

# ESOMAR/WAPOR Guide to Opinion Polls

## - including the ESOMAR International Code of Practice for the Publication of Public Opinion Poll Results

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### Introduction to the Guide

Public opinion polls are regularly conducted and published in many countries. They measure not only support for political parties but also public opinion on a wide range of social and political issues and are published frequently in a variety of newspapers and broadcast media. They are the subject of much discussion by the public, journalists and politicians, some of whom wish to limit or ban them completely. In a small number of European countries legislation actually exists which restricts the publication of opinion polls during the late stages of election campaigns.

The public discussion of opinion polls is not always well informed. The case for restriction on the publication of polls during election campaigns is hard to support with rational argument or empirical evidence. ESOMAR has 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.

WAPOR joins ESOMAR in the publication of this booklet. The WAPOR Council endorses all recommendations put forward in this document. WAPOR and ESOMAR believe there is a need for more consultation and coordination in issuing future guidelines and statements regarding standards of practice in the industry, given the rapid growth in market and opinion research around the world and the new technologies and developments.

An ESOMAR Code of Conduct for the Publication of Opinion Polls has existed since 1983. It is reproduced in this booklet together with guidance on the interpretation of opinion poll data. There are also three additional sections. First, there is an ESOMAR position statement on the role of opinion polls in democratic systems. ESOMAR'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.

Second there is a section on the misuse of the term opinion poll to describe unscientific and unrepresentative measurements of public opinion. Push polling, televoting and certain Internet polls are examples of the type of activity frequently, but incorrectly, presented as opinion polls.

Third, there is a section providing guidelines on the conduct of pre-election opinion 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 for journalists, politicians, academics and other interested parties. They are not intended to be a "How to do it" manual. The subject of public opinion research and the measurement of voting intention continues to evolve and every election may bring new circumstances to be addressed by the researcher. The professional skills and previous experience of polling organisations are essential components of effective public opinion research. It is not possible to write this into guidelines or codes of practice.

## Opinion Polls and Democracy

For the last fifty years opinion polls have proved to be one of the permanent operational constituents of modern democracies.

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 irreplaceable information on the electoral choices of different groups of citizens and on the motivations which explain those choices. They enable sociologists to follow shifts of opinion on the major social problems and chart the evolution of values. To those in power and their opponents they trace the movements in their relative support between elections, as well as the public impact of important national or international events. And they allow citizens to make themselves heard at all times and to see where their own views stand compared with those of other people.

The more direct the link established by the institutions of a country between its citizens and the nation's political direction, the more opinion polls are in demand. Wherever the choice of the chief executive rests on the whole electorate, the media resort more extensively to opinion polls.

Conversely, those countries whose institutions set up a screen between the citizens' vote and the designation of rulers make far more sparing use of election polls.

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. The relationship between the pollsters and the polled presupposes a climate of confidence, and published results are credible only in so far as all opinions can be freely expressed, unpleasant as they might be to those in power.

Yet, however important their place in modern democracies, the right to conduct and publish polls freely is occasionally contested by the political establishment. 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 are concerned to protect voters from any risks of manipulation that might be attributable to opinion polls.

Thus in the last fifteen years some European 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. The justification advanced for such action is a supposed need to protect the citizen against any excesses which might confuse him or interfere with his freedom of choice.

Now that we have been able to observe the impact of such laws in practice, it is possible to make a preliminary assessment of the impact of this policy.

From the French experience, the longest in Europe, we note that the controlling body, although it has succeeded in bringing into line certain questionable operators, still had to admit it was unable to prevent attempts at disinformation by another public institution, the Service des Renseignements Généraux of the Interior ministry. This was the source in France of the clearest proven effort to manipulate opinion through the publication of misleading polls.

Belgian legislation is the most extreme concerning the duration of the censorship period, initially fixed at four weeks. Experience in this country suggests that the silence created by censorship seems to encourage manipulation by special interest groups much more than free and potentially contradictory information would have done. During the 1985 legislative election, when this law was first applied, there was lively speculation on the stock exchange during the black-out period when those with access to unpublished polls, secured an advantage over those kept in ignorance by the effects of the law.

Despite the good intentions underlying the introduction of legislation of this kind, these and other unfortunate results have stemmed from reliance on two equally debatable assumptions.

