

# **ESOMAR/WAPOR Guide to Opinion Polls including the ESOMAR International Code of Practice for the Publication of Public Opinion Poll Results**

## **1. Introduction to the Guide**

Public opinion polls are regularly conducted and published in many countries. They measure not only support for political parties and candidates, but also public opinion on a wide range of social and political issues. They are published frequently by a variety of print and broadcast media.

The public discussion of opinion polls is not always well informed. However, the case for restricting the publication of polls during election campaigns is hard to support with rational argument or empirical evidence. ESOMAR and WAPOR have produced the present booklet in order to help those interested in the subject of opinion polls to reach a more informed judgement about the value of such polls and the most appropriate ways of conducting and reporting them.

There are four sections in this booklet. First there is a statement on the role of opinion polls in democratic systems. ESOMAR and WAPOR's position on this issue is quite clear. We believe that there should be no restriction on the conduct or publication of opinion polls which have been carried out according to the ICC/ESOMAR International Code of Marketing and Social Research Practice and published according to the ESOMAR Code for the Publication of Opinion Poll Results. An ESOMAR Code of Conduct for the Publication of Opinion Polls has existed since 1983. This Code is adhered to by members of ESOMAR working in more than 100 countries around the world.

Second there is a section on frequently asked questions about how to judge the quality of an opinion poll. These questions are designed to help journalists, politicians, academics and other interested parties understand how to judge the quality of an opinion poll.

Third there is the ESOMAR Code of Practice for the Publication of Opinion Poll Results, followed by Notes on the application of the Code rules in practice.

Finally, there is a section which provides specific guidelines on the conduct of pre-election and exit polls. These guidelines are designed to help ensure that polls are carried out to high standards. They provide technical guidance to researchers and background information but they are not intended to be a "How to do it" manual. The subject of public opinion research and the measurement of voting intention continue to evolve and each election may bring new circumstances the researcher must address. The professional skills and previous experience of polling organisations are essential components of effective public opinion research. It is not possible to write them into guidelines or codes of practice.

## **2. Opinion Polls And Democracy**

Public opinion is a critical force in shaping and transforming society. Properly conducted and disseminated survey research gives the general public an opportunity for its voice to be heard. Through opinion research the public, politicians, the media and other interested groups have access to accurate measures of public attitudes and intentions.

“Scientific” polling is among the most successful political developments of the last century. Public opinion polls help guide policy by giving decision-makers impartial information about what the public wants. Polls also alert the public to their own hopes, desires, and political goals. They are mirrors, permitting individuals to understand where they fit into the political system. Media reports of the results of opinion polls tell readers and listeners that their opinions are important, and can even sometimes be more important than the opinions of the elite.

The democratic urge towards participation and the journalistic desire to ask questions have merged to create the extensive media polling of the last 70 years. Imagine a political system where the public is told what it thinks by its political leaders, where election winners have the ability to tell voters why they voted the way they did and where the government, when it looks for public input, asks only its friends what the public thinks. The alternative to properly conducted polls is a the public and a government exposed only to unscientific and probably inaccurate assertions about what people believe, in many cases presented by partisan individuals or organisations with a political agenda.

### **2.1 The value of polls**

Public opinion polling seems today like a fixture of politics in a democracy, sometimes helpful and sometimes annoying. But thanks to such polls, journalists can trace, step by step, the ups and downs of election campaigns and the rise and fall of rulers' popularity. Political scientists obtain from them unique information on the electoral choices of different groups of citizens and on the motivations which explain those choices. Sociologists can follow shifts of opinion on the major social problems and chart the evolution of values. Political leaders and their opponents can trace the movements in their relative support between elections, as well as the impact of important national or international events on the public. And citizens can now make themselves heard at all times and compare their own views with those of others.

In democracies, poll results are recognized and credible sources for journalists, who need those sources in order to have authority and detachment. Accurate reporting of polls in the news media keeps the government honest by not allowing misrepresentations of public opinion. When new nations join the ranks of democracies, polls soon appear. That is the case today in Eastern Europe, as it was yesterday in Latin America. Totalitarian regimes, even when they claim to have won 99% of votes in single list elections, have never risked allowing opinion polls to be conducted in which their citizens might be able to say whether they would prefer a freely chosen regime.

Indeed opinion polls and freedom cannot be separated since the relationship between the pollsters and the polled presupposes a climate of confidence. Published results become credible only when all opinions can be freely expressed, unpleasant as they might be to those in power.

Because opinion polls are so valuable in democracies, those who conduct and report them must be both transparent and accurate. They must disclose their methodology and provide realistic interpretations of data. The code of every national and international association of opinion researchers underscores the importance of responsible and unbiased reporting of poll results to the public interest.

## 2.2 The Polling Debate

Polls are part of the political process and subject to the same pressures as are communications by any other political players, candidates, advisers, consultants and other “experts.” Polls are loved and hated, used and abused, and (in part because of their precision) subject to attack.

Those same leaders who eagerly scrutinize the shifts in their popularity rating are sometimes uneasy about what they perceive as the dangerous “tyranny of polls” and claim to be concerned to protect voters from any risks of manipulation that might be attributable to opinion polls. In the last twenty years some countries have passed laws intended to regulate the practice of election polls. These laws generally lay down a pre-election period during which the publication of opinion polls is forbidden<sup>1</sup>. The justification proffered for such action is a supposed need to protect citizens against any excesses of information that might confuse them or interfere with their freedom of choice.

But this silence created by censorship can encourage manipulation by special interest groups even more than freely available and potentially contradictory information would have done. There is lively speculation on the stock exchange during the polling black-out period, as those with access to unpublished polls can secure an advantage over those kept in ignorance by the effects of the law. The 1992 French referendum on the Maastricht Treaty highlighted the dangers of two-speed access to information. Small investors were denied the right to monitor and consider the evolution of the views of the electorate, while large financial organisations commissioned daily private polls which enabled them to foresee the ups and downs of the European monetary system. This was an unforeseen result of the French law prohibiting the publication of poll results a week before the referendum. That law’s declared aim was “to protect the citizen against abuses and manipulations”.

It is said that voters need a “quiet period in which to reflect for a few days before casting their votes”. Yet no one seeks to ban politicians from expressing their opinions right up to an election or to ban the media from covering political issues or making assertions on the election outcome.

In fact, nobody knows the answer to the question: “which polls should I publish in order to favour the candidate of my choice?” Electoral choices are not mechanical affairs; the voter’s mind is not a computer into which you can input percentages and be sure to receive a given vote as output. There can be both “bandwagon” and “underdog” effects or even, most likely, no effect at all<sup>2</sup>. Few electors cast their vote merely on the strength of their knowledge of other people’s choices. Those who do may use the information from polls to vote tactically and even welcome knowledge of others’ preferences.

Voters have diverse reactions to a given opinion poll. Their conclusions are determined by the credibility of the source, their political sympathies, temperaments, and many other elements. Legislation to “protect” adult citizens is an insult to their ability to make their own decisions.

