Can Polls Be Trusted?

Supporting Questions

1. What types of polls exist?
2. How does the wording, tone, or location of use of the question influence an answer?
3. Which polls are valid?
Can Polls Be Trusted?

Arkansas Standards for Social Studies

PD.S.C.4 Assess the influence of media on the electoral process (e.g., news reporting, political cartoons, public opinion polls, Internet, propaganda techniques, social media).

Staging the Question

Review a set of “fake” polls and discuss how polling has become a controversial issue.

Supporting Question 1

What types of polls exist?

Formative Performance Task

Create a T chart showing polling types and example questions for each.

Featured Sources

Source A: Gallup: *What is Public Opinion Polling and Why is it Important?*

Source B: Constitutional Rights Foundation: *Election Central: Assessing Public Opinion Polls*

Source C: Univ. of Pennsylvania: *Case Study I: The 1936 Literary Digest Poll*

Supporting Question 2

Can the wording, tone, or location of use of the question influence an answer?

Formative Performance Task

Conduct a series of polls and compile data to look for patterns/bias.

Featured Sources

Source A: Pew Research: *Questionnaire Design*

Source B: Gallup: *The Scientific Approach to Question Wording Differences*

Source C: Pew Research: *Just how does the general election exit poll work, anyway?*

Supporting Question 3

Are polls valid?

Formative Performance Task

Develop a claim supported by evidence that answers the supporting question.

Featured Sources

Source A: University of California Santa Barbara: *Election Polls – Accuracy Record in Presidential Elections*

Source B: Pew Research: *Are National Polls Reliable Predictors of Midterm Elections?*

Source C: University of Pennsylvania: *Polling the Polling Experts*

ARGUMENT

Can Polls be Trusted? Construct an argument (e.g., detailed outline, poster, essay) that discusses the compelling question using specific claims and relevant evidence from contemporary sources while acknowledging competing views.

EXTENSION

Participate in a classroom forum to discuss other methods of predicting election outcomes and what might one day replace polls.

UNDERSTAND

Investigate a recent political poll and the groups of people who were involved in it, and focus on how they interpret poll results.

ASSESS

Examine the extent to which the current use of polls has been used as an effective predictor of election outcomes.

ACT

Create a series of posters explaining the “do’s” and “don’ts” of polling so that others can interpret them more accurately. These can be used in the school or at a community event where students can interact with people explaining the process.

- Featured sources are suggested and links are provided. It may be that these links are broken and we apologize in advance for the inconvenience.
Overview

Inquiry Description

This inquiry leads students through an investigation of whether polling can be trusted. By investigating the compelling question “Can Polls Be Trusted?” students evaluate what polls are, how they are used, and how we are growing more confused by them. The formative performance tasks build on knowledge and skills through the course of the inquiry and help students judge polls more effectively. Students create an evidence-based argument about the trustworthiness of polling.

This inquiry highlights the following standard:

**PD.5.C.4** Assess the influence of media on the electoral process (e.g., news reporting, political cartoons, public opinion polls, Internet, propaganda techniques, social media).

Note: This inquiry is expected to take six to eight 40-minute class periods. The inquiry time frame could expand if teachers think their students need additional instructional experiences (i.e., supporting questions, formative performance tasks, and featured sources). Teachers are encouraged to adapt the inquiries in order to meet the needs and interests of their particular students. Resources can also be modified as necessary to meet individualized education programs (IEPs) or Section 504 Plans for students with disabilities.

Structure of the Inquiry

In addressing the compelling question “Can Polls Be Trusted?” students work through a series of supporting questions, formative performance tasks, and featured sources in order to construct an argument supported by evidence while acknowledging competing perspectives.

Staging the Compelling Question

In staging the compelling question, “Can Polls Be Trusted?” teachers may prompt students with handouts that illustrate various polls from vetted pollsters like Gallup, and from questionable sources like Huffington News. You may also want to call up the Gallup website (Featured Source for Staging) and show students what kind of data is tracked by pollsters. This could begin the dialogue with contemporary information. If not comfortable using contemporary illustrations to begin the discussion out of the fear of being too sensational, you could use any one of these, easily found online: 1936 Literary Digest straw poll showing Alf Landon would defeat FDR, 1948 Gallup poll that had Dewey over Truman, or the 1996 Arizona primary where three major tv networks had Bob Dole coming in last out of three running, and he would go on to get the party nomination. These are briefly summarized on the National Constitution Centers Page, found at Constitution Center.

