

# Guidelines for the Publication of Results from Election Polls

These guidelines are issued by the Arbeitskreis Deutscher Markt- und Sozialforschungsinstitute e.V. (ADM), the Arbeitsgemeinschaft Sozialwissenschaftlicher Institute e.V. (ASI), and the Berufsverband Deutscher Markt- und Sozialforscher e.V. (BVM).

As for all other fields of market and social research, the „Declaration for the Territory of the Federal Republic of Germany Concerning the ICC/ESOMAR International Code of Marketing and Social Research Practice“ applies also to election polls. It was issued in December 1994 by the Arbeitskreis Deutscher Markt- und Sozialforschungsinstitute e.V. (ADM) and the Berufsverband Deutscher Markt- und Sozialforscher e.V. (BVM). In October 1995 it was also adopted by the Arbeitsgemeinschaft Sozialwissenschaftlicher Institute e.V. (ASI).

Together with those parts of the „ICC/ESOMAR International Code of Marketing and Social Research Practice“ that apply in Germany, this Declaration sets out important legal principles pertaining to market and social research. These laws are also applicable to clients, directly or indirectly, when they commission an agency to carry out a research project. Clients must therefore be concerned that the appointed agency conducts the research project in accordance with these laws.

For certain fields of market and social research, special guidelines issued by the German professional associations for market research apply additionally. Besides the researchers clients, too, must be concerned that these are also observed.

## 1. Public Interest

A special feature of election polls is that their results generally meet with greater public interest than the results of studies in other fields of market and social research. For this reason, their

results are published more often and discussed more intensively in the public. In fact, publication of the results is often the key reason for conducting these studies. In election polls - as in all fields of market and social research - it is important and necessary to ensure that both the client and the general public be made aware of the possibilities and the limitations in interpreting research results.

The results of election polls are part of the forming of political opinion in a democratic society. Hence, legal restrictions on the publication of the results from election polls are, on principle, politically unjustified. Such a restriction would also run counter to Article 5 of the German Constitution which guarantees freedom of speech and of the media, as well as freedom of science.

The present guidelines deal with the publication of results from quantitative election polls using representative sample surveys. For qualitative election research (e.g. poster or slogan tests by means of group discussions) the same fundamental rules apply with regard to the publication of research results. However - as in other fields of market and social research too - the results must be presented and interpreted differently on account of scientific criteria (e.g. representativeness).

## 2. Background Information about the Study

In order to assess the scientific quality of a study and its results, at least the following background information is required. They have to be documented to the client by the research agency conducting the study:

- name of the research agency conducting the study
- target group of the study
- number of persons interviewed (sample size)
- period of data collection
- sampling method applied

- method of data collection (face-to-face, telephone interviews, mailed questionnaires)
- precise wording of the questions
- weighting routines applied

Beyond this particularly in the field of election polls, additional details are necessary concerning the number or proportion of respondents who answered „don't know“ or who gave „no response“, in order to be able to interpret appropriately the distribution of responses. When enquiring about preferences for political parties or voting intentions, it is therefore also necessary to show the proportion of respondents who stated that they do not prefer any political party or who do not intend to vote or who have not yet made up their minds.

The background information about the study must also be quoted when publishing the results from election polls. The form in which and the extent to which this is done will depend primarily on the type of publication.

## 3. Responsibilities

When publishing results of election polls, the same fundamental rules apply as for other fields of market and social research. Essentially, they state that the researcher must distinguish clearly between the **research results** and their **interpretation**. Recognised scientific and methodological criteria must be observed when interpreting results. In particular, statistical margins of error must be taken into account. Furthermore, the rules for the publication of research results state that a researcher must not knowingly allow conclusions drawn from a study to be circulated which are not supplied accordingly by the data collected.

When publishing the results of election polls, a distinction must be made between publication by the agency conducting the study, and publication

by the client commissioning the research or by some other institution.

#### 4. Publication by the Research Agency

The research agency may on principle publish the results of a study either if it conducted the study out of its own interest, or in so far as the publication has been agreed contractually with the client of the study, or the latter has consented to it. The publication of the results of election polls by the research agency conducting the study should on the one hand furnish evidence of the power of empirical election research, yet also create an awareness for the limitations in interpreting the results. To this end it is necessary that the type of study should also be discussed in the publication. Three types may be distinguished:

**Current measurements of political party appeal or party preferences** in the general public produce a picture of the political atmosphere; however these need not necessarily be relevant to actual behaviour, especially when the time until the election date is fairly long. Political moods do not express which proportion of the electorate would in fact vote for the individual parties at a particular given time. In these measurements, moods are not converted into votes - for example in line with responses about voting behaviour at the last elections.

Furthermore, the results of surveys may be used to calculate **current electorate potentials**. For this the term **projection** is used as well. Aside from survey results involving the so-called „Sunday-question“, the calculation of electorate potentials, or projections, also takes into account external data and findings, in particular the results of the last elections and comparatively stable patterns of behaviour and attitudes in the general public, to calculate, by means of a specific model, the current proportions of the electorate supporting the individual parties. Current electorate potentials, or projections, are not election forecasts either, since they apply only to the time of the specific measurement, but not to the election date itself.

Finally - and constituting only a fraction of empirical election research -

there are genuine election forecasts which are based substantially on survey data. As a rule, several surveys, of which the last is conducted only a few days before the election, serve as the basis, together with external data, for predicting the outcome of the forthcoming election by means of calculations based on a specific model.

Beyond this, research agencies must publish the aforementioned background information, which is necessary in order to assess the meaningfulness of a study, together with the results of the study. Should this be an excessive requirement in the light of the form of publication, research agencies are obliged to provide the necessary details on request.

Aside from a description, publications of results from election polls often also include an interpretation of the results and possibly recommendations based on this. Interpretations and recommendations constitute part of applied empirical research in so far as they are supported by the results. **Interpretations and recommendations that are not supported by results**, on the other hand, **are not a part of empirical research**, but personal views and convictions instead. **Therefore they must be omitted when publishing the results of election polls.**

#### 5. Publication by the Client or Another Institution

Since the agency conducting the research often has no influence on the publication of the research results by its client or some other institution, it normally cannot be held responsible for such publications. Responsibility for ensuring that the publication of the results is not misleading, normally rests with the publishing organisation. However, the research agency is obliged, within the bounds of laws, to take appropriate measures in order to correct false or obviously misleading presentations and interpretations of the research results, should it learn of such a publication.

Legally, research agencies can only supply additional information about the study on which the published results are based in so far as this has been agreed with the client when the study was commissioned, or if the

client has given necessary permission later. In doing so, research agencies are entitled to demand that the recipient of the information should pay for the costs incurred.

#### 6. Closing Remarks

These guidelines form **part of the professional laws** governing market and social research in Germany, resulting as these do from the **law** and the **methodological standards**, but also from **common practice**.

The principles and conduct described in these guidelines are based, inter alia, on the **right to conduct research**, with the resulting methodological requirements, together with the **right to obtain information**. It cannot be ruled out that, if these should be founded again at a later time or by other authorities, other, perhaps stricter measures might result concerning the permissibility of the procedures described above.

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