

MODULE THREE

In the content session, members discuss opinion polls. In the action session, members create an opinion poll on community problems and conduct the poll on community members.

CONTENT SESSION: OPINION POLLING

Because polls are used to measure public opinion on all aspects of American society, it's important that citizens be able to critically examine them and even put them to use. This session asks members to do both. First, members read and discuss questions for analyzing polls. Then they conduct an informal poll about citizenship action on themselves.

Facilitator Checklist

- Chalkboard or chart paper
- Pens and paper for members
- Copies of Handout 3A for members

Learning Objectives

Members will be able to:

1. Conduct and analyze an opinion poll.
2. Identify questions that should be asked of any opinion poll.
3. Express a reasoned opinion on the value of different citizen actions mentioned in the poll.

Notes

Polling

Introduction

You often hear results of opinion polls. Newspapers report them. Politicians cite them to show the public supports their proposals. In debates on issues, people bring them up. But like most statistics, poll results can mislead. When looking at the results of any opinion poll, it's helpful to ask the following questions.

I. Questions to Ask About Opinion Polls

Who sponsored the survey? Watch out for polls sponsored by groups with an interest in the results.

When was the poll conducted? Even if a poll is accurate, it only reflects one point in time—the time it was taken. As a general rule, the more recent the poll, the more meaningful it is.

What were the questions? Confusing, biased, or emotionally charged questions produce misleading answers.

Was the poll scientific? Who was interviewed? How many people? In general, the more the better. Were they selected at random? If not, the poll doesn't mean much. Polls on television and the Internet that ask people to respond by telephoning or responding electronically do not have a random sample. They reflect the views of those who have chosen to respond and do not necessarily reflect the views of the community or nation.

II. Activity

Conduct the following survey on another member. Discuss the results with all the members.

Survey:

1. Do you vote? YES NO
 2. Have you served on a jury? YES NO
 3. Have you ever written a letter to the editor of a newspaper? YES NO
 4. Have you ever written a letter to an elected official? YES NO
 5. Have you ever done volunteer work for a community-based organization? YES NO
 6. Have you ever worked on a political campaign? YES NO
 7. Have you ever started a community project? YES NO
 8. Do you stay informed on community issues? YES NO
If YES, then how do you stay informed? (check all that are appropriate)
- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> read a daily newspaper | <input type="checkbox"/> listen to news on radio |
| <input type="checkbox"/> watch TV news | <input type="checkbox"/> get news from the Internet |
| <input type="checkbox"/> other _____ | |

III. For Discussion

1. What surprised you about the results? What didn't surprise you?
2. Do you think the results of the survey would be similar for AmeriCorps volunteers across the nation? For the community at large? Explain.
3. Which of the citizen actions on the survey do you think is most important? Least important? Explain.
4. How do you think AmeriCorps members can promote these citizen actions?

Conducting the Session

1. Ask members: "How many of you have taken part in an opinion poll or survey?" Hold a brief discussion by asking them:
 - What value do polls have?
 - Do you think we rely too much on opinion polls? Why or why not?
2. Tell them that today they are going to read a little about polls and even conduct one. Distribute **Handout 3A**. Ask members to read the **Introduction** and **Section I: Questions to Ask About Opinion Polls**. When they finish, hold a discussion by asking them:
 - Which question do you think is most important to ask? Why?
 - Are there any other questions that you think should be asked of a poll? Explain.
3. Put members in pairs. Ask them to conduct the survey in **Section II: Activity** on each other.
4. Tally the results on the board.
5. Hold a discussion using the questions in **Section III: For Discussion**.

Optional Follow-up Activity

Ask members to bring in surveys they find and examine them by using the Questions to Ask About Opinion Polls.

ACTION SESSION: POLLING THE COMMUNITY ON PROBLEMS

In this session, members delve further into community problems and create and conduct an opinion poll. First, members share and discuss their lists of community problems, which they were assigned in the last action session. Then they read about how to develop and conduct opinion polls. Finally, they create a poll on community problems and conduct it in the community.

Facilitator Checklist

- Chalkboard or chart paper
- Pens and paper for members
- Copies of Handout 3B for members
- Members bring their lists of community problems that they are supposed to have gathered for this session.

Learning Objectives

Members will be able to:

1. Create unbiased questions for an opinion poll.
2. Conduct an opinion poll.
3. Discuss community problems.

Notes

Do Your Own Opinion Poll

Introduction

Although you probably don't have the means to conduct a scientific opinion poll, you can take an informal poll. It can help you learn what people in the community think about problems. It is important to determine this before you do any service in the community. There are three steps to surveying:

I. Three Steps to Opinion Surveying

1. Create a Survey

- **Make most of your questions multiple choice and yes/no.** This will make your survey easy to tabulate.
- **Keep the survey short and simple.**
- **Be sure that your questions do not force particular answers.** They must be unbiased. Otherwise your survey results will be open to criticism.
- **Test your survey.** Before conducting the survey, ask someone to check it over. Does that person think it is clear?

2. Select the Population and Sample

- **Determine the population.** What will your poll results represent? The opinions of everyone in the community? Of a section of the community? Select the population you want the poll to cover.
- **Select a sample.** You don't have to poll the entire population to get a good idea of how people in the population feel. Try to get a random sample of the population. This means that every person in the population has the same chance of taking the survey. For example, telephoning the fifth person on each page of the phone book would be a random sample.

3. Conduct the Survey

- **Prepare and practice a brief introduction.** When approaching a stranger, introduce yourself, tell what group you are from, explain the survey's purpose, and ask whether the person would mind spending a few minutes answering it.
- **Be polite.** People who answer your survey are doing you a favor. Don't badger anyone to take the survey.
- **Tell all interviewees that they do not have to put their names on the survey.** Results will be reported anonymously.
- **Be as organized as possible.** Use a clipboard to hold the surveys and bring extra pens or pencils.
- **Wait for each survey and check it.** Make sure the information is complete. If you read the survey to the respondent and fill it in, write exactly what the person says.

II. Discussion

1. Why is a random sample important for an opinion poll? How would you get a random sample of the community?
2. What do you think would be the most difficult part of creating and conducting a poll? Why?
3. Why do you think it's important to find out which problems the community considers most serious?

III. Activity

In this session, follow the directions on this handout and create a poll to determine which community problems are considered most important by community members. Before the next session, conduct the poll on five community members. In the next action session, you will compile the results.

Conducting the Session

1. Ask members to share their lists of community problems that they gathered. List the problems on the board, add any other problems that members think are important, and hold a discussion about the problems.
2. Ask members how else they could discover which problems the community believes are important. If someone doesn't answer "with an opinion poll," suggest this answer and distribute **Handout 3B**.
3. Ask them to read the **Introduction** and **Section I: Three Steps to Opinion Surveying**. When they finish, hold a discussion using the questions in **Section II: For Discussion**.
4. Have them read **Section III: Activity**. Ask them to get in pairs and develop questions for the survey. Remind them that the questions should be multiple choice or yes/no questions and should not lead a person to a particular answer.
5. After the pairs have developed questions, call on people to share their questions and have the group decide on the best questions and how they should be ordered on the survey.
6. As a group, decide on what population your survey is aimed at and how to get a random sample of the population.
7. Ask the members to practice conducting the survey on one another.
8. Have each member be responsible for surveying five people. As a safety precaution, suggest that the surveying be done in pairs if they are contacting community members in person.

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