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New Zealand Political Polling Code

Effective June 2020

Introduction

This code documents best practice guidelines for the conducting and reporting of political polls in New Zealand.

The code is binding on companies that are members of Research Association New Zealand and on researchers that are members of the Research Association New Zealand.

The polling code was first published in 2014 and updated in 2020.

The code only covers "political polls", which for the purpose of the code are polls that relate to public votes such as national elections, local body elections and parliamentary referenda.

For each issue, the code details:

- Best practice for the researcher conducting the poll
- Best practice for the researcher in reporting results
- Best practice for the media in publishing results

The term "must" indicates a requirement, while the term "should" indicates recommended best practice.

It is intended that the code assist politicians, political scientists, journalists and members of the public to be confident that political polls do in fact represent the opinions of the wider public and are a guide as to likely voting behaviours.

The development of the code is in recognition of the fact that reporting of polls can have an impact on how people vote.

Inaccurate polls or polls that are reported inaccurately can impact on voting attitudes and behaviours and thus influence the democratic process.

All members of the polling and media communities must treat polling responsibly. Reliable polls, rather than informal surveys, require a high degree of rigour. These guidelines are designed to ensure that rigour is understood and applied.

The guidelines have been developed in the light of the European Society of Market Research (ESOMAR) international guidelines.

ESOMAR is the global authority on research best practice and RANZ has a formal partnership agreement with ESOMAR.

We recommend that those interested also read the ESOMAR /WAPOR guide to opinion polls and published surveys at:
http://www.esomar.org/uploads/public/knowledge-and-standards/codes-and-guidelines/WAPOR-ESOMAR_Guidelines.pdf

The Code

	Conducting	Reporting	Publishing
Sampling			
Size	Nationwide polls must use a sample size of at least 500. Note that for a maximum margin of error of 3 percentage points, the sample size should be at least 800 For regional polls or electorate-wide polls (Which way is Wellington Central leaning? What are the results from the Māori seats?) the minimum sample size must be at least 250.	Report must include the sample size, and the sample size of "decided" voters Due warning must be added that results for small subsamples (e.g. what over 65-females think) are based on small numbers and should be treated with caution. The maximum margin of error at a 95% level of confidence must also be reported alongside sample size.	Story must include the sample size Due warning should be added that results for small subsamples (e.g. what over 65-females think) are based on small numbers and should be treated with caution The maximum margin of error at a 95% level of confidence must also be reported alongside sample size.
Sampling Method	Should be either "random", "stratified sample" or "quota"	Report must disclose the sampling method	Story should include the sampling method
Randomness	Researchers should aim to maximise the true randomness of the survey sample. Although less relevant today, one method is to conduct multiple call-backs to avoid systematically 'missing' hard to reach people.	Report should disclose how the randomly selected respondents were reached. Landline, mobile, on-line, door to door Report should disclose that multiple call-backs have occurred	Story should include how respondents were reached.
Avoid self-selection polls	Polls should invoke the principle of random sampling. Self-selecting polls (for example on websites) do not even come close to passing the test of true randomisation.	Report must state that the poll is of a representative sample of New Zealanders	
Representativeness	The sample should represent either those self-identified as eligible to vote or those likely to vote	Report should disclose the population the sample represents	Story should include the population the sample represents

	Conducting	Reporting	Publishing
Likely Voters	Unless voting is compulsory (as in Australia) then the likelihood of voting is very much part of the equation in compiling poll results. Those who say they are ineligible or unlikely to vote should be excluded from the analysis	Report should consider excluding those unlikely to vote from the analysis of voting behaviour. The report should include a definition of how it was determined someone was likely to vote	Reporting should consider results in terms of reflecting the intentions of *likely* voters.
Response Rates	Establishing a good response rate is one means of having data you can rely on – though the importance of this measure has been challenged. There is no guarantee that a survey with a 40% response rate is significantly more reliable than a survey with a 20% response rate. In addition, the use of panels makes these measures less relevant. However, the benefits include the ability to identify 'hard to reach' segments of the population. Response rates also act as a general reliability/confidence indicator. A low response rate may indicate a systematic bias.	The report should include the response rate and discuss the weighting method and extent of weighting.	

