

## **Lesson Plan for Public Opinion**

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### Objectives

- I. Introduce concept of public opinion and methods of measuring it
- II. Explain why public opinion differs from answers to survey questions
- III. Discuss different methods of assessing public opinion and distinguish from push polls
- IV. Provide an exercise for students to assess the opinion of those in their class and possibly other groups. Include some “bad questions” to help them become good consumers of public opinion polls.
- V. Compare their responses to questions in a national poll (e.g. a recent Gallup Poll).

**I. Definition of Public Opinion and Overview**

- A. What people think about an issue or set of issues at any a given point in time.
- B. Usually measured by public opinion polls (aka surveys). Sometimes a census, which is a survey that includes all members of the population of interest.
- C. Ways to assess public opinion:
  - 1. Person on the street interviews
  - 2. Constituent mail received by policy makers
  - 3. Public opinion polls
  - 4. Focus groups

**II. Public opinion does not equal answers to surveys.**

- A. Heisenberg effect—presence of research creates event. Ie, ask Q, create opinion on it.
  - 1. Members of public often have no opinion about an issue, but develop an opinion as soon when asked a question
  - 2. Examples of opinion being created when someone is asked a question
- a. Do you approve of the Federal Reserve Board’s policy of lowering taxes?  
Response categories: Yes/No  
  
Factually, the Federal Reserve Board cannot raise or lower taxes. The question misled respondents and created an opinion where there is no factual reason to have one.  
  
When someone who had no prior opinion was asked a question and gave an opinion, the so-called “opinion” quickly disappears.
- b. Survey findings on complex issues or issues that are not highly visible are suspect because most people do not have opinions on them. In the case of most respondents, the question created an opinion where there was none.

Again, when someone who had no prior opinion was asked a question and gave an opinion, the so-called “opinion” quickly disappears.

B. Question bias: what you ask and how you ask it influences how interviewees respond.

1. Example of a socially desirable responses to question

Did you vote? Response categories: yes, no

Many non-voters will answer yes because it is socially desirable to vote. As a result, most surveys significantly overestimate voter turnout.

2. Example of a politically biased question: Given that Barack Obama is a socialist who wasn't born in the United States and John McCain is a war hero who shares American's values, who do you plan to vote for in November?

This could encourage a voter who has no prior information or partisan leanings to vote for McCain over Obama

C. Interviewer bias—

1. Working class people answer an interviewer in a suit different than they answer one who is in jeans to try to show they know as much as the person in a suit.

2. Women answer female interviewers differently than they answer male interviewers, particularly on gender-based topics, such as abortion rights and the glass ceiling

3. Minority/racial groups are also influenced by whether an interviewer is white or belongs to one of their group.

D. Sampling error (for polls)

There is a possibility that a pollster drew a bad survey. Surveys of 1,000 have a margin of error of  $-3/+3\%$ . That means that 3 out of 1,000 samples do not accurately reflect public opinion.

E. "Snapshot problem"

Public opinion is fluid, not fixed. It responds to changes in conditions and events. A poll taken today, may not reflect public opinion tomorrow.

Example, President George W. Bush had modest presidential approval ratings, but after the attacks of 9/11 his approval went sky high because Americans rallied behind their leader, as they typically do when the U.S. is threatened.

F. Public opinion is not monolithic

Example The US is a very diverse nation. Subgroup variations exist. That is, groups have different opinions depending on age, education, income, occupation, race/ethnicity, gender, and a host of other factors.

**III. Different methods for assessing public opinion**

A. Polls and surveys

Based on a simple random sample—random selection means all have equal chance of being included and so it typically results in a sample that accurately represents the public.

B. Types of Polls and their uses

1. Baseline polls

Surveys of 1,000 or more

Designed to assess knowledge voters on a large number of issues or candidates. It is usually a year or many months before the campaign season.

Typical questions are used to learn whether voters have ever heard of a candidate. The percentage with knowledge is usually very low, especially in the case of challengers for low-level offices, such as the U.S. House of Representatives, state legislature, or a local office.

2. Trend polls

Surveys of 800 or less that have fewer questions

Usually follow-up on areas of interest that are found in a baseline poll, such as specific issues that voters disagree on.

