ADL®

How Do Polls Inform, Influence and Impact Elections?

Grade Level		Time	Common Core Standards
K-2	3-5	45–60 Minutes	Reading: R1, R2 Speaking & Listening: SL1, SL4 Language: L4, L6
MS	HS		

LESSON OVERVIEW

Polls and opinion surveys are part of our daily lives. From responding to surveys on social media to reading results from the latest election poll, we are inundated with information about what the public thinks about a variety of topics and issues. During elections, polls are used to provide information to the general public and for candidates to gain insight into their standing in the race. During the 2016 Presidential election, as many as four polls a day were released in the months leading up to the election.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to learn more about polling, understand the importance of identity and demographics in polling, reflect on potential bias in polls and create their own poll in order to analyze their design.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

O Students will understand the purpose and impact of election polls.

O Students will examine election polls and reflect on why identity and demographics are critical factors in polling results.

O Students will create their own election polls in order to think critically about how polls are designed and results analyzed.

MATERIALS & PREPARATION

O Poll about Polls (optional, one copy for each student)

O Background information about Election Polls (for teacher)

O Five articles for small group discussion (depending on class size, about 6–10 copies each):

– "Why public opinion polls don't include the same number of Republicans and Democrats" (Pew Research Center, October 25, 2019, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/10/25/why-public-opinion-polls-dont-include-the-same-number-of-republicans-and-democrats/)

– "Why You Can't Volunteer for Election Polls, and Other Polling Facts" (*The New York Times,* August 30, 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/08/30/us/politics/2020-election-polls.html)

– "Explainer: What early U.S. presidential polls tell us about the 2020 race" (Reuters, August 21, 2019, www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-polls-explainer/explainer-what-early-u-s-presidential-polls-tell-us-about-the-2020-race-idUSKCN1VB0YZ)

Web Related Connections

Lessons
Ballot Initiatives Expand Voting Rights
Census Question Controversy
Identity and Diversity in My Generation
Representing the People: Diversity and Elections
Voting Rights Then and Now

Other Resources
10 Ways Youth Can Engage in Activism
Election Polls
Helping Students Make Sense of News Stories about Bias and Injustice
Let's Bring Current Events to Life in the Classroom
Teaching about Elections

Key Words

affiliation	name recognition
aggregate	nonpartisan
arbitrary	poll
biased	pollsters
criteria	precipitous
demographics	predictive
electorate	proportion
foolproof	random
hypothetical	sampling
incentivize	regulations
margin-of-error	representation
methodologies	reputable
sampling	survey
regulations	

–   "How political opinion polls affect voter behavior" (The Conversation, June 20, 2016,
   http://theconversation.com/how-political-opinion-polls-affect-voter-behaviour-60554)

–   "How Today's Political Polling Works" (*Harvard Business Review,* August 1, 2016,
   https://hbr.org/2016/08/how-todays-political-polling-works)

○ Poll Creation Worksheet (one copy for each student)

PROCEDURES

What are Polls?

1. Begin the lesson by asking: *Have you ever taken a poll or survey?* Have students raise their hands. Then ask: *Was the survey done online, on paper, on the phone or in person?* As students answer by a show of hands, quickly note how many answered the question each way (or ask a student volunteer to do so).

    Alternative: Distribute the Poll about Polls and have students complete it. Collect the polls and quickly calculate the responses.

2. Share the results by saying something like: "Out of 30 students in the class, 20 have done polls. That means two-thirds or 66% of students in this class have done a poll. Of the 20 students who have done polls, 17 have done them online, 5 have done phone polls, 5 have done paper surveys and 2 have done polls in person." (Or, share the results of the Poll about Polls if completed.)

    Explain to students that "we just did a poll and I am sharing the results."

3. Ask students: *What else could we find out using the data from this poll? What if I asked about specific identity characteristics and how people voted according to those identities? What if I asked more specific questions about polling?*

4. Ask students: *What does it mean to poll people?* Elicit answers and explain that **polling** or surveying people means to ask people a question or a series of questions in order to get information about what most people think about something. Ask students to share information and experiences they've had with taking polls.

Information Sharing: Election Polls

1. Explain that polling can be done about anything (e.g., your favorite flavor of ice cream, how many hours you spend on Instagram, for whom you plan to vote in the next Presidential election).

2. Ask: *What do you know about polls? How are polls used in elections? Have you seen any polls about the current Presidential election?* Engage in a brief discussion about their experiences with polls.

3. Share with students some or all the basic Background Information about Election Polls.

4. Engage students in a brief discussion by asking the following questions:

    ○   What of this information is new and what did you already know?

    ○   Why is it important to understand how various dimensions of identity and demographics are factored into polls?

    ○   Why is it important that we look at specific identity groups or demographics when we analyze polling data?

