

Top 10 Hints for Reporting on Political Polls

1. Beware of polls' limitations:

- ✓ They're snapshots in time.
- ✓ They don't predict the future.
- ✓ They can be invalid (sample size, questions, timing, just plain statistical average).
- ✓ They can be manipulated.

2. Ask the "20 Questions for Journalists" from the National Council on Public Polls:

www.publicagenda.org/aboutpubopinion/aboutpubop1.htm.

3. Always translate the jargon and include basic info on how poll was conducted.

Story should include, for example, the margin of error. Explain what that means. Be sure to give sample size, who paid for it, when was it done, why and how.

4. Don't overplay an individual poll.

Remember: It's a snapshot, a slice of time and attitude. Attitudes change over time and because of events.

5. Don't treat polls as the most important news in a campaign or election.

A campaign or election is more than the horserace of who's ahead at any given time. Sure, it's interesting to say who's ahead at the moment – but put that in context of issues and citizens' concerns.

6. Consider polls as background information – but not the whole story.

Read it. Understand it. Ask: So, how do I flesh out the statistics and percents? See below.

7. Flesh out the poll findings with shoeleather reporting.

Use the polls as background for interviewing ordinary folks. Try to get to the *why* of the statistics. *Why* do x percent oppose spending \$87 billion in Iraq? *Why* do x percent favor the mayor? Ask the pollster for contact info on some of the folks polled. Or find your own who match the statistics.

8. Put each new poll in perspective to earlier ones.

Trends over time tell us more than a poll that catches only one moment. But note that polls find different results over time also by asking *different* questions. Be sure that the trend reflects changing answers to the *same* questions. Read the whole poll, including questions, so you can compare.

9. Explain – or ask pollsters and scholars to explain – conflicting polls and contradictions.

Different questions, different times of day, different samples can equal different conclusions. Also, let your audiences know that different polls – even on the same day – can get different results.

10. Be willing to ignore a poll. Ask: WTHC?

Just because it's out there doesn't make it newsworthy.