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<sup>1</sup> For a survey on current legislative restrictions see “The Freedom to Publish Opinion Poll Results – Report on a Worldwide Update”; Foundation for Information/ ESOMAR/WAPOR 2003

<sup>2</sup> For a summary of current knowledge see “Who’s Afraid of Election Polls – Normative and Empirical Arguments for the Freedom of Pre-Election Surveys”; Professor Wolfgang Donsbach, University of Dresden Germany; Foundation for Information/ ESOMAR/WAPOR 2001

A citizen's freedom of choice is better protected by freely available and competitive information than by some form of legal restriction. It is silence, not freedom, which lends itself to rumour and manipulation. Censorship creates two categories of citizens, those who are entitled to full information, (in this case through private polls conducted by those with the resources to do so - often including the legislators themselves), and those who are held to be too easily duped and who must be kept unaware of any changes in the public opinion of candidates toward the end of a campaign.

### **2.3 Exit Polls**

Exit polls are a specific application of opinion research on Election Day. They are polls which are used to provide a quick forecast of the outcome of an election, the description of the voters and their motives. They have become much more common as the media can confront politicians with the outcome of an election based on a fairly accurate prediction immediately after poll closing time. i.e. mostly during TV prime time. Because of their accuracy they may be used in new democracies as a way of spotting possible electoral malpractice and discouraging those who may be considering trying to cheat.

### **2.4 The right to freedom of expression**

The expression of the democratic right to conduct and publish polls freely is part of the modern democratic process. It allows citizens to make themselves heard. This right is upheld by Article 10 of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms which states

*“Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers.”*

The Council of Europe had no misconceptions on this point. In 1985 it approved the conclusions of a report on opinion polls on behalf of the Committee on Parliamentary and Public Relations, which stated that “the objective publication of genuine public opinion polls did not have a strong and discernable influence on the result ...”; “The Committee are not of the opinion that stronger controls are shown to be desirable or necessary ...”.

By explicit reference to the ICC/ESOMAR International Code, the Committee recommended that polling institutes should follow the existing Codes and that further restrictions on public opinion polls were both unnecessary and undesirable.

### **2.5 The Future**

The good news is that existing restrictions on public polls are severely threatened. The explosive growth of the internet has made it almost impossible to prevent the widespread publication of opinion polls to a worldwide audience – even when legislation prevents print and broadcast media from local publication. The World Wide Web will probably make future restrictions impossible to impose. The bad news is that this same freedom makes it possible for people to give widespread publicity to opinion polls which are biased, unrepresentative and misleading. The ESOMAR Code is therefore essential, to ensure that people can be confident that those who subscribe to it and observe it are doing their best to provide an accurate measurement of public opinion.

### **3. Frequently Asked Questions About Polls**

#### **1. What is an opinion poll?**

An opinion poll is a scientific and representative survey designed to measure the views of a specific group – for example a country’s electors (for most political polls) or parents or trade union members.

#### **2. What makes a survey “scientific”?**

The two main characteristics of scientific surveys are a) that respondents are chosen by the research organisation according to explicit criteria to ensure representativeness, rather than being self-selected, and b) that questions are worded in a balanced way. For example, if the population being sampled contains 52% who are women and 30% who are over 55, then a scientific opinion poll will represent those groups appropriately and the questions will be balanced and not lead the respondent towards a particular answer

#### **3. How does a poll choose a sample that is truly representative?**

There two main methods. The first is “random” sampling, the second “quota sampling”. With random sampling, a polling organisation either uses a list of randomly-drawn telephone numbers or email addresses (for telephone or some internet polls); or visits randomly-drawn addresses or names from a list such as an electoral register (for some face-to-face surveys). The polling organisation then contacts people on those telephone numbers or at those addresses, using a random selection procedure, and asks them to take part in the survey.

“Quota” sampling involves setting quota controls – for example, age and gender – and letting the interviewer seek out different people who, together, match those characteristics. Surveys based on quota sampling are often used in face-to-face surveys. In addition, some internet polls employ quota sampling to select representative samples from a database of people who have already provided such information about themselves. Quota sampling may be used, in otherwise randomly sampled telephone surveys, to select the person to be interviewed within the household, in order to speed up the fieldwork process.

#### **4. Do polling companies do anything else to achieve representative samples?**

Usually they do. While well-conducted random and quota samples provide a broad approximation to the public, there are all kinds of reasons why they might contain slightly too many of some groups and slightly too few of others. What normally happens is that polling companies ask respondents not only about their views but also about themselves. This information is then used to compare the sample with, for example, census statistics. The raw numbers from the poll may then be adjusted slightly, up or down, to match the profile of the population being surveyed. If, for example, a poll finds that, when its survey-work is complete, it has 100 members of a particular demographic group, but should have 110 of them (in a poll of, say, 1,000 or 2,000), then it will “weight” the answers of that group so that each of those 100 respondents counts as 1.1 people. This way, the published percentages should reflect the population as a whole.

#### **5. Are other kinds of surveys bound to be wrong?**

No. Just as a stopped clock tells the right time twice a day, unscientific surveys will occasionally produce right percentages. But they are far more likely to be badly wrong. The most common forms of unscientific surveys are phone-in polls conducted by television programmes and self-selecting surveys conducted over the internet. These contain two defects. First, their samples are self-selecting. Such polls tend to attract

people who feel passionately about the subject of the poll, rather than a representative sample. Second, such polls seldom collect the kind of extra information (such as gender and age) that would allow some judgement to be made about the nature of the sample.

**6. But surely a phone-in or write-in poll in which, say, one million people take part is likely to be more accurate than an opinion poll sample of 1,000?**

Not so. A biased sample is a biased sample, however large it is. One celebrated example of this was the US Presidential Election in 1936. A magazine, Literary Digest, sent out 10 million post cards asking people how they would vote, received almost 2.3 million back and said that Alfred Landon was leading Franklin Roosevelt by 57-43 per cent. The Digest did not gather information that would allow it to judge the quality of its sample and correct, or “weight”, groups that were under- or over-represented. Since the Literary Digest sent its postcards primarily to individuals with telephones and automobiles, their “sample” included few working class people. A young pollster called George Gallup employed a much smaller sample (though, at 50,000, it was much larger than those normally used today), but because he ensured that it was representative, he correctly showed Roosevelt on course to win by a landslide.

**7. How can you possibly tell what millions of people think by asking just 1,000 or 2,000 respondents?**

In much the same way that a chef can judge a large vat of soup by tasting just one spoonful. Providing that the soup has been well stirred, so that the spoonful is properly “representative”, one spoonful is sufficient. Polls operate on the same principle: achieving representative samples is broadly akin to stirring the soup. A non-scientific survey is like an unstirred vat of soup. A chef could drink a large amount from the top of the vat, and still obtain a misleading view if some of the ingredients have sunk to the bottom. Just as the trick in checking soup is to stir well, rather than to drink lots, so the essence of a scientific poll is to secure a representative sample, rather than a vast one.

**8. But isn't there some risk of sampling error in a poll of 1,000 or 2,000 people?**

Yes. Statistical theory allows us to estimate this. Imagine a country that divides exactly equally on some issue – 50% hold one view while the other 50% think the opposite. Statistical theory tells us that, in a random poll of 1,000 people, with a 100% response rate, then 19 times out of 20, a poll will be accurate to within 3 percentage points. In other words, it will record at least 47%, and no more than 53%, for each view. But there is a one in 20 chance that the poll will fall outside this range. With a sample of 2,000, the poll will be within 2 percentage points 19 times out of 20.

**9. You say those calculations apply to “a random poll with a 100% response rate”. Surely that's pie in the sky?**

Fair point. Many polls are non-random, and response rates are often very much lower – well below 50% in many countries for polls conducted over just a few days.

