are there any contextual differences between the two polls?

Nowadays, in most cases, only two data collection methods are used: face-to-face interviews and telephone interviews. Results of polls conducted using these two different methods can partly differ even if such polls are conducted at the same time. These differences occur for two reasons; the first is that face-to-face and telephone interview samples often have different characteristics. The second, that respondents sometimes answer questions differently depending on whether they are interviewed face-to-face or by phone.

Some experiments have shown that respondents answer the same questions differently by phone than during face-to-face interviews. Such differences are significant when we use questions with scales. The main reason is that during face-to-face interviews we can judge body language and facial expressions, or provide visual aids (such as campaign posters or advertising) whereas we don't have that possibility if we conduct telephone interviews.

Different question wording, even a slight one, can affect the results. If we use different scales with the same question, we can expect different results. For example, if you ask the question "Is the government moving the country in the right direction?" and you provide the participants response options of "Yes" or "No" you will get different results than if you provide the response options of "Yes", "Somewhat", "No", and "Don't Know/No Answer". You will collect a reliable data set if you compare two questions with different response options.

Some contextual difference between polls can also affect the occurrence of unjustifiably different results even if the polls are conducted using the same method, with the same question and the same scale. In some cases, the order of questions can affect how a person responds to them. For example, if you ask respondents about negative events, affairs, or government decisions and then ask them to assess that government, you can end up with a more negative assessment than the one you would get if you ask them to do the government assessment first. Such instances are relatively rare, but happen in certain cases and you should be aware of them.

Influence of Events

Events undoubtedly have an influence on the attitudes, which are the subject of examination through public opinion research. Drastic events have drastic influence. For example, you are carry out a survey covering the topic of the increasing economic stability

in your country. You interview a large sample size and begin analysis of your results, but during this time the economy suddenly falters due to outside influences. Your results, while of some provide historic value, will no longer represent the real attitudes of the population as they are now more concerned with an increasing cost of living, or potential job losses, due to the influence of an event that was not present during your initial survey period.

This can be a case of the presence of the psychological phenomenon of changed perception as a result of changed circumstances. Some drastic events provoke permanent change, while others provoke only temporary changes. Remarkable events can be singled out and they can even be graphically presented, making it easier to note changes in public opinion. Lower-intensity events can also have a considerable impact, but in such cases impact is neither directly recognizable, nor is it easy to estimate in which direction the impact of the mutually unrelated events will go.

For this reason, the results of a survey, which is several weeks or months old, can still be valid, but not reflect the actual situation. The moment when the survey results are publicized and the event preceding it represents crucial information, without which the survey results can look completely useless.

Comparing and Contrasting Responses

Outlined below are the components to analyzing poll and survey results:

Frequency – By examining the frequency of responses we can answer the question “How many people say?” It is important to know the distribution of responses. For respondents who have chosen a Don’t Know/No Answer response (because they do not want to share their answers or do not feel they have enough information to answer) on the standardized questionnaire, this will skew the overall number of responses. By taking out the Don’t Know/No Answer percentages, you are left with the total number of respondents who have an opinion on the question. This is called the valid percentage. For example, if we ask about the performance of a government leader and many respondents don’t respond, we need to analyze the answers of those who gave a response. In this case we have to look at the valid percentages. This needs to be clearly stated, and the number/percentage of non-responses must be stated to fully understand the findings of the data.

Cross-Tabulation –Cross-tabulation answers the question “Who says...?” or “Which demographic believes...?” This method allows us to understand the differences in responses between younger and older participants, urban versus rural, educated or limited education, etc. Sometimes cross-tabulation will show us demographic breakdowns between different demographics, for example, young and rural participants versus older and well-educated participants. This type of information is helpful when writing policy or advertising campaigns, allowing to impact the largest demographic spread as possible.

Bias and Non-Response

When conducting a survey, you are often faced with the refusal of cooperation by selected respondents. The number of refusals, as well as who (demographically) refuses to cooperate, is important information for assessment of the quality of obtained data. In practice, there are always a certain percentage of non-responses. If you believe that the number of non-responses obtained from your sample is not distributed randomly or if a certain demographic is refusing to answer questions, you may have discovered a bias in your data. In such cases, a big sample becomes a disadvantage because of the narrow interval defined by sampling error around the value, which, due to a bias generated by non-response of a certain homogenous subgroup, does not represent a real value for the entire population.

