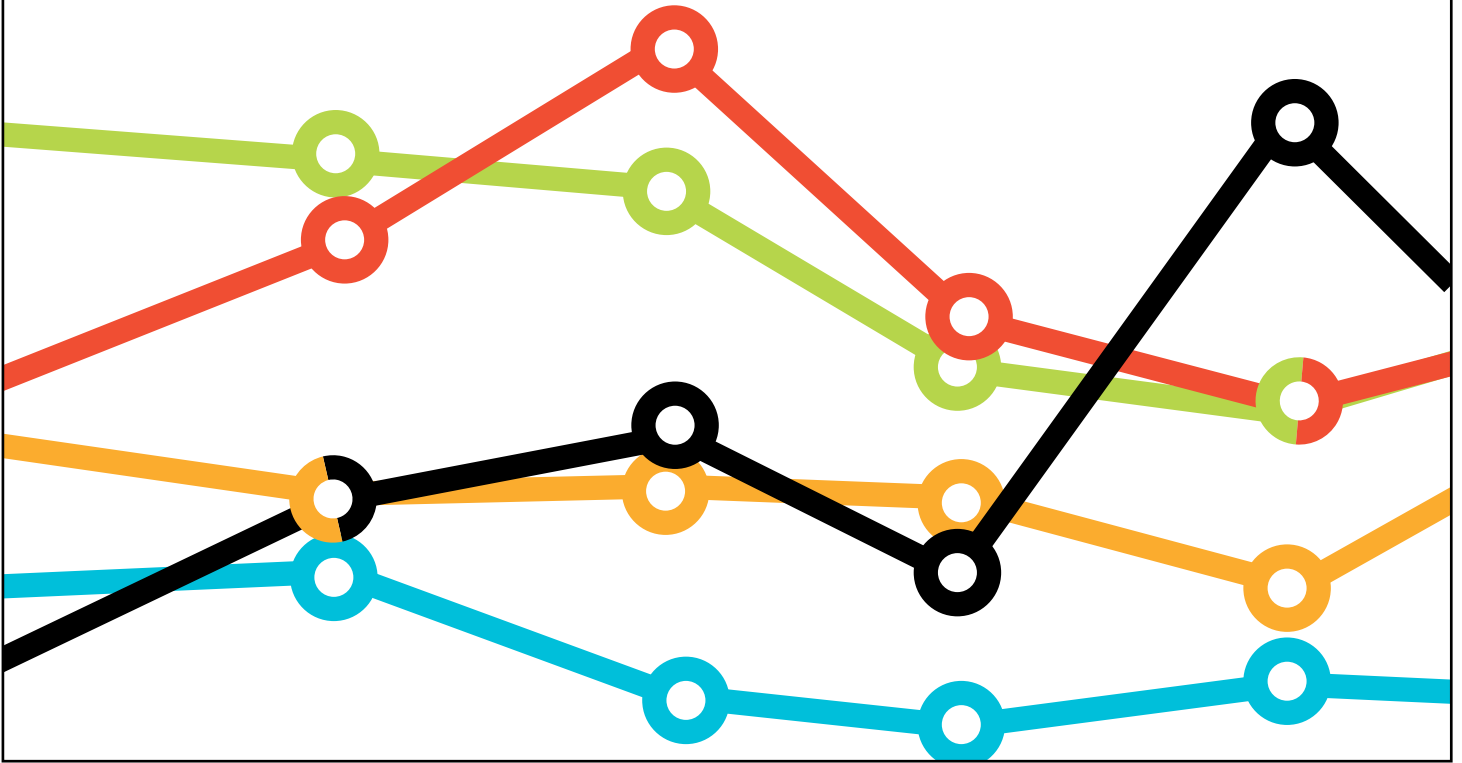


OPINION POLLING



An **opinion poll** is a question or a series of questions designed to measure the public's views on a specific topic or series of topics. Public opinion can change from one day to the next, and the results of a poll present a 'snapshot' of views and attitudes at a given point in time.

Polls are often reported on in the lead-up to and during an election. During a provincial election campaign, it is common to see the results from several polls per week from a variety of sources.

There are two main types of polling used in elections: preference polls (also called horse race polls) and issue polls. **Preference polls** report on which leader, party or candidate is favoured at the time by the general public, while **issue polls** focus on assessing voters' feelings on the issues of the campaign and proposed policies.

A poll can never be 100 per cent accurate and there are many aspects that affect the validity of a poll. These include methods for selecting respondents, the sample size or number of individuals surveyed, the wording of a question, the time when respondents are surveyed and even the attitude of the person asking the questions.

A **margin of error** is a small amount calculated for most polls to allow for miscalculations or changes in opinion. Generally, the margin of error is around 3 per cent. For example, a candidate with a 2 per cent lead in a poll with a 3 per cent margin of error could possibly be tied or trailing, or could be ahead by up to 5 per cent.

The methods for opinion polling have changed in recent years. In the past, polls were conducted by telephone or by sending interviewers to speak with people in the street or at their homes. With the advancement of technology, polling has become easier, faster and less expensive. Polls are now conducted online, through social media or by mobile phone. These polls can be hard to judge accurately and are not always entirely representative of the population, as participants tend to select themselves to participate, rather than by random or targeted selection.

