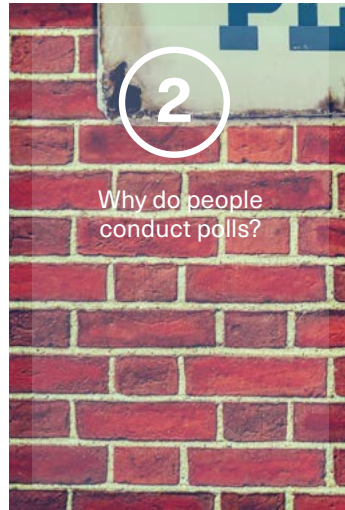


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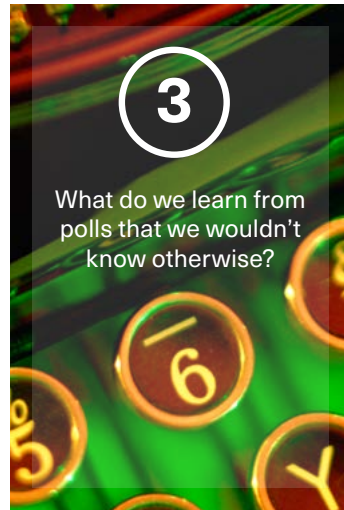
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What are polls and how are they conducted normally?



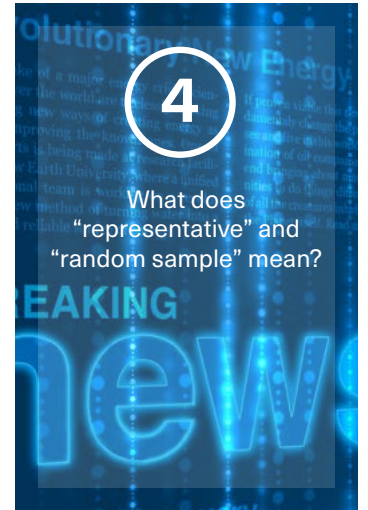
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Why do people conduct polls?



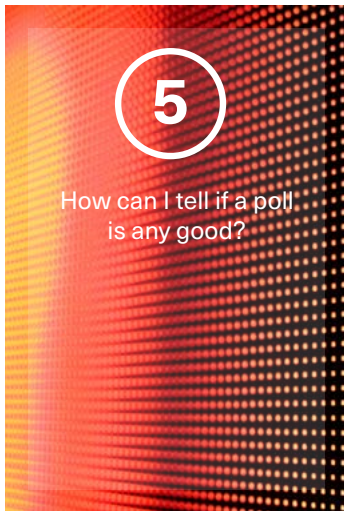
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What do we learn from polls that we wouldn't know otherwise?



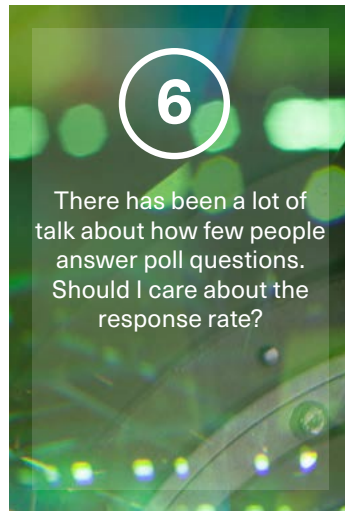
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What does “representative” and “random sample” mean?



