



CRIC Primer on Election Polling - Communications Package

The Canadian Research Insights Council (CRIC) is Canada's voice of the research, insights, and analytics industry. CRIC is the standard-bearer for quality research and world-leading industry standards.

We achieve this by ensuring that research conducted by CRIC member companies follows best practices and the highest ethical standards. CRIC requires its member companies to ensure research released into the public domain is unbiased and the findings are supported by the data. CRIC also requires its members to provide detailed disclosures with the research so the public and media can assess the reliability of the research. If a research firm can't or won't commit to this, then they can't be a member.

In today's era of misinformation, partisan communications, and unethical data collection practices, quality standards are more important than ever.

When Canadians read the results of an election poll or other survey conducted by a CRIC member company, they can be confident that the findings are based on best practices and abide by CRIC's high standards.

The reason that polls work – when they are done well – is that they are based on methodologies rooted in statistical science. This includes using properly constructed samples, valid questionnaires, and rigorous adherence to procedures and standards that have been developed over many decades by the world's best statistical experts and are continuously enhanced to reflect the numerous changes impacting how we conduct research.

A look at the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election:

There was much criticism by media and pundits the evening of November 3 and shortly thereafter, on how pollsters fared in predicting the outcomes of the U.S. elections. The reality is that once the totality of votes was counted (including the millions of mail-in ballots that were counted after election night), pollsters did reasonably well. Most of the surveys were within their stated margin of errors and most states were "called" correctly, as was the overall winner:

"...a high percentage of states (likely 48 out of 50) were "called" correctly, as was the overall Electoral College and popular vote winner (Biden)." (Nate Silver, [FiveThirtyEight](#), Nov. 11, 2020)

That's not to say that there were no issues with the polling, as several polls underestimated the Republican vote in multiple states, resulting in races that were much closer than polls suggested they would be.

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There are two primary theories for why the polls underestimated Republican support:

1. **A segment of Trump supports is less likely to participate in public opinion research.** The report [An Evaluation of 2016 Election Polls](#) prepared by the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) following the 2016 election found that people with more formal education who tended to vote Democrat were more likely participate in polls while those without a college education who tended to vote Republican were less likely to. In 2020, theories suggest that some trump supporters, due to a lack of trust in public institutions, may have been even less likely to participate in polls. To the extent that this proves to be correct, additional efforts will be needed to recruit Republicans to participate in polls and/or weighting will need to be used to match their share to the population.
2. **Polls failed to accurately assess voter turnout in the face of a pandemic.** A regular challenge with election polling is not only assessing support but also determining the likelihood that individuals will in fact vote. This challenge was amplified with the election taking place during the pandemic. The polling clearly demonstrated that those voting Democrat were more likely to vote by mail-in ballot. Did polls overestimate the willingness of those voting Democrat to vote in person during the pandemic? Did some Democrat voters have trouble with mail-in ballots? Did polls underestimate the enthusiasm of Trump supports to vote despite the pandemic? While all of these reasons could explain why polls varied from election results, the positive is that they would not typically impact the reliability of public opinion polling.

The Future of Polling After 2020

CRIC, in collaboration with [ESOMAR](#), the [Market Research Institute International](#) (MRII) and the University of Georgia will be hosting the **free webinar: [The Future of Polling After 2020](#) on Wednesday, December 16, 2020 at 12pm EST** (and available on demand following the live webinar).

The panelists will cover a number of areas regarding polling and the U.S. Election, including:

- How the evidence explains what actually happened in this U.S. election;
- How criticisms of U.S. pre-election polls have raised questions about the viability of public opinion research;
- How to evaluate the impact of the 2020 election polls for all forms of opinion research.

In February of 2020, AAPOR announced it will convene a [task force to formally examine polling performance during the 2020 presidential election](#). A final report of the task force is expected in early 2021 after the final, official vote totals are available for every state. This report is anticipated to include recommendations on how to enhance the accuracy of public opinion research in the United States.

CRIC has also recently established the **Public Opinion Research Thought Leadership Council**, featuring a who's who of Canadian public opinion research experts. The Council's mandate is to keep the industry abreast of emerging/innovative methodologies and technologies, identifying new practices and supporting the development of additional standards.

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How does the polling around the U.S. Election reflect on Canadian Polling?

