Executive Summary

When the results of the 2024 election were tallied, they showed that the picture of the race provided by publicly released polls had been largely accurate. As the polls had indicated, the race between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump was close, in both pivotal swing states and the nation as a whole. Coming on the heels of larger-than-typical errors in 2016 and 2020, and in the face of considerable skepticism of surveys' accuracy, 2024 was a good year for public polling, even as the need for continued experimentation in future cycles remains.

The Executive Council for the American Association for Public Opinion Research established a task force with the goal of assessing the accuracy of pre-election surveys in 2024, making sense of what worked and what was less effective. To that end, the AAPOR task force gathered information about the publicly released election polls conducted in 2024 and prior years, as well as a number of different data sources with which those polls could be compared.

The main findings of the AAPOR task force are as follows:

Public polls were more accurate in 2024 than in 2020 and 2016. Across 611 polls of presidential, senatorial, gubernatorial, and congressional contests fielded in the campaign's final two weeks, the average absolute error on the two-party margin was 3.3 percentage points—down from 5.3 points in 2020 and 5.2 points in 2016. National presidential polls missed by 2.6 points on average, and state-level presidential polls by 3.0 points. State polls were their most accurate for any presidential cycle since 1944 and national errors were close to their average over the long run.

For the third straight presidential cycle, pre-election polls underestimated Republican vote shares relative to Democrats'. Polls in the last two weeks of the campaign overstated Democratic margins by 2.7 points across all offices—smaller than the 4.6-point overestimate in 2020 and 3.1 points in 2016, yet still notable. In comparison, there were relatively small average signed errors in recent midterm years, which overestimated Republicans by only 0.6 points in 2022 and Democrats by only 0.1 points in 2018. Historically, it has been rare for polls to err in the same direction for more than a couple of consecutive presidential elections: Democrats and Republicans have each been underestimated about equally often since the dawn of modern polling in the 1930s (Figure ES-1 displays average signed and absolute error for presidential general election polls since 2000).