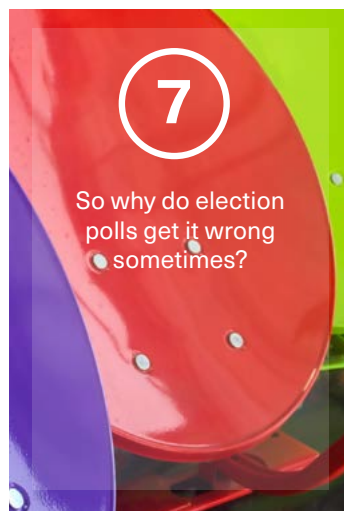
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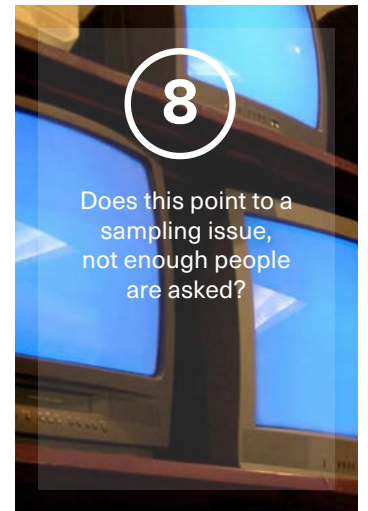
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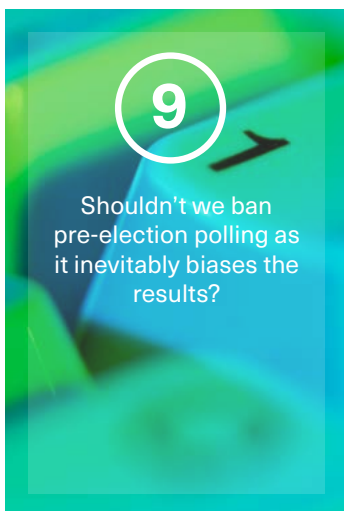
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Shouldn't we ban pre-election polling as it inevitably biases the results?



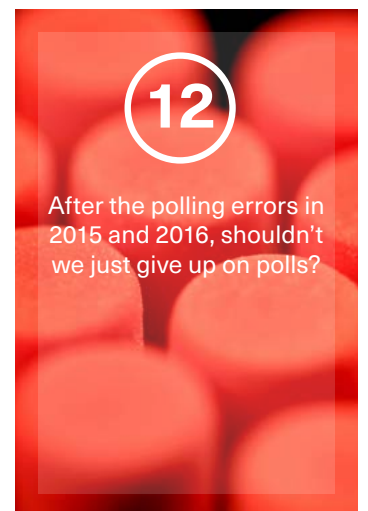
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1

What are polls and how are they conducted normally?

Good polls are “scientific” surveys. The two main characteristics of scientific surveys are:

- a) That respondents are chosen by the research organisation according to explicit criteria to ensure representativeness, not by respondents decided on their own to select themselves and participate, and
- b) That questions are worded in a balanced way. If organisations follow the guidelines of market and opinion research organisations like ESOMAR when it comes to conducting and reporting public polls, they are probably trustworthy.

But it is important to ask questions about every poll you see:

Who conducted it?

Who paid for it?

What questions were asked?

When was it carried out – and, especially how it was conducted?

Most polls in Western countries are done by telephone or online. Polls conducted by telephone select their samples using information about the distribution of telephone numbers in order to draw numbers that are representative of whole telephone population. That can be achieved through random sampling (discussed in more detail in question 4). Online polls are drawn from panels of individuals who have agreed to be contacted by polling organisations. Companies use different procedures, but the goal is to create a data base that represents the country.

In most European countries, polls conducted by telephone provide excellent coverage of the population, when both landline and mobile phones are included. This often exceeds the coverage provided by polls conducted online. Internet access, while higher than in many other parts of the world is only above 85% in a few countries. In addition, the fact that people must opt-in to an internet polling sample may limit coverage, and can raise questions about whether some people are being systematically excluded.

In some parts of the world polls are still conducted face to face and by posted mail. In many developing democracies, where there is limited landline phone availability and no easy access to sampling mobile phones, the only way to conduct opinion polls that represent the population is through in person interviewing: choosing locations based on population and then selecting individuals in randomly-selected households in those locations. In these cases, there may be limits to what the results represent– if they were conducted only in urban areas, for example, they may be a good reflection on opinion in the big cities, but rural citizens are excluded, and therefore not represented.