For example, you are polling a population during an election campaign to determine which political party is leading among popular opinion. A particular party may ask its supporters to not indicate their voting intentions. During analysis of your polling results, you would be underestimating the support of that particular party and your sample size would be unable to capture the bias. The outcome of this would be a surprising jump in support for a particular party on Election Day, one that was not anticipated by pollsters or opinion leaders.

If possible, it is worth trying to recognize who the citizens refusing cooperation are. It would be very difficult if the refusal comes out before the beginning of the interview, but on the other hand, it would be possible if the respondent refuses to answer some particular question. Through cross-tabulation, it is possible to determine that at least one half of the respondents who refused to answer a specific question were concealed supporters of the specific party (using above example).

Other Sources of Misunderstanding and Errors Concerning Surveys

Each survey has a number of so-called non sampling sources of errors and misunderstandings. The larger the number of these errors, the less clear and/or reliable is the overall picture. Without a rigorous control of all non-sampling sources of errors, the picture obtained from a very correct sample completely loses its quality.

One of the most common sources of non-sampling errors relate to the manner in which the question is asked – regardless of whether this concerns the questions which the respondent does not wish to answer, questions which are easy to answer or questions that are poorly articulated.

In addition to the complex of non-sampling sources of errors are the possible technical errors at the point of data entry (or transcription in the computer). This source of errors is the least risky, easiest to control and when noticed, easiest to fix.

Trend as an Indicator

Some events are so extreme that they can totally change public attitudes for a short period of time. However, when the immediate effect is over, things often go back to normal. Other

events change the public's attitudes permanently. A series of events often have diverse effects, with one stirring public opinion in one direction and the other in an opposite one. What is reflected in the public opinion attitudes is not easily explainable, because it is the result of not just one, but several events. The moment when public opinion is recorded is a real snapshot in time. A survey captures a moment, which, as early as the next day, can represent the past, because new events have a new effect.

Basic tendencies are not so easily subject to change. Therefore on a graph or a table on which trends are highlighted, as well as occasional oscillations together with causes of those oscillations, it is not a problem to recognize in which direction citizen attitudes on certain political phenomena are going.

Sometimes mid-study it is necessary to eliminate or redo an individual focus group discussion completely. This is all part of the broader analysis, but here we are evaluating the scientific quality of a focus group for research purposes. The primary question is whether unplanned circumstances contaminated the focus group "laboratory" thus producing unreliable results.

SECTION V: STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNICATING POLITICAL SURVEY RESEARCH RESULTS

Now that we understand how qualitative and quantitative data are collected and conducted, and how to read and analyze poll data, what happens next?

With so much information contained in data sets, it is easy to get lost in statistics and numbers. While using statistics to discredit surveys released or endorsed by opposing parties is certainly a good use, the information you have is very powerful. With it, you can share insights on a population's opinions, concerns, and attitudes. Before communicating the results of a poll or focus group survey, you must clearly outline your goal. Keeping this goal in mind, use the statistics and facts to tell a story, and share this story with citizens, government, decision makers and media.

Think of quantitative numbers as the backbone of the story you want to tell. These facts will give credibility to your message, which is key in achieving your goals you've set out to achieve. Out of any data set, choose the most pertinent numbers that will lend power to message, that back up what you wish to share. Keep in mind that the average person has difficulty paying attention to a list of numbers. Pick only the strongest statistics and results, limit yourself to three data items, and use these to your fullest advantage.

Quantitative data can sometimes be boring to communicate, but it is essential in proving your credibility. Your opponents will be examining the same data sets, looking for the statistics that will counter the facts you are presenting. When speaking to sample sizes and margin of errors you have to be very precise and able to back up your numbers. All the work that has been done previously, in which you ensured that proper standards were met and the surveys were held in an ethical manner, pay off here.

Once you have your backbone (quantitative), flesh out our story. This is where qualitative data comes in handy. Personal opinions collected from individuals during focus groups will allow you to describe in a more emotional manner the quantitative data sets. Qualitative data is easier to communicate. Use the personal experiences you have gathered, the human aspect of the numbers you are presenting, to draw in your audience. This is how you gain the media's attention, how you have constituents and the public pay attention to your message.

