

WELCOME TO:



The Past, Present, and Future of Exit Polls

Presented by: Marc Trussler

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Presenter: Nola du Toit

October 30, 2024

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Today's Presenter

- Director of Data Science at the University of Pennsylvania Program on Opinion Research and Election Studies (PORES).
- Senior Elections Analyst on the NBCNews Decision Desk.



Exit Polls: Past, Present, and Future

AAPOR Webinar

Marc Trussler

Plan for today

- What makes the Exit Poll different?
- What challenges are faced by the traditional exit poll?
- How do we deal with absentee voters?
- Should you trust the numbers?
- What will happen in the future?

What is the exit poll?

- High quality poll of the electorate.
- Around 800 interviewers speaking to around 80k voters.
- Dates to the 1970s
- Since 2004 the National Election Pool sponsors the National Exit Poll and is conducted by **Edison Research**.
 - The National Election Pool is made up of NBC, CBS, CNN, and ABC.
- The AP conducts an alternative exit poll: “Votecast”.

National Election Pool

Conducted by **YOUR ANSWERS ARE CONFIDENTIAL**
Please check only ONE response for each question.
Version 1

abc AP CNN FOX NBC

edison research

[A] Are you:
1 Male
2 Female

[B] Are you:
1 White
2 Black
3 Hispanic/Latino
4 Asian
5 American Indian
6 Other

[C] In today's election for president, did you just vote for:
1 Hillary Clinton (Dem)
2 Donald Trump (Rep)
3 Gary Johnson (Lbt)
9 Other: Who? _____
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[D] In today's election for U.S. Senate, did you just vote for:
1 Deborah Ross (Dem)
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[E] Are you of Hispanic or Latino descent?
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[F] In which age group are you?
1 18-24 5 45-49
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[G] In today's election for governor, did you just vote for:
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[H] In today's election for U.S. House of Representatives, did you just vote for:
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[I] Are you currently married?
1 Yes 2 No

[J] In your vote for president, how would you rate the importance of _____?
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4 Not a factor at all

[K] Which ONE of these four issues is the most important facing the country? (CHECK ONLY ONE)
1 Foreign policy
2 Immigration
3 The economy
4 Terrorism

[L] Which ONE of these four candidate qualities mattered most in deciding how you voted for president? (CHECK ONLY ONE)
1 Cares about people like me
2 Can bring needed change
3 Has the right experience
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PLEASE TURN THE QUESTIONNAIRE OVER →

North Carolina (G-N-V1-2016)

Please fold questionnaire and put it in the box. Thank you.
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What is the exit poll?

- Purpose 1: Calling races.
 - More to come on this later on...
- Purpose 2: Characterizing the electorate.
 - Moving beyond the blunt feedback of votes.

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What is the exit poll?

- When I say “we”....
- I am a small cog in a large machine!
- The expertise and experience that Edison Research brings is extraordinary.
- Much of the credit for methodology goes to them. Were working on it while I was still in grade school!

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Is the exit poll just another poll?

- We are inundated with polls pre-election....
- What makes the exit poll different?
- Should you pay more attention to it?

Back up...

- What makes *election* polling different?
- All polls try to use a sample of data to estimate the features of a population.
 - Often “US Adults”.
- What is the population for an election poll?
- The people who will vote!
- But as we are looking at polls right now.... The electorate doesn't exist yet....

“Likely” voters

- Determining who is a “likely” voter, and thus who represents the population, is the fundamental challenge of election polling.
- How do you do that?
- Self reports: “I am very likely to vote”
 - But people lie!
 - Using the CES: approx. 75% of people who say this *actually* vote.
- Model: What made people in the past more likely to vote?
 - Why should patterns stay the same from election to election?

The Exit Poll

- Here is where the exit poll comes in.
- How can we interview likely voters? Interview voters!
 - Stand outside polling places and interview people as they come out.
- (You are thinking about people who vote early or by mail right now and don't worry I am going to get to that!)

What does the procedure look like?

- Start with a sample of precincts, drawn proportionate to size (number of voters).
- Assign an interviewer to each precinct.
- Create a random sampling interval of voters as they exit the polling place.
 - i.e. every 10th person to leave.
- Interviewers approach selected voters with a questionnaire
- Completed questionnaires are tallied each hour.
- Results called in to a phone center at scheduled intervals, three times total on election day.

What problems does this procedure have?

- If **everyone** we asked answered our surveys, and **everyone** voted in person, this procedure would be perfect.
- But neither of these things are true.
- That introduces the two big challenges to exit polling.
 - (1) Non-ignorable Non-Response.
 - (2) Early voters and absentee voters.

Non-Ignorable Non-Response

- Not a problem isolated to exit polls, this is one of the primary sources of bias in all polls. (Though not the only source!)
- NI-NR occurs when people who refuse to be part of your survey are systematically different than the people who do.

Non-Ignorable Non-Response

- Lots (probably most!) people refuse to take part in surveys.
- But it might be the case that these people are missing “at random”.
- Various reasons why people can’t take a survey that are completed unrelated to their opinions.
- This poses no problem: the people who take the survey are just like the people who don’t take the survey.

