Chapter 12

Political Data and Polling

I. POLITICAL RESEARCH

A. PUBLIC OPINION POLLS

Political scientists collect data using a variety of polling, or mass survey methods, to assess the opinions, policy preferences, and voting patterns of citizens. Data from polling is used by policymakers, politicians, and the media, which ultimately impacts policy debates and elections.

1. Opinion polls are used to determine the beliefs that citizens have regarding policy issues, government institutions, elected officials, or candidates running for office.
2. Benchmark polls, surveys used at the beginning of a campaign, used to reveal the attitudes citizens have about a particular candidate or issue that can be later used as a basis for comparison.
3. Tracking polls are surveys that involve asking individuals the same questions at different time intervals as a method of measuring data over time (trends).
4. Entrance polls are surveys given to individuals just before voting takes place to predict the outcome of an election and determine voter reasoning.
5. Exit polls (surveys taken directly outside of a polling location) are used to predict the winners of elections and collect data about how voters made their decisions, as well as which groups support which parties and candidates.
    a. Media outlets may use exit poll data to predict or "call" the winners of elections, or, in the case of presidential elections, the winner of the popular vote within states. Such reporting may, in turn, affect voter turnout and impact election results.

b. To avoid interfering in the election process, most media outlets follow careful guidelines and refrain from reporting election results until polls have closed.

6. A push poll is not a true poll or survey, but a propaganda technique designed to manipulate voter opinion through the use of such devices as biased question wording or by spreading false information.

7. A straw poll is a nonscientific survey method of gauging opinion based on a nonrandom sample. It has no scientific or predictive value.

B. COMPONENTS OF SCIENTIFIC POLLS

1. **Sampling:** It is not possible to give a survey to every member of a large population, such as the voting-eligible population of the United States. For this reason, political scientists choose a small group, or sample, to study to make predictions about the larger population. *Sampling error* and *margin of error* are terms describing the potential discrepancy between poll results and the opinions of the larger population being measured. To reduce sampling error, samples should be large enough to make inferences about the population, as well as being random and representative.

   a. A mass survey is a poll given to a larger sample size in order to reduce the margin of error, increasing the chances that data can be applied to the larger population. Mass surveys for large populations typically involve 1,000 to 2,000 respondents.

   b. The term *random sample* refers to the individuals chosen by chance to be in the study. To ensure the randomness of the sample, each member of a population must have an equal probability of selection or an equal chance of being chosen to participate. It is difficult to obtain a random sample of the population being studied—for example, the voting-eligible population of the United States. Political scientists have developed various methods to achieve a random sample.

      ➤ Random-digit dialing is a polling method that involves having computers call listed and unlisted landline phone numbers by chance to reach survey respondents.

- Because landline usage is declining, and federal law prevents automated calling of cell phones for survey purposes, pollsters must supplement the use of random-digit dialing with human volunteers calling cell phone numbers.
- Modern communications technology, such as cellular phones with caller identification, has decreased response rates to polling attempts and made random samples more difficult to generate.

c. Researchers use a variety of methods to create a *representative sample* or one that accurately and proportionally mirrors the diversity of the population being surveyed.

- One such method involves the process of weighting, in which the sample data is mathematically manipulated to match the demographic characteristics of the population. For example, in a poll measuring voter attitudes where the population of the state is 54% urban dwellers, the number of urban dwellers in the sample data could be adjusted (weighted) to match the population being measured.
- This process can be applied to other demographics, including age, education level, and ethnicity.

The goal of all polls is to obtain a large enough random sample that is also representative of the population. If the sample is random and representative, it is possible to make generalizations that apply to the entire population.

d. All scientific polls have a margin of error or sampling error, terms quantifying the potential mathematical difference between the survey's results and the opinion of the larger population. Polling organizations strive to reduce the margin of error through several methods:

- One of the main factors influencing the size of the sampling error is the size of the sample. In general, the larger the sample, the lower the sampling error.

- Most public opinion polls for large populations have between 1,000 and 2,000 respondents, resulting in reduced sampling error. Interestingly, sample sizes larger than 2,000 result in negligible increases in poll accuracy, regardless of the size of the population being studied.
- Given an adequate sample size, a margin of error is quantified using percentage points. A sampling error of plus or minus 3 percentage points, for example, indicates that 95% of the time the poll results from the sample are accurate to within 3 percent of what the larger population believes.
- It is important to consider the size of the sampling error when evaluating claims made by polls (large sampling errors make the results unreliable as an indicator of the population), and polls that do not report a sampling error are considered unscientific and unreliable.
- The margin of error may negate a lead in a poll where, for example, candidate X is leading candidate Y by 47% to 45% and the margin of error is 3%.
- Note that the margin of error applies to both results, so that if candidate X is leading candidate Y by 47% to 43%, the actual level of support for candidate X is somewhere between 44%–50%, while the actual level of support for candidate Y is somewhere between 40%–47%, placing the poll within the margin of error, or too close to call.

Margin of error *and* sampling error *describe potential discrepancies in generalizing poll results to larger populations. Although there are technical differences between these terms, you should be aware that they may be used interchangeably.*

2. **Question Design:** Polling questions may be written in several ways, affecting the quality of the information the poll will produce.
   a. Question types include:
      - Forced-choice, also called selective-response, questions, that require respondents to choose from among given options or rate themselves on a scale, produce more accurate results. Multiple choice or yes/no questions

are effective because they simplify data calculation and analysis.