The first of these is the assumption that it is actually possible to manipulate opinion through the publication of pre-election polls. For this to work the manipulator needs to secure the complicity of the numerous competing polling organisations whose reputations are involved, and of the many competing newspapers whose credibility is at stake. In practice attempts to manipulate polls in this way have been generally unsuccessful not least because nobody knows the answer to the crucial question: "Which polls - or which series of polls - should I publish in order to favour the candidate of my choice?" And the reason no one knows the answer to this crucial question is because there is no answer.

Electoral choices are not a mechanical affair; the voter's mind is not a computer into which you can input percentages and be sure to receive a given vote as output. Few electors vote merely on the strength of their knowledge of other people's choice. And even those electors who operate in that way have diverse reactions to a given opinion poll. Their conclusion is determined by the credibility of the source, each individual's political sympathies, temperament, and many other elements which combine to create a unique personal decision. Legislation to "protect" adult citizens is an insult to their ability to make their own decisions.

The second debatable assumption is the idea that the citizen's freedom of choice is better protected by some form of regulation rather than by free and competitive information. However, 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.

The French referendum on the Maastricht Treaty highlighted the dangers of two speed access to information in this way. Small investors were denied the right to monitor and consider the evolution of the views of the electorate, while large financial organisations were daily

commissioning private polls which enabled them to foresee the ups and downs of the European monetary system - an unforeseen result of a law whose declared aim was "to protect the citizen against abuses and manipulations".

The Council of Europe had no misconceptions on this point. In September 1985 it approved the conclusions of a report on opinion polls prepared by Sir John Page on behalf of the Committee on Parliamentary and Public Relations, which stated that "all the evidence of the influence of opinion polls on election results is subjective ..."; "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.

Not only are further restrictions unnecessary and undesirable, but also the viability of existing restrictions is under severe threat. The explosive growth of the Internet is the main factor making it almost impossible to prevent the widespread publication of opinion polls. During the period when legislation prevents print and broadcast media from local publication, opinion polls can be (and have been) conducted and published on the Internet to a worldwide audience. If the force of reason and logic does not persuade legislators that poll restrictions are unnecessary, the world wide web will probably make restrictions impossible to impose.

## Representativeness of Opinion Polls

All opinion polls should be based on scientific and representative measurements of public opinion. Far too often the term opinion poll is misused to describe unscientific and unrepresentative measurements of public opinion. Representativeness means the obtaining of measurements which can be generalised to apply without any statistical bias to the whole population under consideration. ESOMAR is determined to oppose the misuse of the term Opinion Poll to describe activity in contravention of this Code. Members are asked to bring any instance of misuse to the attention of their ESOMAR Representative. ESOMAR's Professional Standards Committee has prepared letters and support material for Representatives to use. Particular example of current concern are push polling, televoting, Internet polls, frugging and mega databases. These are explained below.

1. Push polling has become a feature of politics in some countries. Push polls use deliberately biased questionnaires or samples. Some seek to produce false poll findings in support of a particular issue. Others use biased questions in an attempt to convince those being interviewed to support a particular point of view. In both cases the "poll" is a deliberate attempt to manipulate public opinion. This clearly contravenes the fundamental principles of the ICC/ESOMAR Code which prohibits researchers from participating in such exercises. Rule 15 of the Code makes it clear that such non research activities as push polling must not be carried out by research organisations.

2. Televoting involves inviting viewers or readers to phone special numbers in order to register their vote on a particular issue. The results are then published or broadcast on TV or radio as editorial content. With advances in technology, these televotes can now be live, on screen as viewers phone in. While this is a perfectly legitimate media exercise for entertainment purposes, it can not be described as an opinion poll which satisfies the requirement of the ESOMAR Code. Televoting polls cannot deliver reliable and representative samples. They can

represent the views only of those viewing or listening, who chose to respond. Even then, because there is no control of the number of times each person can vote, there is no guarantee that the televote is representative of those who voted. The results from televotes cannot be generalised to apply to the whole population. Researchers should not carry out such projects.

