

ESOMAR/WAPOR revised GUIDELINE ON OPINION POLLS AND PUBLISHED SURVEYS

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DRAFT GUIDELINE ON OPINION POLLS AND PUBLISHED SURVEYS

ESOMAR, the World Association for Social, Opinion and Market Research, gathers around 4900 members in over 130 countries and is the essential organisation for encouraging, advancing and elevating market research.

WAPOR is a professional society of around 500 individuals from academic and business professions in over 50 countries who share information in the field of public opinion research through conferences, publications, and personal contact.

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1 INTRODUCTION AND SCOPE

Public opinion is a critical force in shaping and transforming society. Public opinion polls and surveys are regularly conducted in many countries to measure not only support for political parties and candidates, but also public opinion on a wide range of social and political issues. The results are published frequently in the print, online and broadcast media.

Properly conducted and disseminated opinion polls and surveys use scientific statistical methods to provide the public, politicians, the media and other interested groups with access to accurate and objective measures of public attitudes and intentions. They give the general public an opportunity for its voice to be heard and to receive feedback about the opinions of their fellow-citizens. They also help guide policy by giving decision-makers impartial and unbiased information about what the public wants. Although some opinion polls are commissioned by political groups or individuals to help determine strategy, a great many opinion polls are meant for public consumption.

The study of people's attitudes and beliefs and behaviours about political, social and other issues forms part of the total market and social research field, but often deals with issues which arouse greater public interest. Consequently, those findings are much more widely published and debated, and may sometimes be presented in a provocative or political way. Those who conduct opinion polls have a special responsibility to the scientific community, clients and other research users, respondents and the general public. This responsibility means not only using samples, methods, and tools that are up to date, but also delivering to the public the information required to ensure transparent, unbiased reporting of the results supported by comprehensive documentation.

Opinion polls are subject to exactly the same professional and ethical requirements as other forms of market and social research, set out in the [ICC/ESOMAR International Code on Market and Social Research](#) to which researchers and research users must conform. The Code sets minimum standards of professional and ethical conduct.

ESOMAR and WAPOR recognise there are particular issues in the collection and reporting of opinion poll and survey information and have therefore issued this Guideline as part of the self-regulatory framework that applies to international research. It highlights the responsibilities of researchers to conduct opinion polls in a professional and ethical way, and report them with sufficient transparency so that the public can judge the quality of results. Both will help ensure public confidence in opinion polls and published surveys.

This Guideline:

- Sets out the ethical rules that opinion researchers must follow;
- Underlines the rights and safeguards to which participants are entitled;
- Highlights the key information to be made available to maintain transparency when results are published;
- Specifies standards to guide the agreements to be in place with those who commission polls to ensure published survey results are presented in an unbiased way;
- Highlights the core methodological principles that apply in the design and conduct of such research;
- Underlines some of the additional issues that arise with specific forms of opinion polls.

All market, social and opinion research involves the gathering and further processing of personal data, which is regulated by law in many countries. In addition, certain countries regulate the conduct and publication of pre-election opinion poll results. Whilst ESOMAR and WAPOR collect information about such restrictions, researchers must verify which requirements are current as this Guideline cannot replace the advice of legal experts and self-regulatory bodies.

Throughout this document the word ‘must’ is used to identify mandatory requirements. We use the word “must” when describing a principle or practice that researchers are obliged to follow in order to comply with the ICC/ESOMAR Code and the WAPOR Code of Ethics. The word ‘should’ is used when describing implementation. The usage is meant to recognize that researchers may choose to implement a principle or practice in different ways depending on the design of their research.

2 DEFINITIONS

For the purpose of this Guideline, the following definitions apply:

Opinion polls and opinion surveys include all systematic gathering, aggregating and interpretation of information about policy, electoral and other preferences and behaviours of individuals or organisations using the statistical and analytical methods and techniques of the applied social sciences in order to gain insight and support decision-making. In opinion research, as in all market research, the identity of respondents will not be revealed without explicit consent and no sales approach, or attempt to influence their opinion following the interview, will be made to respondents as a direct result of their having provided information.

Researcher is defined as any individual, institute or organisation carrying out, or acting as a consultant on, an opinion poll or research project.

Research client is defined as any individual or organisation that requests, commissions, sponsors or subscribes to all or any part of an opinion poll or research project. This can include a media organisation or a political group, as well as those who have purchased content on an omnibus survey.

Respondent is defined as any individual or organisation from which information is requested and/or collected for the purposes of an opinion poll or research project.

Interview is defined as any form of contact with a respondent in order to collect information for opinion research purposes.

Pre-election polls are conducted at any point prior to an election and include questions about voting intention.

Exit polls are conducted to measure how people voted and are usually conducted outside polling stations.

