

## **“Take 5” - 5 Things to Think About Before Taking Polling Information at Face Value**

During a major political contest like a presidential election, you may see lots of polling numbers and data while consuming the news. Before you accept polling information at face value - “Take 5”!

### 1) Who was surveyed?

Look to see which population was surveyed. Was it all adults or maybe a more specific population? In an election year, the population surveyed might be “registered voters” (people who are registered to vote) or “likely voters” (people who indicated a likeliness to vote in the upcoming election). These can be overlapping groups but are not the same!

### 2) When was the poll conducted?

Polls are a snapshot of how people feel at the time they were surveyed, so knowing when the poll was conducted is important context. Is it a recent poll or more outdated poll? Has any major event happened between when the poll was conducted and when you’re reading the information?

### 3) What's the margin of error?

The margin of error shows how precise the survey results are. Take the survey result and both add the margin of error to the result (getting a number that is larger than the result) and subtract the margin of error from the result (getting a number that is smaller than the result). This will give you a range. The truth is somewhere in this range. So if a poll says that a politician’s approval rating is 50% with a margin of error of +/- 3 percentage points, the true result is likely that 47-53% percent of people approve of the politician. Knowing the margin of error for a political poll is especially important because lots of polls coming out every day! The media may try to characterize a candidate’s polling results as showing a clear increase or decline in support, but if you take the margin of error into consideration, you can see if there has really been a noticeable change.

### 4) What are other polls saying?

Looking at other news sources and searching out additional polls can help provide context. A series of polls could help you understand trends, while reading from a variety of reputable news sources can give background on major events and the political landscape. Knowing more than just the polling numbers of one survey will help inform your understanding.

### 5) How are the survey questions worded?

The choice of words in survey questions is important. Consider whether the survey asks questions in a neutral manner or if they use specific buzzwords. A question that asks about “Obamacare” versus a question that asks about “The Affordable Care Act” could elicit very different responses.

Resources consulted:

<https://medium.com/pew-research-center-decoded/5-tips-for-writing-about-polls-9cb0596ff28>