Non-Ignorable Non-Response

- We can even relax this assumption further.
- Maybe the people who don't take the survey *are* different from the people who do.
- Maybe coffee drinkers are less likely to take the survey because they have to get to a bathroom!
- As long as being a coffee drinker is not related to the things we are measuring (like vote choice, or what you think the most important problem is...) then this is *also* no problem for surveys.

Non-Ignorable Non-Response

- A lot of “missingness”, however, is *not* at random.
- Young people are less likely to participate in traditional surveys, for example, and they likely have different attitudes than older people.

Non-Ignorable Non-Response

- What we are worried about: anytime there is a correlation between attitudes and the likelihood of people participating in the poll.
- Are the attitudes of the people not in our poll the same as the attitudes as the people who are in our poll?

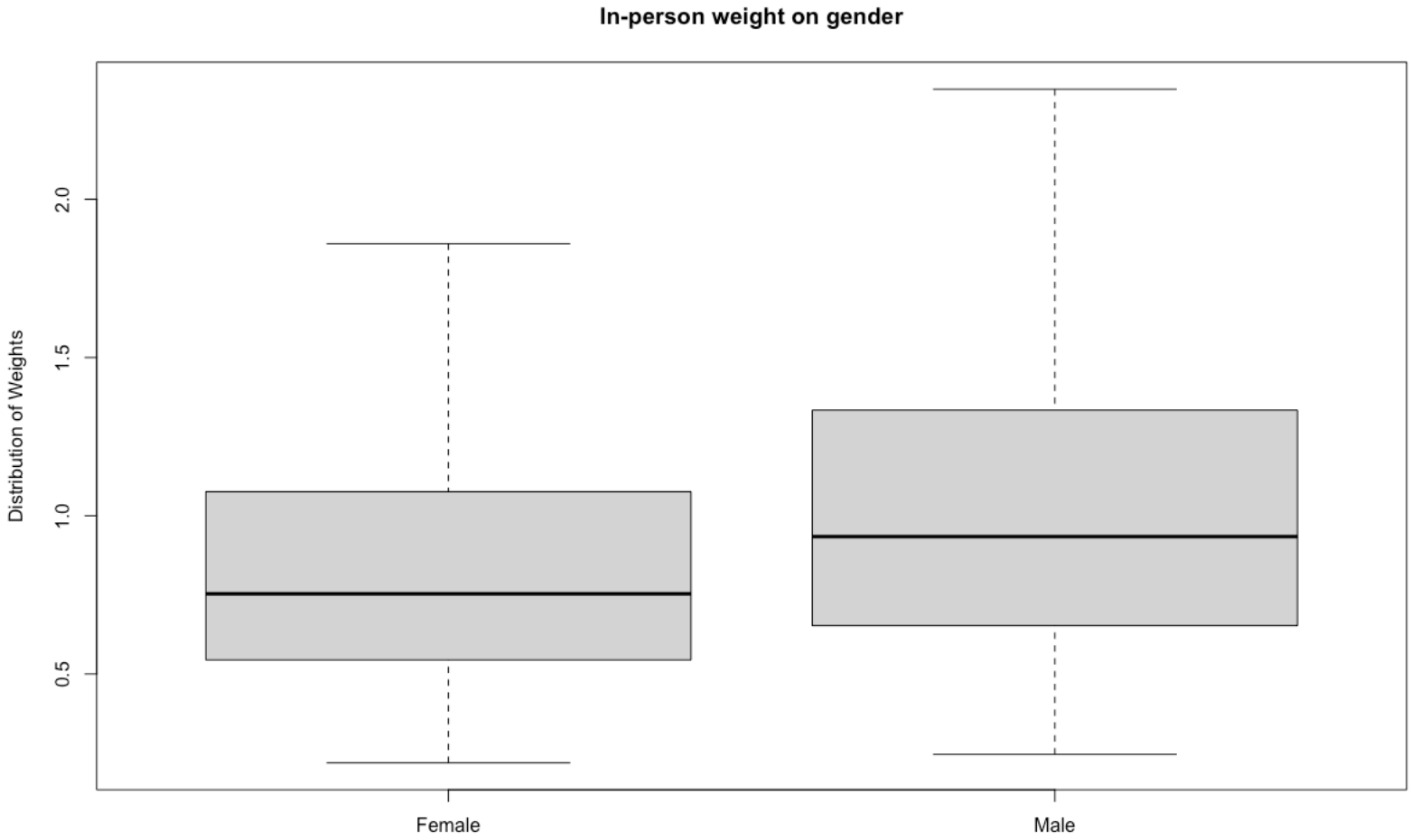
Non-Ignorable Non-Response

- This immediately reveals the challenge: how can we know the attitudes of the people *not* in our poll?
- We cannot. Instead, we must rely on adjusting for observable variables we know the population totals for.
- We know from the census how many white men there are.
- If we get too few in our sample relative to what's expected, we can use the white men we *do* have to fill in the data for the white men not in our sample.
- This is traditional survey weighting.