Access panel is defined as a database of potential research participants who declare that they will cooperate with future data collection requests if selected.

3 SPECIAL CHALLENGES WITH THIS AREA

An opinion poll may be designed to measure the views of a specific population or group – for example a country’s electors (for most political polls) or parents or trade union members. Opinion polls may deal with complex and sensitive issues about which respondents have varying degrees of knowledge and interest, and where their views may be half-formed, inconsistent and subject to change.

- Scientific opinion polls must not be confused with phone-in polls or other self-selecting surveys, including those that may be open to anyone who visits a particular website, attracting people who feel passionately about the subject of the poll, but do not constitute a representative sample.
- Pre-election polls make up only a minority of published surveys. They are however, a very public test of sampling theory and survey research in action. Polls have a good track record for accuracy but the occasional poll which appears to be wrong gets extensive media coverage with a very negative impact on the image of opinion polls and surveys and opinion research in general.
- Exit polls (interviewing voters as they leave the polling station) are even more likely to be seen as prediction polls and the analysis of their results is often used to explain why the election came out the way it did.

- The means of collecting representative polling data vary country by country. In some places, only face-to-face interviewing is appropriate; in others, opinion polls are conducted by phone or online and the viability as a method largely depends on the accessibility of a representative sample via the phone or the internet.
- While special care must be taken by researchers to ensure that results are accurately and fairly reported, clients and journalists also have a key role to play. The published survey report is often the only exposure the public has to polling results – and to market research in general. To do this well, journalists require a sufficient level of knowledge about opinion polls and methodologies to understand why some poll results need to be treated with caution because of timing or coverage. ESOMAR and WAPOR take seriously the need for public education in this area and are committed to helping educate journalists on the proper use of opinion polls ¹.

Researchers have a responsibility to ensure that both clients and the public have a reasonable understanding of the special challenges in measuring attitudes and beliefs as distinct from behaviour.

It is therefore important that key information is published alongside a poll or survey report to ensure professional and transparent reporting so the audience has the opportunity of judging the evidence presented and deciding whether or not it agrees with the conclusions drawn from the research.

4 RELATIONSHIP WITH PARTICIPANTS

4.1 Honesty

Market, social and opinion research must be clearly distinguished and separated from non-research activities (see Article 1d of the [ICC/ESOMAR International Code](#)). This means that:

- Activities like political telemarketing, and any enquiry whose primary purpose is to obtain personally identifiable information about individuals for compiling or updating lists, obtaining names for sales, advertising, fundraising or other promotional approaches must not be represented as opinion research.
- Researchers must not attempt to sell anything (sugging) or raise money (frugging) in the course of conducting a poll or survey.
- Researchers must not engage in negative campaigning that is disguised as a political poll, such as push polling, which aims to persuade large numbers of voters and affect election outcomes. It does not measure opinions.

4.2 Professional responsibility and transparency

Respondents' cooperation is entirely voluntary, and they must not be misled when being asked for their cooperation (see Article 3a of the [ICC/ESOMAR International Code](#)). This means that:

- Interviewers must not make statements or promises that they know or believe to be incorrect in order to secure the co-operation of respondents or others – for example, about the likely length of the interview.
- Researchers must take all reasonable precautions to ensure that respondents are in no way harmed or adversely affected as a direct result of their participation in an opinion poll or research project (Article 3b of the [ICC/ESOMAR International Code](#)).
- Researchers should ensure they contact potential respondents at appropriate times.

¹ Poynter Institute NewsU online course for journalists <https://www.newsu.org/about>

British Polling Council journalist guide to opinion polls <http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/questions.html> based on ESOMAR work; British Polling Council Seminar; AAPOR/Poynter Training Module; National Council on Public Polls: 20 Questions a Journalist Should Ask about Poll Results

- Researchers are required to promptly identify themselves and unambiguously state the purpose of the research and enable respondents to check their identity and bona fides without difficulty. This is especially important, given the possible sensitivity of the subject (Article 4b of the [ICC/ESOMAR International Code](#)).

4.3 Data protection and privacy

Researchers must respect the principles of data protection and privacy (see Article 7 of the [ICC/ESOMAR International Code](#)). In some parts of the world, especially where democracy is not well-established, the importance of protecting respondents and the confidentiality of the information they provide is even more important. In such places, respondents may be especially concerned about the impact of improper disclosure.

