

Presidential Polling and Constitutional Law – What Happens Next - 12.13.2020

Larry:

Hey, Eric, question for you, Eric. You mentioned maybe layering on top of what questions to ask during the polling to maybe help you reference what kind of audience representation you have. You mentioned asking questions about trust, asking questions about immigration, but what other things can they do? Can they tease out maybe religiosity views on race, views on childcare, or any tax policy for the wealthy? What sort of questions do you think would be adding value to properly incorporate these from other studies?

Eric Kauffman:

Well, I think you want something that's relatively stable that isn't something that can be manipulated, let's say, by a political campaign, like support for the wall, something that's very clearly a politically manufactured constructed issue. So, something like can people generally be trusted, a question on that, a question on support for death penalty, views on childcare or even one of the big five personality dimensions is called openness to experience. I think these would all be useful if we could benchmark them ideally in the exit polls and then begin to start to form a view as to what share of the electorate, what the electorate looked like in terms of things like trust, things like openness, then we could start doing what we do with validated voter rolls in the census and to form a picture of what the demographics of the electorate are.

Eric Kauffman:

I think it's going to be important to try and get at some of these psychological dimensions in order to weight properly. Otherwise, you'll just consistently, particularly when politics now is increasingly revolving around this so-called open closed rather than left right dimension, which is more about openness to experience or perhaps people who want faster change, slower change. That is linked also to this trust dimension even more, so you're getting a systematic error in the same direction. I mean, that's the other point is if the polling errors for Trump votes and also for Brexit here have gone in the same direction each time. That's, I think, what's also important to point out. These aren't just random errors. These are errors, which I think we can, because they're moving in the same direction we can start to try and correct. I think these sort of psychological items might be one way of doing that.

Larry:

Yeah. I think what's particularly embarrassing is websites like Fivethirtyeight saying, "Biden has a 90% chance of victory," or Hillary Clinton has a 95% chance of victory." When they assume a confidence interval where they conclude that if Biden's up by 10, then they have a two standard deviation basically has them Biden winning, when in fact maybe the distribution is not that random, nor do they have the competence interval right. It's one thing to say, "Look, it looks like Biden's in the lead," but to say that he has 95% chance of victory, that doesn't do anybody any justice.

Eric Kauffman:

Right. Yeah. I mean, of course you have to know what your target population is to calculate that confidence interval right. So, it's a chicken and egg a little bit. You have to be able to have some idea of what the electorate should look like. I think not just in these demographic terms, but also to some degree in psychological terms if you really want to get this better, really, and correct for this kind of error that seems to be happening in the same direction, time and time again.

Joe Campbell:

I was just going to say that in defense Fivethirtyeight.com, in 2016, Silver was projecting Clinton at a 70% chance of victory. There were some polling forecast models that had others that had Clinton up ahead as high as 98 or 99%, but that did not include the Fivethirtyeight. This time, Silver was saying that there's a fine line between what could be a Biden landslide in a very narrow election. So, he was kind of hedging his bets a little bit if you will, but nonetheless, that's what turned out. It was not a landslide, but it was not really a nail biter either in terms of the overall popular vote in the country.

Larry:

Well, I mean, I think that currently in the United States with California representing such a positive vote getter for the Democratic party, if it's 70, 30 Democrat in California and California represents around 10% of the country, the Democrats are going to win the popular vote by four and then tie elsewhere in the nation. It's those other States that it matters so much and to have gotten the battleground states off by such an enormous amount, I think, is where the real problem was, not so much in the popular vote. I don't know what to make of that, what you think of that.

Joe Campbell:

This is [Joe Campbell 00:00:42:52]. Yeah. I think quite right, that California is going to give the Democratic candidate an overwhelming majority. I mean, this year, it was almost 30 percentage points for Biden, and there's just no way that the Republican party is going to overcome that kind of popular vote deficit elsewhere in the country. There was some discussion that Texas, of all places, might go Democrat. It did not, but that's the only place where they could begin to make up that kind of deficit. With New York trending Democratic as well, the expectation is that that Democrats are likely to win the popular vote in presidential elections for years to come.