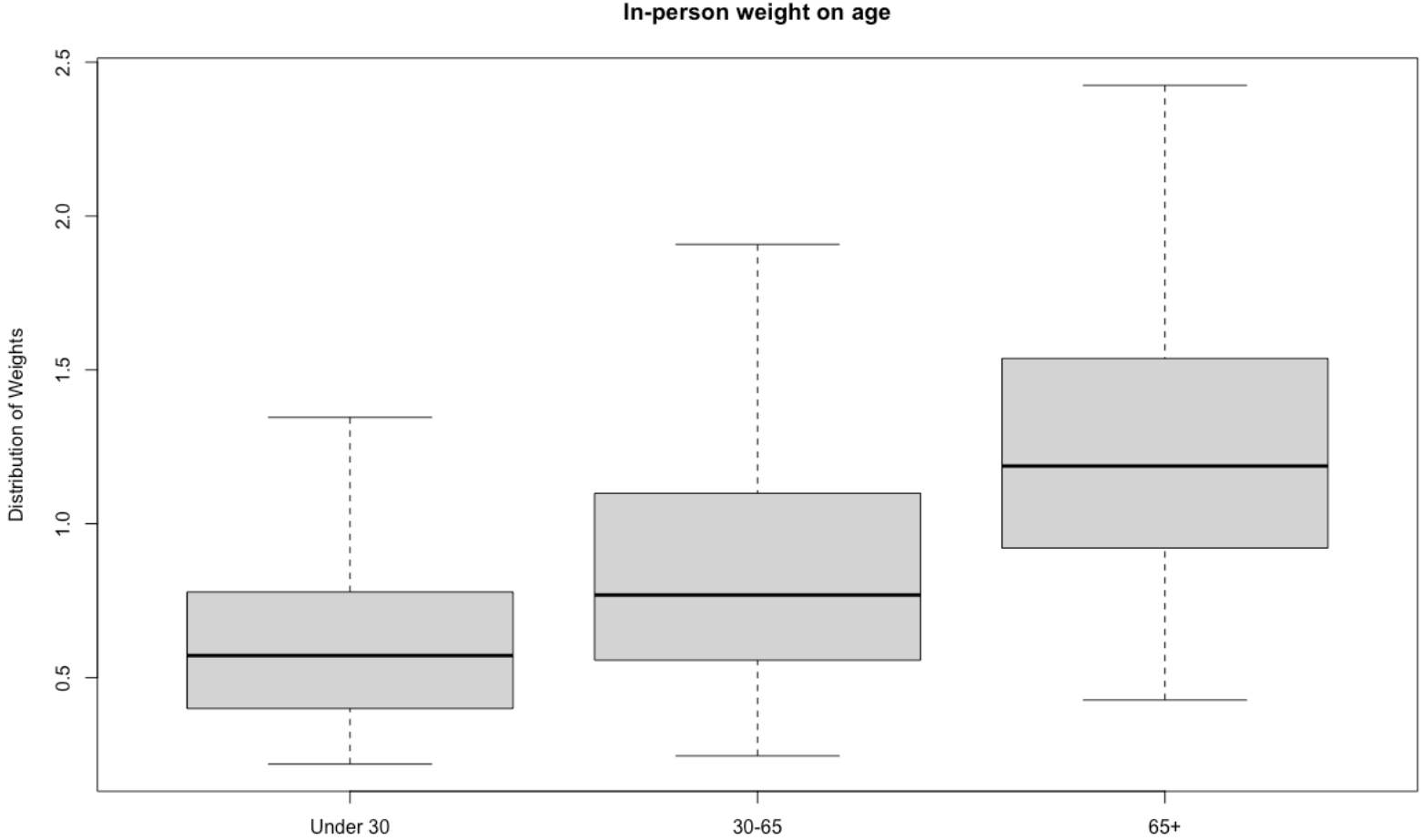
Non-Ignorable Non-Response

- But this is much harder for the electorate!
- What percent of the electorate will be white men in a few months?
- Here is one other other big innovations of the exit poll:
- Interviewers record observable details about the people who refuse to take the polls.
- For refusals capture the sex, race, and approximate age.
- We then have a measure of the characteristics of the group who refused.
- We can then give more weight to groups with more refusals.