For example, let's say a political opinion survey has been released in your country, studying the intent of women to participate in the next federal election. You have read the survey and determined that the sample size is satisfactory and that the margin of error falls within a suitable range. The survey shows that 17 percent of women polled intend to participate in the next federal election. You have read the questions and studied the methodology and understand that 520 women with some level of post-secondary education were asked if they intended to participate, either as a candidate or in support of a candidate. Of the 520 women polled, 88 women (or 17 percent) intend to participate in the electoral process. You have cross-referenced this number with a previous poll, prior to the last federal election, which showed that only 8 percent of women intended to participate. Using the analysis skills you have learned, you know that the question asked in both surveys is either identical or similar enough to compare and that the same amount of women were polled. But of the 520 women polled previously, only 42 women intended to participate in some capacity.

So while we can all admit that 17 percent is not an ideal number, we still have the ability to show that women are becoming more interested participating in the political process. Opponents will say that only 17 percent want to be involved, proving that women are not interested in being active. But you can counter this by saying that there has been an increase in women announcing their intention to participate. You have used your facts in an open and transparent manner to counter opposing opinions.

Numbers speak to facts, but you want to reach out to more women, to educate them on the benefits of participating in the electoral process, to make them understand how important it is to support women in their country or region. This is when you use qualitative data. Statements gathered from focus groups can put an emotional spin on facts you present. Sharing quotes gathered from focus groups is important. Highlight how you engaged members of the community and how they believe that more women participating in the electoral process is not only good for the country, but good for women in overall. Use opinions of the people surveyed to show that women support women running in elections. By doing so, it helps to inspire other women to become more involved.

Strategies for Achieving Best Results

The best strategy for communicating the results of both quantitative and qualitative data is by setting a plan in advance. Throughout this manual you have been reminded to keep goals, credibility and standards in mind with it comes to your public opinion research. This

should not diminish once you have your results in hand. Planning ahead will ensure that you can easily overcome any hurdles that may come your way.

When developing your strategic plan keep in mind the following:

Accuracy – Do not misrepresent facts. Be accurate to increase your credibility. Without credibility, your message will not be well-received.

Simplicity – Keep it simple. Remember to use facts and figures sparingly, enough to back up your findings, but don't overwhelm your audience. People will rarely remember specific numbers, so communicate a feeling or an attitude instead. Keep language simple and easy to understand. Jargon and acronyms will confuse people and they will not understand your message.

Relevancy – Be aware of what is happening around you. While you may believe certain results should be a priority to discuss, outside factors may limit the resonance of your message. If you are speaking about an issue that is not relevant to the general population, you will find you are easily discredited.

Audience – Always keep in mind who your audience is and the best method of communication to them. While your message will always be the same, the language and tone will change depending on who you are speaking to. For example, if you are speaking to an individual at home, in the media, or with government officials your tone and presentation should cater those audiences. Treat everyone with respect because if combined with credibility, people will pay attention to your message.

Repetition – Know your message. State your message clearly. Repeat your message. Keep repeating your message! State your message as many times as possible so that it becomes ingrained in the minds of the people you speak with. Keeping your message consistent is integral to your success. Do not change your message if criticized.

Tailoring Communications Products to Effectively Share Research Results

After establishing a message and outlining the story you wish to tell with accurate results and facts to back it up, the next logical step is to get the message out. This is an opportunity to be creative and to try new methods. For the purpose of this Standard Series manual, we will look at some of the more basic and traditional communications methods.

Talking Points – Talking points serve as the basis for all of your communications products. Talking points encompass the data results you wish to communicate and outline the qualitative information you wish to share. Have a limited number of talking points in order to remember them easily. Ideally three talking points is a good start.

Spokesperson Statement – A statement will outline the basics of your position. If you are working for an organization, the statement should be posted on your organization's website and should be sent to local stakeholders. A statement will be treated as a direct

quote. A statement is not long - three to five paragraphs at most. Your audience for a spokesperson statement is very general. Tailor your language to suit all audiences. Start with your talking points, outline the data you wish to highlight and include your qualitative results to bring interest to the statement.