2

Why do people conduct polls?



Many organisations want to learn what the public thinks. Those organisations include the government itself, the political parties, companies, non-profit and charitable organisations, and the news media. In a democracy, knowing public opinion provides a base for parties to campaign on, and gives government information on whether their policies are approved by the electorate.

Journalists, too, care about opinion, and reporting on opinion gives the news media good stories – that is something especially true before an election. Think tanks, non-profit and charitable organisations also may conduct surveys about social problems. Regardless of who commissions the poll, all polls need to be done well, otherwise they will give a distorted view of opinion (for example, if news organisations only interview people who visit their website, they are missing a large component of the public).

Finally, the public itself should care about national opinion. Since this information is being used by decision-makers, well-done opinion polls that are made public give the people access to the same type of information that governments and politicians use and may affect them.. Well-done and properly reported-on opinion polls democratise information.



3

What do we learn from polls that we wouldn't know otherwise?

Most governments and institutional bodies, even many that are not democratic, claim that having an appreciation of public opinion is their primary motivation behind policy making and implementation. Thus, the “voice of the people” is an important element in the creation and maintenance of societal structures. Polls provide a way for government to learn the public's positions in between elections.

More visibly, the ever-growing need for news content has pushed the media towards the more frequent deployment of opinion polls as part of their news coverage. Polls give a news organisation data that may support the government's policies or leaders, or indicate the weaknesses the public finds in those policies or leaders. For this reason, many efforts have been made to ban opinion polling – particularly before election periods. Indeed, the public, through the media, learns whether it supports or opposes government policies, what problems people are most concerned about, whether the nation is in favour of international engagement, and much, much more.





4

What does “representative” and “random sample” mean?

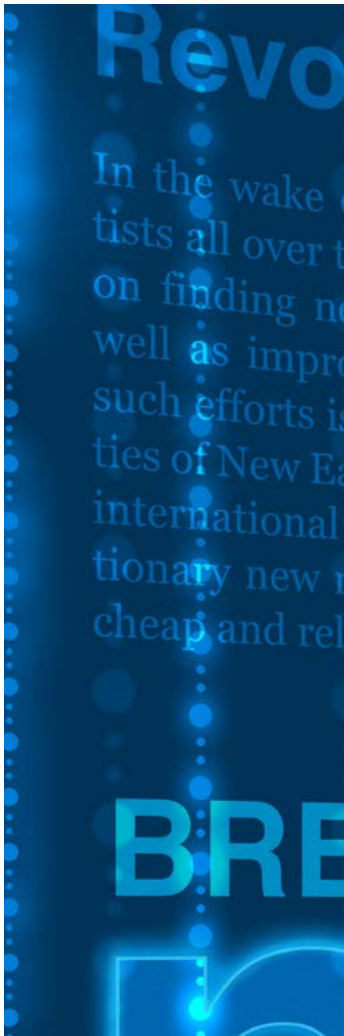
Those words are sometimes used interchangeably, but you can have neither, only one, or both.

The important quality of **random sampling** is the possibility that everyone has some chance of being selected at the start. True random sampling is becoming more difficult to achieve in practice for many reasons, including the declining response rate, but pollsters can overcome this and make the achieved sample of interviews resemble the population demographically and behaviourally.

With random sampling, a polling organisation either uses a list of randomly-drawn telephone numbers or email addresses (for telephone or some Internet polls), visits randomly-drawn addresses or uses names from a list such as an electoral register (for some face-to-face surveys). The polling organisation then contacts people at those telephone numbers or at those addresses, using a random selection procedure, and asks individuals to take voluntarily part in the survey. This can also be called probability sampling. If it is carried out properly, a random sample should be a representative sample.