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Collection Method			
Landline Phone	When employing random probability sampling, both the household dialled, and the respondent selected in the household should be random. When employing quota sampling, the household dialled should be randomly selected, but the person in each household may be selected to achieve specific quota requirements.	Report must disclose how a respondent is selected. The report should disclose if calls were to landlines only, and any impact this may have had on the poll	The story should disclose if calls were to landlines only
Mobile Phone	Polling based on respondent contact via mobile phones either come from random dialling or use of a research panel. (See below). This should be specified.	Report must identify whether one or other or both landline and mobile devices were used as part of the random survey design.	Published stories should indicate whether the polling was conducted door to door, via landline, via mobile or using mixed methodology
Online – opt-in panels	The chief challenge for panels is to ensure that participants in a poll are representative of the wider public. No panel member should be asked to complete the same poll question more than once every six months, unless the poll is longitudinal and deliberately of the same set of respondents as a previous poll, and reported as such. The final panel sample should reflect a true cross-section of eligible New Zealand voters, which may be fully achieved by screening or by weighting. The panel should stay open for at least 72 hours. Researchers should try	Report should disclose the use of panel recruitment, the size and make-up of the panel being employed. The report must state whether the use of the panel complies with the ESOMAR guideline for online research. Not all online devices successfully handle online surveys. Usually this is a very small percentage. But the report should disclose if there were any major platforms that the poll was not accessible on.	The story should disclose if there were any major platforms that the poll was not accessible on

	and minimise people signing up to their panel, just to participate in political polls as such self-selection can bias the result. The panel should be managed in line with the ESOMAR guidelines for online research		
Robo-polling	This involves auto-diallers and the use of automated voice interviews. Overall robo-polling has been found to be less accurate than live interviewer polls due to non-response bias and self-selection by participants.	Robo-polling results exhibit bias. If such a poll is to be published, the report must explain that the results were gathered using robo-polling methods.	Be very wary of publishing robo-poll results. Any such story should disclose that these results will in all probability differ to more scientifically designed polls.
Quality controls – data cleaning	Researchers must check data for (and eliminate,) 'straight-liners' and incomplete responses		
Omnibus	If the political questions are part of a longer omnibus poll, they should be asked early on.	The report must disclose if the questions were part of an omnibus survey.	The story should disclose if the questions were part of an omnibus survey.
Question Order	Principal voting behaviour question should be asked before all other questions	The report must disclose the order of questions asked and any political questions asked before the principal voting behaviour question.	The story should disclose any other questions which may have impacted the responses to the principal voting behaviour question
Questionnaire wording	Scientific polls must use language that ensures fair and unbiased results.	Reports must use the actual wording used in the poll.	Reporters should quote the actual question wording.

	Conducting	Reporting	Publishing
Weighting			
Weighting	Researchers should attempt to make their samples representative to obviate the need for weighting. However, weighting provides a final adjustment in attempting to match the sample universe.		
Weighting Method	A random sample poll should be weighted using an industry accepted weighting methodology to correct for the probability of selection and/or non-response. RIM Weighting should exclude variables that bear a strong relationship with each other.	The report must confirm the sample was weighted.	Story must include that the sample is weighted.
Weighting Variables	A minimum of gender and age should be weighted. Other typical weighting variables include region, ethnicity and household income. When weighting to correct for demographic non-response, the calculated sample weights should be based on known or estimated population characteristics (for example, from Statistics New Zealand or the Electoral Commission).	Report should disclose which variables the poll is weighted on	
Weighting limitations	Extreme weighting can distort poll results. An indication of the spread of weights is desirable- e.g. 95% of weights are between 0.8 and 1.4	Report should disclose the extent of the weighting – suggest the 95% range of weights be utilised as standard	

	Conducting	Reporting	Publishing
Margin of Error			
Maximum Error	The maximum sampling margin of error must be no more than ±4.5 percentage points and should be no more than ±3.5 percentage points for national polls, at the 95% confidence level.	The report must disclose the maximum margin of error at a 95% level of confidence.	The story must include the maximum margin of error at a 95% level of confidence.
Maximum errors for breakdowns		The report should disclose the sample size and maximum margin of error for demographic breakdowns.	Stories should avoid reporting breakdown results from small samples
Significance		The report should highlight results that are statistically significant. This includes trend changes, not just from the previous poll.	Stories should focus on changes that are statistically significant
Errors for results < 50%		The report should include the maximum margin of error for results below 50%, such as for 10%.	Media should be careful not to assign the maximum margin of error to low results.
Other Errors	Care should be taken to eliminate sources of error not associated with the sampling process	Again, the report must state the maximum margin of error for a simple random sample, at the 95% confidence level. Other sampling errors or assumptions should be reported on if deemed significant.	