All show that any poll may show results that are anything from accurate to highly inaccurate, and it is critical that students know how to judge the validity of a poll by understanding what they are and how they are created.
This should begin a classroom Q and A about what polls are, how they are used, and why many are considered “fake” and how that impacts our confidence in the polls we read and hear about daily.

### Supporting Question 1

The first supporting question—“What types of polls exist?”—has students create a T-chart showing polling types and example questions for each type. The formative performance task asks students to debate the question of “Are polls valid?” The featured sources for this question will set the foundation for the rest of the research of polls and their features. Featured Source A is “What is Public Opinion Polling and Why is it Important?” to show what polls are. Featured Source B is “Election Central Assessing Public Opinion Polls” to determine why we use use polls and the extent to which they impact elections. Featured Source C is “Case Study I: the 1936 Literary Digest Poll” that first illustrated the possible inaccuracies of polling.

Links to Featured Sources:

**Source A**: Gallup

*What is Public Opinion Polling and Why is it Important?*

**Source B**: Constitutional Rights Foundation

*Election Central Assessing Public Opinion Polls*

**Source C**: Univ. of Pennsylvania

*Case Study I: The 1936 Literary Digest Poll*

### Supporting Question 2

For the second supporting question—“Can the wording, tone or location of use of the question influence and answer?”—students will look at the designing of questions, and sampling techniques in order to create their own polls. In addition to the resources from the previous supporting question, the featured sources provide students with additional materials that allow them to judge for themselves what makes a poll an accurate and how to identify if those features are present. Featured Source A is “Questionaire Design”.

**Source A**: Pew Research

*Questionnaire design*

**Source B**: Gallup

*The Scientific Approach to Question Wording Differences*

**Source C**: Pew Research

*Just how does the general election exit poll work, anyway?*

### Supporting Question 3

The third supporting question—“Are Polls Valid?”—asks students to develop a claim supported by evidence that answers the supporting question. In addition to the previous featured sources, the sources for this task look at
what experts think about polling both historically and most recently. Featured Source A is Election Polls – Accuracy Record in Presidential Elections”. Featured Source B is “Are National Polls Reliable Predictors of Midterm Elections?”. Featured Source C is “Polling the Polling Experts”.

Links to Featured Sources:

Source A: University of California Santa Barbara
Election Polls – Accuracy Record in Presidential Elections

Source B: Pew Research
Are National Polls Reliable Predictors of Midterm Elections?

Source C: University of Pennsylvania
Polling the Polling Experts

Summative Performance Task

At this point in the inquiry, students have examined sources that delineated what polls are, how they are constructed and use, and what we as Americans think of them today.

Students should be expected to demonstrate the breadth of their understandings and their abilities to use evidence from multiple sources to support their claims. In this task, students construct an evidence-based argument using multiple sources to answer the compelling question “Can Polls be Trusted?” It is important to note that students’ arguments could take a variety of forms, including a detailed outline, poster, or essay.

Students’ arguments will likely vary, but could include any of the following:

- **Polls may not be trusted when many citizens do not respond to polls even if given the opportunity.**
- **Polls may not be trusted if voters participate but don’t want to commit to their choice, misleading pollsters.**
- **Polling can be trusted because it is the most reliable and time-tested method of determining what the general public feels about any particular candidate.**

To extend their arguments, teachers may have students participated in a classroom forum to discuss other methods of predicting election outcomes and what might one day replace polls as we know them today.

Students have the opportunity to Take Informed Action by drawing on their understandings of the validity or reliability of Public Opinion Polls. To understand, students can investigate a recent political poll and the groups of people who were involved in it, and focus on how those involved interpret poll results. To assess the issue, students can examine the extent to which the current use of polls has been an effective predictor of most election outcomes. To act, students can create a series of posters explaining the “do’s” and “don’t’s” of polling so that others can interpret them more accurately. These can be used in the school or at a community event where students can interact with people explaining the process.