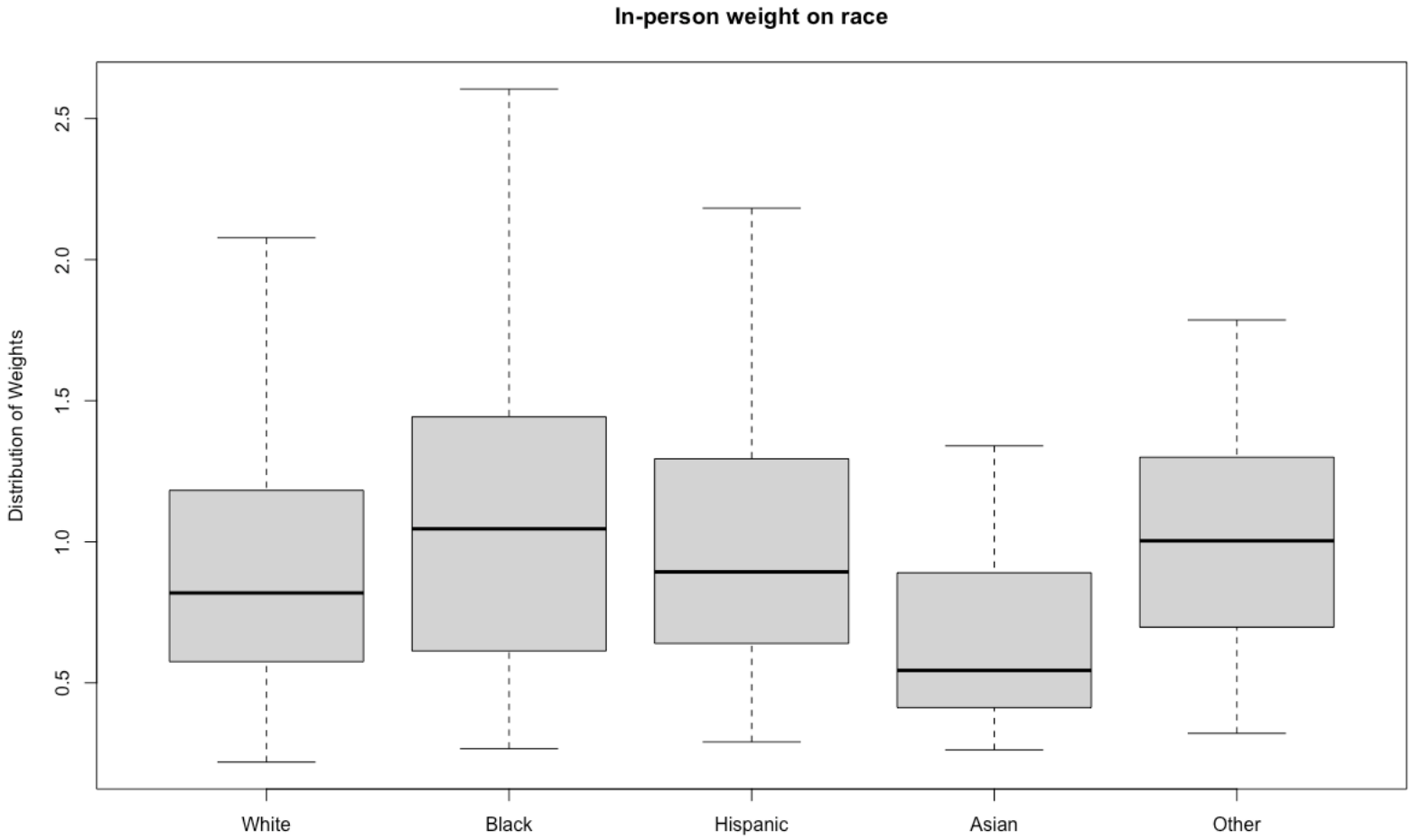
Who got more weight in 2022?



Who got more weight in 2022?



Who got more weight in 2022?



Problem solved?

- Is this enough to “fix” the exit poll?
- If less 65+ year olds take our poll, we give more weight to the 65+ year olds we *do* have.
- But that means that we are assuming the 65+ we do have are a good replacement for the 65+ we don't have.
 - What if the pro-Harris 65+ are the ones that talk to us and the pro-Trump 65+ are the ones that refuse?
- What weighting does is pushing the “missing at random” assumption to the group level.

More work to get it right

- Indeed, Edison Research was finding that this weighting was not enough, and our polls were biased against Republican candidates.
- In 2018 introduced a procedure to weight to education.
- Still were biased...

VA “Flag” Experiment

- Needed to decrease refusals for Trump voters.
- Method: increase feelings of patriotism.
- In randomly selected precincts drape American flag tablecloth. Respondents were offered an American flag pen and interviewers wore an American flag pin.
- Significantly smaller anti-Republican bias in the results in precincts with this treatment.
- Continues to be the method that Edison uses!



So what about early and absentee voters?

- We know that people who vote in-person on election day are very different from early and absentee voters: how does the exit poll deal with this?
- For early in-person voters the answer is easy: we also do in-person exit polling at early voting locations in key states.
- Absentee mail voting is more complicated.
- Since 2004 Edison has run a “traditional” phone poll (now a phone/text/email poll) to capture these voters.

Absentee poll

- Two big problems to overcome with this poll.
 - (1) Has to overcome all the problems that every other poll has to overcome.
 - (2) How do you combine it with the in-person interviews?

Absentee poll – common problems

- Need to poll absentee voters, not the general population.
- The poll is now 100% RBS: *Registration Based Sampling*.
- Traditional phone polls are RDD: *Random Digit Dialing*.
- Because the sample comes from the voter file, we specifically start with a sample of frequent voters.
 - And specifically: frequent absentee voters!
- Then sub-set down to those who are “very sure” they will vote absentee or have already voted absentee.