Press Release – This is a document sent to the press. It is recommended that it be sent to government officials, opposition and stakeholders. A press release starts with a general paragraph outlining the reason for the release. The second paragraph should include a quote prepared as part of your talking points. The language used in the quote should reflect in your spokesperson statement as well. A press release is more formal in nature than a spokesperson statement and should explain the survey methodology, margin of error and sample make-up. The goal of the press release is to draw the media’s attention to your issue. Always include contact information at the bottom of a press release and link it to your (organization’s) website if you have one.

Speeches – Speeches are prepared for public events such as a debates and fundraisers. Speeches are also be used in part during media interviews. Media interviews provide the opportunity to be creative and a space for you to play with emotions and anecdotes. Your goal is to influence the people you are talking to. Tone should personal and language easy to understand. Use numbers sparingly in speeches. You can clarify your methodology later.

Social Media – The key to using social media is drawing in people to your website, public events and educating the public on the issues handoff concern. Keep social media updates informal, but respectful. Include links whenever possible to direct traffic to your website or other resources you wish to draw attention to.

Remember as you prepare these products to keep everything accurate, simple, relevant and appropriate for your intended audience.

BEST PRACTICES

The best practice when communicating results of political survey research is to ensure information is accurate. Any communications products prepared will be examined very closely by opposition, media and government officials. Always present findings in an accurate manner. Always be prepared to back up your findings.

Below is a document previously shared by the International Republican Institute’s Europe Division. If research has been conducted correctly, you should be able to answer the following questions:

20 Questions Journalists Should Ask About Poll Results

Second Edition

Courtesy of National Council on Public Polls

Who did the poll?

What polling firm, research house, political campaign, corporation or other group conducted the poll?

If you don't know, you cannot answer the other questions listed here. If the person providing the poll results can't or won't tell you who conducted the poll, serious questions must be raised about the reliability and truthfulness of the results being presented.

Reputable polling firms will provide you with the information you need to evaluate the survey. Because reputation is important to a quality firm, a professionally conducted poll will avoid various errors that could jeopardize the credibility of the research.

Who paid for the poll and why was it done?

Always know who paid for the survey because that tells you – and your audience – why topics addressed in the research were important enough to spend money to find out what people think. This supports the main premise of why the poll was done.

Polls are conducted for a reason – either to gain helpful information or to advance a particular cause. News organizations might want to develop a good story. It may be that a politician wants to be re-elected and get a better sense of who and what his constituents are concerned about. It may be that a corporation is trying to push sales of its new product and want to test public reaction to the product. A special interest group may also be trying to prove that its views are the views of the entire country.

All of the above mentioned reasons are legitimate for conducting a poll.

It is important from a journalism standpoint that if the motive for doing a poll creates serious doubts about the validity of the poll results, the results should not be publicized.

Examples of suspect polls can be private polls conducted by a political campaign. These polls are conducted solely to help the candidate win. The poll may have significantly slanted questions or a strange sampling methodology with a tactical campaign purpose. For example, the campaign may be testing out new slogans or a new stance on a key issue or a new attack on the opponent.

But since accurately gauging the general public's sentiments is not the goal of the candidate's poll, the results should be reported with great care.

Likewise, reporting on a survey by a special interest group is tricky. For example, an environmental group trumpets a poll saying the American people support strong measures to protect the environment. That may be true, but the poll could have been conducted for a group with definite views. That may have swayed the question wording, the timing of the

poll, the group interviewed and the order of the questions. You should examine the poll to be certain that it accurately samples public opinion – and does not simply push a single viewpoint.

How many people were interviewed for the survey?

Because polls give approximate answers, the more people interviewed in a scientific poll, the smaller the error due to the size of the sample. A common trap to avoid is “more is automatically better.” It is true that the more people interviewed in a reliable survey, the smaller the sampling error – all other things being equal. But, other factors may be more important in judging the quality of a survey.

How were these people chosen?

The key reason that some polls reflect public opinion accurately and other polls are unscientific junk is how the people were chosen to be interviewed.

In scientific polls, the pollster uses a specific method for picking respondents. In unscientific polls, the person picks himself who participates.

The method pollsters use to pick interviewees relies on the bedrock of mathematical reality: when the chances of selecting each person representing all backgrounds in the target population is known, then and only then do the results of the sample survey reflect the entire population. This is called a random sample or a probability sample. This is the reason that interviews with 1,000 American adults can accurately reflect the opinions of more than 200 million American adults.