A **representative sample**, however, can be achieved in other ways. One is by use of a quota. Quota sampling involves setting controls – for example, age and gender – and matching the sample to those characteristics. Some polls use very complex quotas, with many variables. Surveys based on quota sampling are often used in face-to-face surveys.

In addition, some Internet polls employ quota sampling to select representative samples from a database of people who have already provided such information about themselves. Quota sampling may be used, in otherwise randomly sampled telephone surveys, to select the person to be interviewed within the household, in order to speed up the fieldwork process. Quota samples can therefore be representative, but they are not random.



5

How can I tell if a poll is any good?



There are a number of questions that people should ask about polls that can be used to evaluate them. Any good pollster should be comfortable answering them, and should provide that information when a poll is released. The answers should not be hard to find or this may already signal a problem with how the poll was conducted! In fact, the ICC/ESOMAR Code requires that this information be made available and easily accessible to comply with our Code of Conduct.

The questions are:

Who conducted the poll and who sponsored the poll?

Was it done by a known company?

Was it paid for by anyone like a political party that who had an interest in the outcome? That may not make a poll wrong, but it is good to be a little sceptical, as there can be an ulterior motive in a poll release.

Who were the respondents?

Were they registered voters or all adults?

Do they live in one region, etc.?

How many people were interviewed?

When were they interviewed?

What were the dates of interviewing?

How were the respondents interviewed – in person, by phone, online? All of these methods have advantages and disadvantages, but some are not feasible for certain kinds of polling or in certain places.

Has anything happened since then that could change opinion?

What were the questions?

Is the sample representative?

First of all, the sample must represent the group at interest – is it the entire population, voters, a certain subset of voters?

See what the pollster is claiming for the sample. Whatever the claim, there are possible issues depending on how the poll was conducted.

Think of the question of representing the public the same way a spoonful of soup represents the entire bowl.

Do you drink the whole pot of soup to determine whether it's hot? Not usually. Generally, you take a spoonful and "taste a sample" of the soup. From that "sample" – the one teaspoon you taste – you determine whether the whole pot is at the right temperature to serve. But you want to make sure that you do a good job choosing a random spoonful. You generally stir the pot and dip in the teaspoon, so that any given spoonful of that soup has an equal chance of ending up in your spoon. If you just skim a spoonful off the top or from the very bottom without stirring the soup, you might come to a very false impression of the temperature of the pot. You would serve cold or extremely hot soup to your guests simply because you "skewed" the sample from which you tasted.

In-person and telephone interviewing can and should be based on some kind of probability sampling: in the case of phone polls, all telephones associated with households and individuals should have a chance of being selected. That includes mobile phones in places where a significant part of the population is only reachable through them. Face-to-face interviewing also covers the entire population, with probability selection of geographic areas, and then selection of households and individuals in those places. Results from these probability samples, if done properly, can be extended to the entire population – and a margin of sampling error can be calculated.

Online polling has a different issue. Not only are there people without internet access who are left out in online polls, but most online polls are not probability samples. They are conducted among people who have voluntarily joined panels ("opted in").

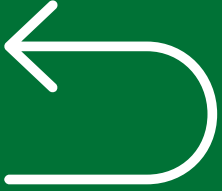
Those who conduct these polls try to create "representative samples" reflecting the overall population, which can involve a very complex weighting process. (There are some internet panels that have been selected using a probability design, with internet access given to those who do not have it).

• Was the sample weighted and how was it weighted?

Some kind of weighting is almost always necessary, even in those polls based on probability sampling methods, because of difficulties in reaching everyone sampled. Pollsters should indicate how a sample was weighted, and which demographic or political characteristic were used to create the weights.