Absentee poll – common problems

- Then sub-set down to those who are “very sure” they will vote absentee or have already voted absentee.
- Can we trust this?
- The CES study validates the votes of their participants post-hoc.
- How did answering the “vote likelihood” question translate into actual voting?
 - No: 6% voted.
 - Maybe: 23% voted.
 - Yes: 68% voted.
 - Already voted: 80% voted.

Absentee poll – common problems

- Then sub-set down to those who are “very sure” they will vote absentee or have already voted absentee.
- Is this a problem in the absentee portion of the exit poll?
- To find out I matched the 2022 telephone survey respondents back to the voter file, and looked to see if they actually voted in that election.
- 7% did not vote, which is lower than the CES.
 - This shows the importance of the sample selection step!
- After weighting this number is 11% - so those who are less likely to vote are also receiving more survey weight.

Absentee poll – common problems

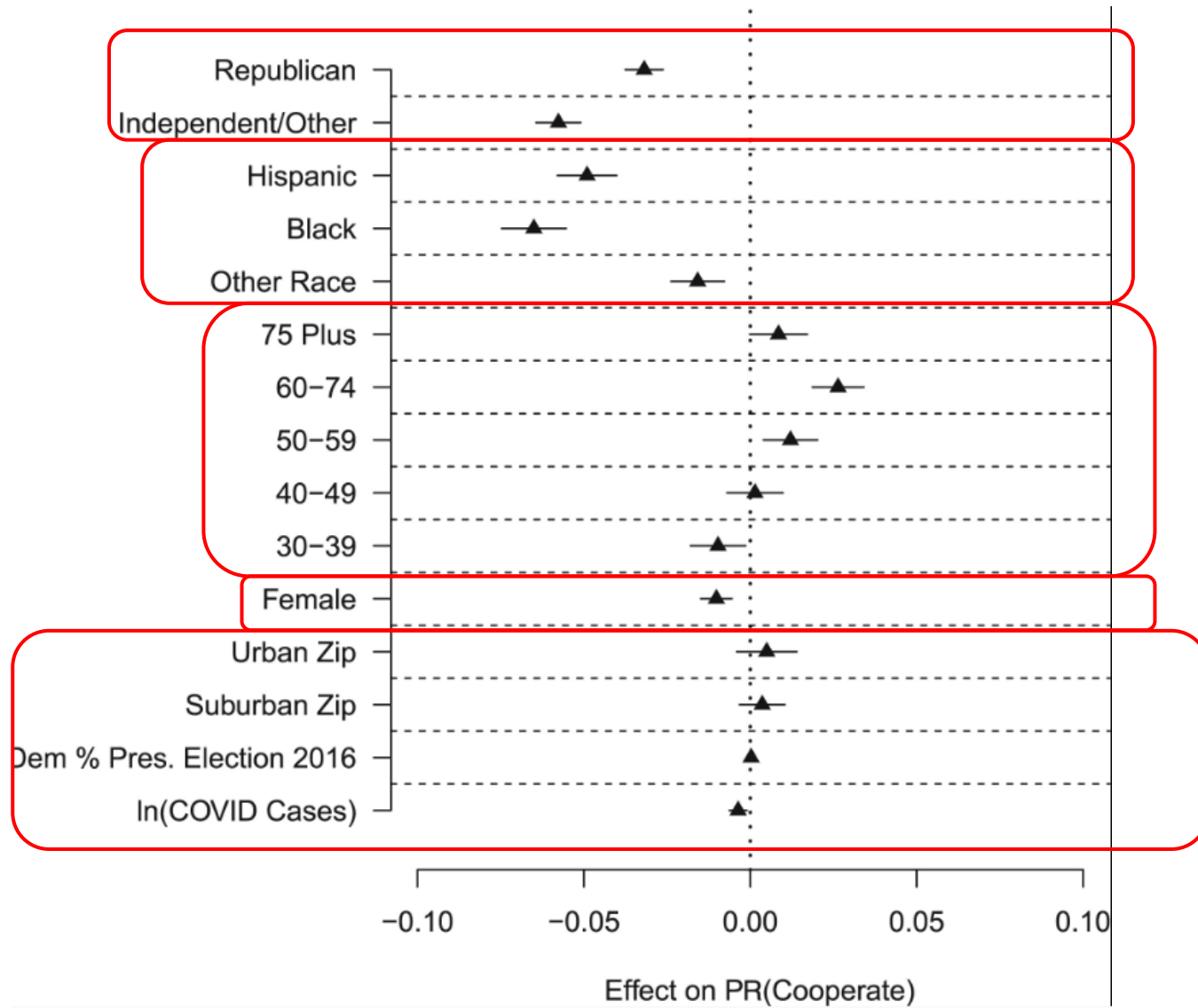
- Then sub-set down to those who are “very sure” they will vote absentee or have already voted absentee.
- Is this 11% a problem?
- It’s a problem if their attitudes are significantly different from those who did actually vote.
- Thankfully, not the case.
 - 64% of absentee voters who *did* vote supported Democratic candidates.
 - 65% of absentee voters who *did not* vote supported Democratic candidates.
- A *potential* source of error – but not one affecting the exit poll.