Are helpful to assess the impact of the advertising that candidates have done. Try to learn if more people know the candidate or associate the candidate with any particular issues or causes.

### 3. Tracking polls

Preceding types of polls are analogous to snapshots of public opinion. Tracking polls are more like moving pictures.

Tracking polls usually are taken during last two months of an election campaign.

The idea is to see how public opinion responds to campaign activities.

Typically 150-200 people are sampled per night. There are three-night waves. That is, if 200 are surveyed per night. The first night the sample will have 200 people, the second night it will have 400 people, and the third night it will have 600 people. When the fourth night arrives 200 more people are surveyed and the people surveyed on the first night are dropped, resulting in a sample of 600 people. Every night another 200 people are surveyed and those whose data are four days old are dropped from the sample.

The expectation is that by adding and dropping respondents pollsters will be able to see changes in public opinion take place in response to campaign activities.

### 4. Exit polls

Conducted at polling places on election day to speculate about outcome and reasons for it.

Pick a set of voting precincts that pollsters believe have individuals who represent other precincts. Survey them as they leave the polling place at different times of the day.

Precincts and the voters in them that are interviewed are chosen in order get information from a sufficient number of voters of different population groups to assess the opinion of those groups and generalize to other places.

### 5. Focus Groups

Used to get in-depth reactions to campaign themes, messages, TV ads.

Usually 15 to 20 individuals participate.

They are members of a target audience that are selected because they have certain characteristics that represent a campaign is trying to influence. This type of public opinion study is useful in selecting or fine tuning campaign messages.

Examples: middle-class suburban women, conservative farmers. They are not scientific random sample

Focus group participants are presented with various pieces of information about candidates, issues, or campaign advertisements and are asked their opinions about what they have viewed. Do they like or dislike them? Have suggestions for making the ads more appealing?

#### 6. "Push Polls" Do not measure public opinion

Push polls are a type of negative campaigning that do not intend to collect objective public opinion information.

They start out with a person asking questions as if a survey was being conducted. Then they quickly switch to a communication in which the so-called "interviewer" provides negative information about one of the candidates. They amount to a telephone attack ad that tries to conceal itself as a poll.

**IV. An exercise for students to assess the opinion of those in their class and possibly other groups (on next page). Include some problematic questions to make them better consumers of public information polls. These appear on the page that follows, which should be used when reviewing the poll results.**

**THE CIVICS POLL**

1. Do you think things in this country are generally going in the right direction, or do you think things have gotten pretty seriously off on the wrong track?

- 1. Right direction
- 2. Wrong track
- 3. Don't know/No answer

2. Do you approve or disapprove of the way Barack Obama is handling his job as president?

- 1. Approve
- 2. Disapprove
- 3. Don't know/No answer\

Do you plan to vote for the Democratic, Republican, or some other candidate for:

- 3. Governor            1. Democrat    2. Republican    3. Independent/other    4. Not vote
- 4 U.S House member    1. Democrat    2. Republican    3. Independent/other    4. Not vote

5. Generally speaking, do you usually consider yourself a Democrat, a Republican, an Independent, or Gwhat?

- 1. Democrat
- 2. Republican
- 3. Independent
- 4. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
- 5. Don't know/No answer

6.. Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as liberal, moderate, or conservative?

- 1. Liberal
- 2. .Moderate
- 3. Conservative
- 4. Don't know/No answer

7. Who is the Governor of Connecticut? \_\_\_\_\_

8. Who is the Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court? \_\_\_\_\_

9. Who is the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives? \_\_\_\_\_

10. What is your sex?

- 1. Male
- 2. Female

11. What is your religious background?

- 1. Protestant
- 2. Catholic
- 3. Other Christian
- 4. Jewish
- 5. Muslim
- 6. Hindu
- 7. Agnostic
- 8. Atheist
- 9. Other \_\_\_\_\_

12. What is your racial/ethnic identity?

- 1. White
- 2. African American
- 3. Hispanic/Latino
- 4. Asian American
- 5. Other \_\_\_\_\_

13. What was your approximate total family income for 2013?

- |                        |                          |
|------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Under \$25,000      | 5. \$100,000 - \$199,000 |
| 2. \$25,000 - \$49,999 | 6. \$200,000 or more     |
| 3. \$50,000 - \$74,999 | 7. Don't know            |
| 4. \$75,000 - \$99,999 |                          |

14. Now I am going to ask you a question about your vote for town council. If you knew that John Doe dodged his taxes for five years in a row and was accused of holding up a bank, would you vote for him?