Most scientific samples use special techniques to be economically feasible. For example, some sampling methods for telephone interviewing do not just pick randomly generated telephone numbers. Only telephone exchanges that are known to contain working residential numbers are selected – to reduce the number of wasted calls.

But even a random sample cannot be purely random in practice since some people don't have phones, refuse to answer or simply aren't home.

What area (nation, state, or region) or what group (teachers, lawyers, voters, etc.) were these people chosen from?

It is absolutely critical to know which group the interviewees were chosen from.

You must know if a sample was drawn from among all adults in the United States, or just from those in one state or in one city, or from another group. For example, a survey of business people can reflect the opinions of business people – but not of all adults. Only if the interviewees were chosen from among all American adults can the poll reflect the opinions of all American adults.

In the case of telephone samples, the population is that of people living in households with telephones. For most purposes, telephone households may be similar to the general population. But, if you were reporting a poll on what it was like to be poor or homeless, this would not be the appropriate sample. Remember, the use of a scientific sampling technique does not mean the correct population was interviewed.

Political polls are especially sensitive to this.

In pre-primary and pre-election polls, how the people are chosen as the base for poll results is critical. A poll of all adults, for example, is not very useful on a primary race where only 25 percent of the registered voters actually turn out. So look for polls based on registered voters, "likely voters," previous primary voters, and such. These distinctions are important and should be included in the story. One of the most difficult challenges in polling is trying to figure out who actually is going to vote.

Are the results based on the answers of all the people interviewed?

One of the easiest ways to misrepresent the results of a poll is to report the answers of only a subgroup. For example, there is usually a substantial difference between the opinions of Democrats and Republicans on campaign-related matters. Reporting the opinions of only Democrats in a poll purported to be of all adults would substantially misrepresent the results.

Poll results based on Democrats must be identified as such and should be reported as representing only Democratic opinions.

Of course, reporting on just one subgroup can be exactly the right course. In polling on a Republican primary contest, it is the opinions of the Republicans who can vote in the primary that count – not those of Democrats who cannot vote in that GOP contest.

Who should have been interviewed and was not?

No survey ever reaches everyone who should have been interviewed. You out to know what steps were undertaken to minimize non-response, such as the number of attempts to reach the appropriate respondent and over how many days.

There are many reasons why people who should have been interviewed were not. They may have refused attempts to interview them. Or interviews may not have been attempted if people were not home when the interviewer called. Or there may have been a language problem or a hearing problem.

When was the poll done?

Events have a dramatic on poll results. Your interpretation of a poll should depend on

when it was conducted relative to key events. Even the freshest poll results can be overtaken by subsequent events. The President may have given a stirring speech to the nation, the stock market may have crashed or an oil tanker may have sunk, spilling millions of gallons of crude on beautiful beaches.

Poll results that are several weeks or months old may be perfectly valid as history, but are not always newsworthy.

How were the interviews conducted?

There are three main possibilities: in person, by telephone or by mail. Most surveys are now conducted by telephone with calls made from a central interviewing center. However, some surveys are still conducted by sending interviewers into people's homes to conduct the interview.

Some surveys are conducted by mail. In scientific polls, the pollster picks the people to receive the mail questionnaires. The respondent fills out the questionnaire and returns it.

Mail surveys can be excellent sources of information, but it takes weeks to do a mail survey, meaning that the results cannot be as timely as a telephone survey. And mail surveys can be subject to other kinds of errors, particularly low response rates. With mail surveys, more people fail to participate than those that do. This can make results suspect.

Surveys done in shopping malls, stores, restaurants, or on the sidewalk may have uses for the research sponsors, but publishing the results in the media is not advised. These approaches may yield interesting human-interest stories, but they should never be treated as if they represent a public opinion poll.

Advances in technology have allowed the development of computerized interviewing systems that dial the phone, play taped questions to a respondent and then record answers the person gives by punching numbers on the telephone keypad. Such surveys have a variety of server problems, including uncontrolled selection of respondents and poor response rates and should be avoided.

What about polls on the Internet?

The growth of the Internet has given rise to an equally explosive growth in various types of online polls and surveys. Many online polls may be good entertainment, but they tell you nothing about public opinion.

