

The 2016 Elections: Making Sense of Public Opinion Polls

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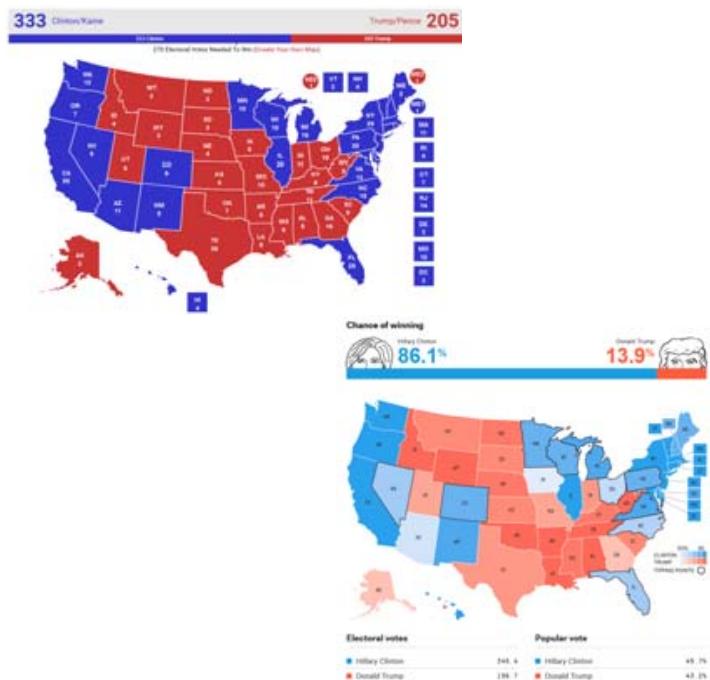
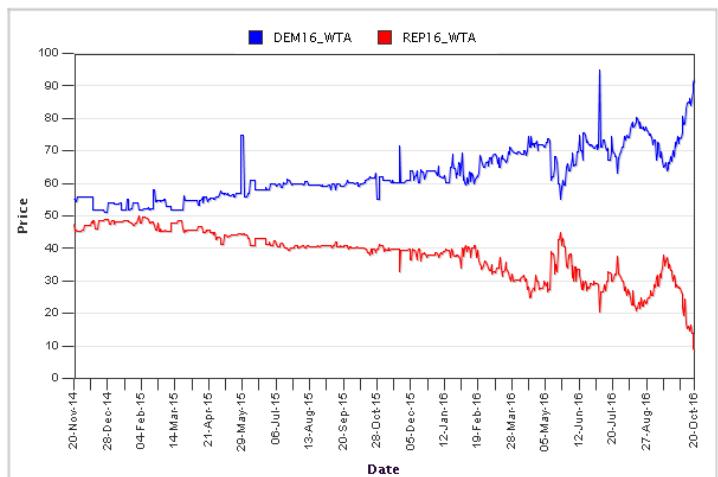
Forecasting election outcomes

- Election markets (University of Iowa, Predictit.org) have been as accurate as polls in recent elections. “Investors” bet real money on the outcomes.
- 2012 presidential election: revenge of the nerds. Nate Silver of 538.com fame and Drew Linzer of Votomatic got all 50 states right (Silver only missed Indiana in 2008). Overall, the national polls were right on the money in 2012.
- Poll aggregators like 538 and Pollster are the best way to use polling.

Public Opinion Polling

- Public skepticism – “no poll have ever called me!”
- General theory of polling. How to get an accurate picture of what the 300 million people are thinking by talking to 1,000 of them?
- sampling error (margin of error); getting a random sample, random digit dialing versus registered voter lists.
- Confidence level: typically 95%.
- pervasiveness of polling, especially during the election season, but also important for letting elected leaders know about their constituents’ issue positions.

Pres16_WTA
 2016 US Presidential Election Winner Takes All Market



Non-scientific polls

- Biased sample. The *Literary Digest* poll in 1936 and the advent of modern polling by George Gallup.
- Self-selected internet “polls.” Most of them showed Trump winning the debates, but all of the scientific polls showed Clinton winning.
- “Push polling.” Misuse by campaigns – they give legitimate pollsters a bad name.