15. What if you learned that he regularly was a loan shark that punished those who did not pay him back on time by breaking their legs?



**THE CIVICS POLL: VERSION TO GO OVER RESULTS WITH CLASS. IT INCLUDES SOME PROBLEMATIC QUESTIONS. SEE COMMENTS.**

1. Do you think things in this country are generally going in the right direction, or do you think things have gotten pretty seriously off on the wrong track?

1. Right direction
2. Wrong track
3. Don't know/No answer

2. Do you approve or disapprove of the way Barack Obama is handling his job as president?

1. Approve
2. Disapprove
3. Don't know/No answer

Do you plan to vote for the Democratic, Republican, or some other candidate for:

- |                    |             |               |                      |             |
|--------------------|-------------|---------------|----------------------|-------------|
| 3. Governor        | 1. Democrat | 2. Republican | 3. Independent/other | 4. Not vote |
| 4 U.S House member | 1. Democrat | 2. Republican | 3. Independent/other | 4. Not vote |

Paul Herrnson 7/29/14 2:35 PM  
**Comment:** Note: Standard questions used by Gallup and other major polls.

5. Generally speaking, do you usually consider yourself a Democrat, a Republican, an Independent, or Gwhat?

- |                |                         |
|----------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Democrat    | 4. Other: _____         |
| 2. Republican  | 5. Don't know/No answer |
| 3. Independent |                         |

Paul Herrnson 7/29/14 2:34 PM  
**Comment:** Note: Compare to question 5. Most Democrats will vote Democratic; most Republicans will vote Republican.

6. Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as liberal, moderate, or conservative?

5. Liberal
6. Moderate
7. Conservative
8. Don't know/No answer

7. Who is the Governor of Connecticut? \_\_\_\_\_

8. Who is the Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court? \_\_\_\_\_

9. Who is the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives? \_\_\_\_\_

10. What is your sex?

1. Male
2. Female

Paul Herrnson 7/29/14 2:31 PM  
**Comment:** Note: Answers to these questions should be correlated. Ie, Many Democrats should answer liberal; many Republicans should answer conservative;

Paul Herrnson 7/29/14 2:30 PM  
**Comment:** Note: Good questions for learning how much students know about politics.

11. What is your religious background?

- |                    |           |                |
|--------------------|-----------|----------------|
| 1. Protestant      | 4. Jewish | 7. Agnostic    |
| 2. Catholic        | 5. Muslim | 8. Atheist     |
| 3. Other Christian | 6. Hindu  | 9. Other _____ |

12. What is your racial/ethnic identity?

- |                     |                   |
|---------------------|-------------------|
| 2. White            | 4. Asian American |
| 4. African American | 5. Other _____    |
| 5. Hispanic/Latino  |                   |

Paul Herrnson 7/29/14 2:28 PM  
**Comment:** Note: This question is problematic because it does not provide important response categories, including mixed race.

## Herrnson, Public Opinion-10

13. What was your approximate total family income for 2013?

- |                        |                          |
|------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Under \$25,000      | 5. \$100,000 - \$199,000 |
| 2. \$25,000 - \$49,999 | 6. \$200,000 or more     |
| 3. \$50,000 - \$74,999 | 7. Don't know            |
| 4. \$75,000 - \$99,999 |                          |

14. Now I am going to ask you a question about your vote for town council. If you knew that John Doe dodged his taxes for five years in a row and was accused of holding up a bank, would you vote for him?

15. What if you learned that he regularly was a loan shark that punished those who did not pay him back on time by breaking their legs?

Paul Herrnson 7/29/14 2:39 PM

**Comment:** Note this question is problematic because it asks students to provide information they probably do not have.

Paul Herrnson 7/29/14 2:41 PM

**Comment:** Examples of questions that would appear in a "push poll."

V. Compare student poll responses to questions in a national poll. For example, find a recent Gallup Poll <http://www.gallup.com/home.aspx>