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This Month’s HEADLINES

This Month’s DEEP DIVE: Polling with Dr. Aimee Vella Ripley

This Month’s HOMEWORK: Actions you can take this month
Questions

Use the chat box to ask a question.

More opportunities for Q&A at the end.
CONGRESS

• Congress Averts Government Shutdown, CR through December 11; COVID Relief Timeline Unclear
  • More: https://www.cossa.org/policy/

EXECUTIVE BRANCH

• White House Directs Federal Agencies to Defund Race-Related Trainings for Federal Employees, Contractors, and Grantees
• Census Deadline Still in Flux
• ICE Proposes Major New Restrictions to International Student Visas
• NSF Seeking Comments on STEM Education Strategic Plan

COMMUNITY

• National Academies’ Leaders Raise Concern about Politicization of Science
• National Academies Holds Webinar on Earning Trust in the Age of Pandemic

COSSA

• COSSA to Co-Host Symposium on “Responding to COVID-19: Emerging Insights from SBS Sciences” – TOMORROW!
• “Why Social Science?” Focuses on Misinformation and Online Extremism
  • More: www.whysocialscience.com
Use the chat box to ask a question.

More opportunities for Q&A at the end.
Deep Dive

Presidential Election Polling

Today’s Guest:
Aimee Vella Ripley
Research Director
The Harris Poll
Webinar Purpose

For journalists and others who seek to understand the basics of how to report on polling and to provide some background on the history of accuracy of polls.
Reporting on Polls: 1948
Have Polls Gotten Less Accurate?

Weighted-average error of polls in final 21 days before the election, among polls in FiveThirtyEight’s Pollster Ratings database.
The Status Quo of Polling Historically: Accuracy
Can we still trust polls?

(note: the below was NOT a polling result. It was a model built on polling and other data to predict the electoral outcome!)

CLINTON 98.0%  
TRUMP 1.7%
National polls were generally correct and accurate by historical standards

State-level polls showed a competitive, uncertain contest, but clearly underestimated Trump’s support in the Upper Midwest

Why:
- Real change in vote preference during the final week or so of the campaign
- Adjusting for over-representation of college graduates was critical, but many polls did not do it
- Undecided voters swung disproportionately for Trump
Before You Report on Polls, Do You Know…?

Who

What

When

How
Who conducted the poll?

Who paid for the poll?

Are they credible and transparent?

Do they have a dog in the fight?

Examples of poll sponsors:
- Media organizations
- Advocacy groups
- Political campaigns
What were asked?
In what order?

What other polls have been done on this topic?

What is the sample size of the poll?

Are the results from a subset of the respondents?

What is the margin of sampling error?*

* More to come on this later…
When were the interviews conducted?

Were the interviews before or after a major news event?

Are there historical polls on this topic showing change over time?
How was the poll conducted: phone, online, in person?

How was the poll weighted? What were the weighting variables?

Do the results of different polls differ by mode (i.e., a mode effect)?

What was the weighting source for the benchmarks?
Tracking Polls:

Who, What, When, How

Questions to ask about tracking polls (e.g., approval ratings)

- Are you comparing the same poll over time?
- Is the methodology (e.g., question wording) the same?
- A change of only a few points could be noise and not a significant change
The Fundamentals of Reporting on Polls

- Understanding margin of error
- Explaining leads in pre-election polls
- Writing clear polling headlines
- Additional resources
Understanding Margin of Error

Error Margin
The range that the answer likely falls between if we had talked to everyone and not just a sample of people.

95% Confidence Level
95 times out of 100, we expect an answer to fall within that margin (but 5 times out of 100, it won’t).
Understanding Margin of Error

A poll says 58% of Americans think unicorns are real, within an error margin of +/-3 percentage points.

We can be 95% confident the percent of the public that says unicorns are real is somewhere between 55% - 61%.
Explaining Leads in Pre-Election Polls

Pre-election “horserace” polls: Who is in the lead?

If a poll with these results has an error margin of +/- 4 points, who is in the lead?

- Smith – 48%
- Jones – 43%
- Neither
Explaining Leads in Pre-Election Polls

ANSWER: NEITHER!

The margins of error overlap, so there is no clear leader.

With an error margin of +/- 4, there is a 95% chance that:

- Smith’s support is between 44% - 52%
- Jones’ support is between 39% - 47%
Writing Clear Polling Headlines

RULES OF THUMB

A candidate’s advantage should be between 1.5x-2x the margin of error to be 95% certain that candidate actually has a lead.

Headline terminology:
- Slight, apparent lead, or edge: Lead of 1x-2x the error margin
- Lead or clear lead: Lead of > 2x the error margin (AP Style Guidelines)
WASHINGTON HAS SLIGHT EDGE OVER ADAMS

WASHINGTON LEADS ADAMS

WASHINGTON IS BEATING ADAMS

WASHINGTON IS WINNING

POLL SAYS WASHINGTON WILL WIN
"Slight edge" best describes a 3.5 point lead with a +/- 3 point error margin. Polls reflect a snapshot in time; they are not a prediction of the future.

WASHINGTON HAS SLIGHT EDGE OVER ADAMS
• American democracy requires we know what the public thinks.
• Public opinion polls are the standard method of knowing what the public thinks, and for good reason: Done well, they are nonpartisan, unbiased, and accurate.
• “Horserace” polling is but one corner of the polling landscape, but ironically is both the most visible corner, and the one that is least about “public opinion,” meaning what people think about issues and events.
• It is therefore incumbent upon survey researchers to continue to strive toward accuracy, and of journalists to uphold scientific polls as generally accurate and important to democracy.
Additional Resources

Online resources:

• AAPOR: 2016 Report of the Polls
• AAPOR: Journalist cheat sheet
• AAPOR: Margin of Error
• AAPOR: Transparency Initiative
• Associated Press: Style guide for reporting on polls
• Poynter: Online course on polling

Videos:

• Washington Post: How polls work
• Pew Research Center: Methods 101
Thank You
Let’s hear from you!

If using computer microphone: raise your hand!
   Step 1: select “participants”
   Step 2: select “raise hand”
      (may be in sidebar)
   Step 3: after you’re unmuted, ask your question!

If using telephone audio: put your question in the chat box!
Make your plan to vote
https://www.vote.org/

Tell the Senate to extend the 2020 Census deadlines
https://app.govpredict.com/portal/grassroots/campaigns/n1dert3x/take_action

Share examples of social science research related to timely policy issues with COSSA
https://www.cossa.org/share-your-story
Next Month:

- NOVEMBER’S HEADLINES
- DEEP DIVE TBD
THIS YEAR’S DEEP DIVE TOPICS:

• September 2020: Tracking School Reopening Plans
• August 2020: The Psychology of COVID-19
• July 2020: The Societal Experts Action Network (SEAN)
• June 2020: A Conversation on Police Violence
• May 2020: A Conversation with an Epidemiologist
• April 2020: Communication Strategies in an Emerging Public Health Crisis
• March 2020: White House Office of Science and Technology Policy Updates
• Feb 2020: The Trump Administration’s FY 2021 Budget Request
• Jan 2020: 2019 Policy Wrap-Up and a Look Ahead
❑ Tune in each month – 2nd Thursday
❑ Tell your colleagues to sign up for COSSA Member Messages and Alerts—MEMBERS ONLY (email Julia at jmilton@cossa.org)
❑ Encourage other organizations and universities to Join COSSA (email Wendy at wnaus@cossa.org)
❑ Send us your ideas for DEEP DIVES (email Ben at bgoodrich@cossa.org)
Wendy Naus
Executive Director
Email: wnaus@cossa.org

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