Difficulties in getting an accurate sample

- Even with random digit dialing, it is still difficult to get an accurate sample of who is going to actually vote:
 - Screening for likely voters (self-identified or voter history)
 - Weighting the sample: to the census or to the voter rolls and traditional weighting or modeling. Try to get right proportions based on race, sex and age. Some do region, party, education and past turnout. If you add too many categories, can end up with a few respondents in each subcategory. Problem with the LA Times poll that is a Trump outlier – one African American 19 year-old male is weighted 30 times more than the average respondent.
 - Low response rate (caller ID).

Weighting sample

Different outcomes with the same underlying data (from “The Upshot” in the NY Times)

Pollster	Clinton	Trump	Margin
Charles Franklin Marquette Law	42%	39%	Clinton +3%
Patrick Ruffini Echelon Insights	39%	38%	Clinton +1%
Omero, Green, Rosenblatt Penn Schoen Berland Research	42%	38%	Clinton +4%
Corbett-Davies, Gelman, Rothschild Stanford University/Columbia University/Microsoft Research	40%	41%	Trump +1%
NYT Upshot/Siena College	41%	40%	Clinton +1%

Polling differences

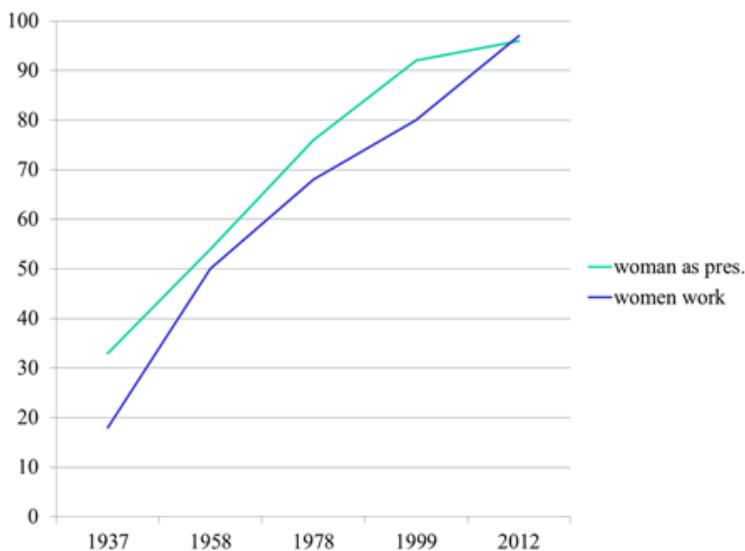
Pollster	Result	White	Hisp.	Black	Sample
Charles Franklin Marquette Law	Clinton +3	68%	15%	10%	+5 Dem.
Patrick Ruffini Echelon Insights	Clinton +1	67%	14%	12%	+1 Dem.
Omero, Green, Rosenblatt Penn Schoen Berland Research	Clinton +4	65%	15%	12%	+4 Dem.
Corbett-Davies, Gelman, Rothschild Stanford University/Columbia University/Microsoft Research	Trump +1	70%	13%	14%	+1 Rep.
NYT Upshot/Siena College	Clinton +1	69%	14%	12%	+1 Rep.

Polling differences

Pollster	Who is Likely Voter?	Type of weight	Tries to match...
Charles Franklin Marquette Law	Self-report	Traditional	Census
Patrick Ruffini Echelon Insights	Vote history	Traditional	Voter File
Omero, Green, Rosenblatt Penn Schoen Berland Research	Self-report	Traditional	Voter File
Corbett-Davies, Gelman, Rothschild Stanford University/Columbia University/Microsoft Research	Vote history	Model	Voter File
NYT Upshot/Siena College	Report + history	Traditional	Voter File

Problems with Polling

- Lack of information leads to “doorstep opinions.”
- Inconsistencies in public opinion: women running for president versus working outside the home. Balanced budgets but more spending and lower taxes.
- Timing of polling
 - “Snapshot polls.” “Rally around the flag.”
 - Early election horserace polls (2016 presidential campaign) are meaningless.
 - Exit polling. Florida 2000 pres. election. Problems in factoring those who already voted (not on election day; in 2012 about 35% voted early).



