

Presidential Polling and Constitutional Law – What Happens Next - 12.13.2020

Larry Bernstein:

Thank you, Eric. Our next speaker is Doug Massey. Doug is a professor of Sociology at Princeton. Doug, please go ahead.

Doug Massey:

I've been running surveys for most of my 40-year career. And one thing is clear is that surveys and polls are not doing what they used to do in American society. And this has changed for two reasons. First-

Doug Massey:

Well, as I was saying, the reason that polling is not working as well as it used to is for two reasons because society has changed and second, because technology's changed.

Doug Massey:

Polling really came of age in the 1950s when the United States was a homogenous middle-class society. It was overwhelmingly white, only 10% black, two-thirds of blacks lived in the South, 2.1% Latino and only less than 1% Asian and 92% of all Americans were native born. It was a period of historically low immigration. And the family composition was overwhelmingly nuclear families, either on the way to becoming a nuclear family or having been a nuclear family. 71% of women were not in the labor force, which meant that there was somebody home most of the time.

Doug Massey:

It was a time of rise in median income and declining inequality with a relatively high level of generalized trust and a strong belief in government and faith in government. Most voters were moderate and there was a relatively high and consistent turnout.

Doug Massey:

Today, we have a segmented society. It's only 60% non-Hispanic white, 15% foreign born, 18% Hispanic, 6% Asian, 13% black with a very unequal distribution of both income and wealth and a polarized polity that's fomented by social media, internet, cable TV, and the internet.

Doug Massey:

This brings us to technology. The fifties was an analog world where communication was by telephone and one landline per household with a low frequency of calls. The media was basically three broadcast TV networks supplemented by a few local stations. Local radio and TV program were independently owned, not chain. Data processing was mainframe computing with mechanical adding machines.

Doug Massey:

Now we've moved into a digital world, of course, where communication is cellular and internet with a high frequency of communication, dozens of specialized cable channels, syndicated talk radio, consolidation of TV and radio under a private ownership, chain ownership. Data processing is distributed computing with processing power changing every two years.

Doug Massey:

According to Moore's law, these developments have reinforced a strong segmentation and defragmentation of society and a fragmented media environment targeting specific demographics and political niches.

Doug Massey:

All of these changes make it extremely difficult to do polling in today's world. It's difficult to reach the entire population on a telephone poll. Political and marketing come-ons often masquerade as surveys and make people suspicious. Technology permits screening of phone calls, keeping people from answering. Random digit dialing does not cover cell phones very well. People in households have multiple phones. Homes are often unoccupied. In fact, they're mostly unoccupied. There's a public overload with information and data. Of course, generalized trust has declined and faith in institutions has declined as pointed out in the first presentation.

Doug Massey:

Now, we have a populist revolt based on anger, a lot of hatred and resentment. A rising diversity means you need larger samples to generate reliable results. It's difficult to predict turnout because non-respondents tend to be unreliable voters. A large fraction of the voters in 2020 turned out to be new or first-time voters and these people are very difficult to predict.

Doug Massey:

So in the end, polls today have dropped normally to single digits pulling in, it used to be in the range of 60, 65%. Good polls would be 80 or 90%. Today, you're lucky to get 10% and they're down to single digits.

Doug Massey:

If there's one thing that survey researchers know is that people who don't respond are not a representative sample of the entire population. People tend to not to respond for reasons. The reasons are, as Eric pointed out, not simply social and demographic, but they have to do with ideologies and feelings and emotions. These are very difficult to predict.

Doug Massey:

So now, we're down to single digits and single digit polls are not doing the job they used to in any domain of life, political, consumer surveys or whatever we're looking at. Polling is under challenge because of profound changes in American society and the technology that governs it.