Larry:

Just to follow up with something Eric said about using exit polls to help us properly gauge going forward our analytics of our population. I guess Eric, what I want to push back against and Joe, I'm going to lean on you for some support on this, is that exit polls themselves are also deeply flawed. In the 2004 election with Kerry, you highlight in your book, Joe, that the exit polls were completely wrong. So, I worry that using the exit polls as a fixed help in this process may be leading us into another rabbit hole.

Eric Kauffman:

Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I think there are different instruments we can use. I mean, there are also surveys that have intensively, like the GSS that intensively trine and reduce non-response by recontact. That's another way of validating. But I do think the exit polls have some advantages, not only the much higher response rate, but the fact that they don't, perhaps because they are associated with an official process, wouldn't engender the same reactants that you might get from a pollster that's associated with either a university or the media. But of course, I agree. I think we need to use a number of different methods, but I think we need to get beyond the census categories, just the demographics, because so much of the variation is not to do with the demographics. So, I think we got to use whatever instruments we have that are less contaminated. I still think the exit polls are useful in that respect.

Joe Campbell:

This is Joe Campbell. There is a lot of concern about exit polls overall though. It was not just in 2004 when, as you say, Larry, John Kerry was seen as headed to victory based on exit polls that year. In fact,

the exit polls prompted George Bush to brood at the White House for a couple of hours or so thinking that he had lost just like his father had lost after a single term and exit polls signaled that night, that Kerry's victory. In fact, one of his top aides believe that he had one and he referred to Kerry as Mr. President. I think we've seen exit polls go, if not completely off the rails as they did in 2004, but to be misleading often enough to be very, very wary and some journalists who cover election polling and do so fairly well, like Nate Cohn of the New York Times, as well as Nate Silver at fivethirtyeight.com. They really have deep reservations about exit polls and what they tell us.

Joe Campbell:

There is so much that we rely on exit polls, not just for who's winning, who's losing, but why people voted the way they did. If exit polls are suspect, if they're in error, if they're off, then all that valuable information about how the election turned out the way it did is questionable. That's really very serious.

Larry:

Let me give you an example. [crosstalk 00:46:57]. Sorry, let me give you an example from the...

Eric Kauffman:

Sorry, go ahead.

Larry:

No, go ahead.

Eric Kauffman:

Well, no, I was just going to say, I mean, I think it would be important to look at a range of exit polls. I mean, and certainly the ones in Britain recently have been very good. It just depends, I guess, on the year, but it's one thing to say how correctly do they predict the final outcome, but I just think also just for looking at some of these breaks by other variables and using those perhaps to weight future surveys, I think they're useful from that perspective. It's not to say they're going to get it exactly right either, but I think they're probably better than polls based on a several percentage point response.

Larry:

Let me throw out a couple of things that came out in the exit polls in this presidential election. One was that Hispanics voted much more for Trump than expected. Second is the black males voted more for Trump than expected, and that white males voted less for Trump than expected. How much value should be placed on those conclusions based upon these exit polls, if any? Anybody?

Doug:

Well, an exit poll's only as good as the precincts that you got in your sampling and how correctly they're weighted to reflect the population. That's a very tricky exercise to get done correctly. So, there's a lot of unreliability in exit polling, depending on the weighting scheme and where you're doing your exit polling.

Joe Campbell:

This is Joe Campbell. I agree that exit polls can be very dicey in that regard, as well as the fact that early voting is taking place in greater numbers than ever before, which complicates it. It doesn't make

impossible exit polls, but it really does complicate the taking of exit polls. So, some exit pollsters do go to early voting locations and conduct exit polls as much as they have done on election day at various precincts in the country. But it's still a bit of a roll of the dice. As I said earlier, relying on so much information about why the election, went as it did, and if those exit polls are in error, if they're off, then our understanding of the election is off. So, the points that you just made a few moments ago, Larry, they could be right, they could be wrong. We really don't know for sure, unless the exit polls are on target, and they're [crosstalk 00:49:33].

Eric Kauffman:

It's Eric [Kauffman 00:49:36] here. I just want to say that with regard to Hispanics and Asian shift, I mean, we also can look at aggregate level data and particularly from heavily Hispanic areas, such as the Rio Grande Valley and Miami Dade and Imperial County and various other parts of the country. You can certainly see in many of these locations, actually all over the country, a shift amongst these groups towards Trump. So, I do think that tallies pretty well with what we see in the exit polls. I think if you look at the swing, that's also come out in the aggregate data. I think those two points really would suggest that something did happen in this department. I'm happy to talk about why I think that's occurred, but I'm going to let others have a chance.