	Conducting	Reporting	Publishing
Timing			
Data Collection Dates	The final poll before an election should be conducted as close as possible to the reporting date	The report must disclose the dates the data collection occurred poll results	The story should disclose the dates the data collection occurred
Median Date	As more responses often occur earlier in the poll, the date the median response was collected should be calculated	The median date of collection should be included in the report	

	Conducting	Reporting	Publishing
Influential events	Potentially influential events that occurred during the conduct of the poll should be noted.	Reporting should include mention of significant events that *may* have influenced the results. No claim should be made unless there is clear evidence that those events actually drove voter opinion.	
Results			
Undecideds	The poll script should probe initially undecided voters as to a lean or preference.	The report must state the number and percentage of undecided and refused	The story should include the percentage that were undecided
Trends		Reports should highlight statistically significant trends	Stories should focus on statistically significant trends, which may not be just between the current and last poll, but over a number of polls
Seats	In NZ there is a close fit between overall election results – seats won under MMP – and credible poll results. However, a small complication arises if a Party is polling close to the 5% threshold. They may – or may not - attain the 5-6 seats available	Reports should include seat projections, and any assumptions used for electorate seats. Care should also be taken to explain that polls may indicate the final result – but do not predict. Voters are still capable of changing their minds.	Stories should include analysis of likely "bloc" results (not just individual party results) as the highest polling party may not be most likely to form a Government. Story should state that polls do not predict – they measure a point in time.
Reports		The agency must prepare a report suitable for publication with full results and methodology. The report must include the wording of the voting questions and all the other information required by this code. The report must be published on the conducting agency's website.	The online version of stories should link to the full report, as quickly as practical.

	Term	Definition
Terminology	Random sampling	A subset of individuals (a sample) chosen from a larger set (a population). Each individual is chosen randomly and entirely by chance, such that each individual has the same probability of being chosen at any stage during the sampling process, and each subset of k individuals has the same probability of being chosen for the sample as any other subset of k individuals.
	Stratified random sampling	When subpopulations within an overall population vary, it could be advantageous to sample each subpopulation (stratum) independently. Stratification is the process of dividing members of the population into homogeneous subgroups before sampling. The strata should define a partition of the population. That is, it should be collectively exhaustive and mutually exclusive: every element in the population must be assigned to one and only one stratum.
	Quota sampling	In quota sampling, a population is first segmented into mutually exclusive sub-groups, just as in stratified sampling. Then judgment is used to select the subjects or units from each segment based on a specified proportion. For example, an interviewer may be told to sample 200 females and 300 males between the age of 45 and 60. This means that individuals can put a demand on who they want to sample (targeting).
	Self-selection poll	Surveys where the sample selects itself (for example, when a website seeks views from those who are browsing it).
	Push poll	A political poll that has a hidden agenda of tilting the respondent toward one party or another. Characterised by loaded questions.

Describing polls

A sample standard paragraph or box which media can use in stories which conforms to this code is:

This poll was conducted by *Agency Name* for *Media Name*. It is a *sample method* poll of *sample size* *sample populations* and is weighted to the overall *adult population*. It was conducted by *method* between *dates*, has a maximum margin of error of *+/- x%* and *y%* were undecided on the party vote question. The full results are at *URL*.

An example would be:

> *This poll was conducted by Kiwi Research for Kiwi Media. It is a random poll of 1,000 adult New Zealanders likely to vote and is weighted to the overall population of adult New Zealanders. It was conducted by phone between 15 and 19 June, has a maximum margin of error of +/- 3.2% and 8.5% were undecided on the party vote question. The full results are at www.kiwiresearch.com/polljune2020.pdf.*

Compliant polls

Polls following the code are entitled to use the emblem below to signal their compliance.

Polling Best Practice Guidelines for Media

1. If possible, get a copy of the full poll report and do not rely on a media release.
2. The story should include the name of the company which conducted the poll, and the client the poll was done for, and the dates it was done.
3. The story should include, or make available, the sample size, sampling method, population sampled, if the sample is weighted, the maximum margin of error and the level of undecided voters.
4. If you think any questions may have impacted the answers to the principal voting behaviour question, mention this in the story.
5. Avoid reporting breakdown results from very small samples as they are unreliable.
6. Try to focus on statistically significant changes, which may not just be from the last poll, but over a number of polls.
7. Avoid the phrase “This party is below the margin of error” as results for low polling parties have a smaller margin of error than for higher polling parties.
8. It can be useful to report on what the electoral results of a poll would be, in terms of likely parliamentary blocs, as the highest polling party will not necessarily be the Government.
9. In your online story, include a link to the full poll results provided by the polling company, or state when and where the report and methodology will be made available.
10. Only use the term “poll” for scientific polls done in accordance with market research industry approved guidelines, and use “survey” for self-selecting surveys such as text or website surveys.