

Module on Survey Methods: Public Opinion Polling

Module Section Title

“Taking the Pulse: Public Opinion Polling in Social Research”

Course Level

Undergraduate

Duration

2-3 weeks (can be expanded)

Public Opinion Polling Section Description

This module section introduces students to the practice of public opinion polling as a research method in the social sciences. Students will learn how polls are used to understand attitudes, values, and behaviors in the public, and will critically examine how polling data is gathered, interpreted, and used in media, politics, and social policy. Through real-world examples and hands-on activities, students will explore how survey questions are designed, how samples are selected, and how to evaluate the quality of polling data.

Learning Objectives

- Define public opinion and describe its role in social research.
- Describe key AAPOR principles, including transparency, informed consent, and data integrity.
- Identify key components of a public opinion poll, including sampling, question design, and data collection methods.
- Recognize common sources of error and bias in polling data.
- Distinguish between high-quality and low-quality surveys using AAPOR’s Best Practices.
- Develop a small-scale survey instrument aligned with AAPOR’s Code of Professional Ethics and Practices.
- Design a mini survey using AAPOR-recommended wording, structure, and distribution methods.
- Access and explore the Roper Center’s iPoll database and archived datasets.
- Analyze historical public opinion data from the Roper Center using appropriate social science frameworks.
- Critically evaluate how polls are used and misused in public discourse.

Key Topics

- What is public opinion?
- History of polling and its impact on democracy
- Sampling: How pollsters select who to ask
- Question design: wording, order effects, and bias
- Polling methods: phone, online, in-person
- Interpreting poll results: margins of error, top-lines, cross-tabs
- Ethics in polling: transparency, consent, and representation
- Case study: media polls vs. academic surveys

Suggested Readings

- AAPOR. 2015. A Primer on Pre-Election Polls.

- Pew Research Center: [“How Polling Works”](#) (online explainer)
- Meyer, Philip. 1972. Precision Journalism (selected chapters)
- Krosnick, Jon & Alwin, Duane. 1987. “Response Order Effects...” (*Public Opinion Quarterly*)
- Select infographics and interactive tools from [FiveThirtyEight](#) or [the Roper Center](#)

Activities & Assignments

- Poll Analysis Worksheet: Analyze a published poll for methodology and media reporting accuracy
- Survey Question Workshop: Write and revise a set of survey questions in groups
- Polling Ethics Scenario: Class discussion on a controversial use of polling
- Mini Poll Project (optional): Conduct a short in-class survey and present findings

Assessment Options

- Participation in discussion and group activities
- 2-page reflection paper on the role of public opinion in democracy
- Quiz on key concepts: sampling, bias, margin of error, etc.
- Graded group survey project or question critique

Teaching Tips

- Use recent polling headlines to spark interest (e.g., youth attitudes toward climate change)
- Emphasize the difference between good and bad polls using AAPOR’s transparency standards
- Link to broader course themes like validity, generalizability, and ethical research practices