- The rights of respondents extend through all stages of the research, including data collection where appropriate measures are required to ensure that respondents understand and can exercise their rights not to participate, to withdraw from the research interview at any time, to require that their personal data are not made available to others and to delete or to rectify incorrect personal data which are held on them.
- Personal information must only be collected and used for specified research purposes. The researcher must ensure that respondent's personal identity is withheld from the client/research user and may only communicate the respondent's identifiable personal information to the client/research user under the following conditions (unless national provisions require stricter regulations):
 - The respondent has explicitly expressed this wish and/or
 - The respondent has given their explicit consent and
 - On the understanding that no commercial or political activity will be directed at them as a direct result of their having provided information.
- Researchers must ensure adequate security measures are employed to prevent unauthorised access, manipulation and disclosure to the personal data, including any possible third parties.

5 RELATIONSHIP WITH THE GENERAL PUBLIC

5.1 Maintaining public confidence

Researchers must not act in a way that could bring discredit on the profession or lead to a loss of public confidence in it (see Article 1 of the [ICC/ESOMAR International Code](#)). Opinion polling depends on the public's willingness to participate, and public confidence in the accuracy and reliability of opinion polls and published surveys. This means that researchers must:

- Use appropriate methods, and be transparent about sampling, the variables used for weighting, question wording and timing of the opinion poll.
- Follow professional standards for disclosure, as indicated in this document.
- Make legitimate comparisons between surveys.
- Not make claims which exceed the limits of the appropriate scientific principles on which opinion polling is based, such as claims about subgroups with sample sizes too small for statistical reliability.

5.2 Requirements for publishing results

What sets most opinion polling apart from other market research is the fact that it is frequently conducted primarily for publication. When publishing results (by print, television, online or other media), researchers must make available information about how the poll was conducted (see Article 11 of the [ICC/ESOMAR International Code](#)), as elaborated below.

Disclosure requirements matter because as opinion polls have grown in number and variety, decision-makers, journalists and the public need to be able to differentiate between professional and unprofessional polls, to use them as appropriate information when evaluating public attitudes. Because all surveys have become more complicated and diverse, and the difficulties of conducting polls have grown in recent years, researchers need to provide a higher level of methodological disclosure. Some of this information may be too detailed for publication in newspapers or broadcast, but can easily be provided by linking to a web site.

When opinion poll results are published in the media, researchers must take care to keep their interpretations and statements fully consistent with the data. Speculation must be presented as such. Limitations and weaknesses in the poll design, its execution, and the results must be noted in all reports and analyses. The following information must be included in the report, or made available online or in other published form:

- The **names of the organisation which conducted the poll and its sponsor, the organisation or person who paid for the poll**. If internal campaign polls are made public, it must be indicated that the data originally were collected for a political entity.
- The **universe** effectively represented (i.e. who was interviewed), whether the poll sample included all adults or only eligible or likely voters, the geographic range of the poll (country, province, state, electoral district, city) and whether certain groups were excluded from the design (those without telephones or internet access, for example).
- The actual **sample size** (number of completed interviews included in the reported findings) and the **geographical coverage**. For face-to-face interviewing, the number of sampling units must be included.
- The **dates of fieldwork**.
- The **sampling method** used. For quota samples, provide the characteristics by which the sample was selected. For random samples, additional information, including the response rate, must be provided on request, as indicated in Section 5.3 Further Information to be made available.
- The **method by which the poll was conducted** (face-to-face, telephone interview, internet access panel etc.).
- Whether **weighting** was used to adjust the results and the general **demographic or behavioural characteristics** used for the weights. For example, if respondent distributions were adjusted to reflect known census population characteristics or known voting distributions from previous elections, or if adjustments to the unweighted poll findings are made, this should be noted in the publication of the poll findings. The general weighting variables should be described but proprietary algorithms and specific weighting variables do not need to be disclosed.
- **The percentages of respondents who give 'don't know' answers** (and in the case of voting-intention studies, **of those who say they will not vote**). This information must always be given when it is likely to affect significantly the interpretation of the findings. When comparing findings from different surveys, any changes (other than minor ones) in these percentages must be indicated. There are many occasions on which the interpretation of particular findings will be quite different if the level of 'don't know' answers is 5% or 50%. In the case of voting-intention studies the same consideration also applies to 'will not vote' answers
- **The relevant questions asked**. In order to avoid possible ambiguity the actual wording of the question should be given unless this is a standard question already familiar to the audience, such as an approval rating of the government or the government's leaders or has been given in a previously published report to which reference is made.
- The guiding principle when deciding which question wordings are relevant to publish is the elimination of ambiguity and misunderstanding. This is particularly important where the actual question wording is critical to interpreting the findings, and where the reported answers can be affected by the form of the question or its context – especially on politically or socially sensitive issues such as attitudes towards abortion.

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- Certainly where tabular data are given, the full question wording must be included. On websites, the full question wording must be made available, together with, as a minimum, the answers for the weighted sample in total. These answers should include “Don’t know and non-response.”
- Where the questions form part of a more extensive or ‘omnibus’ survey, this must be made clear to any enquirer, including a general indication of the placement of the questions in the questionnaire.