Absentee poll – common problems

- The other big problem is the one we discussed above, that affects all polls: Non-ignorable Non-Response.
- Again: is there a correlation between the probability of responding and the outcome of interest (vote choice)?
- A huge potential for this to be the case: in 2020 the response rate for the absentee poll was approx. 1.5%!
 - Nearly 1 million phone calls needed to get the eventual sample!
- What are the odds that this 1.5% of people are just like the 98.5% of people not in our sample?

Absentee poll – common problems

- Again, because we are using the voter file to sample, we know *some* things about the people who refused (or we could not contact).
- Same logic as looking at the demographic profile of the people who refuse to take the in-person exit poll.
- We (myself, Josh Clinton, and John Lapinski) investigated who didn't take the poll in a 2022 article for *Public Opinion Quarterly*.



Absentee poll – common problems

- These observable differences – even party registration in this case, can be fixed via weighting.
- Doesn't necessarily fix all of the problems!
- Again, the new assumption is that people are missing at random *within groups*.
- Are the registered Republicans who take our poll the same as the registered Republicans who don't take our poll?

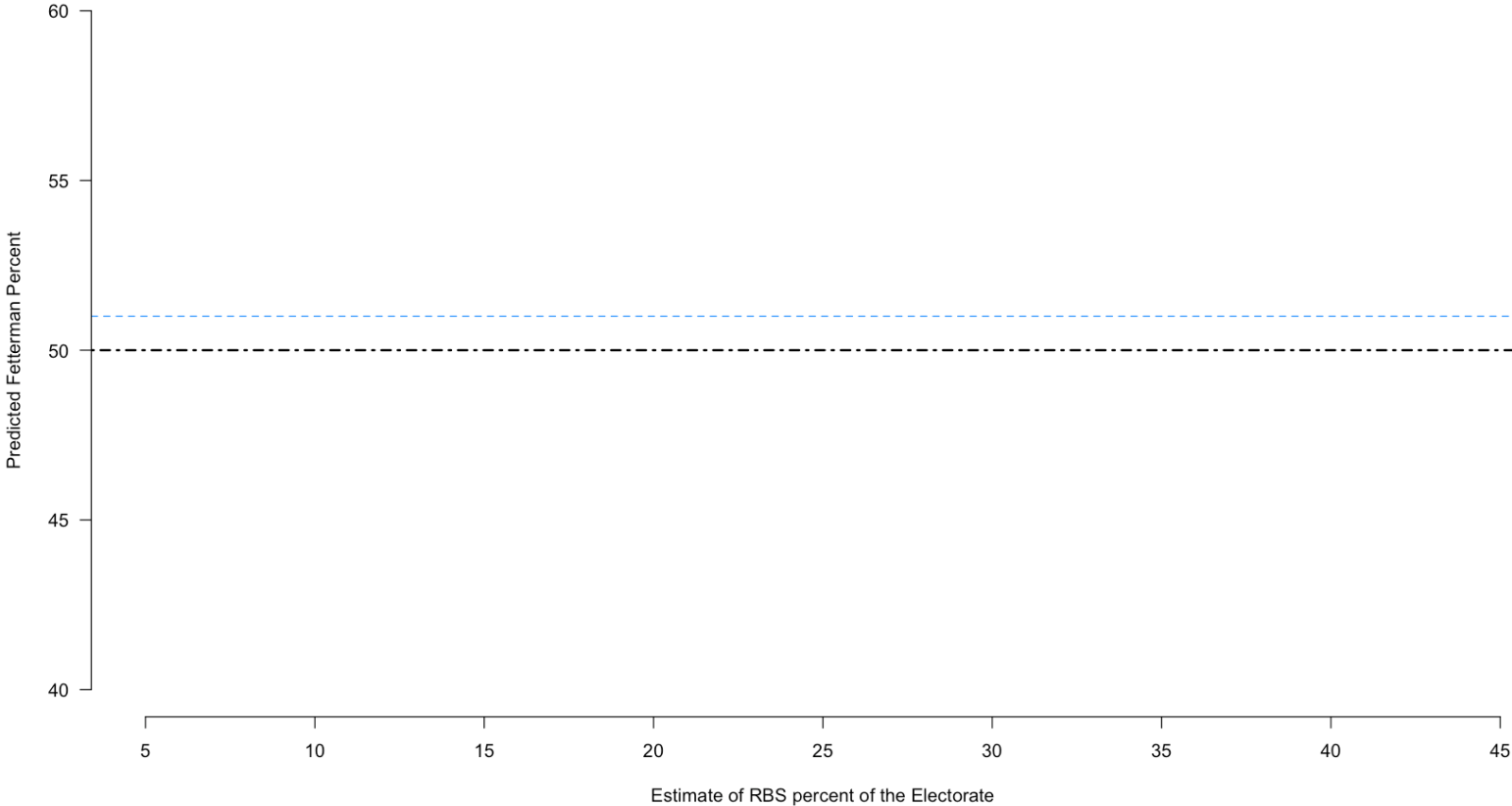
Absentee poll – putting it together

- So we have a decent in-person exit poll and a decent absentee phone poll.
- How do we stitch these things together into one estimate of the electorate?
- We need to combine within each state by estimating what percentage of the electorate will be in-person voters and what percent will be absentee voters.

