

# Opinion Polls and Surveys

An opinion poll can tell you how people feel about the community, its problems, and particular policies. Surveys are useful at all stages of citizen action.

## Creating a Survey

- **Keep the survey short and simple.** Make sure your questions are easy to understand. Avoid questions that are too wordy and have difficult vocabulary words. Keep your survey concise because a shorter survey allows you reach more people in a shorter time.

Create questions that do not force particular answers. They must be unbiased, otherwise your survey results will be open to criticism.

- **Ask for demographic information.** Knowing people's age, gender, etc., may be useful to your survey.
- **Include an option for people to express that they are undecided or unsure of an answer.**
- **Avoid embarrassing or personal questions.**



## Survey Questions

Surveys are made up of two types of questions: closed-choice and open-ended. Closed-choice questions ask the responder to answer yes or no, choose from a multiple choice list, or use a rating scale. Open-ended questions ask the responder to write his/her own thoughts, rather than choose from a set of possible answers.

Make most of your questions closed choice (see examples on the next page). Avoid too many open-ended questions because when people answer in their own words it is more difficult to score the surveys. Use open-ended questions to ask responders to clarify their answers.

### Yes/No:

Is anyone over 65 years of age living with you?

Yes No Unsure

### Opinion Scale:

Do you agree that the new park should be adjacent to the mall?

- 5 – strongly agree
- 4 – agree
- 3 – unsure
- 2 – disagree
- 1 – strongly disagree

### Frequency Scale:

How often does the city clean your street?

- \_\_\_ Once a week
- \_\_\_ Once every two weeks
- \_\_\_ Once a month
- \_\_\_ Less than once a month
- \_\_\_ Unsure

### Multiple Choice:

Where do you think the new park should be located?

- a. Next to Elwood School
- b. Across from the post office
- c. Adjacent to the new mall
- d. Other \_\_\_\_\_
- e. Unsure \_\_\_\_\_

## Selecting the Sample

You don't have to poll everyone in the community. Most professional polls try to get a random sample of respondents. This means that every person in the population had the same chance of taking the survey.

## Conducting the Survey

Practice a brief introduction. When approaching a stranger:

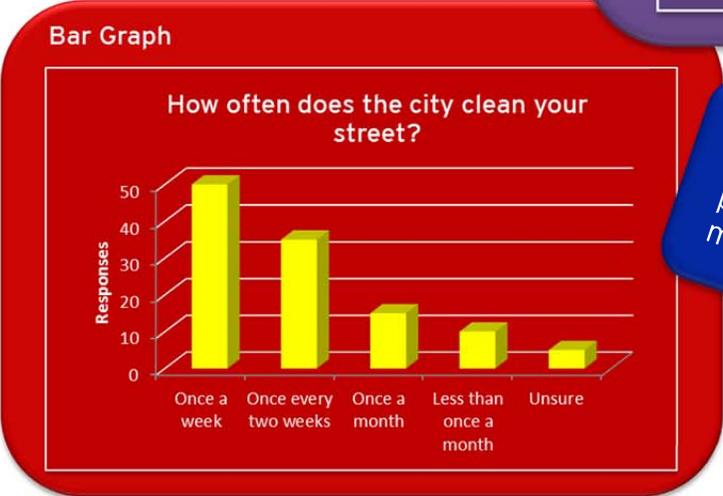
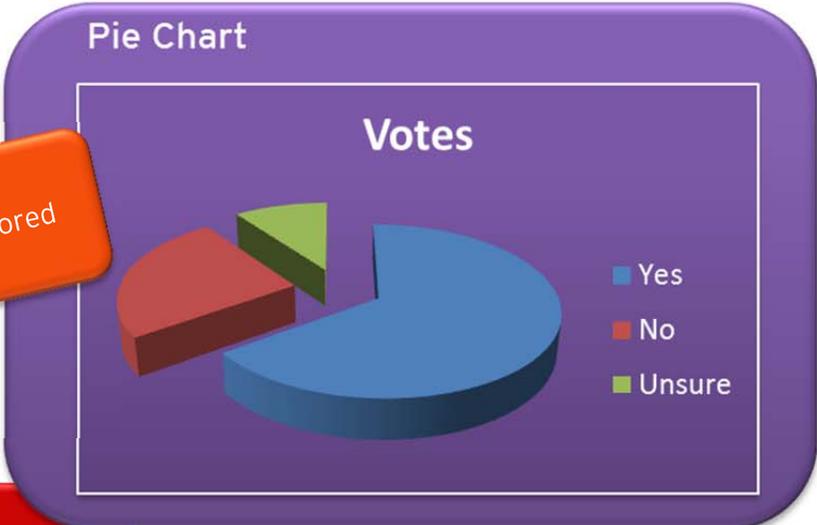
- Introduce yourself.
  - Tell what school or group you are from.
  - Explain the purpose of your survey.
  - Ask whether the person would mind spending a few minutes to take the survey.
- **Don't be too persistent.** If the person is reluctant, don't persist because the responses of a reluctant individual are questionable.
  - **Tell respondents the survey is anonymous.** Don't put anyone's name on the survey.
  - **Be organized.** Use a clipboard to hold the surveys and bring extra pens or pencils.
  - **Be polite.** Ask for clarification if the response is not clear. For example: "Would you please repeat that?" Thank the respondents when they finish. If they ask questions, take time to answer them.
  - **Check each survey.** Make sure all the information is complete.

## Calculating the Results of Your Survey

- **Count the number of completed surveys.**
- **Tabulate the survey results on one of your blank survey forms.**  
Be able to explain how your sample was chosen. People will want to know this.

- **Include respondents who were undecided.** Dropping the unsure responses can seriously distort the results. For example, let's say you ask people whether they favor X, and 40 percent favor X, 30 percent oppose X, and 30 percent are unsure. If you throw out the unsure responses, your survey will show 57 percent favoring X and 43 percent opposing. These results misrepresent your survey.
- **Write down significant findings.** You may also want to report on any unusual comparisons of demographic characteristics.
- **Decide how you will present your data.** Here are some common methods:

**Raw numbers:**  
 "Of the 450 polled in our survey, 348 favored putting the park next to the mall."



**Percentages:**  
 "Over 77 percent favored putting the park next to the mall."