Obviously, this information is most easily provided in reports of opinion polls published in print or online. For video and audio reports, the requirement can be satisfied by including this information in an online version of the poll, or in an accompanying press release. However, all video and audio reports must include information about the conduct and sponsorship of the opinion poll, the timing of the interviews and the interview method.

In preparing materials for publication (in print, online or any other medium), journalists and other users of the research connected with the media normally follow their own codes of practice and ethics, many of which require adequate disclosure of polling information². This Guideline is not intended in any way to substitute for these codes, but rather to support them.

One example of a suitable form of wording for print publication would be:

This survey was carried out by ABC Research, on behalf of News Inc., using a national quota sample of 1111 adults of voting age personally interviewed in 102 locations between 1st-5th March 2014, weighted to reflect census characteristics for age, gender, region, and education.

Another alternative is to use a ‘data box’ of this kind:

Survey carried out by XYZ Research, sponsored by QRS interest group. It is a national survey of 1234 adults aged 18 and above, interviewed by telephone between 25th-28th February 2014 using random digit dialling and quota selection within households, weighted to national voting patterns.

A further example is:

Polling method: Online
Number of interviews: 2222 adults
Dates of interviewing: 5th March 2014 to 7th March 2014
Conducted by: XYZ Research for the *Guardian*
Additional Information: The poll was weighted to represent national voting results in the last election. Full details of survey available at www.xyzresearch.com.”

Detailed information within the published report itself may not be necessary when an article summarises the results of a **number** of surveys, or when it would be too complicated to give all the key information for each of the surveys referred to. Where a given survey is reported on serially (for example in the course of several consecutive issues of a newspaper) it might be unnecessary to repeat all the technical details in every issue.

² New York Times Polling Standards; BBC Guidelines; Australian Press Council Reporting Guidelines

However, even in the more complex cases key information should be presented: the conduct and sponsorship of the opinion poll, the timing of the interviews and the interview method.

5.3 Further information to be made available

In all cases, the basic principle of fair and informative reporting requires that **it be made clear how and where the enquirer can obtain additional details**. The survey company and the media should publish all required full details of public polls on their websites within 24 hours of publication, with the website address provided by the media, or the full details presented on the media's own website.

In some countries, market and opinion research association codes may require more detailed disclosure as part of good practice.

The survey company and the media must be prepared to supply the technical information necessary to assess the validity of published findings on request (see Article 11 of the [ICC/ESOMAR International Code](#)). This technical information may include more detailed description of the sampling and general weighting procedures adopted by the organisation, all codes, the weighted and unweighted bases for all demographics and other data that has been published, and, when appropriate, the achieved response rates (using one of the [definitions](#) in the AAPOR/WAPOR Standard Definitions: Final Dispositions of Case Codes and Outcome Rates for Surveys) and any known non-response bias.

There is no obligation for further information **beyond** this to be supplied – although researchers will normally be prepared to discuss their research methods in more detail with enquirers.

5.4 Secondary reporting

Many published opinion polls and surveys are reported by individuals and media other than the original client. The research organisation normally cannot be held responsible for any secondary reporting or subsequent use made of opinion poll results by people other than the original client. It should however be ready to immediately issue such comments or information as may be necessary to correct any cases of misreporting or misuse of results when these are brought to its attention.

6 RELATIONSHIP WITH CLIENTS AND OTHERS REPORTING RESEARCH

6.1 Responsibilities

To avoid possible misunderstandings, the research organisation must make clear to its clients in advance of conducting research (see Article 12 of the [ICC/ESOMAR International Code](#)):

- that the research organisation itself is bound by the requirements of the Code.
- that subsequent wider publication of the research findings by the client is in accordance with this Guideline.

Researchers must make a clear distinction between the results that emerge directly from the questions asked, and any commentary/interpretation based on these results (see Article 11a of the [ICC/ESOMAR International Code](#)).

Where the findings are published by the client, the latter shall be asked to consult with the researcher as to the form and content of the findings. Both the researcher and the client have a responsibility to ensure the published results are not misleading (see Article 11b of the [ICC/ESOMAR International Code](#)). This means for example:

- Misleading comments based on non-significant differences must be avoided.
- Special care is required to ensure that any graphs or charts used do not convey a misleading impression of the current survey's results or of trends over time.
- The public must be able to clearly distinguish between the survey findings as such and any editorial or other comments based upon these findings.

When an organisation conducts fieldwork for published surveys, but has not been involved in the analysis, it should be attentive to how the results are portrayed. That is especially the case when its name is included in the report. However, it has no responsibility if its name is not mentioned or when it has no control over how results are reported.