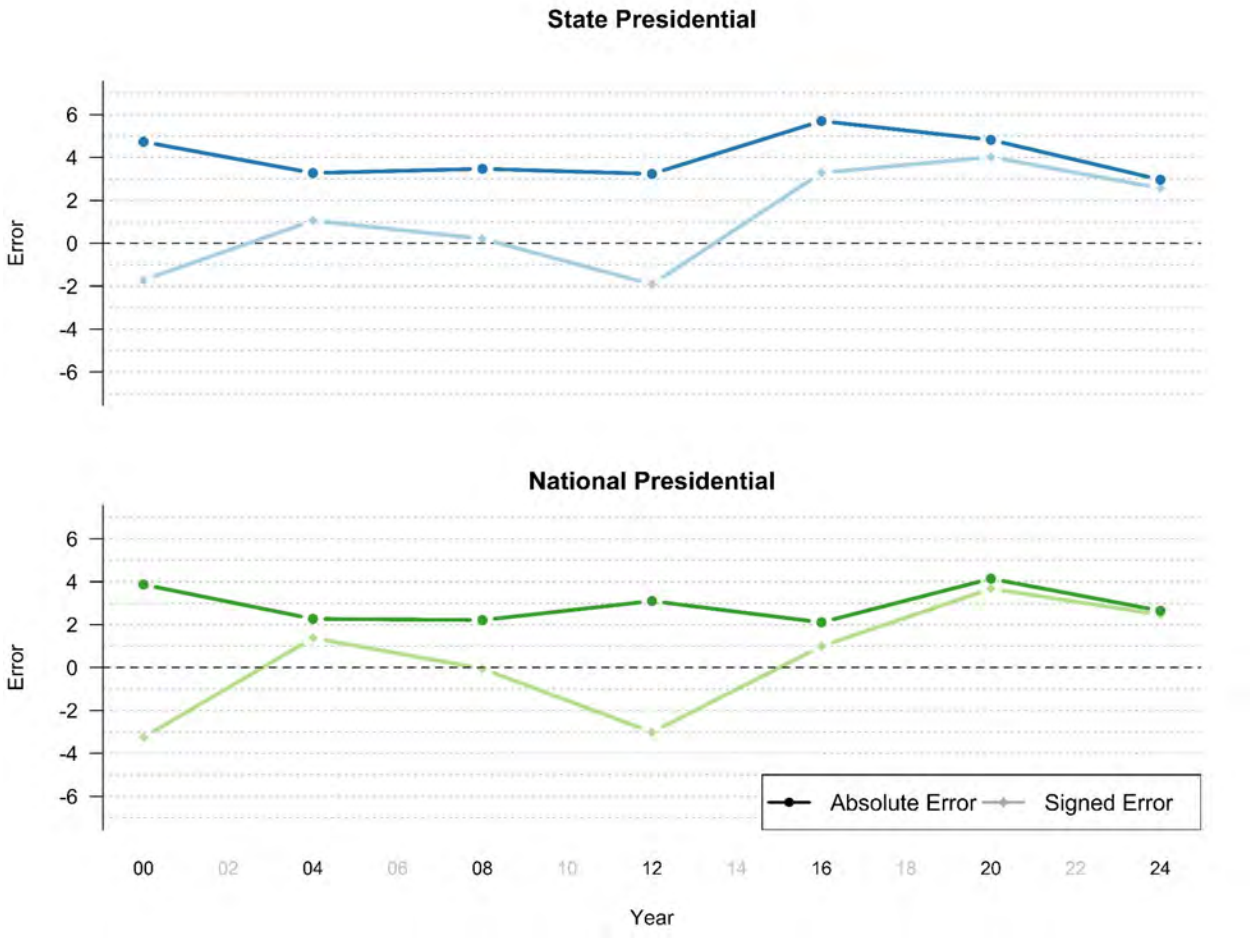

Figure ES-1 Signed and absolute polling errors for state and national presidential polls since 2000. For absolute errors (darker colors), the y-axis measures the difference in percentage points between the average poll for each type of contest and the final result. For signed errors (lighter colors), the y-axis measures the average directional difference between all polls for each type of contest and the eventual result. Positive signed errors indicate that polls overestimated Democratic performance whereas negative signed errors indicate that polls overestimated Republican performance.

No single methodological recipe guarantees higher accuracy. Polling firms used an array of sampling frames, modes, weighting variables, and likely-voter models in 2024, yet most major methodological choices showed little relationship to error size. Surveys from higher-volume firms, those weighting on partisan self-identification, those using detailed likely-voter models, and Republican-affiliated pollsters were slightly more accurate, but differences were small and may reflect other attributes of these pollsters' approaches rather than the methods themselves. For Republican pollsters in particular, this increased accuracy could possibly reflect a tendency to publicly release more Republican-friendly numbers in most elections. This tendency in itself would produce more accurate numbers in years when the average poll has a Democratic bias, but not in other years.

Accounting for past voting can improve poll performance, but how to do so is not straightforward. Many firms incorporated information about voters' 2020 voting behavior into sampling, weighting, or likely-voter modeling. The fact that most people voted the same way in 2024 as they had in 2020 means that if pollsters knew who would turn out and the past voting behaviors of those individuals, they could have almost perfectly predicted the results. Because of this predictive power, an ideal application of past vote could cut average absolute error considerably when added to a poll's weighting strategy. Yet those gains depend critically on how past voting behavior is measured and used to calibrate the sample, what firms did to account for differences between the prior and current electorates, and how well they forecast the swing from election to election. For individual surveys, the efficacy of these efforts varied.

Some key groups of voters are difficult to capture in surveys. Polls did not reliably measure the preferences of three critical blocs that fed into Democratic overestimation in 2024: (1) Republican voters in GOP-leaning areas, who were under-represented relative to Democrats in those same GOP-leaning areas; (2) Hispanic voters, whose Democratic support was overstated in pre-election polling versus post-election data; and (3) 2024 voters who had not voted in 2020—surveys signaled that they leaned Republican but still underestimated their share of the electorate.