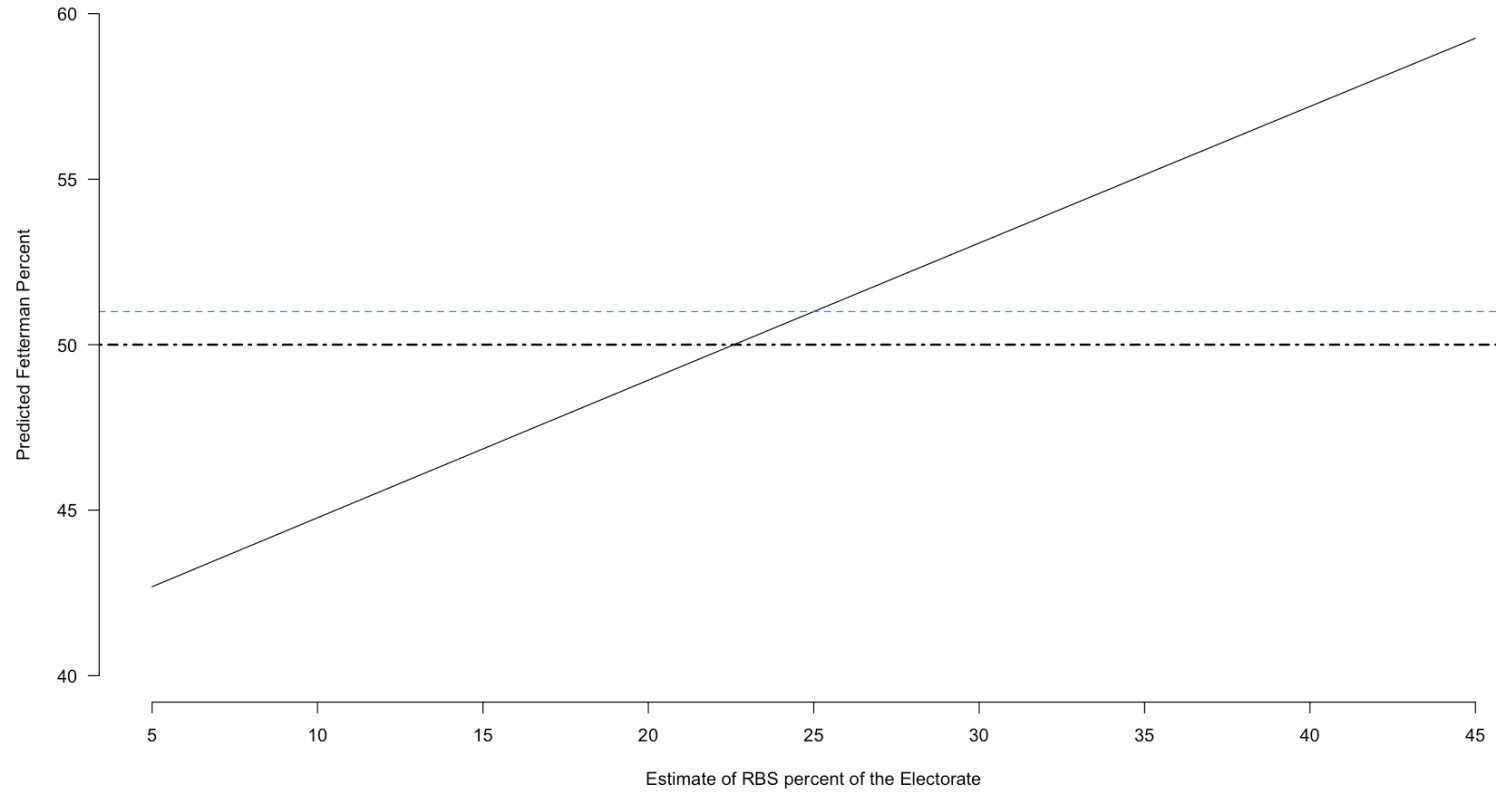
Absentee poll – putting it together

- How do we know those percentages?
- We know (approximately) how many absentee ballots or early ballots there will be because states release that information.
- But election day turnout has to be an (educated!) guess.
- Let's take the 2022 exit poll in Pennsylvania, for example.
- Pennsylvania has *around* 25% absentee voting...

