

“Take 5” - 5 Things to Think About Before Taking Polling Information at Face Value

During a major political contest like a presidential election, you may see lots of polling numbers and data while consuming the news. Before you accept polling information at face value - “Take 5”!

1) Who was surveyed?

Look to see which population was surveyed. Was it all adults or maybe a more specific population? In an election year, the population surveyed might be “registered voters” (people who are registered to vote) or “likely voters” (people who indicated a likeliness to vote in the upcoming election). These can be overlapping groups but are not the same!

2) When was the poll conducted?

Polls are a snapshot of how people feel at the time they were surveyed, so knowing when the poll was conducted is important context. Is it a recent poll or more outdated poll? Has any major event happened between when the poll was conducted and when you’re reading the information?

3) What's the margin of error?

The margin of error shows how precise the survey results are. Take the survey result and both add the margin of error to the result (getting a number that is larger than the result) and subtract the margin of error from the result (getting a number that is smaller than the result). This will give you a range. The truth is somewhere in this range. So if a poll says that a politician’s approval rating is 50% with a margin of error of +/- 3 percentage points, the true result is likely that 47-53% percent of people approve of the politician. Knowing the margin of error for a political poll is especially important because lots of polls coming out every day! The media may try to characterize a candidate’s polling results as showing a clear increase or decline in support, but if you take the margin of error into consideration, you can see if there has really been a noticeable change.

4) What are other polls saying?

Looking at other news sources and searching out additional polls can help provide context. A series of polls could help you understand trends, while reading from a variety of reputable news sources can give background on major events and the political landscape. Knowing more than just the polling numbers of one survey will help inform your understanding.

5) How are the survey questions worded?

The choice of words in survey questions is important. Consider whether the survey asks questions in a neutral manner or if they use specific buzzwords. A question that asks about “Obamacare” versus a question that asks about “The Affordable Care Act” could elicit very different responses.

Resources consulted:

<https://medium.com/pew-research-center-decoded/5-tips-for-writing-about-polls-9cb0596ff28>