    ○   In what ways can the questions asked in a poll lead to biased results? How can the way the poll is conducted lead to biased results?

    ○   How can polls reveal biases of the respondents? How can polls shield biases of the respondents?

    ○   How do you think polls impact how people feel about candidates and ultimately vote? In other words, do polls encourage or discourage voting a certain way?

    ○   What questions do you still have about polls?

📖 **Reading Jigsaw Activity**

1. In order to learn more about polling, explain to students that they will read and discuss different articles using a "jigsaw" strategy. Tell students that the jigsaw strategy provides an opportunity for small groups of students to learn about different aspects of a topic and then teach each other.

   Note to teacher: If you want to learn more about the jigsaw strategy, watch this video.

2. Divide students into five equal-size groups and designate them Groups A, B, C, D and E. Distribute to each student the article for their designated group.

   Group A: "Why public opinion polls don't include the same number of Republicans and Democrats"

   Group B: "Why You Can't Volunteer for Election Polls, and Other Polling Facts"

   Group C: "Explainer: What early U.S. presidential polls tell us about the 2020 race"

   Group D: How political opinion polls affect voter behaviour"

   Group E: "How Today's Political Polling Works" (Note: This article is from 2016 and specifically addresses the 2016 Presidential election, but has very good background and contextual information.)

3. Have each group read their article and then discuss the main points of it in their designated groups. Encourage students to take notes and underline important points so that they are ready to share the important points with other students. Provide 20 minutes for this process: 10–15 to read and another 5–10 to discuss. Check in periodically with the groups to see if they need more time.

4. After each group has read and discussed their articles, divide the students into **new** groups with five students in each group. Each **new** small group should have a member from each of the previous A, B, C, D and E groups, so that each new small group has a representative for each of the five articles. In these newly formed groups, have each student tell the others in the group about their article, sharing pertinent information from their group discussion. Provide 8–10 minutes for this process.

5. After the jigsaw process is complete, reconvene the class and engage students in a discussion by asking some or all the following questions:

   ⭕ What is the main point of the article you read? How would you sum it up in a few sentences?

   ⭕ What did you learn about polling from your article?

   ⭕ Did reading the article or hearing about other articles change your perception or something you previously thought about polls?

   ⭕ What causes bias in political polling? How do polls try to address the bias?

   ⭕ How does the media and media bias impact how poll results are reported?

   ⭕ How does your article address identity and demographics? What is your takeaway about the importance of identity and demographics in polling?

   ⭕ What more do you want to know about polling?

✏️ **Create Your Own Poll**

1. Explain to students that now that they know more about polls, they are going to create their own poll. First, engage students in a brief brainstorm about things they want to know about other teenagers and peers—that they can determine through a poll. Make a list that looks like the following:

   ⭕ Favorite Netflix show

   ⭕ Amount of time you spend on social media

   ⭕ Favorite holiday movie

   ⭕ The age you think people should be able to vote

- Employment status

- Summer activities

- Favorite game (digital or face-to-face)

2. Ask students: *What questions do you have about people, voters and the 2020 Presidential election?* Brainstorm a list of ideas. To get ideas, you can use this Reuters Polling website.

3. Have students work in pairs or triads to create a poll. Distribute the Poll Creation Worksheet to each student. Review it and have students use it to begin to sketch out what their poll will include. Provide students 15–20 minutes to complete the worksheet and create their poll. If you don't have enough time for the polls to be completed in class, have students finish them for homework.

4. If time permits, have students test their polls by asking their classmates (or the whole school, to get a larger sample size) to complete them. Since most high school students are not voting age, they can either be themselves or take on another persona when completing it.

5. Engage students in a class discussion by asking the following questions:

- What was it like to create the poll?

- What parts were more or less difficult in creating the poll?

- How did you work together?

- What do you learn by creating the poll?

- How did you factor in identity and demographics?

- How did you assess your poll for bias? If there was bias, how did you address it?

- If you conducted the poll, how did the results turn out?

- Did the results surprise you?

Closing

Do a go-round where each student shares their overall question that they are aiming to answer in their poll.

Optional Homework/Follow-Up Activity

Have students work individually or in pairs to identify an election poll (either for this election cycle or a past election cycle). Have students analyze the poll by examining who was polled, what questions were asked and how the questions were phrased, what time period in the election cycle the poll was conducted and how the media reported on the poll. Students should also reflect on the extent to which the poll included any biases and what those were. Students can then present their analysis in class to compare and contrast different polls.

ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

- "A Field Guide to Polling: Election 2020 Edition"(Pew Research Center, November 19, 2019)
- "Election Polling" (Pew Research Center)
- "FAQ: Why you can be largely confident in public political polling" (*The Washington Post,* January 18, 2019)
- "No One Picks Up the Phone, but Which Online Polls Are the Answer?" (*The New York Times,* July 2, 2019)
- "Politifact's guide to understanding public opinion polls" (Politifact, November 20, 2019)
- "Polling Explorer" (Reuters)
- "The difference between good and bad state polls, explained" (Vox, November 14, 2019)
- "Who's Actually Electable in 2020?" (*The New York Times'* The Daily Podcast, November 5, 2019)
- "Why You Can't Volunteer for Election Polls, and Other Polling Facts" (*The New York Times,* August 30, 2019)

Common Core Standards

CONTENT AREA/STANDARD
Reading
R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
R2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
Speaking and Listening
SL1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
SL4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
Language
L4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.
L6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

Poll about Polls

---

1. Have you ever taken a poll? ☐ Yes ☐ No

---

3. Approximately how many polls you have taken? *(Check only one.)*

   ☐ More than 20

   ☐ 10–19

   ☐ 3–9

   ☐ Less than 3

   ☐ None

2. Where have you taken polls? *(Check all that apply.)*

   a. On the telephone: ☐ Yes ☐ No

   b. Online (on smartphone/digital device: ☐ Yes ☐ No

   c. On paper (print): ☐ Yes ☐ No

   d. In person (face to face): ☐ Yes ☐ No

---

4. Please share some of the details of one or more of the polls you have taken.

This poll is anonymous. Please share the following identity characteristics.

Age or Grade: _____

Gender: _____

Race: _____

Background Information about Election Polls

○ A poll is a survey of public opinion that is based on a sampling of people. Opinions polls are conducted by asking questions of a smaller subset of people that represents the larger group. The data is compiled and generalizations are made about that group of people's opinions, based on responses to those questions.

○ During elections, polls are used to share information with the general public and for candidates to gain insight into their standing in a race.

○ Polls are conducted in a variety of ways: (1) live-calling people on a landline or cell phone, (2) random calling people and the person called responds to automated prompts, (3) online polls with selected people and (4) face-to face polls conducted in person. Each of these types of polls has advantages and disadvantages.

○ Pollsters (people who design the polls) use "weighting" in order to adjust the results to match the population being represented. For example, if a poll has a lower percentage of women respondents than there are in the U.S., the responses from that group of people (in this case, women) would be adjusted, or weighted more heavily, to make up the difference.

○ The number of people who are polled varies, but in general, between 600-1000 people are polled for elections. The number of people pollsters have to contact in order to reach that amount is much higher because some people refuse to participate or may not meet the criteria for participating in the poll (e.g., not eligible to vote because of age).

○ There are a variety of questions that are typically asked in election polls, including:

Are you registered to vote? How likely are you to vote in this election? Who are you likely to vote for? What is the most influential factor in whether you vote? Who do you identify with most politically? What issues are most important to you?

Polling questions are often asked with limited options for responding (i.e., multiple choice). They may also be phrased in particular ways or asked with timing that could affect the outcome. For example, asking someone who they are likely to vote for in a general election before the primary is over. Also, polls may vary in who they seek to survey; some approach all adults, while other polls look for "likely voters," or "past primary voters." All of these factors can impact the outcome of a poll.

○ Tracking polls are commonly used in elections. Tracking polls gather responses during a consecutive time period (i.e., daily) in order to measure the attitude or opinion changes of a target population over a period of time.

○ Bias and stereotypes can impact how people answer poll questions. For example, the "Bradley Effect" is named after Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley, an African-American man who lost the 1982 governor's race. Some white voters, while intending to vote for the white candidate, told pollsters they were undecided or likely to vote for the black candidate (Tom Bradley) because they didn't want to appear biased. This theory can explain discrepancies between opinion polls and election outcomes when there is a white candidate and a candidate of color.

Another example: In a recent poll, 74% of respondents said they were comfortable with a woman president but only one-third of them believe their neighbors are comfortable with a female candidate. This could skew poll results.

○ Exit polls are used to understand how people voted and to make predictions about the election's outcome. Exit polling asks people, right after they voted, how they voted and to share aspects of their identity (i.e. demographic information).

Poll Creation Worksheet

Students' Names: _____

What overall question will this poll answer?
Who will I poll? What certain demographics do I need to target? *(For example, women, Southern states, Latinx people, young people ages 13–17)*
How will I conduct the poll? *(For example, online survey, paper survey, phone, in person)*
What is my sample size? *(How many responses do I need?)*
How will I introduce the poll to motivate people to take it?
What graphs, charts or infographics will I use to share the data?
How will I share the results? *(For example, essay, PPT, video, infographic)*
Is there potential bias in the poll and if so, how will I address it?
What other factors do I need to consider?
Sample poll questions (include at least three plus demographic information). 1. 2. 3.