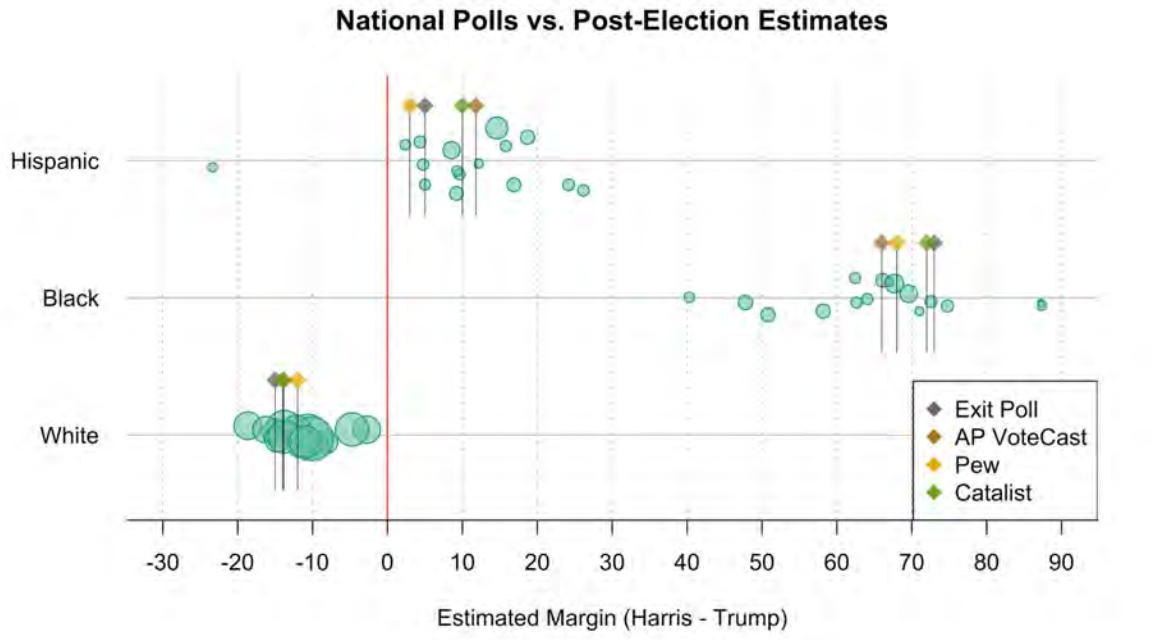

Figure ES-2: Comparing pre-election poll group estimates from microdatasets with alternate benchmarks for racial and ethnic group voting preferences using firm-provided weights. Benchmark post-election studies suggest that polls overestimated Hispanic voter preferences for Harris relative to Trump.

Although variability across survey estimates was relatively low, this does not appear to be a result of herding. Polls in 2024 displayed impressive consistency—especially in swing states, where most surveys showed the difference between Trump and Harris within the margin of sampling error. While some observers suspected that this was evidence of firms adjusting their results to match competitors ("herding"), our tests find no evidence to support this; rather, a broader reliance on political variables for sampling and weighting likely reduced spread.

Polling did not reliably anticipate within-state turnout shifts. Counties that backed Trump in 2020 saw turnout surges in 2024, whereas Biden-leaning counties in 2020 saw declines. Most surveys assumed a 2024 electorate distributed much like 2020. That turnout mis-projection explains a moderate share of the remaining directional error.