Researchers must always be prepared to make available the technical information necessary to assess the validity of any findings (see Article 11c of the ICC/ESOMAR International Code). Furthermore, researchers must not allow their name to be associated with the dissemination of the conclusions from a market research project unless they are adequately supported by the data (see Article 11d of the [ICC/ESOMAR International Code](#)).

This means that the researcher must reserve the right to publish the total study and not just the technical specifications in the event of:

- a shortened version of the publication distorting the analysis of the results;
- an unforeseen and abridged version of the publication;
- a publication which does not conform to the prior agreements.

In the event that a client releases data from a survey that was not originally intended for publication, this Guideline will apply as if it had originally been commissioned for publication.

6.2 Contractual agreements

Contracts between research organisations and their clients that ensure adherence to the ICC/ESOMAR Code (see [ESOMAR Guideline on the mutual rights and responsibilities of researchers and clients](#)) are strongly advised, for instance including the Code requirements in the contract. For example, some contracts stipulate that the research organisation has the right to examine and approve a copy of the publication based on its research. Where the research organisation reserves the copyright of the findings this can also help to reduce some of the problems involved in misleading secondary reporting of the findings by other people.

In addition to any other requirements it is suggested that such a contract should cover:

- Clarification of the point that the contract binds both the client as survey sponsor and the media commissioning the survey, where these are different parties.
- Some measure of control by the researcher over the published form of the results including figures and graphs.

Certain contracts also provide that if research findings commissioned for publication are not published, such findings can subsequently (after a specified period of time) be released by the research organisation itself; or alternatively the researcher is free to repeat the survey for another client/research user.

6.3 Archives

It is increasingly common practice in certain countries for data sets from public opinion surveys to be lodged with appropriate archives for subsequent secondary research by academic researchers and others. Where this is possible, researchers are encouraged to archive their data files, after insuring that all identifiable respondent characteristics have been deleted from the data set.

7 METHODOLOGICAL QUALITY AND TRANSPARENCY

The two main characteristics of scientific surveys are that respondents are chosen according to explicit statistical sampling criteria to ensure representativeness, rather than being self-selected, and that questions are worded in a balanced way.

Researchers must therefore:

- Make clear whether a random or a quota sample is used.

- Allow the client on request to arrange for checks on the quality of data collection and data preparation (see Article 4 of the ICC/ESOMAR International Code).
- Provide the client and research users with appropriate technical details of the research project carried out for the client and ensure that projects are designed, carried out, reported and documented accurately, transparently and objectively.
- Pay attention to the timing of the fieldwork, interviewer training, the size and method of sample selection and weighting of results.

The following section includes methodological and practical considerations for the conduct of the most visible types of opinion polls and the various ways that data can be collected.

8 ADDITIONAL GUIDELINES FOR SPECIFIC TYPES OF OPINION POLLS AND PUBLISHED SURVEYS

8.1 Pre-election and voting intention polls

Opinion polls taken before elections are highly scrutinised, in part because many people believe that vote projections may affect the way the people vote. The evidence for this belief is limited, with some studies finding little impact, and others suggesting moderate impact in some cases.³

Objective poll results are just one of the many inputs on social and political issues. Other inputs include events, political advertising, and messages from individuals or organisations with a partisan or ideological approach to presenting their views. Whatever the impact of pre-election polls, the public has the right to receive all kinds of information to help them make a rational voting choice; opinion polls deliver very valid information to the voter.

Pre-election polls are expected to be accurate in their estimates of a voting tally or the share of the vote for parties and candidates in an election, especially if they are conducted close to the election itself. However, they should not be seen as predictions per se. They are instead a reflection of opinion at the time the poll was conducted. Researchers must recognise that new events and information may still change preference and must state if there is any evidence that respondents favouring one party or candidate may be unwilling to indicate their true preference or unwilling to participate in the poll. People do change their mind, some even in the second before marking their vote on the ballot slip and 'undecided' voters can have a decisive impact on the result.

While all opinion polls require high technical standards, pre-election polls need particular care in noting the timing of interviews (how long before an election the poll was taken), the sample from which results are being reported (all adults, those eligible to vote, those who are deemed most likely to vote), and how likely voters have been determined.

As good practice in conducting pre-election polls, researchers should:

- Observe the need for samples of appropriate size and quality and technical considerations particularly affecting pre-election polls. For example, such polls must have a sample large enough to draw conclusions about voters, who may be only a percentage of the total adult population (in some cases, the effective sample size may be reduced by as much as half). It is necessary to disclose the actual sample size on which the key vote preference findings are based.
- Measure key variables such as likelihood to vote and wherever possible, reasons for party choice or attitudes on issues or other aspects of the campaign. Such polls will have greater political and social value if they do not confine themselves only to measuring voting intention but also explore the reasons for party choice and opinions on important campaign issues.