3. Internet polls, conducted by placing questions on a web site and inviting visitors to the site to give their opinion, have recently started to become common. It is at present impossible to get a representative sample of public opinion using the Internet in this way. Only a small and unrepresentative minority has access to the Internet. Further, it is very difficult to obtain a representative sample of Internet users using this method as it will almost certainly over represent the heavy users who will have the greatest chance of coming across the questionnaire. Researchers should be cautious when creating web sites containing opinion poll type questions. While this may be a valid activity for surveys of certain computer users, or for experimental purposes, researchers should be careful not to set the wrong example by publicising the findings of Internet surveys unless they are sure that the sample is representative.

4. Frugging stands for fund raising under the guise of polling. Some political parties, charities and pressure groups have started to use false opinion poll approaches in order to request donations from respondents. While understanding the need of these organisations to collect funds and establish the views of their supporters, it is in the interests of all concerned that the public should not be misled into co-operation by making false claims about the intention of the enquiry. Again, researchers should not carry out fund raising under the guise of polling and should bring any examples to the attention of their ESOMAR Representative.

5. One final area of concern is the creation of mega databases for the distribution of millions of questionnaires. There is no scientific support for the notion that just because millions of people have answered some questions, the results produced will be valid and reliable. Some direct marketing databases now claim to have answers from tens of millions of people; one UK utility company recently sent a questionnaire to all 17 million of its customers; a French transport company distributes 1.5 million self completion questionnaires to young people using its service; these are all examples of massive but unscientific sampling likely to deliver unrepresentative results. The accuracy and reliability of the results of an opinion poll depend not merely on the number of people interviewed, but more importantly on the scientific representativeness of the sample questioned and responding.

The 1936 US presidential election campaign provided the first, and still the best, demonstration of the inaccuracy of the "ask millions approach". The Literary Digest poll dispatched questionnaires to 10,000,000 Americans. 2,376,523 replied and the analysis pointed to a Landon victory. (If you asked your self "Who is Landon?", you already know they got it wrong!). Among others, George Gallup using scientifically constructed samples of only 3,000 respondents predicted a Roosevelt win. This was the real birth of modern opinion polling and the lesson still applies today. The Literary Digest "poll" of millions was in error by some 19%.

## [International Code of Practice for the Publication of Public Opinion Poll Results](#)

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

1. 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.

2. 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.

3. 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. We recognise that there are some sincerely-held worries about possible (but mostly unproven) effects which some polls could in theory have upon voting or other behaviour. However, 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.

4. 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.

5. 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.

6. 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 desirable and what is practicable.

7. 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.

8. 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.

9. 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**

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). These Rules together with relevant extracts from the Notes on How the Code should be applied are reproduced in Appendix 1 to this document.

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**

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.

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) - (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.

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.

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.

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**

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.

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 original International Code.

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.

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.

## Appendix 1

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

While all Rules of the International Code apply to Public Opinion Polls, the following Rules have special significance in this connection:

#### **The Professional Responsibilities of Researchers**

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.

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.

#### **The Mutual Rights and Responsibilities of Researchers and Clients**

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

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.

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.

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

### **Notes on how to apply the ICC/ESOMAR International Code of Marketing and Social Research Practice**

#### ***(Rule 14)***

The kinds of technical information which should on request be made available include those listed in the Notes to Rule 25. The Researcher must not however disclose information which is confidential to the Client's business, nor need he disclose information relating to parts of the survey which were not published.

### **(Rule 15)**

The kinds of "non-research activity" that must not be associated in any way with the carrying out of marketing research include:

- Enquiries whose objectives are to obtain personal information about private individuals per se, whether for legal, political, supervisory (e.g., job performance), private or other purposes;
- The acquisition of information for use for credit-rating or similar purposes;
- The compilation, updating or enhancement of lists, registers or databases that are not for scientific research purposes (e.g., those that may be used for direct marketing);
- Industrial, commercial or any other form of espionage;
- Sales or promotional approaches to individual Respondents;
- The collection of debts; and
- Fund-raising.

Certain of these activities - in particular, the collection of information for databases for subsequent use in direct marketing and similar operations - are legitimate activities in their own right. Researchers (e.g. those working within a client company) may be involved with such activities either directly or indirectly. In such cases it is essential that a very clear distinction be made between such activities and marketing research. Any work that involves the collection and use of personal data for non-research purposes (such as those listed above) must not be carried out under the name of marketing research or of a marketing research organisation as such, or be incorporated into a marketing research survey. Personal data collected for marketing research purposes must never be used in connection with non-research activities such as direct marketing.