**10. So isn't the real margin of error much larger?**

Possibly – but possibly not. Here are two examples, at opposite extremes of this issue. Return to our example of an equally divided country. Suppose everyone who hold view A lives in the northern half of the country, while everyone who holds view B lives in the southern half. In that case, if pollsters ensure that half of each survey is conducted in the north, and half in the south, then their polls should be exactly accurate. Structuring polls in this kind of way is called “stratification”. Properly done, stratification can help to increase a poll's accuracy.

Now make a different assumption about our mythical, equally divided country. Suppose people who hold view A are far more likely to be members of a religious or ethnic minority who refuse to answer questions than people who hold view B. Unless the polling company is aware of this bias, and knows how big it is, it could well produce results showing that view A is far more popular than view B. This is an example of a systematic error.

To measure the “true” margin of error, we would need to take account of random sampling error, and the effects of stratification, and possible systematic errors. The trouble is that it is hard, and arguably impossible, to be sure of the true impact of stratification and systematic errors. (If the impact of all systematic errors were known, a competent survey company would adjust its results to compensate for them.)

**11. Doesn't this mean that polls can't really be trusted at all?**

No. Polls may not be perfect, but they are still the best way of measuring what the public thinks. In most countries where poll results can be compared with actual results (such as elections), well-designed polls are usually accurate to within 3 percentage points, even if they occasionally stray outside that margin of error. Moreover, much of the time, polls provide a good guide to the state of opinion, even allowing for a larger margin of error. If a well-designed, representative survey finds that the public divides 70-30% on an issue, then a margin of error of even 10 percentage points cannot alter the fact that one view is expressed far more widely than the other. However, it is true that in a closely-fought election, a polling lead (in a sample of 1-2,000) of less than 5 percentage points for one candidate or party over another cannot be regarded as a certain indicator of who was ahead at the time the survey was taken – let alone a guarantee of who will in the days, weeks or months ahead.

**12. Can I Trust an Internet Poll?**

The answer depends on the people being sampled and the answer is the same for telephone or face-to-face interviewing as well, not just the internet. If a representative sample of people can be reached by any of these interviewing modes, the answer is yes, the poll can be trusted. In some cases the coverage of the internet may be sufficiently high for internet interviewing to be a good, or even the best, way of carrying out surveys, but with the level of access to the internet still low and unrepresentative in most countries, internet polls of the general public should be treated with caution.

Internet surveys use panels of people who have given permission to be contacted for surveys. The ESOMAR Guideline on internet Access Panels provides help on how to assess the quality of an internet panel sample.

**13. I have seen polls conducted by different, well-regarded, companies on the same issue produce very different results. How come?**

There are a number of possible reasons, beyond those issues related to sampling error.

- a) The polls might have been conducted at different times, even if they are published at the same time. If the views of many people are fluid, and liable to change in response to events, then it might be that both polls were broadly right, and that the public mood shifted between the earlier and the later survey.
- b) The polls may have used different definitions of the group that they are representing (e.g. different age, regions, ethnic groups etc.)
- c) They might have been conducted using different methods. Results can be subject to “mode effects”: that is, some people might, consciously or sub-consciously, give different answers depending on whether they are asked questions in person by an interviewer, or impersonally in self-completion surveys sent by post or email/internet . There is some evidence that anonymous self-completion surveys may secure greater candour on some sensitive issues, than face-to-face or telephone surveys.
- d) The polls might have asked different questions. Wording matters, especially on subjects where many people do not have strong views. It is always worth checking the exact wording when polls appear to differ.
- e) There might be an “order effect”. One poll might ask a particular question “cold”, at the beginning of a survey; another poll might ask the same question “warm”, after a series of other questions on the same topic. Differences sometimes arise between the two sets of results, again when many people do not have strong views, and some people may give different answers depending on whether they are asked a question out of the blue or after being invited to consider some aspects of the issue first.

**14. Does the way the question is asked influence the answers?**

There is a great deal of knowledge about how questions should be worded, based on what we know about how people process information. But this is really a matter of common sense. It is important to look at the exact question which was asked and, if possible, to check the questions asked before it. Questions can contain concepts within them which lead the respondent in a certain direction e.g. “There seem to be fewer policemen on the streets and a lot of people around here are concerned about rising crime, do you think the police in this area are overstretched?” or questions which contain more than one concept but where only one answer is reported e.g. “How well is the city council dealing with traffic congestion and the lack of public transport?” reported as the level of concern with public transport. Questions like these will not provide clear or helpful answers about what people really think of the police or public transport.

The context in which questions are asked can obviously influence the way in which people respond. If a question about concern with crime is asked after a series of questions about whether people have ever felt nervous on public transport or have a relative or friend who has been mugged etc. it is likely that more people will say they are concerned than if this question had been asked before the others.



When using answers to questions like this, it is important to be aware that the questions were biased or ambiguous and therefore the answers cannot be an accurate reflection of what the people answering them really believe. This type of questioning is particularly popular with pressure groups who use them to try and get media coverage for their point of view. Responsible journalists and commentators should not report those polls, or they should draw attention to misleading questions when reporting the results of opinion polls.

**15. When I read or see a report of a poll, how can I tell whether to take it seriously or not?**

Check the following:

**a) Who conducted the poll?**

Was it a reputable, independent polling organisation? If not, then regard its findings with caution. If you are not sure, then one test is its willingness to answer the questions below. Reputable polling firms will provide you with the information you need to evaluate the survey.

**b) Who paid for the poll and why was it done?**

If it was conducted for a respected media outlet, or for independent researchers, there is a good chance it was conducted impartially. If it was conducted for a partisan client, such as a company, pressure group or political party, it might still be a good survey (although readers/listeners/viewers should be told who the client was). The validity of the poll depends on whether it was conducted by an organisation that used a scientific approach to sampling and questionnaire design, whether it asked impartial questions, and whether full information about the questions asked and results obtained are provided. If such information is provided, then the quality of the survey stands or falls according to its intrinsic merits. If such information is not provided, then the poll should be treated with caution. In either event, watch out for loaded questions and selective findings, designed to bolster the view of the client, rather than report public opinion fully and objectively.

**c) How many people were interviewed for the survey?**

The more people, the better – although a small-sample scientific survey is ALWAYS better than a large-sample self-selecting survey. Note, however, that the total sample size is not always the only relevant number. For example, voting intention surveys often show figures excluding “don’t knows”, respondents considered unlikely to vote, and those who refuse to disclose their preference. While excluding these groups ensures that, the poll reports the opinion of the most relevant group – “likely voters” -- reported voting-intention sample size may be significantly lower than the total sample, and the risk of sampling error therefore greater.

Likewise, be careful when comparing sub-groups – for example men and women. The sampling error for each sub-group could be significantly higher than for the sample as a whole. If the total sample is 500, and made up of equal numbers of men and women, the margin of error for each gender (counting only random sampling errors and disregarding any systematic errors) is around 6 percentage points

**d) How were those people chosen?**

Is it clear who is included in the sample and who was left out? If the poll claims to represent the public as a whole (or a significant group of the public), has the polling company employed one of the methods outlined in points 2,3 and 4 above? If the poll was self-selecting – such as readers of a newspaper or magazine, or television viewers writing, telephoning, emailing or texting in – then it should NEVER be presented as a representative survey. If the poll was conducted in certain locations but not others, for example, cities but not rural areas, then this information should be made clear in any report.