Most internet polls are simply the latest variation on the pseudo-polls that have existed for many years. Whether the effort is a click-on web survey, a dial-in poll or a mail-in survey, the results should be ignored and not reported. All these pseudo-polls suffer from the same problem: the respondents are self-selected. The individuals choose themselves to take part in the poll – there is no pollster choosing the respondents to be interviewed.

Remember, the purpose of a poll is to draw conclusions about the population, not about the sample. In these pseudo-polls there is no way to project the results to any larger group. Any similarity between the results of a pseudo-poll and a scientific survey is pure chance.

Clicking on your candidate's button in the "voting booth" on a website may drive up the numbers for your candidate in a presidential horse-race poll online. In doing so, no effort is made to pick the respondents, to limit users from voting multiple times or to reach out for people who might not normally visit the website.

900-number dial-in polls may be fine for deciding whether or not Larry the Lobster should be cooked on Saturday Night Live or even for dedicated fans to express their opinions on who is the greatest quarterback in the National Football League. The opinions expressed may be real, but in sum, the numbers are just for entertainment purposes. There is no way to tell who actually called in, how old they are or how many times each person called.

Mail-in coupon polls are just as bad. In this case, the magazine or newspaper includes a coupon to be returned with the answers to the questions. Again, there is no way to know who responded and how many times each person did.

Another variation on the pseudo-poll comes is for a fundraising effort. An organization sends out a letter with a survey form attached to a large list of people, asking for opinions and for the respondent to send money to support the organization or pay for tabulating the survey. The questions are often loaded and results of such an effort are always meaningless.

This technique is used by a wide variety of organizations from political parties and special-interest groups to charitable organizations. Again, if the poll in question is part of a fundraising pitch, pitch it – in the wastebasket.

With regard to the internet, methods are being developed to sample the opinions of those who have online access, although these efforts are just starting. Even a survey that accurately sampled those who have access to the Internet would still fall short of a poll of all Americans (for example), since only a relatively small fraction of the nation's adults have access to the Internet.

What is the sampling error for the poll results?

Interviews with a scientific sample of 1,000 adults can accurately reflect the opinions of more than 185 million American adults. That means interviews attempted with all 200 million adults – if such were possible – would give approximately the same results as a well-conducted survey based on 1,000 interviews.

What happens if another carefully done poll of 1,000 adults gives slightly different results

from the first survey? Neither of the polls are wrong. The range of results is called the error due to sampling, or the margin of error.

This is not an “error” in the sense of making a mistake. Rather, it is a measure of the possible range of approximation in the results because a sample was used.

Pollsters express the size of the uncertainty caused by using a sample at a “confidence level.” This means a sample is likely to be within so many points of the results one would have gotten if an interview were attempted with the entire target population. They usually say this with 95% confidence.

Thus, for example, a 3 percentage margin of error in a national poll means that if the attempt was made to interview every adult in the nation with the same questions in the same way at about the same time, the poll’s answers would fall within plus or minus 3 percentage points of the complete count result 95% of the time.

This does not address the issue of whether or not people cooperate with the survey, if the questions are understood or if any other methodological issue exists. The sampling error is only the portion of the potential error in a survey introduced by using a sample rather than the entire population. Sampling error tells us nothing about the refusals or those consistently unavailable for interview; it also tells us nothing about the biasing effects of a particular question wording or the bias a particular interviewer may inject into the interview situation.

Remember that the sampling error margin applies to each figure in the results – it is at least 3 percentage points plus or minus for each one. Thus, in a poll question matching two candidates for President, both figures are subject to sampling error.

Who is on first?

Sampling error is one of the larger problems in the presentation of poll results: For example, for a horse-race poll, when is one candidate *really* ahead of the other?

Certainly, if the gap between the two candidates is less than the error margin, you should not say that one candidate is ahead of the other. You can say the race is “close,” the race is “roughly even,” or there is “little difference between the candidates.” But it should not be called a “dead heat” unless the candidates are tied with the same percentages.

And just as certainly, when the gap between the two candidates is equal to or more than twice the error margin – 6 percentage points in our example – and if there are only two candidates and no undecided voters, you can say with confidence that the poll says Candidate A is clearly leading Candidate B.

