LESSON 7:
Opinion Polling

OBJECTIVE
Students will learn about opinion polling and its influence on voters and political campaigns.

KEY WORDS
polling, preference poll, issue poll, margin of error

QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE DURING THIS LESSON
- What is a poll?
- What are the different types of polls?
- What is the impact of new technology on polling?
- How do opinion polls influence the election?

SUPPLEMENTARY TOOLS
- PowerPoint 7: Opinion Polling in Elections

TEACHING STRATEGIES
Hook: 15-20 min
Find an article or summary of a recent opinion poll to introduce the concept of polling to your students.

1. Ask students to respond to one or more of the questions from a recent opinion poll. This can be completed informally or by creating a paper 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 students' results with the official 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)? How do you think polls influence election campaigns?

Instruction: 10-15 min
1. 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, but the results present a 'snapshot' of views and attitudes at a given point in time.

2. Polls are often reported on in the lead-up to and during an election. During a federal 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 the issues of the campaign.

3. A poll can never be 100 per cent accurate and there are many aspects that affect the validity or legitimacy of a poll. These aspects include methods for selecting respondents, the sample size or number of individuals polled, the wording of a question, the time when respondents are surveyed and even the attitude of the person asking the questions. All polls also have a margin of error. A margin of error is a small amount given 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.

4. In the past, polls were conducted by telephone, or by sending interviewers door-to-door 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 respond to a random invitation.

5. Polls are used by media organizations to share the views of the public and 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 ridings they want to win.

Activity: 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 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 any materials to conduct the survey (e.g., paper survey, online survey).
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.

2. Review the results of the opinion poll(s) as a class. If the class was divided into groups, have each group present their findings to the rest of the class. Were the results surprising? What were the most interesting findings? What challenges did students face in collecting and analyzing data?

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 distribute the results to the rest of the school.

Debrief: 5-10 min
Have a closing discussion about the influence of 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.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES
A. Throughout an election campaign you will hear reports about many different polls. Each poll is commissioned by a different company, media organization or political party 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 from the same time period. 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 or why not.

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 election 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., 2013 British Columbia provincial election, 2012 Alberta provincial election). In some cases, pollsters have predicted a different governing party completely. Do you think polling results can impact voter turnout or voting preferences? Debate the advantages and disadvantages of polling and the impact on elections.

D. Read the *Globe and Mail* article titled "We have to be smarter about how polls are conducted, interpreted and put into context" (July 9, 2015). What insight does this give you into political polling and its relationship with the media?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS

What is an opinion poll?
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, but the results present a 'snapshot' of views and attitudes at a given point in time.

How are opinion polls used during election campaigns?
Polls are often reported on in the lead-up to and during an election. During a federal election campaign, it is common to see the results from several polls per week from a variety of sources. Polls are used by media organizations to share the views of the public and 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 ridings they want to win.

What types of polls are used?
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 target the important issues of the campaign.

What aspects of polls impact validity?
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 polled, the wording of a question, the time when respondents are surveyed and even the attitude of the person asking the questions.

What is the margin of error?
A margin of error is a small amount given for most polls to allow for miscalculations or changes in opinion. 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. All polls have a margin of error, whether it is reported or not.

How have polls changed over the years?
In the past, polls were conducted by telephone, or by sending interviewers door-to-door 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.

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

National and local media websites. Major national examples include:
- The Globe and Mail — **www.theglobeandmail.com**
- CBC News — **www.cbc.ca/news**
- CTV News — **www.ctvnews.ca**
- Global News — **www.globalnews.ca**
- The National Post — **www.nationalpost.com**

Polling and research company websites. Examples include:
- Abacus Data — **www.abacusdata.ca**
- Ekos Research Associates — **www.ekos.com**
- Environics Research Group — **www.environics.ca**
- Forum Research — **www.forumresearch.com**
- Harris/Decima — **www.harrisdecima.ca**
- Ipsos Reid — **www.ipsos.ca**
- Nanos Research — **www.nanosresearch.com**
- ThreeHundredandEight.com — **www.threehundredeight.com**

Online survey sites. Examples include:
- Fluid Surveys — **www.fluidsurveys.com**
- Survey Monkey — **www.surveymonkey.com**