However, the use of marketing research data in connection with non-research databases is permissible where Researchers have first ensured that such research information has been fully depersonalised (i.e., anonymised). A common way of achieving this is by "modelling" the research data before its fusion with any other data. This is permissible only if there is no risk that any data in the database which is derived from marketing research could be linked to individual Respondents or Data Subjects.

These issues are considered at greater length in the ESOMAR Guideline on Maintaining the Distinctions between Marketing Research and Direct Marketing.

There are no additional requirements which apply to customer satisfaction research in cases where no personal data are disclosed outside the research organisation(s) responsible for the project. Furthermore, if a survey sample or mailing list has been provided for the project by an outside company (eg client or other research organisation) it is also reasonable for the Researcher to notify that company of any names and addresses which have been found during the course of the survey to be no longer operational (eg because a Respondent has died or moved away from the address given). The situation is more complex in the case of a study which may involve other data about identified Respondents (eg specific queries or comments) being disclosed outside the research organisation: these issues are addressed in more detail in a separate ESOMAR Guideline on Customer Satisfaction Research.

### **(Rule 25)**

The Client is entitled to the following information about any marketing research project to which he has subscribed:

## 1. Background

- for whom the study was conducted
- the purpose of the study
- names of subcontractors and consultants performing any substantial part of the work

## 2. Sample

- a description of the intended and actual universe covered
- the size, nature and geographical distribution of the sample (both planned and achieved); and where relevant, the extent to which any of the data collected were obtained from only part of the sample
- details of the sampling method and any weighting methods used
- where technically relevant, a statement of response rates and a discussion of any possible bias due to non-response

## 3. Data collection

- a description of the method by which the information was collected
- a description of the field staff, briefing and field quality control methods used
- the method of recruiting Respondents; and the general nature of any incentives offered to secure their co-operation
- when the fieldwork was carried out
- (in the case of 'desk research') a clear statement of the sources of the information and their likely reliability

## 4. Presentation of results

- the relevant factual findings obtained
- bases of percentages (both weighted and unweighted)
- general indications of the probable statistical margins of error to be attached to the main findings, and of the levels of statistical significance of differences between key figures
- the questionnaire and other relevant documents and materials used (or, in the case of a shared project, that portion relating to the matter reported on).

The Report on a project should normally cover the above points or provide a reference to a readily available separate document which contains the information.

### ***(Rule 27)***

It is clearly impossible for a Researcher fully to control the ways in which research findings are interpreted or applied once these are in the public domain. However, Researchers should use their best endeavours to prevent any misinterpretation or misuse of research findings, and (as far as is practicable) to correct any such misinterpretation or misuse once they become aware that this has happened.

The publication of research findings may sometimes prove to be misleading because certain of the technical aspects or limitations of the research have not been fully appreciated and/or because the public presentation, explanation and discussion of the findings (eg in the media) have not clearly spelt out all the relevant considerations. This can happen accidentally, or as a result of the pressures on media time and space, rather than for any more undesirable reason. Researchers can reduce the danger of such problems arising by making sure (eg in their contract for a research project) that they are consulted in advance by the Client about the form in which any research findings will be published. If following publication it becomes clear that serious misinterpretation of the research and its findings has occurred, leading to misleading discussion of the implications of the research, the Researcher should endeavour to

correct such misinterpretation by any available and appropriate means.

In a case where the Client does not consult and agree in advance the form of publication with the researcher, the latter is entitled to:

- (i) refuse permission for his name to be used in connection with the published findings and
- (ii) publish the appropriate technical details of the project (as listed in the Notes to Rule 25).

### **(Rule 29)**

It is recommended that Researchers specify in their research proposals that they follow the requirements of this ICC/ESOMAR International Code and that they make a copy available to the Client if the latter does not already have one.

## **Guideline to the Interpretation of the International Code of Practice for the Publication of Public Opinion Poll Results**

These Guidelines to the Interpretation of the Code for the Publication of Opinion Polls are designed to help answer some of the questions and problems which inevitably arise when putting the Code's recommendations into practice.

