

Lesson Plan: Making Sense of Political Polling

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Featured resources

[The Lowdown: Poll Dance](#)

[PBS Election Central](#)

[NPR's Fresh Air: Polling is Ubiquitous, But Is It Bad for Democracy?](#)



League of Women Voters/Flickr

Opening quick write prompt:

If a pre-election poll showed that the presidential candidate you support was probably going to lose, would you still vote for him/her? Why or why not?

A quick write allows students to write down their thoughts before discussing the opening question in order to increase participation and make the discussion more accessible to English Language Learners.

Objective

- Students will identify what makes for a high-quality, credible political opinion poll.
- Students will analyze and reflect on the effect of opinion polls on the democratic process.

Essential Question and Lesson Context

What makes a high-quality poll? What are polling pitfalls? What effect do opinion polls have on the democratic process?

Political opinion polls play an increasingly significant role in the democratic process. The non-partisan Commission on Presidential Debates uses them to determine which candidates can participate in televised debates. Donors use them to figure out which candidate to give money to. And voters, especially undecided ones, are often influenced by them.

At the same time, there is a growing body of evidence showing that opinion polls may not always accurately reflect the electorate and sometimes have the tendency to confuse voters more than they help inform them. This lesson examines polling practices and how the art of polling has evolved (or not) over time.

Key vocabulary

Pre-teach key vocabulary before students do the activity, especially if you have English Language Learners. After going over the simple definition, consider providing a visual aid or having students draw one. More ideas for how to pre-teach vocabulary can be found [here](#).

Word	Simple definition
Aggregate (adj.)	Formed by adding two or more amounts together
Collective (adj.)	Involving all members of a group; done or shared by a group
Partisan (adj.)	In support of one political party, candidate, group, or cause.
Representative sample (n.)	In a poll, a small number of people that accurately reflects a larger population
Ubiquitous (adj.)	Widespread, seeming to be everywhere

Activity

- As a class, in small groups or individually, students read [The Lowdown post](#) about polling and watch the embedded video, The Poll Dance.
 - Note: Making videos interactive is easier than you think! Stop frequently and ask the comprehension questions (some are listed below) OR use a platform like [EdPuzzle](#) to insert questions directly into the video.
 - Find strategies for how to make classroom videos interactive [HERE](#).
- Before watching:** Students share their responses to the quick write. Discuss how the predicted outcome of a political race (or any contest) can have an impact on the way people actually participate in the race. Ask students if they have read or heard about any polls leading up to the presidential election. Discuss how those polls have influenced their thinking or the thinking of voters they know, if at all.
- While watching:** Ask students to listen for what goes into constructing an accurate poll and what polls are used for.
 - Pause at 1:49: What are some motives for conducting a poll?
 - Pause at 2:18: Explain why Claire is suspicious of the poll sponsored by the Hat Association of America that claims most people think hats are sexy?

- Pause at 3:40: What is a representative sample? Why is it important to have a representative sample when taking a poll?
 - Pause at 4:40: Why is question order and asking questions in an unbiased way important? Why should you pay attention to which organization is conducting the poll? (Note: The video doesn't answer these questions explicitly, but this is a good place to stop and explain the importance of limiting bias. A biased poll will return biased results, defeating the whole purpose of the poll OR serving only the interests of the polling organization.)
 - Pause at 5:23 (the end): Explain why the election is the "perfect poll" according to the video.
- **After watching:** As a class or in small groups, students make a T-chart using information from the video, The Lowdown post and the NPR Fresh Air story (optional). Issues with current polling practices are discussed at the beginning of the Fresh Air interview (from the 0:11-5:30).

Factors of an accurate public opinion poll	Factors that prevent a poll from being accurate
<p>Example:</p> <p><i>A random and representative sample</i></p>	<p>Example:</p> <p><i>A sample that doesn't represent the poll's intended population.</i></p>

Discussion questions

- What are the most important factors to think about when constructing a public opinion poll? Explain your answer using evidence.
- What should voters always look for when reading a poll to be sure it is accurate?
- Name 1-2 groups of people who may be left out of opinion polls as they are currently conducted? What is a consequence of leaving these groups out of polls?
- Do you think polls have a positive, negative or neutral effect on the democratic process? Explain your answer using evidence.

Circle chats, small-group discussions and think-pair-share provide a safer space for students to practice speaking and listening, and also boost participation during whole-class discussions.

Extension activities

Explore Opinion Polls: Students explore a variety of polls or choose an issue to explore on the [Roper Center archives](#), the [Pew Research Center](#) or other non-partisan political research sites. Students can share their findings with the class using [piktochart](#), [plot.ly](#) or other free data display platforms. For classroom media-making tutorials, check out [KQED Teach](#).

Conduct your own class or school poll: Using the polling techniques discussed above (and avoiding the pitfalls), construct your own classroom poll designed to gauge student opinion on a community issue. A platform like [Slido](#) allows respondents to answer online, or have students ask a representative sample of students in person.

Common Core standards

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1	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.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7	Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.1	Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.
D3.His.12	Evaluate the credibility of a source by determining its relevance and intended use.