

# 10 things to know about polls

## Decoding conflicting results, spin requires a few key rules of analysis

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WASHINGTON — With the last 70 national surveys showing him trailing Barack Obama, you can understand why John McCain is looking at the polls with a dollop of skepticism.

"Look," he told NBC's Tom Brokaw on Sunday, "those polls have consistently shown me much further behind than we actually are. ... We're doing fine. We have closed (the gap) in the last week."

Next Tuesday, we'll find out whether the GOP presidential candidate knows a deeper reality that has eluded the nation's pollsters — or if he's simply trying to spin his way out of a deep political hole.

But McCain is not the only person confused by the mass of polling information that has inundated voters, who sometimes find it difficult to cut through the conflicting numbers and partisan spin.

Even the best survey researchers acknowledge that their business is not a perfect science. Veteran University of Houston pollster Richard Murray said polling is "like pulling marbles out of a bag."

"They're not necessarily good predictors about how the election will turn out."

To help you navigate through the polling barrage, here are 10 rules of the research road.

**Rule 1: Polls are just a snapshot in time.** Even the most accurate survey only reflects public opinion on the day it was taken. People sometimes change their minds.

"Polls don't tell you what's going to happen. They just tell you what's happening now," said Stephen Jessee, a political scientist at the University of Texas at Austin.

Public opinion has been known to shift in the final days of a campaign. Still, in most modern general elections, from Walter Mondale in 1984 to John Kerry in 2004, the final margin was remarkably similar to mid-October polling.

**Rule 2: Beware the outliers.** Over the weekend, McCain cited national surveys showing him within 2 and 3 percentage points of Democratic presidential candidate Obama. Among 11 public polls conducted this past week, those are the only two showing it that close. On the opposite extreme, the CBS/New York Times poll and the Newsweek survey show Obama ahead by 13 and 12 percentage points.

Here's a good rule of thumb: Take a look at the national polls taken in the past week. Cross out the two with the biggest and smallest margins. Average those in the middle. If you follow that rule, Obama would be running 7 points ahead of McCain.

**Rule 3: It's very unlikely that every poll is wrong.** Even the most scientific poll has an "escape clause," noting they are valid 95 percent of the time. That means that one in every 20 good polls can draw inaccurate conclusions. But it's unlikely that all 20 will be off at the same time. McCain has not led in a national poll since September.

**Rule 4: Look for the trends.** One major mistake that reporters often make is to compare one company's poll to another's. The best way to figure out where a race stands is to compare the same poll over time — or look at averages of major polls on Web sites such as [realclearpolitics.com](http://realclearpolitics.com) or [pollster.com](http://pollster.com).

Real Clear Politics' average of presidential polls shows almost no change over the past two weeks. On Oct. 13, Obama led by 50.1 percent to 42.9 percent — a 7.2 point lead. Two weeks later, Obama lead by 50.5 percent to 43.2 percent — or 7.3 points.

**Rule 5: Beware TV hype about the race tightening.** Who's going to watch 24/7 election coverage every day if they think the election is over? It's in the interest of TV networks to keep the contest alive. So you'll see partisan talking heads — and a few nonpartisan pundits — talking about the race getting closer. It always happens, whether it's true or not. Remember the October surges of Michael Dukakis, George H.W. Bush and Kerry? TV reported them, but they never happened.

**Rule 6: Remember the margin of error.** Make sure to read the fine print of every poll. Each poll has a built-in error margin, usually 3 to 5 percentage points for each candidate. That means that an Oct. 21 Rasmussen Reports poll showing Texas Sen. John Cornyn leading Democratic challenger Rick Noriega by 15 percentage points could be as close as 6 points or as wide open as 24 points. The only time you should consider a lead solid is when it is larger than the error margin.

**Rule 7: Polling is an art as well as a science — and nobody knows exactly who is going to vote.** Each poll makes predictions by creating equations likely to screen out people who are not going to vote.

Frank Newport, president of Gallup Poll, said Democratic efforts to "increase turnout abnormally" is testing pollsters' efforts to come up with a reliable snapshot of the electorate that will show up Election Day.

Gallup is coping with the issue by taking two parallel polls. Its traditional turnout model shows Obama 5 points ahead of McCain. Its experimental model, which gives greater weight to the opinion of infrequent voters, gives Obama a 10-point lead. We'll find out on Election Day which model is more accurate.

**Rule 8: Beware polls that oversample Democrats or Republicans.** Democrats outnumber Republicans in the country by roughly 7 percentage points. But because of the random nature of telephone polling, some surveys interview more Democrats or Republicans than there are in the general population. Some pollsters, like John Zogby, adjust their numbers to account for partisan differences. But others, like Gallup and ABC, do not. So, look carefully to see that the partisan makeup of the polling sample reflects the voting population.

**Rule 9: Watch out for "snap" polls.** "Snap polls" are taken on just one night because they are easier to conduct and cost less. But they also are fraught with problems. People who are not at home when the pollster calls are not counted, which can skew the sample against younger people and working women, among others. Samples taken over three nights — with people getting called back — are less likely to be flawed.

**Rule 10: Beware partisan polls.** Surveys taken for candidates are often released for political gain, not public enlightenment. Be particularly careful if a partisan touts a poll without releasing the exact wording of the entire survey.

It is easy to bias a study by stating inflammatory information about the opposing candidate before asking the so-called "horse-race question."

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