6

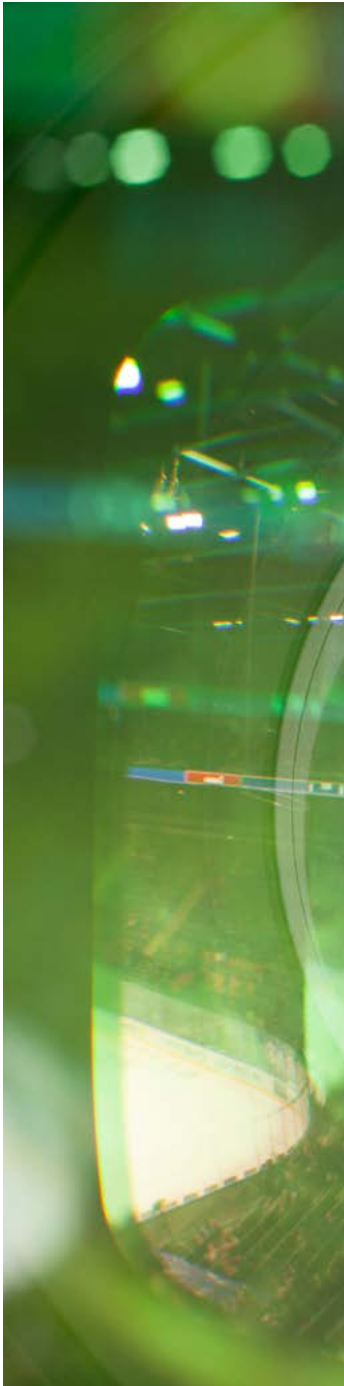
There has been a lot of talk about how few people answer poll questions. Should I care about the response rate?



In many telephone polls, especially in Western Europe and the United States, fewer than 10% of the people from telephone numbers in the original sample complete an interview. The percentage has been dropping for many decades, and raises questions about the representativeness of polls.

However, a low response rate does not make a poll automatically wrong. National general election polls in places like the United States have improved over time. And even in 2016, the national polls were off by only a point or two in reflecting the popular vote.

Pollsters have learned how to control for the low response rate by ensuring that the final sample is a good demographic representation of the country. So yes, you should care about the response rate, but it is by no means the sole predictor of polling accuracy.



7

So why do election polls get it wrong sometimes?



There is so much coverage of election polls that when one is wrong those mistakes dominate news and talk about polling. There are several reasons for a mistake.

And every once in a while, at least according to the laws of statistics, drawing a sample of the population will give results that do NOT represent the total population well. But there are other, more likely, reasons election polls can be wrong besides sampling error.

They may include:

- Not adequately determining who will vote (in some places less than half of the age-eligible population votes);
- Not having the correct distribution of the voting population;
- Asking questions about voting intentions in ways that produce answers that misrepresent people's intentions.

This can be done by the way questions are ordered. For example, asking questions about the problems an incumbent government faces before asking questions about vote intention can depress the expressed vote for the ruling party.

There are also times when misrepresentation can be inadvertent. In multi-party contests, voters may vote strategically, and may use the results of pre-election polls to help them do this. So the poll result may be wrong as soon as it is published;

- Not being able to take account of last-minute events that can change vote intention.

This is more of a problem in countries that forbid the publication or conduct of polls in the immediate pre-election period. One can never know whether polls conducted immediately before the election are correct.

So what went wrong in the UK general election ?

The review of the 2015 United Kingdom polls so far has suggested that the polls missed big groups of voters – those over the age of 70 and those who, for various reasons, were harder to find and interview. In addition, the polling overestimated the voting interest of younger adults. All those things resulted in an underestimate of the Conservative vote and helped produce the polling error.

Individuals who conducted the British Polling Council's review had no part in the polls reported in 2015. Many are academics and some have even criticized polling practices. In the past, serious reviews of major errors like this one have resulted in improvements in how polls are conducted and greater future accuracy.

But what about the 2016 U.S. election mistakes?

Many analysts in the United States before the election assumed something that is almost always true: that the popular vote winner will capture enough votes in the Electoral College to win. Almost always true, but not that year. Hillary Clinton amassed nearly three million more votes nationwide than Donald Trump, two percentage points higher than Donald Trump's total, but Trump received a total of 78,000 votes more than Clinton from three states (Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania). That gave him the Electoral College vote and victory.