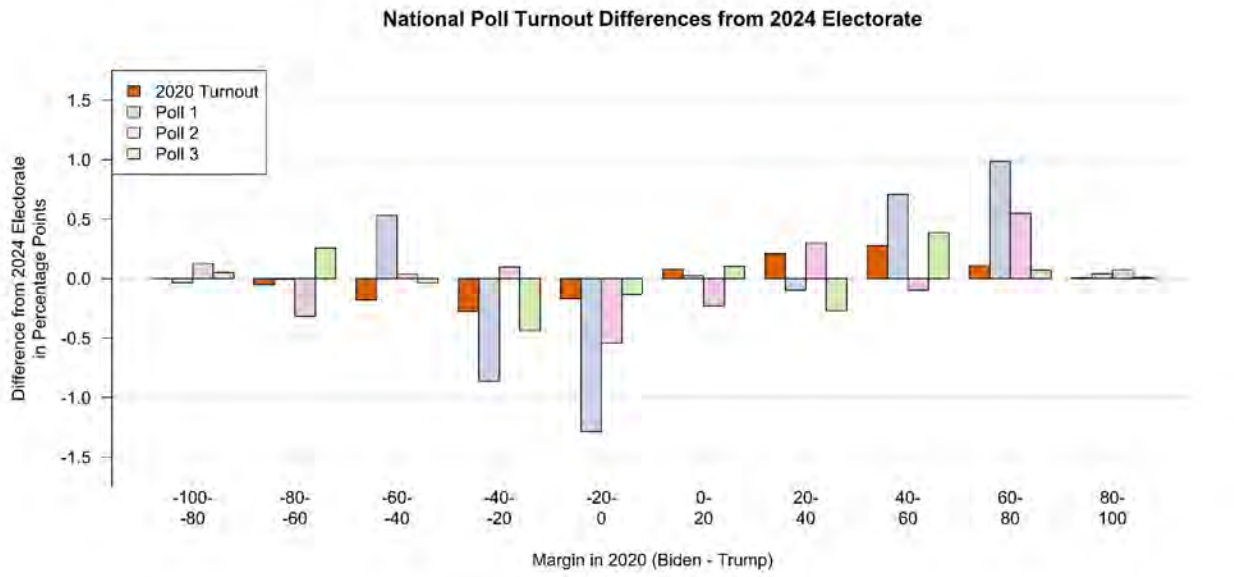

Figure ES-3: Comparing turnout in 2020 and in estimates from three county-matched national polls with actual votes cast in 2024. Plot shows differences in percentage points from 2024 turnout for each 10-percentage-point margin range of county preference from 2020. Counties that supported Trump in 2020 had higher relative turnout than projected in national polls.

Different pollsters told different stories about the electorate, while still reaching the same broad conclusions about the election's outcome. Reliance on various combinations of partisanship, past vote, and weighting variables in 2024 appears to have ensured that most surveys produced candidate-margin estimates that were very close to the final results. However, there was considerably more dispersion in estimates of how specific groups voted. Although polls generally agreed on which groups leaned toward Trump or Harris, their estimated margins varied widely, especially for Hispanic Americans, who seem to have moved sharply toward Trump in 2024.

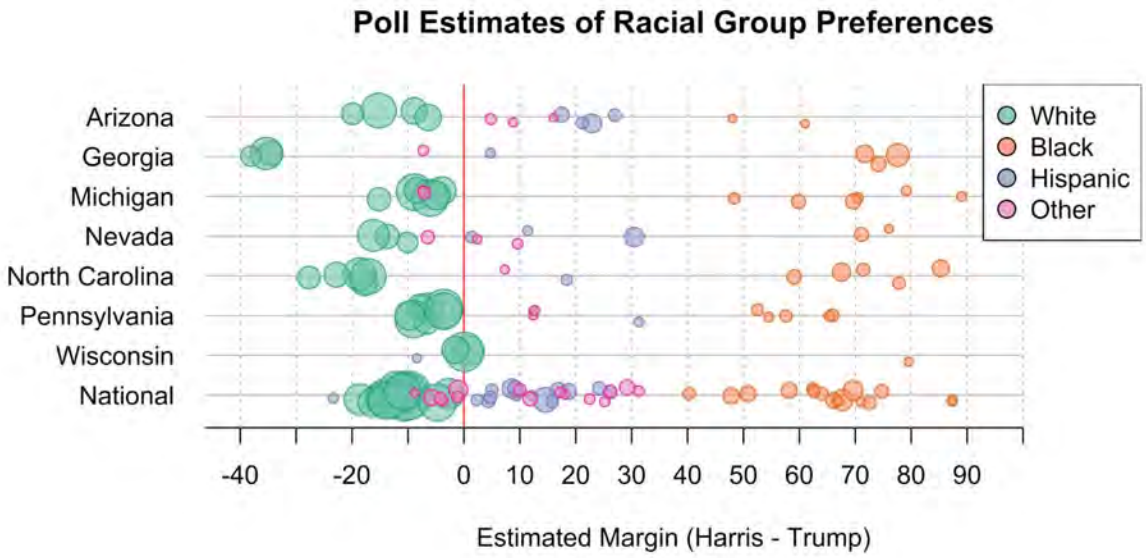

Figure ES-4: Estimated voting margins of racial groups in polls using firm-provided weights with microdata. Each dot represents a single poll's estimate for the margin within a particular racial or ethnic group. Dot size corresponds to within-group sample size. Groups with Ns<50 not shown. Although relative ordering of subgroups was consistent, high variability in estimates for some groups complicates conclusions about those groups.

