

Topic: Why public opinion matters and how to measure it

The main way Americans participate in our representative democracy and make their voices heard is by voting and sending elected representatives to do the work of government. But even when they're not selecting candidates or voting on important issues in their community, Americans have views and opinions that matter and should be included in the public dialogue.

Public opinion polling is an important way to make sure these views and opinions are brought into important national debates and conversations.

Here are a few reasons why measuring public opinion is important:

- **It helps elected leaders know how the people they represent are feeling and how the policies they're enacting are affecting people's lives.** Of course, there are ways constituents can contact their representatives directly (like writing letters or reaching out over social media). But not everyone is that highly engaged, and people who are less involved might have different opinions from those whose voices are the loudest. Public opinion polling captures a wider range of viewpoints.
- **It lets elected leaders know what people who voted in an election cared about and what they wanted.** People choose candidates in elections for many different reasons. Even those who voted for the winner may not agree with the candidate about everything. Public opinion polls can tell us which issues were most important and how the voters want them to be handled. They also shed light on the views of people who voted for the losing candidate.
- **It lets elected leaders know how the people who don't regularly vote feel about issues and policies.** Even in elections with high voter turnout, at least a third of Americans don't vote. Polling can bring their voices into the mix.
- **It helps elected leaders set priorities and provides a counterweight to powerful interests.** Lawmakers face a lot of pressures from people and organizations that have a stake in government policies. Political donors and lobbyists are good examples of this. Ultimately, public opinion can serve as a check on those in power by elevating the concerns of everyday people.
- **It helps us understand how the public is feeling about things outside of politics and government.** How are people experiencing family life? What are their hopes for the future? What are their religious beliefs? Understanding these things helps us make sense of the world and how things are changing.

How are public opinion polls conducted?

The basic goal of a survey is to learn about a large group or population based on what we can learn from a small number of people who are part of that group. The large population could be the general public, registered voters, or even a narrower group like all teenagers ages 13 to 17.

Once we know what population or group we want to study, we need to choose a random sample of people from that group who will represent the views of the entire group. We also need to decide how we are going to interview those people and what specific questions we are going to ask.

Let's unpack that.

- **Sampling:** A good poll needs a sample that includes lots of different kinds of people. The best way to get that diversity is through something called *random sampling*, a method that gives everybody in your target population an equal (or at least a known) chance of being included.

In order to identify a random sample for a telephone poll, researchers call a random selection of telephone numbers. For an online poll, researchers will often recruit people through the mail, using a randomized list of mailing addresses. People can then be asked to complete the survey online. These two approaches give nearly every American a chance to be polled.

Random sampling isn't perfect. But pollsters can correct for some of the potential problems using a technique called *weighting*.

Weighting adjusts the data after it's been collected so the sample comes closer to matching what's known about the population that was being studied. So, for example, if a survey included too many men, their responses would be weighted down. And if a survey didn't include enough Hispanic adults, their responses would be weighted up.

- **Mode of interview:** Some of the earliest polls that were conducted back in the 1930s and '40s involved interviewers knocking on doors and asking questions of people in person. Respondents could be chosen at random based on where they lived.

Around the 1980s, most polling shifted to telephone interviews, and that was the main mode of interview for many decades. At first, people were contacted on their landline phones. Later, pollsters started to incorporate cellphones into the process.

More recently, many polls have transitioned to online interviewing. This allows people to participate in a poll on their computer, tablet or mobile device.

- **The questionnaire:** A reliable poll that truly taps into people's views and experiences starts with a good questionnaire. The questions have to be simple, clear and easy for people to understand. And they have to be fair and balanced. It's a good practice to include both sides of an issue in a question. If people are only presented with one side or one argument, that may lead them to answer in a certain way.

The order in which the questions are asked also matters. A basic rule of thumb is to start with more general questions and then move to things that are more specific. For example, if we're interested in knowing whether people approve of the job the president is doing, we will ask about that early in the survey before asking about events or specific policies that could influence the way people think about that broader question.

When you're trying to figure out if a poll is reliable, check to see if the full questionnaire is available. That way you can see exactly how the questions were asked.

Can polls be trusted?

There's not a yes or no answer to this, because the quality of polls really varies. But there are ways you can become a better consumer of polls and learn what distinguishes a good poll from a not-so-good one.

It's true that it's become harder to reach people and persuade them to participate in polls. And some people are more likely to participate than others. But these are issues that pollsters are aware of and working hard to overcome.

Here are some things you should look for when you're trying to determine how reliable a poll is.

- **Who conducted or sponsored the poll?** Was it an independent research group or media organization, or was it a group that had a vested interest in the topic?
- **How was the poll conducted and how were the participants selected?** Were they chosen randomly, or did they decide on their own to participate? Random samples are usually more trustworthy.
- **How many people were interviewed?** More is usually better, especially when it allows you to compare important groups (like adults younger than 30 versus those in older age groups).

- **Does the poll give you access to all the information that can help answer the questions above?** Pew Research Center thinks this kind of transparency is very important.

The main thing to remember is that polls, if done well, give everyone an equal chance to make their voice heard. And that's what democracy is really all about.

Additional resources

Use this QR code to view a web version of this brief and to visit the publications below:



[Public Opinion Polling Basics: A short course explaining how public opinion works](#)

[Key things to know about U.S. election polling in 2024](#)

[Who Are You? The Art and Science of Measuring Identity](#)

Here are some short videos on the basics of survey methods:

[How can a survey of 1,000 people tell you what the whole U.S. thinks?](#)

[How do you write survey questions that accurately measure public opinion?](#)

[How does the way a poll is conducted influence the answers people give?](#)

[What are nonprobability surveys?](#)

[How is polling done around the world?](#)