

AIMRO

Professional Guidelines On The Conduct & Publication Of
Public Opinion Polls In Ireland

1. INTRODUCTION

Since Public Opinion research represents part of the total spectrum of the market research industry, these guidelines are compatible with those of ESOMAR and WAPOR.

They have been prepared against the background that public opinion polling is a particularly sensitive area, dealing with issues of considerable public interest and emotion, with the findings on most occasions widely published and debated. A further element of this background is the strong reputation which the main Irish opinion polling companies have established over the past twenty years. In most respects therefore, these guidelines replicate the procedures which have been used by these Irish research organisations.

Although the reputation of public opinion polling in Ireland is now well established, it remains an inexact science, and the main technical approaches which are in use today reflect modifications to the ideal approach, necessitated by the constraints of time and money. The recommended guidelines therefore, for the conduct of opinion polls, are to a large extent based on the technical procedures which have been successfully used by the main research companies here over the past 20 years or so, and relate to surveys covering the Republic Of Ireland.

These guidelines cover both public pre-election opinion polls and public exit polls.

2. CONDUCTING PUBLIC OPINION POLLS

In the conduct of opinion polls, there are three essential technical elements which must be addressed:

- Sample design
- Method of data collection, and
- The questionnaire

AIMRO outlines its viewpoint and its recommendations on each.

A fourth aspect, i.e. the manner in which the findings of opinion polls are presented by the research agency and reported upon by the media, is dealt with in Section 3.

2.1. Sample Design

2.1.1. Sample Size & Clustering Of Interviews

The minimum sample size for a national published opinion poll should be 1,000 respondents, with a minimum sample size of 500 for constituency polls. For face to face surveys, interviews should be distributed over not fewer than 50 sampling locations. This also means that the number of interviews per sampling location should not exceed 20, nor should the number of interviews conducted by each individual interviewer exceed 20.

The AIMRO standard is that priority should be given to maximising the number of sampling points and minimising the number of interviews conducted by each interviewer. The absolute minimum number of sampling points should be 50.

2.1.2. Weighting

The demographic profile of polls should be checked for representativeness, and if necessary weighting factors should be applied to correctly represent the electorate.

2.1.3. Adjustments

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

As a 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.

2.2. Method Of Collection Of Data

There are four main methods of collecting data on opinion polls.

2.2.1. In Home Face To Face

The most commonly used, tried and tested means of conducting opinion polls in Ireland. See Section 2.1.1 for guidelines in relation to minimum sample size and distribution of interviews.

2.2.2. In Street

Although in street interviewing has been used to quite an extent in the UK, it is not recommended for use in Ireland for the following reasons.

- Some types of people are more likely than others to be encountered in the street e.g. young, unemployed, housewives, non-car drivers, etc., while older people and those in business for instance are less likely. While quotas in terms of age, sex/status, social class etc can be filled, that does not necessarily mean that the sample is fully representative in other lifestyle terms.
- There has been no evidence where in street interviewing has been used, that adequate filtering procedures were in place to ensure that the sampling clusters applied to a particular designated constituency. Many in street respondents could have travelled quite a distance from their place of residence before being interviewed, which would lead to imprecise adherence to selection parameters and lack of control.
- Pressure of time on people in street leads to higher than average refusal rates, which could yield biased samples in this critical area.
- Furthermore, it is not accepted that the in street environment provides a composed background for a survey interview, where the findings – and consequent reputation of the industry – attract considerable attention in the public arena. If for any reasons, an in street methodology is adopted, the above limitations must be adequately addressed.

2.2.3. Telephone

In principle telephone surveys offer high quality, unclustered, random samples with fast completion of fieldwork. However, in many countries including Ireland, telephone ownership is not 100%. As such, it will be necessary to find a satisfactory way to sample non-telephone owners. Telephone ownership or availability is frequently correlated with voting intention, i.e. those who cannot be contacted by phone are more likely to support one rather than another of the parties in the election. This may also be the case for those telephone owners who are not listed in

the telephone directory which is why random digit dialling is to be preferred. Furthermore, in populations such as Ireland with high ownership of mobile telephones, it will also be necessary to find a satisfactory way to sample mobile telephone owners who do not have a landline.

Where telephone polling is conducted, the above limitations must be adequately addressed.

2.2.4. Internet Interviewing

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

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

2.3. The Questionnaire

It is essential that the principles of questionnaire design are fully adhered to in all public opinion polls, as is the case in all quantitative research projects.

AIMRO recommends that special attention be paid to the following points:

- Questions must be non directional – never leading. Options/alternative answers must be clearly set out and evenly balanced.
- In terms of sequence, early questions should not influence those which follow. (If not possible, a comment should be made on the sequence and its possible effect.)
- Phraseology must be simple and unambiguous.
- Names listed on prompt cards must be rotated, and never presented solely in alphabetical order. Each name on prompt lists should appear in top position for presentation to equal numbers of respondents.
- When using a simulated ballot paper, names should, of course, be presented in alphabetical sequence as on official ballot papers.

2.4. *Timing*

Since opinion polls attract considerable media interest, and in the interests of maintaining the reputation of the industry, it is essential that survey findings are published as soon as is practicable following the completion of interviewing – and in no circumstances should the time interval for political opinion polls be longer than two weeks. This provision i.e. the minimising of the time gap between fieldwork and publication – is particularly relevant during election campaigns.

While the full publication parameters are set out in Section 3 which follows, there are no circumstances in which the fieldwork dates should not be published.

The AIMRO standard is that the final pre-Election polls should be published within 3/4 days of fieldwork.

2.5. General

It is advocated, when opinion polls are conducted for media interests, that research companies do not accept time and other commitments to the extent that the minimum technical standards are prejudiced. Examples of this are not extending survey interviewing over mornings, afternoons and evenings, and also using fewer than 50 sampling points.

2.6. Exit Polls

An increasingly popular component of the election coverage is the exit poll. These are based on selections of electors leaving samples of voting places. Given that the profile of voters changes by time of day, it is important that exit polls collect information up to the point at which the polls close. If this is not possible, a clear warning should be published and the results based on the full sample published as soon as possible.

Exit polls should collect information across the whole of the polling day. No statement about the outcome of an election based on exit polls should be published before all the polls in the contest have closed (in national elections, this means polls relating to local election results can be reported at constituency or state level as the polls close, rather than waiting until the nation has voted). Information other than voting behaviour may be published before the polls have closed.

3. THE PUBLICATION OF PUBLIC OPINION POLL RESULTS

3.1. Basic Publication Requirements

The AIMRO recommendation, in line with that of ESOMAR and WAPOR, requires that when opinion poll findings are published in print media, they should always be accompanied by a clear statement of:

- a. The name of the organisation which conducted the survey, and a clear statement that the organisation is an accredited member of AIMRO.
- b. The population to which the survey relates (i.e. who was interviewed)
- c. The achieved sample size and its geographical coverage
- d. The dates of fieldwork
- e. The sampling method used
- f. The method by which the information was collected (personal, telephone, online, etc)
- g. The relevant questions asked. The actual wording should be given unless the question is a standard one, already familiar to readers.

In regard to the broadcast media, as a minimum points a to d should normally be covered in any broadcast reference.

3.2. Publication Of Questions

The depth of interest created by opinion poll findings, allied to the many comments by political observers emphasises the desirability and necessity of publishing the relevant questions with the poll findings, except in those instances where standard questions are already familiar to the audience.

The AIMRO standard is the publication of the full text of all new questions. Edited versions of the actual questions is unacceptable as this may mislead readers.