Chapter 1
Why Polling Is Important

In This Chapter
▶ Discovering the function of public opinion polls
▶ Positioning public opinion in democracy
▶ Improving business earnings and efficiency

Basically, public opinion is simply what you and other people think about what you see, hear and experience. But to know how people feel about an issue or a product, someone has to conduct a poll, which is the process of asking people what they think about a topic, keeping track of their answers, and then analyzing the results.

Gathering Public Opinion: Who Does It and Why

The opinion research business is built on one simple concept: The best way to find out what people think is to ask them.

Think your opinion doesn’t count? Not true. In fact, public opinion is the most powerful force in the world; it helps shape government policy and determine which products come to market. Public opinion can be more powerful than the mightiest armies and weapons — public opinion, after all, determines whether nations go to war. Have I convinced you yet?

Looking at who uses polls

The best-known form of calculating what people think are the election “horse race” polls showing which candidates and political parties are ahead or trailing. Election polls, however,
are only a sliver of the opinion research business — an industry that employs thousands of people and takes in millions of dollars each year.

Most polls are never published, but a variety of entities use them:

- Businesses use polls to help improve their services and products by gathering and reviewing consumers’ feedback.
- Employers depend on confidential employee comments to get ideas on how to keep their staff engaged in their work and happy on the job.
- Governments use polls to gather information to help make public services better.
- Nonprofit organizations and charities use opinion polling to determine their donors’ priorities — poverty? children? job training? — along with the method they prefer to use and how often they want to contribute.
- Unions take surveys to find out what changes their members want in the workplace.

Market and opinion research helps make goods and services better. Business executives find new markets through customer surveys. Advertisers discover what triggers consumers’ buying decisions. Politicians and interest groups poll to find how to persuade voters. Questions such as “How’d we do today?” and “What could we do better?” are the reason the opinion and market research industry is growing.

**Preventing failure by asking questions**

A big benefit of polling is preventing mistakes. Better to ask first and discover that customers or employees or voters don’t like your products or services or ideas than risk failing in the marketplace or in the market of public opinion. Firms put off making big investments until the executives who have to sign off on the spending know what their customers want or what people likely to be affected by the company’s plans are thinking.
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For example, a manufacturer polls its neighbors to find out what they think of a proposed change in operations at the company’s production facilities. Knowing whether the change will upset nearby residents helps the company navigate the zoning process and devise a strategy for getting all the approvals it needs.

Asking customers what they think helps companies sell the goods and services that keep them profitable (instead of pushing products at consumers who don’t want them). Asking taxpayers about public services helps officials determine where to build (or close) libraries, ice rinks, schools, hospitals, and highways.

After a plan goes awry, somebody always wonders, “Who could have known?” or “Who would have thought?” You can know, however, if you poll before making a big decision.

Keeping scores and benchmarks

Everyone at some time wants to know, “How’m I doin’?” Bowlers want to see their scores, so the pins they knock over appear on screens above the lanes. Retailers want to know if their customers feel their stores are living up to shoppers’ expectations. Where customer feelings matter most is in businesses that offer the same basic products as their competition — think of banks.

Banks charge essentially the same fees for loans and services. So if you’re a banker who wants to grow your bank or improve your bottom line, a good way is to stand out from your competitors with better customer service. The only way to know whether your tellers and customer service representatives are keeping clients loyal to the bank is to ask your customers. One major bank in Canada polls customers every single night — customer feedback is that important to the people managing the bank.

When you ask customers over and again what they think of their experiences with your product or service — a polling method called tracking — the polling results show whether front-line employees are doing a better job today than they were a month or a year ago.
Governments can’t afford to run a referendum every day to find out what citizens want their government to do. Fortunately, they don’t have to — polling is much cheaper.

Polls are just as reliable as elections, or reliable enough to know what the public is thinking without spending the money and time to have people vote on all the vital decisions their governments make.

One of the best reasons to support government polls is that surveys amplify the voices of small groups in society. It’s easy to overlook or ignore people who own no media, can’t afford lobbyists or have no money to run TV commercials or other expensive publicity efforts. But these minorities get a voice when polls reveal that not everybody agrees with the government.

Public opinion polls are the lungs of democracy. In dictatorships, rulers may know that public opinion is against them, but despots don’t need to care what people think. In a democracy, where public opinion matters, opinions are registered through polls.

Opinion counts for nothing unless it’s tabulated so that someone knows how many people agree or what percentage disagree.

An old pollsters’ joke says the reason to hold elections is to see how accurate the polls were! But voter surveys don’t substitute for elections; they make elections even more important.

Preelection polls sometimes are off a few percentage points, and occasionally get the finish order wrong. But around the world, election polls have a good performance record overall. Election polls also safeguard democracy. Politicians tempted to steal elections are unlikely to get away with stuffing ballot
boxes if polls consistently show the voters intend to elect somebody else.

In democracies, leaders lay out choices for the people. Polls reveal what people think about the alternatives politicians come up with. You’re simply a better-informed voter when you know from the polls which policies a candidate embraces are attractive to voters and which are not.

A poll is not a prediction; it’s simply a gauge. Consider polls like a compass or GPS — navigation aids that don’t tell you where to go but just help you get there.

Improving civic life

When the government surveys people about public services, service to the public improves. Officials in charge of everything the government does — recycling the garbage, running the public schools, ensuring the public’s health — also rely on polls to tell them how to make public services more efficient. Polling helps citizens get a better deal for the taxes they pay.

Suppose a poll shows homeowners would accept less-frequent garbage pickup, or commuters want more-frequent bus service and are willing to pay higher fares for it. Information like this helps people in government make decisions that improve our lives. When tax money is involved, officials can’t risk guessing. Taking a poll is cheaper.

Putting the best face on poll results

In nearly every major election someone says it’s time to ban polls, often complaining that polls affect election results. Other people worry that the organizations that buy polls and release the results are trying to manipulate public opinion, which they often are.

Advocacy groups that flash their poll findings are saying, “See, a lot of people agree with us — you ought to agree with us too.” But releasing poll results doesn’t change public opinion.

The modern electorate is wise to the ways of politicians, and everyone knows interest groups release polling results to put a positive spin on their views.
Increasing Business Efficiency and Reducing Risks

Companies do market research to make their products and services better. Every year, people in companies all over the world imagine new products. Those companies, however, could easily go bankrupt launching products and services they assume people want instead of checking with the intended customers first.

Instead of making a product and then trying to convince people to buy it, it’s smarter — and cheaper — to test it first.

When you tell a market researcher what you think of the products you’ve bought, or the services you wish someone would offer, you’re making the marketplace a better place. Innovation doesn’t begin in the research laboratory, after all. Innovation begins in the mind — in the minds of consumers, who have usually thought of the new products and services they want before companies actually put them on the shelves.

When a company decides not to spend money producing stuff no one wants, the company is more productive. When firms spend their money developing the things that market research shows consumers actually want, the whole economy is more efficient.

Market research makes business more customer-friendly and reduces wasteful spending (meaning firms are more likely to be profitable). Customer surveys reduce the chances companies will have failing products, falling sales, and disappointing profits. Instead, by using survey research, firms invest more strategically, leading to more profits and more jobs. Profitable companies also pay more taxes than firms that fail!