Polls are used by media organizations to share the views of the public and to encourage debate and reflection. Political parties also conduct **internal polls** to help them make strategic decisions, such as focusing on particular issues or concentrating on competitive electoral districts they want to win.

LESSON 7: OPINION POLLING

BIG IDEA

Opinion polling has an influence on voters and on political campaigns.

LEARNING INTENTIONS

Upon completion of the lesson, students are expected to know the following:

- Factors that will impact the validity and reliability of polling data;
- How knowledge of polling data can impact voting intentions and behaviour; and
- That factors, forces and events can shift public opinion and impact electoral outcomes or decisions.

Students are expected to be able to do the following:

- Assess the methodology of an opinion poll for validity;
- Assess the justification for competing accounts after investigating points of contention, reliability of sources and adequacy of evidence; and
- Analyze the methods used by the media, governments and other important groups to influence public perception of an issue or event.

RESOURCES

- Slide Deck 7: Opinion Polling in Elections
- An article or summary of a recent opinion poll (Videos, slide decks and digital versions of the activity sheets can be found at www.studentvote.ca/bc)

ACTIVITIES

Hook: 15-20 min

1. Ask students to respond to one or more of the questions from a recent opinion poll reported in the media. This can be completed informally or by creating a paper or online survey.
2. Tally the results and share them with the class. Are students surprised by the results or did they predict them?
3. Compare the class results with the general population results from the opinion poll. Did students vote the same way or were the results different?
4. Have a post-activity debrief discussion. Why do you think the results were the same or different? What factors can impact the results of a poll (e.g., geography, age, the wording of questions)? How do you think polls influence election campaigns?

Essential Concepts: 10-15 min

Use Slide Deck 7 to review the key terms and concepts regarding opinion polling: polling, preference poll, issue poll, margin of error, internal poll.

★ Action: 30 min prep time, implementation time, 30 min post-activity results and debrief

1. As a class or in groups, plan and conduct an opinion poll related to the election. The respondents could be students in the school, their families and/or community members.

Step 1: Determine the target group(s) and sample size. Consider the possibilities for comparing the results afterwards across different groups (e.g., grade, age group, gender).

Step 2: Decide on the purpose and questions to be asked. Some demographic questions should be included as well, such as age and gender.

Step 3: Prepare the survey using an online application.

Step 4: Field the survey and collect responses.

Step 5: Analyze and share the results. The results should include raw numbers and percentages for the responses. Depending on the sample size, more in-depth analysis could compare the results across different groups and demographics.

2. Review the results of the opinion poll(s) as a class. If the class was divided into groups, have each group share their findings to the rest of the class.

- What were the most interesting findings?
- What challenges did students face in collecting and analyzing data?
- Were any of the questions comparable across different polls and did they yield similar or different results? Why or why not? What factors might influence this (e.g., wording of questions, demographics)?

3. Encourage students to distribute the results. Students can write newspaper articles about their findings, share them during morning announcements or find other ways to disseminate the results to the rest of the school.

Extensions:

A. Throughout an election campaign, many different polls and their results will be shared. Each poll is commissioned by a different company, media outlet or stakeholder group and will ask different questions in an attempt to obtain a variety of information. As a class, individually or in groups, have students compare two different opinion polls regarding the same issue or topic. Ask them to determine the source, purpose of the poll, sample size, age group, geographic representation and margin of error. Do the results reflect the same sentiments? Consider why they do or do not.

LESSON 7: OPINION POLLING

B. Create a polling corner in your classroom to display the results of preference polls during the election campaign. Chart the results visually with pictures of the leaders, include a timeline until voting day and find a way to display the results over time. Over the course of the campaign, record major announcements and events for future analysis (e.g., platform announcements, leaders' debate). After the election is over, examine the validity of the polling results. Were the polling results at the end of the campaign predictive of the election outcome? Did the polling results change dramatically from week to week? What major events or announcements impacted the polling results?

C. In recent elections, pollsters have been criticized when their polling results do not reflect the outcome of the actual election (e.g., 2016 U.S. presidential election, 2016 United Kingdom Brexit referendum). In some cases, pollsters have predicted a different election result than what actually occurred. Do you think polling results can impact voter turnout or voting preferences? Debate the advantages and disadvantages of polling and the impact it has on elections.



Reflection: 5-10 min

Have a closing discussion about opinion polling in an election campaign. Alternatively, ask students to write a reflection for their election scrapbook (see *Assessment Opportunities*).

- What did you learn about opinion polling?
- What effect, if any, have opinion polls had on your decision to vote for a particular party or candidate?
- Do you think preference polls have a positive or negative impact on voters? Explain your reasoning.

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

Polling and research company websites. Examples include:

- Abacus Data — <https://abacusdata.ca/>
- Ekos Research Associates — www.ekos.com
- Environics Research Group — www.environics.ca
- Forum Research — www.forumresearch.com
- Insights West — www.insightswest.com
- Ipsos Reid — www.ipsos.ca
- Nanos Research — <https://www.nanos.co/>