- Canadians have every reason to be confident in the surveys conducted by CRIC member agencies. **CRIC members follow the [highest standards and best practices](#) both in their research and in the transparency** around the disclosure of that research into the public domain.
- In fact, all polls conducted by **CRIC member agencies in the final week before the 2019 Canadian federal election were all highly accurate**, as outlined in an article in *Policy Options* by Claire Durant (see callout).
- A [recent global analysis \(ESOMAR\)](#) into the accuracy of polling concluded that done well, polls overwhelmingly continue to correctly predict election outcomes. The study looked at more than 31,000 polls from 473 voting events across 40 countries spanning 1936 – 2017, and found that **at a global level, the average error of polls conducted within seven days before an election is +/-2.5%.**
- The ESOMAR study included polls from the last four Canadian federal elections (previous to 2019) and **found that Canadian pollsters performed well with average errors below the global average.**
- While there has been some speculation about the potential decline in the accuracy of polling, the **ESOMAR study concluded that “there is no evidence of any long-term decline in the accuracy of polling.”**

“The polls conducted during the 2019 federal election campaign were generally accurate, as they usually are, in fact. The results confirm that there are no major problems with the methods used to estimate the vote. The polls informed the voters pretty well of what was likely to happen. They clearly showed that in Canada as a whole, support for the two main parties was similar. They also showed that the battles were not the same in the different regions of the country.”

Claire Durant, professor in the Department of Sociology at Université de Montréal and past president of the World Association for Public Opinion Research

[Policy Options](#), November 6, 2019

The role of Public Opinion Research in a healthy democracy

- Public opinion research strengthens democracy by giving voice and influence to Canadians.
- Election polls play a critical role as they help paint the election story in a very graphic way, highlighting how things are moving and the currents and drifts in public opinion along the way.
- Survey research helps inform Canadians in their decision-making throughout the writ period. When the time comes to vote, the electorate are able to go to the polling stations with a better understanding of how their vote may play out as part of a bigger narrative.
- The real value is not in how close the polls were to the final results; rather it's how the polls contribute to the narrative as it unfolds during an election, engaging Canadians along the way in key issues around the election and informing them as to how their vote could count.

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Supporting the Media and the Public in evaluating research through increased transparency

With limited supporting information it can be difficult for the media or the public to assess the reliability of research or determine whether there is a hidden agenda.

That is why CRIC member agencies are required to comply with the [CRIC Public Opinion Research Standards and Disclosure Requirements](#). These standards require the highest level of ethics and transparency in reporting research into the public domain and help journalists and members of the public assess the quality and validity of research that is released into the public domain.

The disclosures include:

- Who sponsored the research, who conducted it and who funded it (if not the sponsor).
- The exact wording and presentation of questions and response options.
- The dates data were collected.
- Details on the sample design and whether a probability or non-probability sample was used.
- A description of the sampling error (if scientifically applicable).
- Whether weighting was used to make the results more reflective of the intended population
- Detailed tables by key demographic that show both weighted and actual number of respondents, for research on public policy topics and election voting.

3 Tools for the Media:

When deciding whether to report on the results of research:

- CRIC has published a list of “[10 questions journalists should ask before publishing the results of a survey.](#)”
- CRIC maintains a [directory of its member companies who regularly release research in the public domain.](#)
- CRIC requires its members to register all research with [CRIC Research Verification Service](#). The online portal allows the public to search for research projects that are active and confirm that they are legitimate. Visitors can also submit feedback or register complaints about CRIC member research projects.

What happens if a CRIC member doesn't follow the rules?

- Cutting corners or compromising quality is a clear violation of the public trust and of CRIC standards.
- Our objective is simple and straightforward – membership in this organization means strict compliance with a rigorous set of world-class research standards. If a research firm can't or won't comply, then it can't be a member. It's about quality, ethics, and legitimacy of the data.
- Our world-leading standards is a major differentiator between quality polls and those that are slapdash, biased, or intentionally misleading. A reputable research company operates in an open and transparent manner and will provide the information needed to evaluate their survey.
- By providing sufficient information to be able to challenge and scrutinize results, the media can apply the same degree of journalistic critical practices and skepticism that they would to any other source of information.
- Through its partnership with ESOMAR, CRIC subscribes to an international adjudication process that allows complaints to be addressed by an independent panel of experts from outside of Canada.

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Resources:

10 questions journalists should ask before publishing the results of a survey

www.canadianresearchinsightscouncil.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/10-questions-journalists-should-ask-before-publishing-results-of-research.pdf

Additional Resources for Journalists on reporting on Surveys:

[CRIC Public Opinion Research Standards and Disclosure Requirements](#)

[British Polling Council: Opinion Polls: Guidance for Journalists](#)

[ESOMAR/WAPOR Guidelines on Public Opinion Surveys and Published Surveys](#)

[AAPOR Journalist Cheat Sheet for Understanding Surveys](#)

[Poynter News University Course: Understanding and Interpreting Surveys](#)

[ESOMAR –Information and resources on polling](#)

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