**e) When was the poll done?**

Events have a dramatic impact on poll results. The interpretation of a poll should depend on when it was conducted relative to key events. Even the freshest poll results can be overtaken by events. Poll results that are several weeks or months old may be perfectly valid, for example, if they concern underlying cultural attitudes or behaviour rather than topical events, but the date when the poll was conducted (as distinct from published) should always be disclosed. The date of the fieldwork is particularly important for pre-election polls where voting intention can change right up to the moment the voter records their vote.

**f) How were the interviews conducted?**

There are four main methods: in person, by telephone, online or by mail. Each method has its strengths and weaknesses. Telephone surveys do not reach those who do not have telephones. Email surveys reach only those people with internet access. All methods depend on the availability and voluntary co-operation of the respondents approached; response rates can vary widely. In all cases, reputable companies have developed statistical techniques to address these issues and convert their raw data into representative results (see points 3 and 4 above).

**g) What were people asked?**

Try to get a copy of the full questionnaire, not just the published questions. A reputable organisation will publish the questionnaire on its website, or provide it on request. Decide if the questions were balanced and be cautious about the results if the interview was structured in a way which seemed to lead the respondent towards a particular conclusion.

**h) Are the results in line with other polls?**

If it is possible, check other polls to see if the results are similar or very different. Surveys aiming to cover the same topic should come to similar conclusions. If the answers are very different, the reasons may become apparent when the questionnaire or the sampling method is examined.

**i) Was it a "push poll?"**

The purpose of "push polls" is to spread rumours and even outright lies about opponents. These efforts are not polls, but political manipulation trying to hide behind the smokescreen of a public opinion survey. In a "push poll," a large number of people are called by telephone and asked to participate in a purported survey. The survey "questions" are really thinly-veiled accusations against an opponent or repetitions of rumours about a candidate's personal or professional behaviour. The focus here is on making certain the respondent hears and understands the accusation in the question, not in gathering the respondent's opinions. "Push polls" have no connection with genuine opinion surveys. The best way to guard against "push polls" is to find out who conducted the survey. Reputable companies have nothing to do with "push polls", a phenomenon that has grown in recent years in a number of countries.

**j) Was it a valid exit poll?**

This question applies only at elections. Exit polls, properly conducted, are an excellent source of information about voters in a given election. They are the only opportunity to survey actual voters and only voters. They are generally conducted immediately after people have voted, and are therefore able (in theory) to report actual behaviour. Pre-election surveys, even those conducted the day before the vote, cannot entirely avoid the danger that some people may change their mind, about whether to vote or which party/candidate to support, at the very last minute.

Properly conducted, they are an excellent source of information about voters in a given election. In addition to answering the question “Who won?” they provide information to answer the questions: Who voted for the winner and why did candidate/party (a) or candidate /party (b) win?. Exit polls are characterised by an elaborate design and a much higher number of interviews than pre-election polls; often tens of thousands and, in some countries, hundreds of thousands are interviewed.

Exit polls have four distinct sources of error, apart from pure random error:

- a. Supporters of one candidate/party may be more willing to disclose their vote than supporters of another.
- b. Some people may genuinely have thought they voted for a particular candidate/party, but may inadvertently have voted for someone else, or spoiled their ballot paper or (when using voting machines) not have completed the process properly.
- c. Exit polls may not have been conducted on an absolutely representative group of polling stations. Even if the total sample is very large – say, 5,000 or more – it may suffer from an effect known as “clustering”. If, say, 50 polling stations are selected, and 100 voters questioned at each, the figures could be wrong if the overall political balance of those 50 polling districts is even slightly askew.
- d. There may be operational difficulties in sampling voters accurately at polling places – either because of interference by local election officials or because of legal restrictions on where interviewers may stand.

Reputable polling organisations go to considerable lengths to avoid these problems. Other organisations may conduct exit polls in a minimal number of voting locations using interviewers who do not have experience or specialist training in this method of polling.

## **4. The ESOMAR International Code of Practice for the Publication of Public Opinion Poll\* Results**

### **4.1 Introduction to the Code**

Public opinion research - the study of people's attitudes and beliefs about political, social and other issues - forms a part of the total marketing and social research field. It is subject to exactly the same professional and ethical requirements as other forms of survey research. These requirements are set out in the ICC/ESOMAR International Code of Marketing and Social Research Practice, including the responsibility to preserve respondents' anonymity.

However, public opinion research tends to be a specially 'sensitive' area. It deals with issues which arouse greater public interest and emotion than do most commercial market research projects. In addition, its findings are much more widely published and debated, and may sometimes be presented in a provocative or even tendentious way. ESOMAR has therefore set out specific recommendations about the publication of such research.

Opinion polls have a valuable role to play in present-day society. It is desirable that the general public, politicians, the media and other interested groups should through research have access to accurate and unbiased measures of public attitudes and intentions. The alternative is that the public is exposed only to unscientific and probably inaccurate assertions about the situation, in many cases presented by individuals or organisations who have an insufficient understanding of the nature of the information they are using or who take an extremely partisan approach to presenting the facts. The objective of this Code is to reduce the risk of the public being misled by research which is inadequate or badly presented.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has examined this ESOMAR Code for the Publication of Opinion Polls and has given the Code its blessing. The Council of Europe has recommended the widespread application of this Code to govern the publication of polls.

The validity and value of public opinion polls depend on three main considerations:

- (i) the nature of the research techniques used and the efficiency with which they are applied,
- (ii) the honesty and objectivity of the research organisation carrying out the study,
- (iii) the way in which the findings are presented and the uses to which they are put.

This Code concentrates primarily on the second and third of these issues. Guidelines on techniques and the conduct of opinion polls, and pre-election in particular, are given in the next section.

Major problems can arise when opinion poll findings are published and debated. It would clearly be unrealistic, and unreasonable, to expect the media to quote the full technical background of a survey when presenting its findings: they have limitations of space and must also hold the interest of their audience. However, there is certain basic information which must be provided if that audience is to have the opportunity of judging for itself the evidence presented and deciding whether or not it agrees with any conclusions drawn from the research. This Code is primarily concerned with trying to ensure that the public has reasonable access to this key information about the survey, and that published reports of the findings are not misleading. The Code tries to strike a realistic balance between what would be theoretically

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\* "Opinion poll" is generally held to include all surveys of public opinion which are published to the general public.

desirable and what is practicable.

All reputable research organisations apply the appropriate scientific methods and operate with professional objectivity. In doing so they conform to the ICC/ESOMAR International Code of Marketing and Social Research Practice. There is also general agreement among them on the principles which should underlie the publication of research results. However, normal professional practice varies between countries in some respects and in certain countries additional information to that specified in this Code will also customarily be provided as part of the standard key material.

Research organisations have a particular responsibility in the field of public opinion polls, to make sure that both the client and the public have a reasonable understanding of the special problems and limitations involved in measuring attitudes and beliefs as distinct from behaviour. Such research frequently deals with complex and sensitive issues about which respondents have varying degrees of knowledge and interest, and where their views may often be half-formed, confused and inconsistent. High professional integrity and skill is essential if the research itself is to be unbiased and meaningful, and if the findings are to be presented and interpreted clearly and accurately. It is important also that the research budget available is sufficient to carry out a valid study. ESOMAR fully recognises that such considerations are vital if public opinion polls are to merit public confidence and support.

