Accuracy in election polling

Courtney Kennedy
Director of Survey Research

NARRATIVE: 2016 PROVED POLLING IS BROKEN
The facts about 2016 polling

- **2016 proved that many state-level polls, which are often underfunded and poorly conducted, did not work.**

- **Rigorous national polls, by contrast, were very accurate by historical standards.**

- **One of the primary reasons that the state polls were off is fixable.**
  (Reporters are part of the solution for getting pollsters to make that fix!)
The facts about 2016 polling

- 2016 proved that many state-level polls, which are often underfunded and poorly conducted, did not work.
- Rigorous national polls, by contrast, were very accurate by historical standards.
- One of the primary reasons that the state polls were off is fixable. (Reporters are part of the solution for getting pollsters to make that fix!)

Exhaustive post-mortem on 2016 election polls

The national polls in 2016 were quite accurate

- Polls, on average, came within about 1 percentage point of the national popular vote margin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Polling Average</th>
<th>Hillary Clinton</th>
<th>Donald Trump</th>
<th>Clinton +3.3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>45.5%</td>
<td>42.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>

Source: Real Clear Politics
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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hillary Clinton</td>
<td>45.5%</td>
<td>48.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donald Trump</td>
<td>42.2%</td>
<td>46.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Clinton +3.3  Clinton +2.1

Source: Real Clear Politics

In 2016 national polls were not broken
Average absolute error in national election polls

Error in national polls was historically low in 2016

Source: National Council on Public Polls

Some years polls over-estimate GOP support; other years they over-estimate Democratic support

Source: National Council on Public Polls
You may be thinking...

That’s fine, but polling led everyone to believe Trump would lose. So what gives?

1) The Electoral College. National polls can be accurate and point to the wrong winner

2) State polling truly had a bad year in 2016.
In 2016 state polls did have an historically bad year

![Graph showing error margins for state polls from 2000 to 2016.](chart)

Orange line represents average absolute error
Bars represent average signed error
Red bars indicate overestimation of Republican vote margin
Blue bars indicate overestimation of Democratic vote margin

Source: AAPOR Evaluation of 2016 U.S. Election Polls

Why did state polls do poorly in 2016?

1. In key states late-deciding voters broke heavily for Trump
2. Most state polls were not weighted properly
In key states late-deciding voters broke heavily for Trump

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% Voters who decided in final week</th>
<th>Vote choice among voters deciding in final week</th>
<th>Vote choice among voters deciding earlier</th>
<th>Estimated Trump gain from late deciders</th>
<th>Election (%Trump-%Clinton)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>-2.1%</td>
</tr>
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- Late-deciding voters in FL, MI, PA, WI broke for Trump by double-digit margins.
- Polls in September, October were conducted too early to detect this.

Source: Analysis from Aaron Blake (2016) using NEP exit poll data.

Many state polls didn’t even ask about education, and those that did had 10 to 20 points too many college grads

<table>
<thead>
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<th>% College graduate – actual 2016 voters versus IVR polls</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Michigan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPS benchmark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gravis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emerson College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitchell Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trafalgar Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPIC/MRA</td>
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<td>PPP</td>
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Most state polls were not weighted properly

Democratic margin in 2016 Wisconsin vote

- College graduates are more likely to take surveys than less educated adults. This has been true for decades.
- Most national pollsters adjust (“weight”) for this issue, but most state pollsters do not.
- In 2016 college grads broke for Clinton and less educated broke for Trump.
Most state polls were not weighted properly

**Democratic margin in 2016 Wisconsin vote**

Put simply, most state polls had too many of these people responding, and they did not fix it. This led them to systematically over-state Clinton’s support.

* A plea to reporters *
Only report on polls that adjust for this (i.e., weight on education). You are a key audience for public pollsters.
Most state polls were not weighted properly

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Type of Poll</th>
<th>Share of polls that weighted for education</th>
<th>Number of final polls</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Michigan polls</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisconsin polls</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina polls</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida polls</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania polls</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio polls</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National polls</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>21</td>
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Source: AAPOR Evaluation of 2016 U.S. Election Polls

What about the “Shy Trump” effect?

