

The Road to the White House: Poll Position: Collecting & Analyzing Polling Data

Critical Engagement Question

What lies behind the numbers when we analyze polling data during election season?

Overview

We are inundated with polling data throughout the campaign season. It can be a challenge to make sense of polls when data is often interpreted to reach multiple conclusions, and public opinion seems to fluctuate on a daily basis.

Polling data is necessary to analyze trends across the electorate, but we must view it with a critical eye, scrutinizing sample sizes, margins of error, and the degree to which a sample is random. This lesson is intended to illuminate the value of public opinion polls and offer effective strategies for interpreting polling data.

Objectives

- To familiarize students with basic public opinion polling techniques.
- To enable students to compare polls from multiple sources.
- To expose students to longitudinal polling data that reveal long-term trends in candidate performance.
- To provide students with the tools to analyze and interpret polls released throughout the campaign season.

Standards

NCHS: Era 10, Standard 1B

NCSS: Strands 5, 6, and 10

Illinois: Goal 10, Standard A and B; Goal 18, Standard B

Student Materials

Poll Position Worksheet

Internet access (if unavailable, copies of recent opinion polls gathered by the teacher)

Time and Grade Level

One and a half 45-minute class period with pre- and post-activity homework.

Recommended for grades 9-12.

Warm-Up

1. By a show of hands, ask students to indicate their presidential candidate of choice. Allow students to vote 'undecided' if they have yet to make up their minds. Post the results and then ask students to calculate the percentage of votes earned by each candidate.
2. Locate a recent poll that reflects national presidential preferences among the electorate. Depending on the stage of the election cycle, this may pose an unnamed Republican challenger against President Obama, or hypothetical head-to-head match-ups with current Republican contenders. Write the results alongside those of your student poll and ask students to compare the data. Encourage them to offer possible explanations for any disparities between the poll results.
3. Examine a longitudinal polling data on RealClearPolitics.com to highlight how public opinion can fluctuate over time.

4. Have students consider the broader question of why media organizations conduct public opinion polls of candidates and election-related issues.
5. Additionally, these follow-up questions may also be appropriate in preparing for the polling activity at the center of this lesson:
 - What types of organizations conduct polls?
 - What types of questions are asked?
 - How / what methods are used to ask the questions?
 - How is the data compiled?
 - How is the data analyzed?
 - Discuss the importance of demographics.

Activity

1. Distribute one copy of the Poll Position: Collecting and Analyzing Polling Data worksheet to each student. The worksheet will facilitate the balance of the lesson.
2. Have students work with a partner to complete this assignment.
3. Ask students to conduct a poll of students outside of class, with the goal of targeting a diverse sample in terms of gender and age. A sample size of at least 30 is desirable.
4. With their partners, students should then respond the remaining questions on the worksheet, referencing www.RealClearPolitics.com or, if Internet access is not available to students, teacher-provided copies of recent national or state opinion polls.
5. As a class, discuss student poll results and responses to questions posed on the worksheet. Delve deeper into the limitations of the student-conducted polls, addressing issues such as sample size, lack of age and geographic diversity, and possible limitations along the lines of race, gender and income. You may also want to explore the limited value of cross-sectional polls that reflect public opinion at one point in time, as opposed to longitudinal studies that examine opinion trends across time. See www.RealClearPolitics.com for examples of election-related longitudinal studies.

Homework

Ask students to complete a brief write-up of their polling data in the form of a press release. They should acknowledge the size of the sample, its limitations, and how it compares with similar surveys conducted both statewide and nationally.

Poll Position: Collecting and Analyzing Polling Data

Name

Directions

With your partner, complete the steps below to administer a survey, analyze its results and compare it to similar polls conducted by media organizations. For the purposes of this activity, we will imagine that there is no minimum age requirement to vote in national elections.

1. Review the major candidates running for President in 2012 listed in the chart below. Depending upon the stage of the process, this may include one or more candidates for each party, along with third party candidates.
2. Poll at least thirty of your fellow students, seeking balance in terms of gender and grade, if possible. Ask each student to choose the candidates he/she would vote for if the election were to be held today. Tally the results in the space provided. Count up the individual tallies for each candidate and list these numbers in the "TOTALS" row. Lastly, divide these numbers by the total number of survey participants, calculating a percentage for each candidate.

CANDIDATE	REPUBLICAN CANDIDATES				DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATE	UNDECIDED/ THIRD PARTY
	GINGRICH	PAUL	ROMNEY	SANTORUM	OBAMA	
TALLY						
TOTALS						
PERCENTAGES						

Questions

1. Visit www.RealClearPolitics.com. Find the latest poll results for the presidential race. How do they compare with your findings?
2. If you had the chance to conduct another poll at your school, what would you do differently to achieve results that better represent the opinions of voters across the nation?