³Wolfgang Donsbach, "Who's Afraid of Election Polls? Normative and Empirical Arguments for Freedom of Pre-Election Surveys", Foundation for Information, ESOMAR, 2001; Catherine Marsh, "Back on the Bandwagon: The Effect of Opinion Polls on Public Opinion," British Journal of Political Science 15 (1985), pp. 51-74

- Check the demographic profile for representativeness and, if necessary, apply weighting to correctly represent the electorate. Ensure that the population profile that is reported is that of electors eligible to vote rather than the all adults profile normally used in commercial market research.
- Attempt to keep key elements of methodology consistent throughout the election campaign. This particularly applies to sampling method, question wording and the positioning of voting intention questions. It does not apply to sample size or composition; polls closer to the election day may rely on samples of “likely voters” rather than all eligible voters. However, if polls move to sample “likely” voters later in the campaign, this adjustment must be clearly noted and distinguished.
- In omnibus surveys, ensure that political questions are not affected by the subject matter of the preceding questions. That may mean placing such questions near the beginning of the poll. Political questions that might affect measurements of voting intention should not be placed before the vote question.

Whilst the details specified in Section 5 of this Guideline must always be included, in addition, the importance of providing the percentages that are “undecided,” “don’t know” or otherwise do not answer the vote question cannot be overstated. These numbers should be published in all pre-election polls, along with percentages that say they will not vote.

Researchers must take all possible technical steps to ensure that polls, especially those published in the last few days of an election campaign, provide reliable and objective information. In some countries, when election polls are conducted face to face, there may be concern about whether respondents will be willing to divulge their preference. If so, it is good practice to ask respondents to write their choice on paper and place it in a “secret ballot box,” much like an actual election ballot box.

Many countries have set limits on the length of time before elections for publishing pre-election polls. Researchers need to be aware of any such restrictions.

8.2 Exit polls

Exit polls are mainly conducted on election day with voters interviewed as they leave polling stations about how they voted and why. They may be subject to laws about interviewer access (the distance from a polling place interviewers may stand), and about publication.

Exit polls serve functions that differ somewhat from pre-election polls. Because of the speed with which the results are formulated and disseminated, and the fact that they interview those who have already voted, they do predict election results. They also describe patterns of voter support for parties, candidates, and issues. They have supported extensive academic research efforts.

8.2.1 Respondent protections

- Researchers must protect the identity of respondents in exit polls and must not maintain identifying information (e.g. name, address, or other IDs) with the voter-level records or allow the data set to enable deductive disclosure of respondents’ identity. Researchers can limit this possibility by not revealing small-area geographic details such as the specific polling place in which votes were cast.
- As exit poll interviewing is conducted in a public place, interviewers must take special care about respondent confidentiality. Asking voters to complete a pencil and paper form that is then placed in a box without interviewer intervention, or having voters complete the interview privately on a hand-held device is far preferable to an oral interview.

8.2.2 Study design

Those conducting exit polls must follow these principles:

- They must be impartial. Exit polls are designed to collect data from voters and report information on electoral outcomes. They are not tools for partisan advocacy.

- Use transparent, public and well-documented methods. These goals can be achieved by publicly describing the methods prior to conducting the exit poll and by adhering to the standards of minimal disclosure delineated in this Guideline. It is also recommended that when the exit poll is used for analysis, the data set (without individual identifiers) along with appropriate survey documentation be deposited in public archives and/or on websites for general access.
- Adopt study designs that are suitable for producing accurate and reliable results and that follow accepted procedural and technical standards.
- Follow generally accepted good survey practice. In places where voting takes place by mail or even by internet, exit polls may be conducted on election day itself or in the days preceding the event by methods, like telephone or online. If interviewing at a polling place is forbidden or dangerous, interviews may also be conducted on election day at homes or other sites where polling is normally conducted. Special care must be taken in those circumstances to ensure that respondents actually are voters.

8.2.3 Release of results

- Exit polls used for projections should be reported as soon as is practical after the polls close. Any delay in disseminating the results will raise questions about the legitimacy of the effort, especially with regard to estimating the outcome of the election. If **analysis** is the **only** purpose of the exit poll, prompt release is less important.
- In some countries, election laws prohibit the publication of exit poll data until after the polls have closed. In general, statements about the outcome of an election based on exit polls **must not** be published before all the polling places in the contest have closed.
- In national elections with a range of poll closing times, this can mean exit polls relating to results for elections in smaller voting units (such as individual states in the United States) can be reported when all the polling stations have closed in those locations, rather than waiting until all polling stations used for voting that day have closed. Descriptive information other than voting behaviour may be published before the polls have closed, unless this is prohibited by local legislation or codes of practice.
- In addition to the requirements for publication in Section 5 of this Guideline, because of their timing, exit poll results must be released to the public and other interested parties through the general media and simultaneously made accessible to all. It is good practice to disclose as much of the methodology in advance as possible.