When the gap between the two candidates is more than the error margin but less than

twice the error margin, you should say that Candidate A “is ahead,” “has an advantage”, or “holds an edge.” The story should mention that there is a small possibility that Candidate B is ahead of Candidate A.

When there are more than two choices or undecided voters the question becomes more complicated. The solution is statistically complex, but you can fairly easily evaluate this situation by estimating the error margin. Take the percent for each of the two candidates in question and multiplying it by the total respondents for the survey (only the likely voters if that is appropriate). This number is now the effective sample size for your judgment. Look up the sampling error in a table of statistics for that reduced sample size, and apply it to the candidate percentage. If they overlap, then you do not know if one candidate is ahead over another. If they do not overlap, then you can make the judgment that one particular candidate has a lead.

Bear in mind that when subgroup results are reported – women, ethnic minorities or young people – the sampling error margin for those figures is greater than for results based on the sample as a whole.

What other kinds of factors can skew poll results?

The margin of sampling error is just one source of inaccuracy in a poll and not necessarily the greatest source of error; we use it because it’s the only one that can be quantified. All other parts being equal, it is useful for evaluating whether differences between poll results are meaningful in a statistical sense.

Question phrasing and ordering are also a likely source of flaws. Inadequate interviewer training and supervision, data processing errors and other operational problems can also introduce errors. Professional polling operations are less subject to these problems than volunteer-conducted polls, which are usually less trustworthy.

You should always ask if the poll results have been “weighted.” This process is usually used to account for unequal probabilities of selection and to correct demographics in the sample. You should be aware that a poll could also be unduly manipulated by weighting to produce some desired results. While some weighting may be appropriate, other weighting is not. Weighting a scientific poll is only appropriate to reflect unequal probabilities or to adjust to independent values that are mostly constant.

What questions were asked?

You must find out the exact wording of the poll questions. Why? Because the very wording of questions can make major differences in the results.

Perhaps the best test of any poll question is your reaction to it. Up front, does the question seem fair and unbiased? Does it present a balanced set of choices? Would people you know be able to answer the question?

On sensitive questions complete wording of the question should be included in your story.

It may be worthwhile to compare the results of several different polls from different organizations on these sensitive questions. In that case, you should be careful to compare both the results and the exact wording of the questions.

In what order were the questions asked?

Sometimes the very order of the questions can have an impact on the results. Often that impact is intentional but sometimes it is not. The impact of order can often be subtle.

During troubled economic times, for example, if people are asked what they think of the economy before they are asked their opinion of the president, the presidential popularity rating will probably be lower than if you had reversed the questions. And in good economic times, the opposite is typically true.

What is important here is whether the questions that went before the important question affect the results. If the poll asks questions about the environment just before a question about an environment ballot measure, those previous questions could sway the results.

What about “push polls”?

In recent years, some political campaigns and special-interest groups have used a technique called “push polls” to spread rumors and about opponents. These efforts are not polls, but are political manipulations trying to hide behind the smokescreen of a public opinion survey.

In a “push poll,” a large number of people are called by telephone and asked to participate in a purported survey. The survey questions are thinly veiled accusations against an opponent or repetitions of rumors about a candidate’s personal or professional behavior. The focus here is on making certain the respondent hears and understands the accusation in the questions, not in gathering the respondent’s opinions.

“Push polls” are unethical and have been condemned by professional polling organizations.

“Push polls” must be distinguished from some types of legitimate surveys done by political campaigns. At times, a campaign poll may ask a series of questions about contrasting issue positions of the candidates or various statements that could be said about a candidate, some of which are negative. These legitimate questions seek to gauge the public’s reaction to a candidate’s position or to a possible legitimate attack on a candidate’s record.

A legitimate poll can be distinguished from a “push poll” usually by:

The number of calls made – a “push poll” makes thousands and thousands of calls, instead

of hundreds for most surveys; the identity of who is making the telephone calls – a polling firm for a scientific survey as opposed to a telemarketing house or the campaign itself for a “push poll.”

What other polls have been done on this topic? Do they say the same thing? If they are different, why are they different?

Results of other polls – by a newspaper or television station, a public survey firm, or even a candidate’s opponent – should be used to check and contrast poll results you have in hand.

If the polls differ, first check the timing of the interviewing. If the polls were done at different times, the differing results may demonstrate a swing in public opinion.

