

Lesson Title: Polling Pitfalls

Subjects

History, U.S. Government, Civics

Suggested Time

One to two 50-minute class periods

Grade Level

7-12

Essential Question

What do people need to consider when evaluating public opinion polls?

Objective

To examine how polling is conducted and analyze current polls.

Overview

Polls inundate students on social media and in the news, particularly during election season. *The Poll Dance* will introduce students to important aspects of valid polling. After viewing *The Poll Dance*, students will examine important aspects of valid polling and evaluate three polls.

Materials

- *We The Voters* film “The Poll Dance”
- Copies of Student Handouts:
 - Handout #1: Viewing Guide
 - Handout #2: Polling Inquiry
 - Polling Report Website: <http://pollingreport.com/>
 - Handout #3: Political Polling in Past and Present (Extension Activity)

Procedure

Warm Up: Ask students either what their favorite musician is, or what their favorite candy is. Write responses down on the board and ask them to vote on one. Ask them if they can attribute the result of their vote to all students at the school? Throughout the state? Across the U.S.? Let them know that they are going to take a deeper look at public opinion research and polling.

Film Viewing: Have students view the *We The Voters* film “The Poll Dance.” You may wish for students to view it once, and then again a second time to complete Handout #1: Viewing Guide. Discuss what students just viewed and clarify any misunderstandings and/or questions.

[*Teacher's Note:* Review margin of error in polling, the fact that question wording and order can lead to push polls—analogueous to “leading the witness” in TV court dramas, and stress the idea that polling is a science with a need for random sampling as in science experiments.)

Polling Inquiry: Let the students know they are going to investigate the validity of polls using their new knowledge. Teachers may wish to let the students select a topic to examine or give a particular topic or options to the students to focus their Polling Inquiry.

[*Teacher's Note:* Voting Issues, President Obama, and Clinton vs Trump by the Issues are topics students are able to engage in easily.]

Have students complete Handout #2: Polling Inquiry independently or in pairs. Afterwards, drawing on recollection of “*The Poll Dance*” film and their completed handouts, have students write a reflection that includes an overall impression of public opinion polls and these particular results for the polls chosen. What are the advantages and disadvantages of polls? What do citizens need to consider when evaluating public opinion? Option B: Teachers may wish to conduct a discussion of the above-mentioned questions and discuss the poll topics selected. Do these polls contain proper polling techniques? Explain whether you feel these polls provide the public with accurate information.

Extension Activities

1. Have students select two or three organizations and track their election polling. Create a chart on the board and update as the election continues. Discuss what may account for the variation in the results as you track the results. After the election, discuss the elements of each poll and which method was most accurate. See FiveThirtyEight’s 2012 Polling Analysis (<http://fivethirtyeight.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/10/which-polls-fared-best-and-worst-in-the-2012-presidential-race/>) for inspiration.
2. Distribute copies of Handout #3: “Political Polling in Past and Present.” Separate the class into groups of four, with one member of each group assigned an election (1844, 1896, 1912, 1928) to read about and respond to. Give students 10 minutes for the individual readings, and five more minutes to share what they studied and decided with their group. Debrief all the elections as a class (10 minutes). You may want to reverse the imagination process and ask students to imagine the effects that would ensue in the Clinton and Trump campaigns if there were *no* political polling. (Would Clinton's health scare be pursued if polling didn't show that it was helpful to Trump? Would the Khan family have been featured so prominently in Clinton's political commercials if polling did not reveal that it made people angry at Trump?)

Additional Resources

- Gallup: Election 2016 http://www.gallup.com/topic/election_2016.aspx
- Pew Research Center U.S. Politics & Policy <http://www.people-press.org/>
- Quinnipiac University Polls <https://www.qu.edu/news-and-events/quinnipiac-university-poll/>
- FiveThirtyEight, “Which Polls Fared Best (and Worst) in the 2012 Presidential Race,” <http://fivethirtyeight.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/10/which-polls-fared-best-and-worst-in-the-2012-presidential-race/>
- Pew Research Center, “Flashpoints in Polling,” <http://www.pewresearch.org/2016/08/01/flashpoints-in-polling/>
This article includes an overview on current polling and challenges. Teachers may also wish to have students read this article or highlight key findings as needed.

Standards

Common Core State Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.7-12.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.7-12.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.7-12.3 Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.7-12.6 Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.7-12.7 Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.7-12.8 Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards

D2Civ.5.9-12 Evaluate citizens' and institutions' effectiveness in addressing social and political problems at the local, state, tribal, national, and/or international level.

D2Civ.9.9-12 Use appropriate deliberative processes in multiple settings.

D2Civ.14.9-12 Analyze historical, contemporary, and emerging means of changing societies, promoting the common good, and protecting rights.

National Standards for Civics and Government (Center for Civic Education)

Standard 11: Understands the role of diversity in American life and the importance of shared values, political beliefs, and civic beliefs in an increasingly diverse American society

Standard 19: Understands what is meant by “the public agenda,” how it is set, and how it is influenced by public opinion and the media.

Standard 20: Understands the role of political parties, campaigns, elections, and associations and groups in American politics.