Larry:

There was a survey by Trafalgar in which they ask, not who you're going to vote for, but who is your best friend going to vote for, hopefully taking away some of the, to tease out your concerns about bias. These are techniques that some surveys have used to detect racism. They make you choose two or three out of four and then vary the number of questions to look at a larger population to tease out some answer. I'm just wondering what you guys think about structure of polling designed to ascertain the nature of themselves, or do you think that, for example, finding out if they asked who your friend or your daughter or your father, how they're going to vote, whether that would reflect information that would be potentially more valuable? Doug, do you want to start with that one?

Doug:

Well, it doesn't get around the non-response problem, which is fundamental. I don't think that those techniques in the survey research world, asking about friends and who your friends are to vote for, have been validated very well. The one that was described where you can vary the questions so that it's impossible to know which one the person's answering, those work pretty well, but they're complicated to administer, and you can't really connect an individual to a particular response. You can only develop an estimate in the aggregate. So, I'm not hopeful about that avenue.

Eric Kauffman:

Yeah, I would, Eric Kauffman here, I'd add I think I saw a paper where someone tried that list experiment with Trump voting and did not pick up concealment. So, it would seem like the non-response problem is the big one. This, on its own, probably wouldn't address that.

Larry:

Eric...

Joe Campbell:

This is Joe Campbell, Trafalgar has gotten some cachet as the pollster that predicted the 2016 election most closely in key states. I think that some of that has been lost in the 2020 election. I don't think that their election was all that great this year. They didn't do national polling, but they did some key state polling.

Larry:

I think they did pretty well. [crosstalk 00:53:07] I think they called North Carolina and Michigan was going to be way close. They said Wisconsin was going to be really close.

Joe Campbell:

They were off in Michigan, they were off in Michigan. I think that they had Trump ahead by five in Georgia where he lost by less than a percentage point. So, I'd say it's a mixed bag for Trafalgar, but they certainly weren't the pollster of the year in 2020 as they were in 2016.

Eric Kauffman:

But I think, I mean, one thing they did do in addition to asking about how your friends voted is they have a running panel where they're asking about a lot of non-political questions. So, maybe they are able to reduce suspicion that way and then just throw in the odd political question and get away with it more perhaps. So, maybe it's that rather than the question about your friends is why they're getting it a little closer.

Joe Campbell:

This is Joe Campbell. I think it's really intriguing how the polling industry at large is trying various techniques to try to get around this non-response issue. I think that the gold standard of random digit dial live operator telephone polling is recognized as being on its way out, if it's not already out, as the gold standard and just what is going to replace it is uncertain. There is an awful lot of experimentation that's going on. I think what Larry was mentioning related to Trafalgar is an example of that kind of experimentation. The field is rich in experimentation. They haven't yet, pollsters haven't yet landed on the new gold standard, if there is indeed a new gold to be found. The internet is really one of the more alluring aspects of contemporary polling research, but no one's really figured that out yet, either

Larry:

A question for Eric, we've obviously as Americans, the audience is 95 or 98% American. So, we focus a lot on this US presidential race, but Brexit was a huge deal in the UK, an enormous percentage of the population voted for it. The results were shocking to the pollsters and I call it the intelligence of the UK. What lessons about polling, what lessons about understanding the UK did those pollsters miss for that incredibly important vote?

Eric Kauffman:

Well, I think first of all, they didn't get it too wrong. That's one thing on the Brexit, but they did get it wrong and they got it wrong in the same direction as the Trump polls, but it wasn't out by the same margin that the polls are here. But I think it's the same general issue about a shy voting, by shy, we're talking about people who, for whatever social reasons or whether they're reacting against people they don't trust or not answering, are systematically answering less. I think that's kind of the lesson really from all of these misses that are in this direction of being against populace. I think that there has to be some awareness that has to be corrected for somehow and that you can't just keep on business as

usual. So, again, I would urge trying to take into account some of these non-demographics, stable non-demographic attitudes, or psychological dispositions, if you can, to wait at least to some degree and see if you can do a bit better.