The final national election poll average gave Clinton a four-point lead. That is an overestimate of Clinton's national margin, but a very small one, and in line with U.S. polling errors in recent elections.

But there were larger errors when it came to the critical states, especially places like Wisconsin and Michigan. While there is an ongoing investigation being conducted by the American Association for Public Opinion Research, several explanations have been offered:

- There is clear evidence of a late surge to Trump (13% of voters nationwide made up their minds in the last week. They gave an edge to Donald Trump.
- In the critical states of Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, those who decided in the last week voted for Trump by 11 points, 17 points and 29 points respectively, according to exit polls) ;
- Polls may also have missed some critical voters, especially white blue-collar workers in the Midwest.

We will learn more about these concerns once the AAPOR review is completed.

Does having lots of polls make up for this?

Probably not. Especially not if all or most of the polls err in the same direction, which can happen if they are all systematically underrepresenting some groups, or have some other flaw. And, of course, if opinion changes after the publication of the aggregated polls, all polls will have the same errors.



8

Does this point to a sampling issue, not enough people are asked?



Polls typically include about 1,000 adults. This does not mean that every poll includes 1,000 voters. That depends on the share of the adult population that votes. Sampling error increases the smaller the number of interviews included in the reported percentages. So, yes, there could be too few interviews with relevant individuals, and a less than ideal too large sampling error.

9

Shouldn't we ban pre-election polling as it inevitably biases the results?



There is NO credible evidence that pre-election polls create a bandwagon or underdog effect, at least not in two-party or two-candidate contests. However, polls can be used strategically by voters in multi-candidate competitions, as voters weigh the possibilities of choosing among many candidates, and determine how best to use their vote. Sometimes voters might choose to vote for their second choice in order to prevent their least favoured candidate from winning, but it is always the choice of the voter to act upon the information they have whether that is through polls, the opinions of their peers, or other sources.

Banning the publication or the conduct of pre-election polls would not stop polls. Candidates and political parties would continue to conduct them, and would very likely release information selectively for their own benefit. The public would, as a result, lose the protection of well-conducted and reported polls conducted by independent organisations abiding with internationally-recognised codes of conducts like the ICC/ESOMAR International Code.

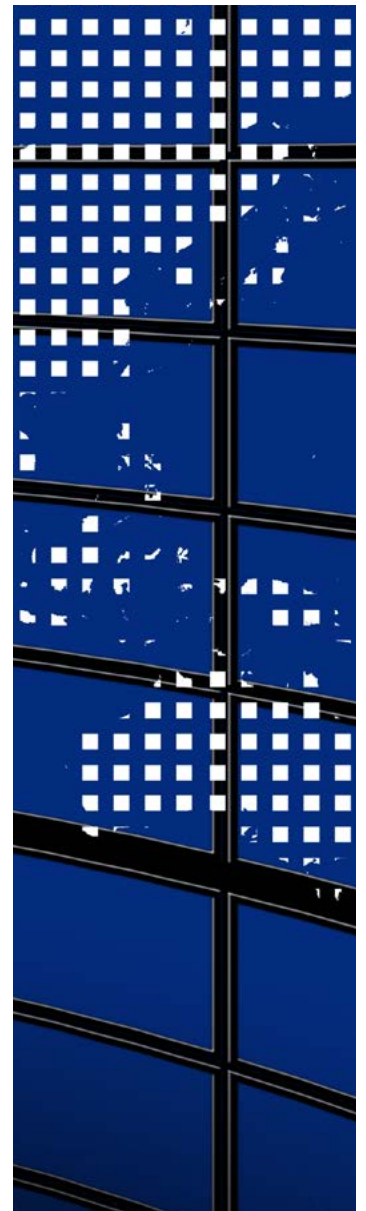


10

Surely the reason why the 2015 U.K. polls were all wrong is that they colluded with each other – or reported results that would match everyone else’s. How independent are polling companies anyway?