8.2.4 Accompanying information

The following information must be included with exit poll reports and election projections, made available in a similar way as required in Section 5 of this Guideline:

- The name of the firm conducting and analysing the exit poll and its sponsor;
- Whether the sponsor of the exit poll has any ties to political parties, candidates, political organisations or governmental bodies;
- Number of interviews;
- Number of polling stations or sampling points and how they were selected;
- The sampling frame and the sample's geographic dispersion and coverage;
- Any legal limits on data collection that might affect polling accuracy (e.g. minimum distance of interviewers from the polling station);
- Whether interviewing was conducted throughout the polling day or for only part of the day;
- Whether interviewers are part of a permanent field staff or hired for the occasion;
- How respondent anonymity is guaranteed (paper questionnaires, etc.);
- The interview schedule or questionnaire and instructions;
- Which results are based on parts of the sample, rather than the whole sample;

- A description of the precision of the findings, including estimates of sampling error;
- Monitoring and validation procedures (if any);
- The demographic and behavioural characteristics used for weighting.
- Response rates (using one of the [definitions](#) in the AAPOR/WAPOR Standard Definitions: Final Dispositions of Case Codes and Outcome Rates for Surveys) and item non-response on vote questions and any known non-response bias.
- General description of how estimates are made, the kinds of variables being used, and whether adjustments for non-response have been made and have known design effects.

8.3 Polls in times of crisis

Opinion surveys are often conducted in times of crisis and researchers must be sensitive to respondent concerns and ability to answer specific questions. They also must note whether there are any locations where interviewing may be problematic because of the crisis. This can include areas affected by natural disasters and those that have been the sites of military action, terrorist attacks, or other forms of violence. The requirement that no harm come to survey participants is particularly important in these circumstances.

8.4 Requirements for specific modes of data collection

8.4.1 Face-to-face interviewing

The face-to-face interview, also known as the in-person interview as an interviewer meets an interviewee in person, is probably the oldest form of survey data collection. Today it is conducted by pencil and paper interviewing (PAPI), where the questionnaire is on paper, or increasingly via computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI), where the questionnaire is stored on a laptop. It is used in places with limited landline phone and internet availability, where it is essential for collecting high-quality data, and also for complex, long and difficult questionnaires.

As the face-to-face interview is time-consuming and expensive, it is often replaced by telephone interviews (CATI) and online interviewing. However, face-to-face interviewing has its advantages since response rates are usually higher than for telephone or online interviews, even though response rates are falling for all types of interviews.

Researchers must ensure that:

- Interviewers are specially trained on how to conduct an interview – how to select respondents and gain their trust.
- Interviewers assure respondents that their participation is voluntary, and their personal data and answers will remain confidential.
- Interviewers act properly, know the questionnaire, and are a neutral transmitter for the respondents' answers.
- Interviewers are adequately supervised, and incompetent or dishonest ones are removed from the interviewing team.

Researchers need to be aware of:

- Interviewer effects – the influence of the interviewer, their manner of behaviour during the interview, and even their appearance and gender - on the answers given by respondents.
- Interviewing in stressful electoral situations or on sensitive topics may impact respondents' willingness to answer accurately and this possibility must be taken into account when analysing and reporting results.
- If interviewing involves some type of quota selection, or the sample is drawn from a list, this information must be disclosed in poll reports as well as the number of sampling points (PSUs) and their geographic dispersion.

- If face-to-face interviewing is the only valid method of data collection in certain places, but accessibility to large parts of the country is limited, “national” polling results may include only interviews in metropolitan areas and if so, the geographic limitations of coverage must be clearly indicated.

8.4.2 Phone interviewing

Telephone interviewing is by far the most popular method of conducting opinion polls and in principle can offer high quality, unclustered, random samples with centralised and supervised interviewing. It permits quick turnaround of fieldwork, with the possibility of multiple contacts of potential respondents. It has been extremely useful in places where there is information available on the allocation of phone numbers, which makes random digit dialling the primary method of sampling phone numbers. Random samples can also be drawn from existing lists, such as lists of registered voters or all residents. However some recent developments, as well as some local issues, can make probability phone sampling difficult. In some countries many households have never owned landline phones. In others, people are using only mobile devices.

