Quote of the day:

“Standing in the middle of the road is very dangerous; you get knocked down by the traffic from both sides.”

-- Margaret Thatcher, British Prime Minister from 1979-1990
Some guidelines for interpreting public opinion polls

1. The wording of the questions should be
   - Clear
   - As neutral as possible
Sierra Club poll:

“Our nation is still blessed with millions of acres of public lands, including roadless wilderness areas, forests, and range lands. Land developers, loggers, and mining and oil companies want to increase their operations on these public lands. Do you think these remaining pristine areas of your public lands should be protected from such exploitation?”
National Right to Work Committee poll:

“Are you in favor of allowing construction union czars the power to shut down an entire construction site because of a dispute with a single contractor, thus forcing even more workers to knuckle under to union agents?”
Common sense keeps any reasonably knowledgeable observer from being fooled by the most biased polls.
2. We sometimes get uninformed answers

• People feel obligated to give an answer

“Some people say that the Public Affairs Act should be repealed. Do you agree or disagree?”

24% said agree, 19% said disagree.
“Do you feel the amount the U.S. spends on foreign aid is too much, too little, or about right?”

Too much: 75%
About right: 17%
Too little: 4%
Don’t know: 3%
“Just based on what you know, please tell me your hunch about what percentage of the federal budget goes to foreign aid.”

Average: 18%

Actual figure: <1%
“Now imagine that you found out that the U.S. spends 1% of the federal budget on foreign aid. Would you feel that this is too little, too much, or about right?”

Too much: 18%
About right: 46%
Too little: 33%
Don’t know: 4%
A poll tells us people’s opinions, but those opinions may be based on little information.

- This is especially problematic on matters remote from people’s lives.
Deliberative opinion polls are one solution to people’s lack of information.

• People spend time investigating the issues.

• People deliberate with each other, and we measure their opinions afterward.

• We thus determine what people would think if they had sufficient information and time for reflection.

• Biggest problem is the cost.
3. Some people give either an aspirational opinion or a socially desired opinion rather than their true opinion.

- Some people say they voted when they didn’t.
- People exaggerate their church attendance.
- In surveys, hardly anyone admits to holding racist views.
Should we ignore polls entirely?

We can learn from them, provided we understand the problems they can encounter.
How to be an informed consumer of polls

1. Inspect the question wording.

2. Examine a range of polls with different wordings.
3. Consider whether respondents had enough information to provide a knowledgeable answer.

4. Consider whether people are likely to give honest answers on the poll’s topic.