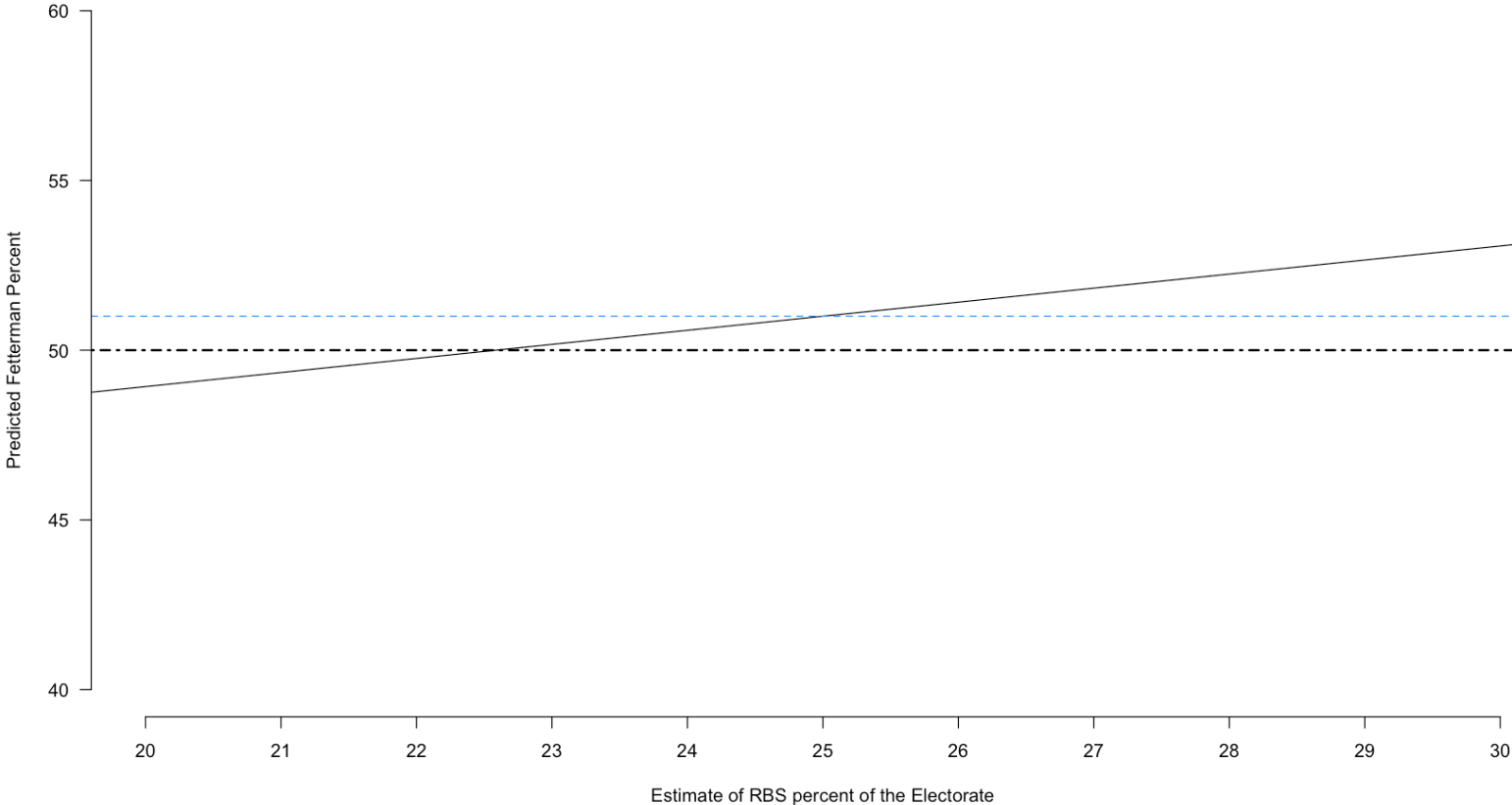
Absentee Percent and Fetterman Result



Absentee Percent and Fetterman Result



Absentee Percent and Fetterman Result



So what is the exit poll good for?

- I've spent a lot of times talking about the challenges of the exit poll: so should we trust it? And what do we use it for?
- We do not call close races off of the exit poll.
 - It is simply too hard to make all of the correct adjustments in order to do so.
 - Even in “blow-out” races, we now often wait for confirmatory real-vote information.
- But the exit poll is not just the topline number!
 - Great information on the demographics and attitudes of the electorate.

So what is the exit poll good for?

- Should we trust these numbers?
- Yes, particularly later in the night and after election day.
- The reason: **we can weight the exit poll to the real results.**
- Is that cheating??
- No.
- The whole issue of NI-NR is that there is a non-random group of people missing, and it's hard to weight to “politics” beforehand.
 - Stuck using proxies like demographics and party registration.
- Now (as in, after the results come in) we have a new population number (how people vote) in every state to weight to!

Future

- Hard to see, and not my call!
- Alternative: AP Votecast.
 - Do not do in-person interviews at polling locations.
 - Instead combine a large probability and non-probability poll using advanced multi-level modeling.
 - Learning from different demographic groups across the county and then inferring what that means about the country given our knowledge of where and in what amount different groups live.
- I think it would be a great loss to lose the in-person exit poll.
 - An amazing innovation in polling with great historical significance.
 - But the error added from needing to combine with absentee poll dilutes what makes the exit poll great.

Thanks!

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