There is little reason for pollsters to “collude,” or “herd,” as making your poll match everyone else’s, is universally frowned upon. Pollsters are in competition with each other, and each hopes to have the most accurate pre-election polls. In fact, many companies lose money on pre-election polling but still conduct them to show the value of their methods and as a democratic service. George Gallup did this in 1936 and pollsters continue to do this. Regardless, every responsible pollster must deal with the same problems.

Some companies work with political parties, providing them with strategic information about public desires. But any work they produce for public consumption must be judged by the same standards as the work of non-partisan pollsters. Organisations like ESOMAR exist to provide guidelines for the conduct and the publication of public polls and have done so since 1948.





11

Should all polls be vetted and verified by the government?



This would NOT be a useful “solution.” Governments themselves are not always independent of partisanship and bias, particularly if the polls are asking the public to evaluate that government.

But there are national and international organizations that set standards for how polls should be conducted. ESOMAR, for example, provides a mechanism for public complaint when pollsters violate its guidelines. The World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR) is also concerned about polling standards. There are also national associations working with pollsters throughout the world that can be found on ESOMAR’s national associations listing.

12

After the polling errors in 2015 and 2016, shouldn’t we just give up on polls?



No. Poll “misses” can provide learning experiences for pollsters – and also reminders for the press and public about the limitations of polls. For example, after the 2015 British election, a panel of experts noted the sampling weaknesses in the polling: too few voters over the age of 75, not reaching younger adults who would not vote, and the overall problem of getting the balances correct. Pollsters will attempt to correct for these problems in the future.

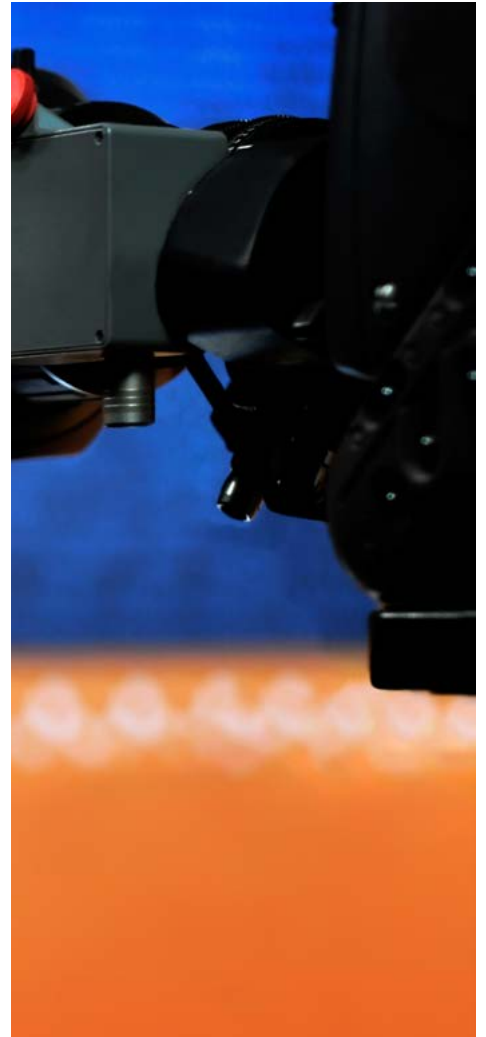
If anything, recent issues with polling point to the continuing need for knowledge about training about polls – not just for those who conduct polls, but also those who report on them. ESOMAR, WAPOR and AAPOR created with the Poynter Institute a free online, international course for journalists about opinion polls which many will find helpful. It can be accessed at www.newsu.org/courses/understanding-and-interpreting-polls-international.



ESOMAR is the global voice of the data, research and insights community

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