Election polling is far more focused on battleground states than it used to be. In 2024, there were nearly twice as many state-level presidential polls as national ones, with most of that activity clustered in seven swing states (AZ, GA, MI, NV, NC, PA, WI). The concentration intensified in the campaign's final weeks—a continuation of a long-running shift and a notable jump even since 2020. This focus may help to better inform the public's election-night expectations (because presidential outcomes are decided state-by-state), but it does come with the tradeoff of reduced awareness of what was happening in less frequently polled states.

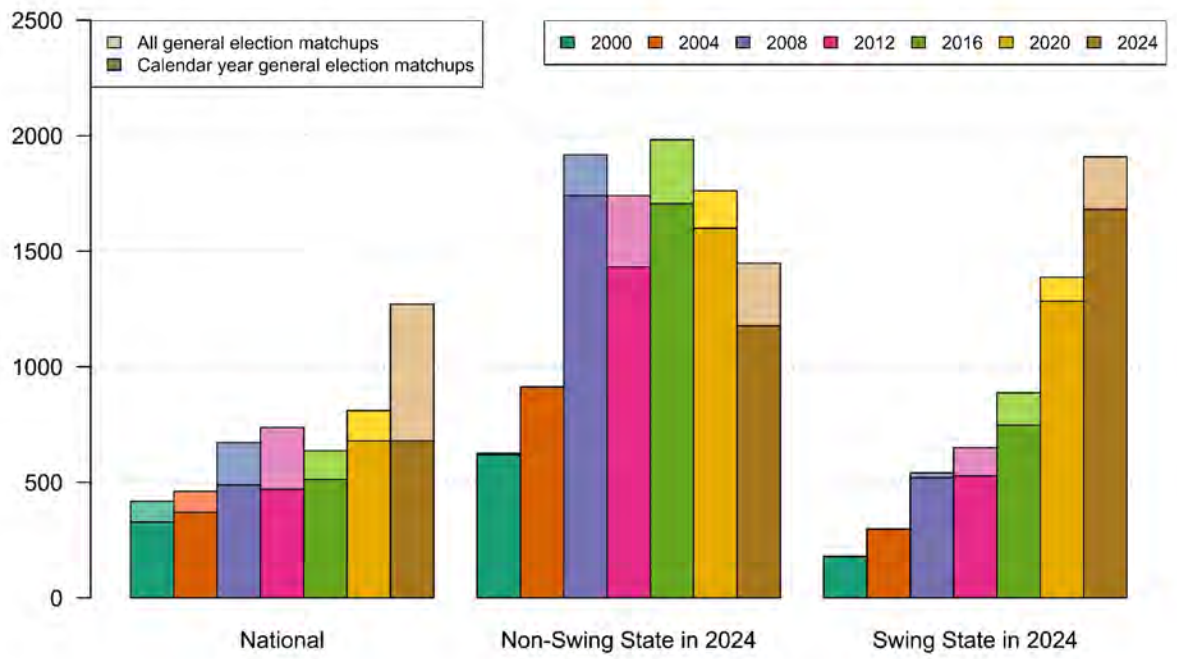

Figure ES-5: Total volume of matchups reported from all general elections by election year nationally, for states that were not considered swing states in 2024, and for states that were considered swing states in 2024 in recent presidential cycles (darker portion of each bar indicates matchups reported in the same calendar year as the election)

Taken together, these patterns show meaningful progress: public polls painted an essentially accurate picture of an extraordinarily close contest. Still, the modest Democratic overstatement, lingering errors in representing key blocs, and difficulties in modeling turnout underscore the need for continued adaptation and experimentation—especially around sampling hard-to-reach populations, weighting on political variables, and building turnout models that adapt to asymmetric changes in turnout.

Technical note: All accuracy statistics in this Executive Summary use only those polls that completed fieldwork between October 23 and November 5, 2024 and report a two-party vote share. Totals may differ in later sections that employ broader field dates, down-ballot contests, or additional methodological filters.