### **5.1 General principles**

1. The key consideration must be to hold firmly to the objectives and spirit of the Code. ESOMAR will look for steady progress in the general standards reached.
2. ESOMAR appreciates that it may not always be easy to persuade some clients that certain recommendations should be adhered to in the public interest. Also it is essential to recognise and support the important principle of (responsible) editorial freedom. In the words of the Code itself, members are expected to **use their "best endeavours"** to achieve the objectives laid down in the interests both of their profession and of the public in general.
3. 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.
4. 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.
5. Many research organisations already exercise strong control over the way in which their research findings are publicly reported on through the form of contract they have with their clients. This is a desirable safeguard which is referred to again later in the Guidelines.
6. 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 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 Code's Introduction Point 9 later in these Guidelines).

## 5.2 Specific issues

### Introduction to point 9

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 Point 9 of the Introduction is intended to apply mainly to the case of **repeated deliberate misinterpretation**, not to more limited "technical" short-comings in the published reports.

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 B3

Although the wording of this article is not completely mandatory, its recommendations are strong ones and should be adhered to as far as possible. Experience in certain countries demonstrates that, even without the backing of legislation (as applies for example to certain aspects of polling in France), 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 1995."*

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, personally interviewed between 25th-28th February 1996 in 86 locations. Random sample (effective interviews = 76% of those eligible for interview)"*

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.

Also, where a given survey is reported on 'serially' (for example in the course of several consecutive issues of a newspaper) it will frequently be unnecessary to repeat all the technical details in every issue.

These situations are the exceptions. Most published reports on public opinion polls refer to much more limited studies than these. Even in the more complex cases it should frequently be possible to give much of the key information asked for in Article B3 other than the detailed question wordings. In all cases where the key information cannot be fully provided the basic principle of fair and informative reporting must be followed, and it should be made clear how and where the serious enquirer can obtain fuller details.

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 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. Although it is preferable wherever possible to quote the actual success rate, the main requirement is therefore to indicate if the success rate is below that regarded in the profession as "normal" for the type of study (this is a matter for experienced professional judgement).

(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 quite possible to include the questions without overloading the published report.

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 B4**

In the case of broadcast media, where the scope for providing basic information about a survey is clearly more restricted, some research organisations currently arrange with their client to provide a press release at the same time as the broadcast report on a survey. Such a press release can more easily include some kind of fact sheet covering all the basic pieces of information referred to in Article B3. The publication of this type of information on the Internet is also a way of making fuller detail available. These types of practices are strongly recommended.

**Article B5** 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 B6**

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.

#### **Article B7**

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 C9**

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 interests. 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 prevaricating the analysis of 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.

### 5.3 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 fund-supplier 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

Certain contracts also provide 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 tapes 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.

### 5.4 Summary

Any code of practice in this area must have 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.

## Guidelines on Practical Aspects of Conducting Pre-Election Opinion Polls

### 6.1 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 political 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 European 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.

#### 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 cannot guarantee highly precise measurement by every single poll. Also, the measurement of stated intentions to vote cannot guarantee that all electors 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 electors to ensure that polls, especially those polls published in the last few days of an election campaign, provide reliable and objective information.

## 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.

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. Also 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, though they play no part in informing the voter in the democratic process.

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. ESOMAR hopes that these guidelines will contribute to the technical education of journalists responsible for poll reporting. However, special care must still be taken by polling organisations to minimise the risk of “getting it wrong”.

## 6.2 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.

### 1. General design

A major issue in the design of a pre-election opinion poll is reconciling the rather contradictory needs for large sample sizes and also for fieldwork dates as close as possible to polling day. Larger samples produce more reliable measurements but also take longer to carry out. This in turn makes them less up to date than a later survey with a smaller sample.

**Guideline** *Historically, in elections with volatile electorates, the closeness of fieldwork to polling day has been more important than sample size or sampling purity. If very large samples are collected, the events of the campaign may affect voters after the completion of much of the fieldwork but before the analysis and publication of the poll findings.*

### 2. Timing of fieldwork

Anyone attempting to prepare a critical case about polls would certainly decide that the date of publication of a poll is a key date. 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 some time in the evening when electors in full-time employment are available for interview.*

### 3. Sample size

The measurement of the share of the vote for a party is subject to the normal statistical confidence limits for sample surveys. Two factors affect the size of the confidence limit of any party share. The first is the absolute level of support for a party. The closer this gets to 50%, the wider will be the confidence limit around the share estimate. The second is the size of the sample interviewed in order to produce the estimate. In most pre-election polls the size of the sample is the more important factor.