Finally, if as a result of past experience, a research organisation has reason to believe that a particular client will not fairly present opinion poll results in his published version of the findings, the research organisation has a responsibility to stop carrying out polls for publication by that client.

## **4.2 The Code**

### **A. Basic Requirements of the ICC/ESOMAR International Code of Marketing and Social Research Practice\***

#### **Article 1**

All research organisations which conduct public opinion polls **must conform** to the ICC/ESOMAR International Code of Marketing and Social Research Practice. Particular attention is drawn to the requirements of Rule 15 (concerning the clear separation of research from non-research activities), Rules 14 and 27 (concerning misleading reporting), Rules 25 and 26 (concerning preparation of reports) and Rule 29 (concerning making the client aware of the ESOMAR Code). The Rules are reproduced in section 4.3 of this document.

#### **Article 2**

It is important to distinguish between the requirements which apply to the reporting of public opinion poll results by a research organisation to its original client, and those which apply to the subsequent publishing of any poll findings by that client to a wider audience. The first of these situations is largely covered by the Notes on the application of Rule 25 of the existing International Code which specifies reporting requirements in detail. This supplementary Code is intended to clarify certain additional requirements which arise in connection with the wider publication of the findings, and therefore applies especially to the second situation.

### **B. Additional Requirements For Public Opinion Polls**

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\* These Code articles may be read in conjunction with the Notes on Interpretation in Section 4.4 which answer questions about their application in practice.

### Article 3

When any public opinion poll findings are published in **print media** these should always be accompanied by a clear statement of:

- (a) the **name of the research organisation** carrying out the survey;
- (b) the **universe** effectively represented (i.e. who was interviewed);
- (c) the **achieved sample size** and its **geographical coverage**;
- (d) the **dates of fieldwork**;
- (e) the **sampling method** used (and in the case of random samples, the success rate achieved);
- (f) the **method by which the information was collected** (personal or telephone interview, etc.);
- (g) the relevant **questions asked**. In order to avoid possible ambiguity the actual wording of the question should be given unless this is a standard question already familiar to the audience or it is given in a previous published report to which reference is made.

### Article 4

In the case of **broadcast media** it may not be possible always to give information on all these points. As a minimum, points (a) through (d) above should normally be covered in any broadcast reference to the findings of a public opinion poll, preferably in visual (written) form where practical.

### Article 5

**The percentages of respondents who give 'don't know' answers** (and in the case of voting-intention studies, **of those who say they will not vote**) must always be given where they are likely to significantly affect the interpretation of the findings. When comparing the findings from different surveys, any changes (other than minor ones) in these percentages must also be indicated.

### Article 6

In the case of voting-intention surveys, it must always be made clear **if voting-intention percentages quoted include any of these respondents who answered 'don't know' or may not/will not vote'** in reply to the voting questions asked.

### Article 7

Whatever information may be given in the published report of the survey, the publisher and/or the research organisation involved must be prepared on request to supply the other information about the survey methods described in the Notes on the application of Rule 25 of the International Code. Where the questions reported on have formed part of a more extensive or omnibus' survey, this must be made clear to any enquirer.

## C. Arrangements between the Research Organisation and its Client

### Article 8

In order to ensure that these Code requirements are followed, and to avoid possible misunderstandings, the research organisation must make clear in advance to its client:

- (i) that the research organisation itself is bound by the requirements of the general International Code.
- (ii) that subsequent wider publication of the research findings should be in accordance with this supplementary Code.

It is therefore the responsibility of the research organisation to draw its client's attention to the

present Code on Publication of Results and to use its best endeavours to persuade the client to follow the Code's requirements.

#### **Article 9**

**The research organisation and the client each have a responsibility in the public interest to ensure that the published report on a public opinion poll does not misrepresent or distort the survey data.** For example, misleading comments based on non-significant differences must be avoided. Special care must be taken to ensure that any graphs or charts used do not convey a misleading impression of the current survey's results or of trends over time. It is also important that the reader or listener should be able clearly to distinguish between the survey findings as such and any editorial or other comments based upon them. Particularly in the case of print reports, the research organisation must wherever feasible approve in advance the exact form and content of publication as required in Rule 27 of the ICC/ESOMAR Code.

#### **Article 10**

The research organisation cannot normally be held responsible for any subsequent use made of public opinion poll results by people other than the original client. It should however be ready to issue immediately such comments or information as may be necessary to correct any cases of misreporting or misuse of results when these are brought to its attention.

#### **Article 11**

In the event that a client releases data from a survey which was not originally intended for publication, this Code of Conduct will apply to it as if it had originally been commissioned for publication.

### **4.3 ICC/ESOMAR International Code of Marketing and Social Research Practice**

While all Rules of the ICC/ESOMAR Code apply to public opinion polls, the following Rules have special significance in connection with opinion polling. A full explanation of the application of these Rules is given in the "Notes to Interpreting the ICC/ESOMAR Code and Annexe to the Notes". The Notes to the Polling Code in the following section provide additional clarification for published polls and are paramount when establishing the interpretation of the rules for published polls.

#### **ICC/ESOMAR Code - Rule 14**

Researchers must not knowingly allow the dissemination of conclusions from a marketing research project which are not adequately supported by the data. They must always be prepared to make available the technical information necessary to assess the validity of any published findings.

#### **ICC/ESOMAR Code - Rule 15**

When acting in their capacity as Researchers the latter must not undertake any non-research activities, for example database marketing involving data about individuals which will be used for direct marketing and promotional activities. Any such non-research activities must always, in the way they are organised and carried out, be clearly differentiated from marketing research activities.

#### **ICC/ESOMAR Code - Rule 25**

The Researcher must provide the Client with all appropriate technical details of any research project carried out for that Client.

#### **ICC/ESOMAR Code - Rule 26**

When reporting on the results of a marketing research project the Researcher must make

a clear distinction between the findings as such, the Researcher's interpretation of these and any recommendations based on them.

#### **ICC/ESOMAR Code - Rule 27**

Where any of the findings of a research project are published by the Client the latter has a responsibility to ensure that these are not misleading. The Researcher must be consulted and agree in advance the form and content of publication, and must take action to correct any misleading statements about the research and its findings.

#### **ICC/ESOMAR Code - Rule 29**

Researchers must ensure that Clients are aware of the existence of this Code and of the need to comply with its requirements.

### **4.4 Notes on the Interpretation of the International Code of Practice for the Publication of Public Opinion Poll Results**

These Notes on the Interpretation of the Code for the Publication of Opinion Polls are designed to answer some of the questions and problems which inevitably arise when working with the Code in practice.

#### **4.4.1 General principles**

1. ESOMAR will regularly review any problems which individuals and organisations encounter with the Code in practice. If experience suggests that it would be sensible and justified to do so, some of the recommendations may then be amended in the light of this experience.
2. Membership of ESOMAR - and therefore the primary responsibility for following the Code - is an individual one. However, ESOMAR would expect organisations associated with the Society through individual membership equally to do their best to ensure that the Code is followed, and will fully support such efforts.
3. Many research organisations already exercise strong control over the way in which their research findings are publicly reported through the form of contract they have with their clients. This is a desirable safeguard which is referred to again later in these Notes.
4. Where individual members - and their organisation - are involved with a study purely as a sub-contractor (for example, for the fieldwork) their responsibilities must relate primarily to this more limited aspect of the **total** study. The key requirements here are covered by the main International Code. At the same time, members would naturally be expected to use their influence as far as possible to ensure that the total study is handled in a way which conforms with the recommendations in this supplementary Code - for example, by obtaining an assurance beforehand to this effect. If the sponsoring organisation for whom they carry out such sub-contracting work repeatedly breaches the spirit of the Code, they must very seriously consider whether or not they are justified in carrying out further work for such a sponsor (please note the comments on the final paragraph of the Code's Introduction in the next section).