- ➤ Open-ended questions, those that allow respondents to answer outside of a preselected framework, generate data that is difficult to quantify or generalize.

b. How questions are worded can impact poll results.

- ➤ Questions should be concise and worded in neutral, careful language to avoid influencing responses. Leading questions, those which suggest a particular response, should be avoided.
- ➤ Vocabulary should be simple and straightforward; biased or emotionally charged language may influence responses.
- ➤ As an example, the statement "America is not spending enough money helping the poor," is likely to produce different responses from the statement "America is not spending enough on welfare."

c. Question order can impact responses when a question creates an impression that may influence a later response.

d. Polling questions must be administered according to standardized procedures.

- ➤ Printed surveys eliminate variables associated with human questioners, who may not read questions in a standardized way, for example, by explaining terms. Questions should be read as written, without elaboration, to maximize the accuracy of results.
- ➤ A questioner's personal characteristics, such as age, race, or gender, may influence respondents, who may be concerned with the impression they are making on the questioner.

e. Some polls force respondents to select an opinion in cases where they may lack the information or interest to form an opinion. Offering an "I don't know" (or similar) response improves accuracy because respondents are not forced to respond to questions about which they lack information or opinions.

Be prepared to critically evaluate polling data presented in both multiple-choice and free-response questions. A scientific poll would have each of the following components:

- ***A large sample size, typically between 1,000 and 2,000 respondents.***
- ***A random and representative sample that allows for inferences to be made about the larger population.***
- ***A small reported sampling error.***
- ***Clearly worded questions that are neutral in tone.***

C. FOCUS GROUPS

1. Focus groups are another method by which information about public opinion can be obtained. A focus group involves a small group of people who participate in a structured discussion to discover insight into public opinion.
2. Focus groups are usually led by a moderator, who leads the discussion and attempts to elicit participants' opinions.
3. Focus groups are often limited to specific policy issues.
4. Focus groups can provide qualitative data and insights into voter perceptions of political issues, but do not generate statistically significant quantitative data and cannot be generalized to a broader population.

D. POLLING AND ELECTIONS

1. Data from public opinion polls and focus groups collected during elections impact candidate messaging in advertising and preparation for public debates. Candidates are interested in tailoring their responses to policy stances that align with voter opinions and priorities.
2. Candidates who have high polling ratings are at an advantage because they are more likely to:
   a. be invited to participate in publicized debates, where participation in a large field of candidates may be limited to a minimum polling threshold.

b. receive more (free) media coverage.

c. have an easier time raising campaign donations.

3. The results of national polls leading up to elections can also create a bandwagon effect. According to this principle, the more people adopt a particular opinion or position, the more others are influenced to adopt it. In other words, gains in support for a candidate lead to further gains in support.

E. POLLING AND PUBLIC POLICY

1. Politicians use polling data to understand how the public feels about proposed or existing public policies, and how strongly those opinions are held.
2. Polling data helps public officials to understand what problems are important to the public and what solutions are favored.
3. Public opinion influences politicians because they are concerned with reelection. The length of an official's term and the time until he or she must run for reelection may impact his or her sensitivity to polling data.
4. Polling is only one factor that influences the legislative process. Politicians may disregard public opinion if they disagree with it, or they may be influenced by interest groups or other factors.
5. Politicians do not always act according to the results of opinion polls.

   a. Policy issues may be complex and difficult for the average citizen to fully understand. Politicians may take this into account in policymaking.

   b. Polling data may be helpful to officials in explaining their decisions to their constituents.

   c. Officials may vote against public opinion.

      ➤ They may believe that policy outcomes may influence voter opinions over time. For example, elected officials know that sometimes polices that are not initially popular gain support over time as the benefits become more clear.

      ➤ They may attempt to use their influence to change public opinion.

F. POLLING RELIABILITY AND VERACITY (VALIDITY)

The credibility of conclusions based on data from public opinion polls is dependent upon the reliability and validity of the survey materials. (The terms *validity* and *veracity* are synonymous.) As a result, mass surveys are carefully evaluated to ensure that results are consistent and accurate.

1. Reliability refers to the consistency or repeatability of a survey and can be measured in a variety of ways. A common way to measure reliability in a survey is to look for internal consistency by including several questions about the same idea spread throughout the survey. Responses may also be compared over time or between two similar versions of a survey. Reliability, by itself, however, does not necessarily ensure that the data is correct.
2. Veracity (validity) describes data accuracy. Beyond making certain that mass surveys provide consistent (reliable) results, political scientists want to be certain that the data is accurate, which is called validity. There are several types of validity for which surveys are examined, including predictive and content validity.
    a. Predictive validity describes how accurate a poll is at forecasting (predicting) future behaviors. It can be used to evaluate benchmark and tracking polls. If an election poll during the campaign accurately identifies the eventual outcome of an election, the poll would be said to have predictive validity.
    b. Polling accuracy also involves content validity, which means that the poll accurately measures the full topic area being studied and that important aspects are not excluded.

Expect to encounter the terms* reliability *and* veracity (validity) *on questions related to scientific polling. Simply stated,* reliability *refers to the consistency of the poll and* veracity *refers to the accuracy of the poll. Think of a scientific poll as a measuring device such as a bathroom scale that you want to be both reliable (consistent) and valid (accurate). It is possible that a poll, like a scale, could be reliable, but not valid. For example if a scale were to indicate that you weighed 15 pounds every time you stepped on it, the scale would be reliable, but not valid.