

Fundamentals for Transparent Polling

By Daniel Lindgren

With the first ever direct Jakarta Governor Election looming, we start to see election polls quoted in the daily press. Looking at the results from some recent surveys the results are amazingly different. How can we assess whether the results are accurate? Some would suggest push polling or it may just be poor research but how do we weed out the good from the bad? Evaluating research polls is not always easy but understanding some of the fundamentals can go a long way. The key is never to take anything for granted but to carefully evaluate any election poll.

First, we must be suspicious if two or more polls come up with very different results. This will only happen if one, or perhaps several, polls were poorly executed or the actual data was in some way manipulated. Of course, if the research poll is in line with our expectations then probably few of us will bother to question the results. But whilst certainly the research results themselves provides for an indicative appraisal of whether the poll can be taken seriously, our analysis should not necessarily stop with that. An important aspect to consider is the methodology behind the poll.

The first simple question that we should keep in mind when evaluating research polls is: how was the data collected? Today's pollsters have a number of data collection options at their disposal including face-to-face interviewing, mail, phone, SMS and the Internet to name a few. Of these, however, face-to-face interviewing is often the most reliable method when conducting opinion polls in Indonesia mainly due to low phone penetration. In fact, there are now more mobile phones than connected landlines in Indonesia. Internet penetration is very low indeed even among people in large cities like Jakarta. Because of this, there is a very strong skew towards people who are better off financially. Hence, a phone poll would not be representative as many people in lower socioeconomic classes would be systematically excluded. The same would apply to an internet survey but with an even more extreme skew. TNS Indonesia recently carried out a poll examining the upcoming election in Jakarta. When looking at candidate preference across different socioeconomic segments it is clear that some candidates have a stronger preference amongst higher socioeconomic classes whilst others appeal more to those in the lower brackets. Hence, the data collection method used becomes critical for achieving accurate results.

A second indicator worth taking note of is the actual target group for the study. For an election in Jakarta it is pretty straight forward, residents of Jakarta who on the election day will be 17 years of age or older, or married if younger. Consequently, a survey with university graduates would not be representative for example. But focusing on eligible voters is not the only criteria, they must also be deemed willing to participate. Asking a person who have no intention of voting who they would vote for is

meaningless. Hence, serious pollsters should also share data on expected voter intention or participation. Voter preference is then only asked of those who intend to participate. For the upcoming direct election for Jakarta Governor, the participation is estimated to be around 84%. This number can, and will, of course change over time. Consequently it is an important piece of information to monitor over time. Currently, voter intention is highest for males (91%) and lowest for socioeconomic class DE combined (72%). It is interesting to note that nearly half (48%) of eligible voters are not aware that there will be a direct election in Jakarta next year. That percentage will of course steadily diminish as the election draws closer.

Coming back to the issue of what indicates whether a poll is reliable, there is also the issue of how questions are formulated. The scope for question bias can be quite significant. Again, at times it can make good sense to show how the question was asked. For example, in the case of next years direct election for Governor in Jakarta, when asking respondents to name their preferred candidate, do we state this as an open ended question, in which case they can name any person including irrelevant ones, or do we show a list of possible candidates? Doing one or the other would no doubt result in vastly different outcomes. The practice should be to simulate the actual Election Day as far as possible, in which case the respondent will have a list of eligible candidates to choose from. Of course, at this point in time candidates are competing for nominations and some may pull out at a later stage. But that does not warrant asking preference in an open ended format. Instead, a better option is to include all reasonable choices of candidates, typically on a list in alphabetical order followed by the question: "Thinking now about the Jakarta Governor election, if you had to decide and vote today, which candidate do you think you would vote for? Although not necessarily prompted on the list, options should be available for the respondent to refuse or select none of the candidates. Proper election reporting should then also state what proportion of potential voters refused to give a preference. The refusal rate itself is a good indication of the quality of the fieldwork. Hence, when this piece of information is left out, or stated as being zero (which would be highly unusual) it should raise suspicion about research quality. Finally, according to best practice research guidelines, the word 'poll' should not be used unless proper probability sampling has been conducted and quality field procedures have been administered. That means all eligible voters should have a known and equal chance of being selected for the survey and field workers should be properly trained to carry out the work in a professional manner. It all comes down to proper reporting of results and transparency in the processes applied. After all, any decent research company should not have any reason to hide this information. On the contrary, they would make a point by highlighting it.

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