Cellphone-only respondents are demographically distinct

Unweighted demographic profiles of respondents with only a cellphone versus all other respondents

	Cellphone only	All other respondents
	%	%
Male	58*	49
Female	42*	51
White, non-Hispanic	62*	76
Black, non-Hispanic	10	9
Hispanic	18*	8
18-29	28*	8
30-49	37*	21
50-64	24*	33
65+	10*	36
High school grad or less	31*	27
Some college/Associate degree	29	29
Bachelor's degree or more	39*	44
Urban	43*	30
Suburban	40*	52
Rural	16*	18
Family income		
Less than \$30,000	32*	22

- 11a. What are your feelings toward Obamacare? Do you feel very positive, somewhat positive, neutral, somewhat negative, very negative, or do you not know enough to say? *

Very positive.....	14	[232]
Somewhat positive.....	15	
Neutral.....	13	
Somewhat negative.....	11	
Very negative.....	35	
Don't know enough to say/not sure	12	

* Asked of one-half the respondents (FORM A).

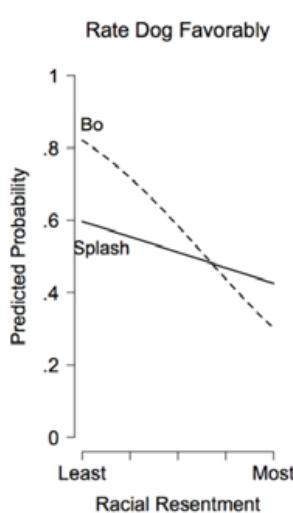
- 11b. What are your feelings toward the Affordable Care Act? Do you feel very positive, somewhat positive, neutral, somewhat negative, very negative, or do you not know enough to say? **

Very positive.....	10	[233]
Somewhat positive.....	12	
Neutral.....	11	
Somewhat negative.....	13	
Very negative	24	
Don't know enough to say/not sure	30	

** Asked of one-half the respondents (FORM B).

Problems with Polling, cont.

- Unlisted #s and cell phones with no landline overcome with random digit dialing. Robo-polls (Rasmussen, Survey USA, PPP) can't reach cell phones, so more difficult to create representative sample (see next slide).
- Different area code than the state you are voting in is a big problem for state polls. Addressed by using billing address zip code (available for about 60% of cell phones).
- "Bradley effect" seems to have dissipated with Obama voters, but still strong anti-Obama subgroup that influences opinion on many issues (even his dog); also ACA vs. "Obamacare."
- Concern among pollsters about missing "hidden" Trump voters. New voters -- Jesse Ventura in MN. Social desirability (internet vs. human polls).



Michael Tesler's research on the impact of racial resentment on views of Bo Obama versus Splash Kennedy (he is a Portuguese water dog).

Question wording

- All of these have different outcomes:
 - If the Nevada Senate election were held today, would you vote for the Democrat or the Republican?
 - If the Nevada Senate election were held today, would you vote for the Republican or the Democrat?
 - If the Nevada Senate election were held today, would you vote for Catherine Cortez Masto or Joe Heck?
 - If the Nevada Senate election were held today, would you vote for Joe Heck or Catherine Cortez Masto?
 - If the Nevada Senate election were held today, would you vote for Democrat Catherine Cortez Masto or Republican Joe Heck?
 - If the Nevada Senate election were held today, would you vote for Republican Joe Heck or Democrat Catherine Cortez Masto?
 - If the Nevada Senate election were held today, for whom would you vote?

Public Opinion Polling

- Being a good consumer of polls
 - sample size, timing, and question wording.
 - Sampling error.
 - who did the poll and paid for it (they should tell you at the end of the poll if you ask).
 - Likely voter screen.
 - Weighting the sample.
 - Allocate the undecided voters?