In countries with a simple proportional representation system, the pre-election poll measurement of the share of the vote to each party is a fair indicator of the election outcome. In other electoral systems this may not be the case. In the UK, for example, the winner in each constituency is the candidate with the most votes. However, the best that the polls can do is estimate the share of the vote to each party at a national level. The key statistic reported in the media is the gap in share of vote between the leading parties, and the measurement of the gap has much larger confidence limits than those for an individual party's share.

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

### 4. Sample distribution

In European countries there are two main approaches to selecting samples for face to face interviews.

#### Method 1

Select sampling points in proportion to the number of electors. 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.

**Guideline** *There is empirical evidence that if the number of interviews per sampling point*

*exceeds 20, then the influence of increased interviewer variation outweighs increased sample size.*

## **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** *Polls using this method should still aim to minimise the number of interviews conducted by any single interviewer and stick to the maximum of 20.*

**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.*

## **5. Telephone interviewing**

There has been technical debate about the use of telephone interviewing for opinion polls. In principle telephone surveys offer high quality, unclustered, random samples, with fast completion of fieldwork. However, in most EU 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.

**Guideline** *If telephone ownership is not extremely high (85%+) and is by definition likely to produce an unrepresentative sample, this method of interview should not be used for pre-election polls.*

In countries with high phone ownership, it may be possible to establish weighting systems which largely compensate for the unrepresentativeness of telephone samples.

**Guideline** *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.*

## **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. 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 (see section 6.2.11 for additional information).

**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 is that of electors eligible to vote rather than the more normal all adults profile used in commercial market research.*

## **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.

Experience has shown that voting intention measurements in some countries 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.

**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.*

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.

Where adjustments to the "simple" poll findings are made, this should be noted in the publication of the poll findings.

## **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.*

## **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.*

## **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.*

## **11. Indicator variables**

It is possible to interview a sample representative as far as age, sex and social grade are concerned, but still have a politically unrepresentative sample. For example, section 6.2.2 above referred to the issue of representing working electors by ensuring that the fieldwork period includes some evening interviewing.

It would be good practice in a pre-election poll to include the collection of information which is correlated with voting behaviour but which is not part of the quota control. The item should have a known penetration from alternative sources.

For example, in the UK membership of a trade union can serve this purpose. It is correlated with party support and should not change its penetration substantially from survey to survey. If a demographically representative poll produces an estimate of trade union membership which is too high, the poll will probably overstate the vote for Labour. In other countries variables such as religion or language spoken may be possible indicator variables if they have not been used in the design of the survey quota controls.

**Guideline** *Polling companies should be encouraged to develop an indicator variable for sample weighting purposes. In the period between elections it is possible to calibrate the electoral implication of an over or under representation of the indicator variable.*

## **12. "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 by telephone to check whether they have changed their mind in a way that would support the unusual finding in the final poll (this however, would be 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 20:1 in favour of the poll being correct and voters do change their minds even in the polling booth.*

## **13. Exit polls**

An increasingly popular component of the television coverage of election nights is the exit poll. These are not based on nationally representative samples of voters asked their voting intention. They are based on selections of electors leaving samples of voting places. The technical requirements of this sort of poll are very different from pre-election opinion polls and are outside the scope of these guidelines.

The methodology for exit polls varies from country to country and is still being developed. Elections are quite rare events and it is impossible to test exit poll methods except at elections. Some years will be needed before it is possible to provide guidelines for the conduct

of exit polls.

#### **14. Local Laws**

All pre-election polls must be carried out in conformance with local laws. If any guides in this document contravene local legislation, the local laws must take priority.

*ESOMAR's mission is to promote the use of opinion and market research for improving decision making in business and society worldwide. Founded in 1948, ESOMAR unites 4000 members in 100 countries. The Society facilitates the exchange of experiences between suppliers and users of research in order to optimise the integration of research results into the decision making process.*

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