- In many countries a growing number of households cannot be sampled from public registers, as they are not listed. However a sample is drawn, researchers must disclose any non-coverage.
- In places where a significant percentage of adults is only reachable by mobile phones, researchers who wish to reach a representative sample of the population **should** include mobile phones in their sampling frames. The specific proportion of interviews on mobile phones and the sample mix of landline and mobiles is dependent on the specific proportions of landline and mobile phones which varies country by country. In the United States, for example, some companies conduct more than half their opinion poll interviews on mobile phones. In countries where mobile phone coverage is very high, and there are few demographic differences between those with and without mobile phones, it may be possible to reach a representative sample with mobile phone numbers only.
- In each of these cases, incorporating mobile phones will require researchers to follow the [ESOMAR Guideline for Conducting Mobile Market Research](#). This includes taking into account such things as respondent safety.
- For many reasons, phone ownership is frequently correlated with voting intention, with those who cannot be contacted by phone more likely to support one party rather than another in an election. If phone ownership is not high and/or likely to produce an unrepresentative sample, this method of interview should not be used for pre-election polls, or it should be supplemented with data collected using another mode of interviewing.
- If phone samples are used for polls, methods must be applied to correct for any under-representation of supporters of particular political parties. Simple demographic profile adjustments may not be adequate.

8.4.3 Online polls

Online surveys are now commonly used for opinion and election polling and have provided estimates with similar levels of accuracy to traditional polling methods; but they continue to be controversial. At issue is the question of representativeness – whether a methodology that is frequently based on respondents who have chosen to be part of an access panel is representative – especially when traditional opinion polling has relied on probability sampling. Unlike face-to-face and telephone interviewing, there is no agreed-upon sampling frame for online sampling.

As with telephone polling, online polling’s viability as a method of carrying out pre-election polls depends largely on the accessibility of a representative sample via the internet, or on the ability to construct a replica sample that reflects the population from what was originally a volunteer and often non-representative access panel. Given the increasing reach of the internet, there are many countries where this can be done, if care is taken to include people who cannot use the internet at home, but connect to the internet at work or some other place. [ESOMAR’s 28 questions to help buyers of online](#)

[samples](#) contains additional guidance on requirements including online sampling and the use of access panels.

Most online polls are conducted using panels of pre-recruited respondents. Methods for panellist recruitment include both conventional probability sampling and non-probability volunteer panels. Usually, the sample for a particular survey involves a second stage of selection to determine which panellists are invited to participate. Finally, as is typical of almost all surveys, the resulting sample is weighted to better represent the target population.

The major points of controversy involving online surveys concern population coverage (who is able to participate in the survey) and the use of non-probability methods for panel selection. Internet access has expanded rapidly in Europe and North America and is becoming a decreasing problem for most, though not all, population groups. Most surveys today involve large amounts of self-selection, even if random selection is used initially to select respondents (due to non-response), though the problem is usually more severe for approaches that do not begin with a sampling frame.

- As with other types of polls, all published reports from online polling must include basic methodological information, such as the sponsor of the poll, the number of interviews, the sample source and any screening criteria, the mode of interviewing, and the field period.
- Additional information is needed so readers can evaluate the poll's reliability and validity. This information is more technical, and should be available on a website of the research organisation or the publication. It must be made available when requested. That information includes:
- Whether respondents were selected from a panel (or multiple panels), the names of the panels and whether they were created using probability or non-probability methods. If the panel is a probability sample, the cumulative response rate (reflecting recruitment, attrition, and the within-panel response rate for a study) should be made available. For non-probability samples, the participation rate (the number of panel members providing a usable response divided by the total number of initial personal invitations requesting members to participate) should be provided.
- The method of selection of panelists for the particular study. This usually involves some form of stratification or quotas, intended to represent the target population. The variables used to define the strata, quotas, or other selection methods (such as matching and propensity score groups) should be listed.
- In most cases, the final sample will be weighted. The most important information to disclose is which variables were used to form the weights. If cell weighting or raking ("rim weighting") is used, the unweighted sample distributions should be included in tabulations. For more complex methods (such as propensity score weighting or matching), a more detailed methodology report should be made available on request.

These disclosures are intended to provide information about the procedures used to conduct a specific survey with a given panel, but do not cover details of panel recruitment (aside from identification of the panel source or sources). For more details see [ESOMAR's 28 questions to help buyers of online samples](#)

8.4.4 Mixed modes

The use of multiple modes within a single poll is becoming common, especially as ways of insuring coverage for groups that may be difficult to reach by the main polling method. For example, face-to-face interviewing may supplement phone interviewing in countries with relatively low phone penetration. Some research organisations offer respondents a choice as to how they wish to be interviewed.

- The value of using multiple modes is their representativeness; however, researchers must always be aware of the possibilities of mode effects as different modes may produce different answers.

- When publishing results from polls using mixed modes, researchers must provide the number of interviews in each mode and provide the information relevant to each mode of interviewing.

9 PROJECT TEAM

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