Pre-Election Polling

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TODAY'S TOPIC

We will discuss whether polls can predict who will win on November 5. Is it possible to predict election outcomes with polls? Predictions using polls are perilous and usually wrong. For example, Nate Cohn on September 22 in the NYT said: "The contest is even tighter in the critical battleground states, where no candidate leads by even a single percentage point in enough states to win the 270 electoral votes needed to win the presidency.

The current leader in the poll average in five of the seven swing states — Michigan, Pennsylvania, Georgia, North Carolina and Arizona — is ahead by just one point or less."

Nate Cohn, and the news media in general follow the election as if it were a dash between two horses for the finish line, the so-called "Horse Race" for President, declaring who is ahead and who is behind based on the recent polling data. But is there really a race? And even if there were, why can't polls detect the difference with certainty? Is there any point at all in looking at polls until the week before the election?

We all know what Nate Cohn means by "tight". A "tight" race means polls show the percentage of people voting in "battleground" states for Harris or Trump is within "...a single percentage point…" But implicit in the statement is the assumption that the polls cannot tell us if one candidate can win by less than 1%. Why is that?

The answer is Margin of Error; the polls' margin of error is actually larger than the measured difference among the voters. We all know on election day, in some states, the margin of victory will be less than 1%. In an election where the margins of victory could be less than the margin of error in the polls, it is logically impossible to tell who is likely to win using polls as the detector.

We are left with the question then, why do useless polling? And what is "margin of error" anyway? Margin of error depends on the number of people polled; more people means less margin of error. If the goal is to know who is ahead, why not then do larger polls? Who pays for these polls and what is their motivation? Why can't polls predict elections? Is this election different from all others, or do all presidential elections have states that are within 1%?

Finally we will try and answer the question whether or not the "Mosaic of Information" available to us can actually predict an election outcome? How best to use the polls as one point in a "Mosaic of Information" indicating the state of the race for President? Are there other predictors with a better record than polls?

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

- [Polls Find Trump Shows Signs of Strength in Arizona, Georgia and North Carolina - The New York Times](#) , By Adam NagourneyRuth Igielnik and Camille Baker,Sept. 23, 2024

- [A Tale of Two Polls](#), Josh Marshall, TPM, Member Newsletter, September 23, 2024 3:00 p.m.

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