A public opinion survey is the best way to measure people’s behavior and attitudes.
Polls and surveys are so prevalent in American life.
More informative than voting
An inappropriate survey technique leads to a wrong conclusion.
Survey Research

The quality of data and the validity and reliability of the measurements depend on the following issues:

- Modes of survey
- Question wording
- Question types
- Question order
Types of Surveys

The quality of data often depends on the types of surveys.

- Face-to-face
- Telephone
- Mail (and Email)
- Internet
Characteristics of Surveys

1. **Response Rate**
   - The proportion of persons selected for participation in a survey who actually participate
   - Face-to-face > telephone > mail and internet

2. **Representativeness**
   - Sample-population congruence
   - Determined by initial selection of respondents or incomplete participation of those selected
   - Face-to-face > telephone > mail and internet

3. **Response quality**
   - Respondents provide accurate and complete information
   - Face-to-face > telephone > mail and internet

4. **Overall Cost**
   - Money and time
   - Face-to-face > telephone > mail and internet
Types of Information from Surveys

- Facts (e.g., respondents’ educational attainment)
- Perceptions (e.g., perception of national economic situation)
- Attitudes (e.g., conservative or liberal, agree or disagree on policy issues)
- Behavioral reports (e.g., voted or not in last election)
Should be chosen to measure accurately people’s beliefs, attitudes, opinions, and behavior

- **Double-barreled question**
  - “Do you agree with the statement that the situation in Iraq is deteriorating and that the US should increase the number of troops in Iraq?”

- **Ambiguous question**
  - “What is your income?”
  - “Rate the two presidential candidates’ performance in a TV debate as good, bad, or indifferent”
  - “How would you rate President Bush’s performance so far?”
    - (A) Great (B) Somewhere between great and terrible (C) Terrible
Question Wording

- **Leading question**
  - Encourages respondents to choose a particular response because the question indicates that the researcher expects it.
  - “Don’t you think that global warming is a serious environmental problem?”
  - “Recently the Soviet armed forces openly invaded the independent county of Afghanistan. Do you think the U.S. should supply military equipment to the rebel freedom fighters?”
Close-ended question

“Do you agree that Mr. Kerry cares for people like me?” (A) strongly agree (B) agree (C) neither agree nor disagree (D) disagree (E) strongly disagree

Easy to answer for survey respondents

Less information but low costs

Open-ended question

“Is there anything in particular about Mr. Obama that might make you want to vote for him?”

Difficult to answer for survey respondents

More information but high costs for coding
Question Type

- **Single-sided question**
  
  “Do you agree or disagree with the idea that the government should see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living?” (A) agree (B) disagree (C) don’t know

- **Two-sided question**
  
  “Do you think that the government should see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living, or should it let each person get ahead on his or her own?” (A) provide job (B) let people get ahead on their own
Question Order Effects

- Answering a survey is a learning situation.
- The previous content of the interview might have an impact on a response to a specific question.

Example:
- “The United States should let Communist newspaper reporters from other countries come here and send back to their papers the news as they see it.” 55% said yes
- “A Communist country like Russia should allow American newspaper reporters to come in and send back the news as they see it.” If this question is asked before the above one, 75% said yes to the above question

- A consistency effect: an answer to a question may be constrained by an answer given earlier.
Question Order Effects

- Sensitive and complex questions should be left to the end.
- **Response set**: a series of questions have the same answer choices. Respondents who find themselves agreeing with the first several statements may skim over subsequent statements and check “agree” on all.
Social Desirability

- People tend to report normatively desirable behavior or attitudes to interviewers.
- Voting, drug use, racial attitudes etc.
- **Social desirability bias** is reduced when privacy is ensured.
Today, most surveys are conducted by telephone rather than in person.

- Random-digit dialing
- Nonresponse and representativeness
- Nonresponse led to an overrepresentation of the elderly, women, the poor, and the less educated.
- The pollsters’ major telephone-related problem is the growing reliance on cell phones.