If the polls were done about the same time, ask each poll sponsor for an explanation of the differences. Conflicting polls often make good stories.

So I’ve asked all the questions. The answers sound good. The poll is correct, right?

Usually, yes. However, remember that the laws of chance alone say that the results of one poll out of 20 may be skewed away from the public’s real views just because of sampling error.

Also remember that no matter how good the poll, no matter how wide the margin, no matter how big the sample, a pre-election poll does not show that one candidate has the race “locked up.” Things change – often and dramatically in politics. That’s why candidates campaign.

With all these potential problems should we ever report poll results?

Yes. Because reputable polling organizations consistently do good work. In spite of the difficulties, the public opinion survey correctly conducted, is still the best objective measure of the views of the public.

Is this poll worth reporting?

If the poll was conducted correctly and you have been able to obtain the information outlined in this manual – yes.

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For any additional information on any aspect of polling or a specific poll, please call the NCPP office at 800-239-0909.

EXERCISE 3 – COMMUNICATING SURVEY RESULTS

For this exercise, practice writing talking points that can be used for communications products. Remember to keep the talking points clear and concise and reflective of your overall position. For the purpose of this exercise, use the following information:

A poll has been conducted regarding the participation of women in the electoral process. After analyzing the poll the following conclusions have been made:

72 percent of the women polled believe that the participation of women in the electoral process is improving. Six percent of the women polled believe the participation of women in the electoral process is deteriorating.

34 percent of the men polled believe the participation of women in the electoral process is improving. Two percent of the men polled believe the participation of women in the electoral process is deteriorating.

The poll reached 2,500 individuals in an urban center. Roughly 53 percent of participants were women.

CONCLUSION

Submitted by Dr. Eman Al-Hussein, AWLI Vice-Chair

As an academic and a political and social activist, I often participate in many international, regional and local conferences. I have also been on several TV and radio programs to talk about political or social issues. It is natural for me to prepare for these public events. The first thing I do is to refer to relevant and reliable research, studies and opinion polls, to ensure that my talking points are robust and credible, based on scientific research and studies. .

For the reasons mentioned above, I encourage and value the Arab Women’s Leadership Institute’s (AWLI) various trainings, targeting relevant groups such as female members of parliament, female members of t programs and resources that work with women from e municipal councils, female candidates and women activists in civil society organizations.

The content of AWLI trainings is highly valuable for other groups too, including media figures and women in other community decision-making positions.

A lot of research, surveys and opinion polls are published in daily newspapers and sometimes they are wrongfully discussed and analyzed through the media. Here proves the importance of AWLI trainings. I have witnessed through my own attendance at an AWLI training on “Understanding Political Survey Research” that the curriculum helped raise participants’ confidence in research, surveys and opinion polls published by reliable study centers and think tanks. Participants were briefed on the steps involved in conducting research and surveys, including the different types of research, the quantitative and qualitative.

Quantitative research was discussed thoroughly during the training, including the preparation of questionnaires and how to make sure that a questionnaire is clearly developed, selecting the sample with the help of the Department of Statistics, and how this should be done in a scientific manner to ensure the impartiality of the researcher, contrary to what the participants used to believe. The participants also learned about the research verification and validation mechanisms that occur before publication.

As for the qualitative research, the participants learned important tools; focus groups, face-to-face interviews, and observation. They also learned how to take advantage of interviews by linking outcomes. This approach had a significant impact on the participants by encouraging them to reconsider the importance of conducting qualitative research before preparing their electoral platforms.

The trainers’ approach of providing hands-on experiences to the participants, including presenting published opinion polls and political research, analyzing the information, and reading numbers and figures in an accurate and scientific manner, raised the curiosity of participants. The participants used to misread these types of figures and believed that the published research was unrealistic and inaccurate. This was further confirmed when some participants requested to conduct opinion polls and research that would serve their parliaments and communities.

In my capacity as the Vice-Chair on AWLI’s Board of Directors, I know that good management, proper organization and teamwork are the most important components for AWLI’s success and excellence. The information and skills the participants acquired through the “Understanding Political Survey Research” training, particularly, the in-depth analysis of opinion polls and political research, will increase their confidence and conviction of the importance of research, will surely enrich their political careers and social development, and will inevitably help them in decision-making process.