- Do some people, some times lie to pollsters? Yes, but five different tests indicate that this was at best a minor contributor to polling errors in 2016.
- There is little to no empirical support for the Shy Trump phenomenon.
- Speculation that “Trump voters must feel the need to lie to pollsters” perhaps says more about the biases of pundits than actual Trump voters.

Test 1. Was support for Trump higher in polls without interviewers?
No. Trump’s support was similar for telephone and online polls.

Test 2. Were people more likely to report being undecided in interviewer polls?
No. Undecided rates were higher in online polls (with no interviewer).

Test 3. In randomized experiments, was Trump support higher in online polls?
Not statistically significant, though in the expected direction.

Test 4. Was the error in Trump support larger that GOP Senate support?
No. Those error levels were almost identical.

Test 5. Did white male phone interviewers elicit higher support for Trump?
No compelling evidence that interviewer gender or race affected responses.
HOW DID POLLING DO IN 2018?

In 2018 midterm election polls performed well in general

- National polling of the U.S. House vote was very accurate

**Polling Average**

- House Dem. candidate: 49.7%
- House Rep. candidate: 42.4%

*Dem +7.3*

Source: Real Clear Politics
In 2018 midterm election polls performed well in general

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Dem +7.3  Dem +8.4

Source: Real Clear Politics

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In 2018 national polls were not broken

Source: Real Clear Politics
Polling accuracy over time around the world (45 countries)

Takeaways

• The record clear: polling writ large is not broken
• In 2016 state pollsters had an historically bad year, but national pollsters did not
• The mix of state level pollsters is different from – only partially overlapping – with the mix of national pollsters
• State pollsters in general often have fewer resources
• Pollsters in general, also did well in 2018
• Some pollsters appear to have learned the lessons from 2016. Others have not and continue to release results based on samples that substantially over-represent college graduates
AAPOR TOOLS FOR JOURNALISTS

Presented by Emily Guskin
AAPOR Journalist Education Chair

TOOLS FOR JOURNALISTS

- Help you to decide whether a poll is quality or not
- Guidance on what to look for in a poll
- Tips on writing about polling
- Specifics for election polling
- Free online course for reporting on polling
- Access to AAPOR leadership for quotes in poll stories

https://www.aapor.org/Education-Resources/For-Media.aspx
JOURNALIST CHEAT SHEET

- Lists items to keep in mind when reporting on public polls
- One sheet to print out
- Links for finding polls
- Clear guidance on what to do
QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN WRITING ABOUT POLLS

- 12 questions to ask before deciding to report on a poll
- Examples:
  1. Who paid for the poll and why was it done?
  2. Who did the poll?
  3. How was the poll conducted?
  4. How many people were interviewed and what’s the margin of sampling error?
   Etc.

5 TIPS FOR WRITING ABOUT POLLS

- Medium post by Pew’s John Gramlich
- Tips include explanations of why each is important
- Including:
  - Always be clear about who was surveyed
  - Pay attention to margins of error
  - It’s good to provide context, but it’s dangerous to ascribe causality
  - Etc.
ELECTION POLLING RESOURCES

- Explanation of likely voters
- Sampling methods
- Automated polls
- Online panels
- More on margin of error
- Nonresponse effects
- Exit polls
- Etc.

UNDERSTANDING AND INTERPRETING POLLS COURSE

- US and international versions of free and self-directed online course to help you cover polls
- Will help you:
  - identify elements of a valid poll
  - understand the methods box
  - analyze the quality of questions
  - understand weighting
  - and more!
FAQ

One place to go to find answers to questions you might have about surveys and polling with simple explanations written in plain English

Poll & Survey FAQ

The information here is designed to help you wade through the massive amount of data presented in the news and on the Web as polls and surveys. Learn how to tell if research is valid. Find out what information every story about polls should contain. Can’t find what you need here? Send your question to FAQ request.

- Election Polling Resources
- What is a “Push” Poll?
- Do Response Rates Matter?
- What is a Random Sample?
- Why Different Election Polls Sometimes Have Different Results
- Is Survey Research Covered by the Do Not Call Rules?
- What Information Should Survey Researchers Disclose?

Other Key Issues

- Question Wording
- AAPOR Standards & Ethics

Learn More About Polling

- Roper Center
- Polling Columns and Commentary

CONTACT AAPOR

- Need a quote?
- Need more explanation?
- Reach out to someone from AAPOR by emailing experts@aapor.org