#### **4.4.2 Specific issues**



### **Code Introduction final paragraph**

There are liable to be occasions on which, despite the researcher's "best endeavours", the detailed recommendations of this Code are not completely met by a given report on a public opinion poll. ESOMAR continues to strive for full conformity with the recommendations; but the sanction recommended in the final paragraph of the Introduction is intended to apply mainly to the case of **repeated misinterpretation**, not to more limited "technical" short-comings in the published reports.

Where there are expected to be problems about the way in which journalists or others interpret polls, or where a poll is likely to be picked up by media other than the original client, it is recommended that the research agency prepares a summary of the key conclusions for the client and publishes them on its website. This enables interested people to check the findings of the survey if they are concerned that the media presentation may be biased or partial. Simply publishing the data without explanation will not be sufficient in any but the simplest surveys. A joint press release could serve the same purpose. Such a summary may also provide the researcher with a defence against unjustified claims of unprofessional behaviour where their findings have been misrepresented by others.

Cases where recommendations included in this Code appear to be contravened may sometimes be handled at national level under a local Code or legislation. Whether or not this happens, the ESOMAR Secretariat should be informed, especially if the problem involves a member of the Society. In the latter cases the Society may offer advice about avoiding such difficulties in the future. If it appears that a member has seriously failed to uphold the spirit of this Code, the ESOMAR Professional Standards Committee will consider whether the case merits some form of disciplinary action. Any action would be taken only after the member involved has been given a full opportunity of showing whether or not he had in practice fully used his best endeavours to follow the Code (see ESOMAR's Disciplinary Procedures). ESOMAR's primary concern is to encourage and support its members in trying to establish more general conformity to the Code's recommendations, and trusts that this will normally be achieved by discussion and agreement with the parties concerned.

### **Article 3**

Experience in certain countries demonstrates that, even without the backing of legislation it is quite possible in practice for published reports on polls to include all, or virtually all, of the information listed.

Any recommendations for a standard format must take account of the different styles, layouts, etc., of widely varying types of publication. One example of a suitable form of wording would be:

"This survey was carried out by ABC Research, on behalf of Intergalactic News Inc., using a national quota sample of 1111 adults of voting age personally interviewed in 102 locations between 1st-5th March 2005."

Another alternative is to use a 'data box' of the kind:

"Survey carried out by XYZ Research, on behalf of Intergalactic News Inc. National survey of 1234 adults aged 18 and above, interviewed by telephone between 25th-28th February 2005 in 86 locations. Random sample (effective interviews = 76% of those eligible for interview)"
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There are certain specific situations in which it is clearly difficult to follow all the

recommendations listed:

- (i) where the survey reported on is **very extensive and complex** and where the media report can therefore provide only a relatively brief overview of the total survey
- (ii) where an article summarises the results of a **number** of surveys, when again it would be too complicated to give all the key information for each of the surveys referred to.

The advent of the internet makes it possible to publish a considerable amount of information about a survey, including details of sampling, weighting and questionnaire which might be difficult to provide in the original publication or broadcast. ESOMAR requires that the survey company publishes full details of all public polls on a website and requests that the website's address is given to the public by the media, so that people can check details if they wish to. This data should be placed on the website as soon as possible after publication. In the case of pre-election polls the data should be made available within 24 hours of publication of the poll findings.

On specific points in this Article:

- (3c) "achieved" sample size is the number of interviews actually reported on. "Geographical coverage" should state which broad regions of the country (national or other) were represented. In addition, in the case of face to face interviewing, the number of sampling locations used should be given as an indication of the adequacy of the sample design. In referring to the number of "locations" the objective is to provide a realistic picture of the extent to which the sample is widely distributed geographically. The best terms to use would vary by country - for example "Départements" might be best in France, "Parliamentary Constituencies" in the U.K.
- (3e) it is important for the reader to be given some general indication of the sampling approach used since this may in certain cases have very strong implications for the likely representativeness of the sample. The information it is possible to include in a published report cannot hope to give all the relevant data for a technical assessment; but even a limited reference can be helpful. In the case of random sampling, the main objective is to identify those studies where an **unusually low** success rate has been achieved, for whatever reasons. The research company should be prepared to supply more detailed information on the quality of the sample, either by publication on its website, or in response to a specific request.
- (3g) the guiding principle is the need to avoid possible ambiguity and misunderstanding. This is particularly important where the actual wording of the question is critical to the interpretation of the findings, and where the answers reported on can be affected by the precise form of the question - especially on issues which are politically or socially 'sensitive' (for example, attitudes towards abortion). The reader should therefore be helped to understand exactly what was asked. In some cases this will be sufficiently clear from the text itself and the actual answers reported; but in any case of possible doubt it is much more preferable to include the question wording used. Certainly where tabular data is given it is good practice to include the full question wording. Experience shows that it is in practice often possible to include the questions without overloading the published report. Where the company is able to publish information on its website, the full question should be made available, together with, as a minimum, the answers for the weighted sample in total. These answers should include "Don't know and non-response"

As a general principle it is also good practice to indicate if the results quoted have been adjusted to take account of weighting procedures or other statistical calculations,

wherever these are likely to mean that the findings reported differ substantially from the raw data collected in the field. (This recommendation is especially relevant in the case of **non-standard** weightings - i.e. other than conventional sample design weighting procedures such as normal weighting by area and similar generally-accepted procedures.)

#### **Article 4**

In the case of broadcast media, where the scope for providing basic information about a survey is clearly more restricted, ESOMAR requires research organisations to arrange with their client to provide a press release at the same time as the broadcast report on a survey, or to provide information on a the broadcaster's website, or one linked to it, covering **all** the basic pieces of information referred to in Article B3.

#### **Article 5**

There are many occasions on which the interpretation of particular findings will be quite different if the level of "don't know" answers is 5% or 50%. In the case of voting-intention studies the same consideration also applies to "will not vote" answers. A research organisation must apply its experience and professional judgement in deciding when such situations arise. It may not be necessary to include all the "don't know" percentages in any tables given, although where this is possible it is frequently the best way of dealing with the issue. It may be quite sufficient, for example, to make a general comment such as: "the proportion of 'don't knows' was never higher than 5%" - or to comment specifically on those instances where the proportion was much higher. (In the case of voting-intention studies, it is **not** necessary to quote "will not vote" percentages separately from "don't know" answers, if by quoting them separately a false idea of likely voting turnout may be given.)

#### **Article 6**

Where a voting-intention study is one of a **series** carried out by a research organisation, and follows the normal standard calculation practices for that organisation, it may not be necessary to refer to this point in every report. However, confusion has been caused on occasions because of the differing practices of different organisations and it is desirable to avoid this problem arising. It must in any case be made easy for enquirers to check what is the practice involved, a website release being the most straightforward solution.

