



Politics and society

The science of opinion polls

Lesson plan

Leaving certificate [Politics and Society](#): Objective 9 - “develop the capacity to analyse and interpret qualitative and quantitative social and political research data and to use such data carefully in forming opinions and coming to conclusions”.

This exercise would take three classes and ideally would include a double class.

Learning intentions

At the end of the lesson students will understand

- what people need to consider when evaluating public opinion polls
- how to examine how polling is conducted and analyse current polls
- how to develop political literacy

Co-curricular

English (social and media literacy)
Mathematics (ability to interpret and analyse data)

Resources

Film: We the Voters - The Poll
Dance

<https://vimeo.com/180771527>

Pew Research Center - Why 2016
election polls missed their mark

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfBAPn7-hDg>

Ted-Ed - Pros and cons of public
opinion polls

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=3&v=u_bR8rEqSZSU

DNews - What is the Science
Behind Polls?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LbzYKfUpG7o>



Introduction

Ask students either who their favourite musician is, or what their favourite food is. Write responses on the board and ask the class to vote on one. Ask them if they could expect to get the same result if they asked all the students in the school? Everyone in the province? The whole country? Let them know that they are going to take a deeper look at public opinion research and polling.

Show the film [We the Voters - The Poll Dance](#).

Discuss the film and clarify any misunderstandings or questions. Ask the class to come up with their understanding of a good opinion poll and identify the key characteristics or elements of a good opinion poll. They will return to this at the conclusion of the lesson.

Development

Explain that there are a number of theories on how opinion polls influence voter behaviour. The most popular is the **bandwagon** hypothesis which proposes that the predictions put pressure on some undecided voters to vote for the party/person that is expected to win. The **underdog** effect is also proposed. News that one party/person is ahead in the polls will encourage other people to vote for the weaker party. Ask the students what the implications are of these theories for opinion polls (design, accuracy, balance, reporting).

Show the Pew Research Center video [Why 2016 election polls missed their mark](#). Ask the class whether they think these theories/explanations might apply in Ireland.

Examine some recent opinion polls here in Ireland. Pick the three most recent polls reflecting the attitudes towards our political parties. Pick one from three different outlets: traditional print such as newspapers; media outlets such as TV and radio; and online sources such as websites. Ask the students to name three companies that conduct opinion polls. In groups, get the students to research how each of the companies carry out their research (when, how, for whom, numbers involved etc.). Get each group to report back and examine whether similarities exist between the methodologies. Then have a look at the Ted-Ed video [Pros and cons of public opinion polls](#).



Conclusion

Divide students into groups and tell them to imagine that they have just been hired to carry out an opinion poll for a media organisation. Their task is to create a hypothetical public opinion poll to survey attitudes of registered voters at a certain point in time towards the political parties or a specific issue such as reducing the voting age to 16. Pose the following questions to help groups determine their polling samples and method:

- Will you use a random sample of voters or some other kind of sample?
- What method will you use to poll your sample?
- Will voters be contacted via the telephone, the Internet, in person or by some other method?
- Are there drawbacks associated with any of these methods?

Remind students that their poll questions should be clear and unbiased, and should not be leading. Allow each group time to craft its questions. To assist each group in writing their questions, ask:

- What is it that your group is trying to determine?
- What questions will you ask?

Have each group write up its sampling, method and questions, and then exchange its poll with another group. Ask group members to analyse that poll using the following questions as a guide:

- Who is the sample for this poll?
- Is anyone left out who should be included?
- What method will be used to conduct this poll?
- Could this method or the sample affect the poll's results? Explain.
- Do any of the polling questions lead a respondent toward a specific answer?
- Are there any questions that are unclear or biased? If so, what changes would you suggest?
- Are there any events that could possibly influence the results of this poll? Explain.

Finally, have groups present their analyses of the polls to the class.

Conclude with a brief discussion about polls and the characteristics that make them useful in reflecting voter sentiment. Ask students to consider what questions an informed voter should ask when considering the results of a public opinion poll and have the class do this the next time they see an opinion poll or survey.

Finish with the DNews video [What is the Science Behind Polls?](#)