#### **Article 7**

Research organisations must be prepared to supply the basic information about the survey methods used according to the Notes on the application of Rule 25 of the main International Code. There is no obligation under either Code for further information **beyond** this to be supplied - although organisations will normally be prepared to discuss their research methods in more detail with bona fide enquirers.

#### **Article 9**

In preparing material for publication, journalists and others connected with the media themselves normally follow professional codes of practice and ethics concerned to uphold the public interest. The present Code is not intended in any way to substitute for these but rather to support them. (In this context, "published report" covers non-print as well as print media.)

The research institute should reserve the right to publish the total study and not only the technical specifications in the event of:

- a shortened version of the publication distorting the results
- an unforeseen and abridged version of the publication
- a publication which does not conform to the prior agreements

The fourth sentence of this Article emphasises the importance of distinguishing as far as possible between the figures which emerge directly from the questions asked, and any

commentary/interpretation based on these. Although the dividing line is not always a simple one to define, in most cases the distinction between “fact” and “comment” is in practice a workable one.

In order to avoid misunderstandings over the interpretation of survey results, researchers preparing questionnaires for public polls must take special care to avoid questions which are ambiguous or lead respondents towards a particular answer.

#### **4.4.3 Contractual arrangements**

ESOMAR encourages the use of contracts between research organisations and their clients to cover certain of the points dealt with in this Code. For example, some contracts stipulate that the agency has the right to examine and approve copy based on its research. Where the agency reserves the copyright of the findings this can also help to reduce some of the problems involved in unscrupulous “secondary reporting” of the findings by other people. In addition to any other requirements it is suggested that such a contract could usefully cover:

1. clarification of the point that the contract binds **both** the client and the media involved, where these are different parties
2. some measure of control by the research organisation over the published form of the results including figures and graphs
3. the option that, if research findings commissioned for publication are not in fact published, such findings can subsequently (after a specified period of time) be released by the research organisation itself; or alternatively the organisation is free to repeat the survey for another client.

It is also increasingly common practice in certain countries for data from public opinion surveys to be lodged with appropriate archives for subsequent secondary research by academic researchers and others. Such steps can help to reduce the danger that polls may be thought sometimes to be used in a ‘manipulative’ way by less scrupulous clients.

#### **4.4.4 Summary**

Any code of practice in this area has obvious limitations, in that researchers can exercise only restricted control over how their results are presented in the media, and still less influence over any comments and interpretations (sometimes misguided and tendentious) based on the findings. A code must therefore depend on trying to spread the use of ‘best practice’ and to influence media clients to avoid misleading presentation of survey results.

ESOMAR expects its members to follow the Code with this objective firmly in mind.

## **5. Guidelines on Practical Aspects of Conducting Pre-Election and Exit Polls**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The following guidelines concentrate on the conduct of the pre-election polls. At first it may seem strange to concentrate the guidelines on pre-election polls since they are just one particular type of opinion poll. However, while it is true that all opinion polls require high technical standards, it is pre-election polls that feature most frequently in the debate about polls, and which are restricted in some countries. These guidelines have two main objectives - to protect the interests of the voter in a democracy and to protect the credibility of market and opinion research.

#### **5.1.1 Protecting the interests of the voter in a democracy**

The first objective of these guidelines is to ensure that polling organisations take all possible technical steps to ensure that polls published close to the vital decision point for voters are an objective guide to the state of public opinion and voting intentions. The process of sampling alone cannot guarantee highly precise measurement by every single poll. Also, the measurement of stated intentions to vote cannot guarantee that all persons will actually vote in line with their earlier stated voting intentions. People do change their mind, some even in the second before marking their vote on the ballot slip. Polling organisations have a responsibility to voters to ensure that polls, especially those polls published in the last few days of an election campaign, provide reliable and objective information.

#### **5.1.2 Protecting The Reputation Of Market Research**

The second objective of these guidelines is to protect the public reputation of market research using sample surveys. Pre-election opinion polls which are published in the final days of an election campaign have a major influence on this. They are inevitably seen as predictions of the election result. While it is true that opinion polls are a snapshot of intentions at a specific point of time, the publication of this snapshot in the very late stages of a campaign is almost universally treated by the media as a prediction. In general, pollsters have not effectively challenged this use of polling data, partly because the track record of the polls in "predicting" the result is good.

Pre-election polls are a very public test of sampling theory and survey research in action. Polls have a good track record for accuracy but the occasional poll which appears to be wrong gets extensive media coverage. "Polls wrong" is news and gets major coverage. "Polls accurate" is a headline which will never be written. Special care must be taken by polling organisations to minimise the risk of "getting it wrong".

In some countries where the publication of polls in the final stages of a campaign is restricted, polls based on national samples are often conducted on polling day, or the day before, for publication within minutes of the close of the polling stations. Carrying out exit polls (interviewing voters as they leave the polling station) has become much more common. Such polls are even more likely to be seen as prediction polls. Their accuracy is equally important to the public image of market research. It is important that polls of this type are published responsibly.

## 5.2 The Guidelines

In the following sections a number of critical technical issues about the conduct of pre-election opinion polls are considered and a guide to good practice is given. The order of the issues is not intended to indicate relative importance or priority.

### 5.2.1 Timing of Fieldwork

Regardless of when the interviewing took place, the publication date is the important fact in judging the contribution of the poll to the electoral process.

Polling organisations must be responsible for ensuring that polls published in the very late stages of an election are likely to be a fair representation of public opinion as close as possible to the end of the campaign.

**Guideline** Polling companies should try to reduce the risk of “getting it wrong” by minimising the time elapsed between fieldwork and publication. A poll is more likely to achieve a good representative sample if the fieldwork period includes a spread of interviewing times so that people in full-time employment are available for interview.

### 5.2.2 Sample Size

Polling organisations frequently represent the margin of error of their polls as  $\pm 3$  percentage points. This may be accurate for a single party but is rarely accurate for what has become the key media figure - the gap between leading parties. A poll that produces a 95% confidence limit of  $\pm 3$  percentage points on the share for one of the leading parties, could produce an equivalent confidence limit as high as  $\pm 5.7$  percentage points on the gap between the two leading parties.

**Guideline** Pre-election polls should not have a sample of less than 1,000 respondents. In circumstances where the gap between leading parties is expected to be small, the sample size should be larger and samples of 1,500 to 2,000, or more, should be used.

### 5.2.3 Sample Distribution

When interviewing face to face, there are two main approaches to selecting samples for face to face interviews.

#### Method 1

Select sampling points in proportion to the number of voters. Then, in each selected area take an equal number of interviews. The rule for samples using this methodology should be to **maximise** the number of sampling points and **minimise** the number of interviews conducted at any one sampling point. This implies minimising the number of interviews conducted by any single interviewer.

#### Method 2

Select sampling points with equal probability but then to take a different number of interviews in each area determined by the size of the electorate in the area.

**Guideline** For both methods, the sample design should give priority to maximising the number of sampling points and minimising the number of interviews conducted by each interviewer. This information should be available to be interested parties;.. e.g. by providing it together with other details about the survey on a website.

## 5.2.4 Telephone Interviewing

In principle telephone surveys offer high quality, unclustered, random samples, with fast completion of fieldwork. However, in many countries, telephone ownership is not 100%. Telephone ownership or availability is frequently correlated with voting intention, i.e. those who cannot be contacted by phone are more likely to support one rather than another of the parties in the election. This may also be the case for those telephone owners who are not listed in the telephone directory which is why random digit dialling is to be preferred. In populations with high ownership of mobile telephones, it will also be necessary to find a satisfactory way to sample mobile telephone owners who do not have a landline.

**Guideline** If telephone ownership is not well distributed across the population and a sample of telephone owners is therefore unlikely to be representative, this method of interview should not be used for pre-election polls, or may need to be supplemented with face to face interviews. If telephone samples are used for polls, the polling organisation must correct for any under-representation of supporters of particular political parties. Simple demographic profile adjustments will generally not be adequate. The organisation should provide information about sample coverage and the weighting variables used to correct the data.

## 5.2.5 Internet Interviewing

Internet surveys are increasingly being used for opinion polls. As with telephone, its viability as a method of carrying out pre election polls depends to a large extent on the accessibility of a representative sample via the internet . Given the spread of the internet, there are a number of countries where this can be done, if care is taken to include people who do not have the possibility to use the Internet at home, but connect to the internet at work or in some other place. The ESOMAR Guideline on Research Using the internet contains additional guidance on requirements including on the use of access panels.

**Guideline:** This method should not be used for pre election polling without evidence that a representative sample of electors can be contacted via the internet. As with telephone surveys, the polling organisation must correct for any under-representation. Simple demographic profile adjustments will generally not be adequate. The organisation should provide information about sample coverage and the weighting variables used to correct the data.

## 5.2.6 Weighting

In order to conduct fast surveys with large samples, most pre-election opinion polls based on face to face interviews will use quota sampling methods at the local level. The application of simple demographic weights to ensure an accurate sample balance is normal good practice. If some parts of the electorate have been deliberately over-sampled, weighting should be used to re-establish the correct balance. With telephone and internet approaches, corrective weighting will almost always have to be applied since it is very unlikely that everyone has equal access to telephones or the internet.

**Guideline** The demographic profile of pre-election polls should be checked for representativeness and, if necessary, weighting should be applied to represent correctly the electorate. Polling companies should ensure that the population profile used will adequately represent those eligible to vote rather than the more normal all adults profile used in commercial market research. The organisation should provide information about the variables used in the weighting as part of the full details of the survey published on a website but, in any case, make this available for people who enquire.

## 5.2.7 Adjustments

In some circumstances polling organisations may feel that the result of their pre-election poll is not an accurate guide to the likely outcome. The most obvious example is where the voting intention of those with a high likelihood of casting their vote is different from the total sample.

In some countries it is common to measure claimed voting at the previous election and use this to adjust the voting estimate from the current survey. In Denmark and France this is an important quality improving procedure. However, this approach has also been shown not to work well in a number of other countries, like the United States..

Experience has shown that voting intention measurements in some countries may need adjustment in order to provide a reliable guide to public opinion. In these countries the weighting or adjustment strategy of the polling organisation may be confidential to that company for competitive reasons. In such circumstances, where the adjustment is made via a stable and systematic procedure and not subject to a "gut feeling", the polling company may wish to withhold full details of its method. However, it should be possible for interested individuals to establish that the impact of the weighting process on the raw data.

**Guideline** Polling organisations should not make any adjustments to the simple poll result which cannot be documented and defined in advance of seeing the results. Any adjustments must be capable of being repeated and justified. Adjustments made on "gut feeling" are unacceptable.

Where adjustments to the "simple" poll findings are made by weighting or other methods, this should be noted in the publication of the poll findings. Full details must be made available as soon as possible, ideally on a website, including weighted and unweighted figures. Any change to the standard methodology in a series of polls must be noted in the publication of the results.

It is good practice for pre-election polls to measure key variables such as likelihood to vote, and to consider whether the simple poll result should be adjusted.

## 5.2.8 Survey content

Pre-election opinion polls will have greater political and social value if they do not confine themselves only to measuring voting intention but also explore the reasons for party choice and opinions on important campaign issues.

**Guideline** Wherever possible, pre-election polls should measure reasons for party choice or attitudes on issues or other aspects of the campaign.

## 5.2.9 Time Series

Polling organisations use different methodological designs. The meaning of a final pre-election poll is far easier to determine if it is the latest of a series of polls conducted by the same organisation during the campaign.

**Guideline** The validity of the methods used by an organisation can be judged better if they produce a series of voting intention estimates during the campaign. Any obvious biases will become apparent by comparison with the published polls of other organisations.

## 5.2.10 Consistent design



The ability to judge a final pre-election poll by comparison with previous polls from the same organisation is weakened if the organisation changes key aspects of its methodology for the final poll. It could be argued that there is a benefit if polling organisations improve the methodological quality of the design they use for final polls. This is a weak position to take. First, it reduces the comparability of a series of polls from the same polling organisation. Second, it suggests that some campaign polls can be of poorer quality. However, if polls are to make a valid contribution to informing the political process, they must **all** be of high quality. A two tier quality policy undermines the value of polls

**Guideline** Polling organisations should attempt to keep key elements of methodology consistent throughout the election campaign. This particularly applies to sampling method, question wording and the positioning of voting intention questions. It does not apply to sample size. If there is a change this must be made available to people who want to know, in line with the Note on Article B3. This could be provided with the basic survey information at the time of broadcast or publication but should also be published with full information about the survey on the survey company's or broadcaster's website if there is one. In any case, information about changes must be made available as soon as possible, to avoid misleading the public.

### 5.2.11 “Rogue” Polls

Probability theory suggests that one poll in twenty may give results outside the normal 95% confidence limits. Polling organisations generally do better than probability theory suggests because they design their surveys to reduce the risk of error. Nevertheless, a polling organisation may find itself with a pre-election poll that is out of line with all the campaign evidence available up to that point. Usually there will be little time available between getting the final result and writing the copy for publication.

It may be possible to recontact some respondents from earlier surveys to check whether they have changed their mind in a way that would support the unusual finding in the final poll (subject to national data protection requirements).

**Guideline** It is unacceptable to suppress a pre-election poll that looks out of line with earlier polls unless a valid technical reason why the poll is wrong has been established. It is also unacceptable to make a “gut feeling” adjustment. The poll should be published with appropriate warning about the unusual poll result. The odds are strongly in favour of the poll being correct and voters do change their minds even in the polling booth.

### 5.2.12 Exit Polls

An increasingly popular component of the election coverage is the exit poll. These are based on selections of electors leaving samples of voting places. Given that the profile of voters changes by time of day, it is important that exit polls collect information up to the point at which the polls close. If this is not possible, a clear warning should be published and the results based on the full sample published as soon as possible. The people carrying out the poll should also take steps to ensure that there are no leaks of information about the outcome before all the polls have closed. Other information (eg about issues and profile of voters) may be published before all the polls have closed. In countries where the election involves the election of representatives who determine the character of the government, it is desirable that the design of the exit poll sample takes this into account and does not simply measure share of the vote.

**Guideline:** Exit polls should collect information across the whole of the polling day. No statement about the outcome of an election based on exit polls should be

published before all the polls in the contest have closed (in national elections, this means polls relating to election results can be reported at constituency or state level as the polls close, rather than waiting until the nation has voted). Information other than voting behaviour may be published before the polls have closed.

### **5.2.13 Local Laws And Codes Of Practice**

All pre-election polls must be carried out in conformance with local laws and codes of practice for carrying out opinion polls. If any guides in this document contravene local legislation or codes, the local laws and rules must take priority.