What can we learn from election forecasting?

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Personal info (to break up zoom awkwardness):

- I graduated from the University of Texas at Austin (Hook'em!) in 2018 (so I'm not that much older than y'all)
- I studied government and history with computer science and statistics on the side (AKA you never know what you might end up doing with your education)
- I live in Washington, DC with my fiance and two cats (bacon and pancake)
- I'm a data journalist for The Economist
  - I've worked on all sorts of projects and pieces
  - But my expertise is in public opinion polling and election forecasting
- Aside from my work at The Economist I also interned with the Pew Research Center on their survey methods team

Let's talk forecasting

What we learn from building election forecasts

Primarily useful as tools for handicapping the horse race

But also let us test theories about voter behavior and the forces guiding out politics:

- The role of economics in shaping presidential evaluations
- The extent to which presidential approval shapes future evaluations of the incumbent party (IE over the course of the election year)
- Whether non-incumbent parties are treated differently (they are)

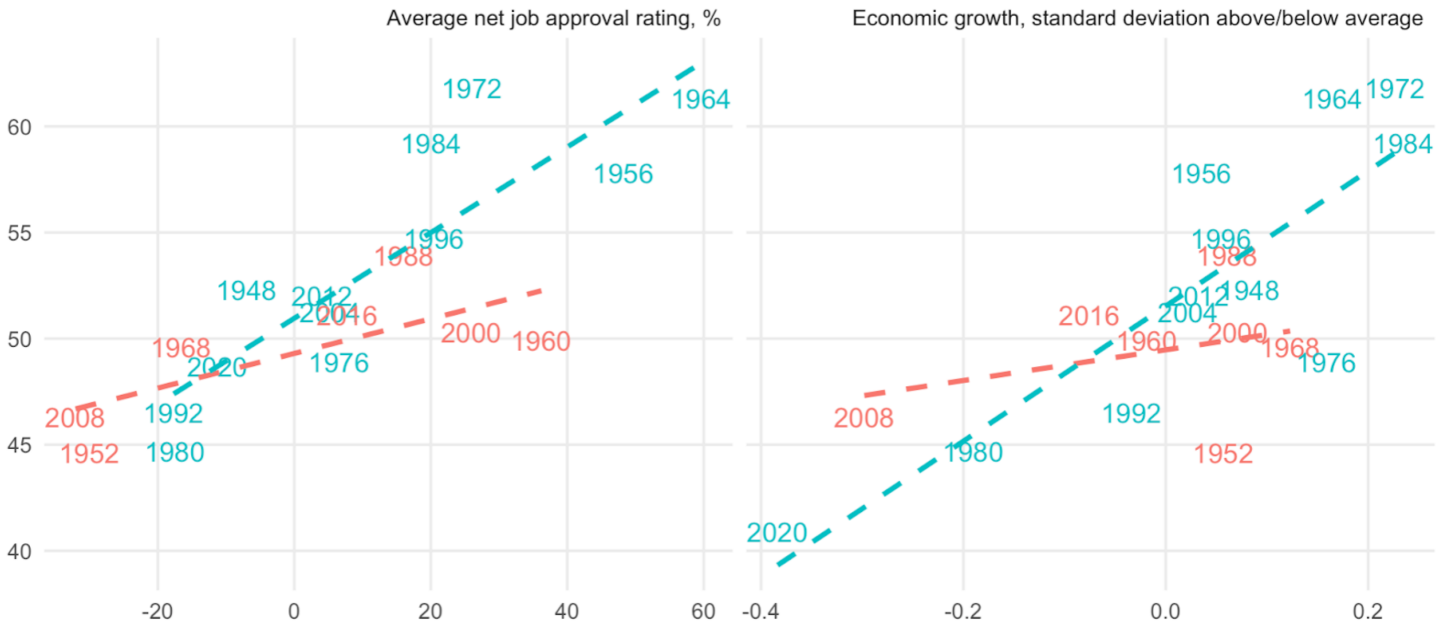
And they enable us to test hypothesis about the accuracy of different polling methods

- Polls provide regular benchmarks against methodological choices
- Such as sampling procedures, weighting modes, etc

And about structural factors

- Is the electoral college biased toward Republicans? White voters?
- By how much?

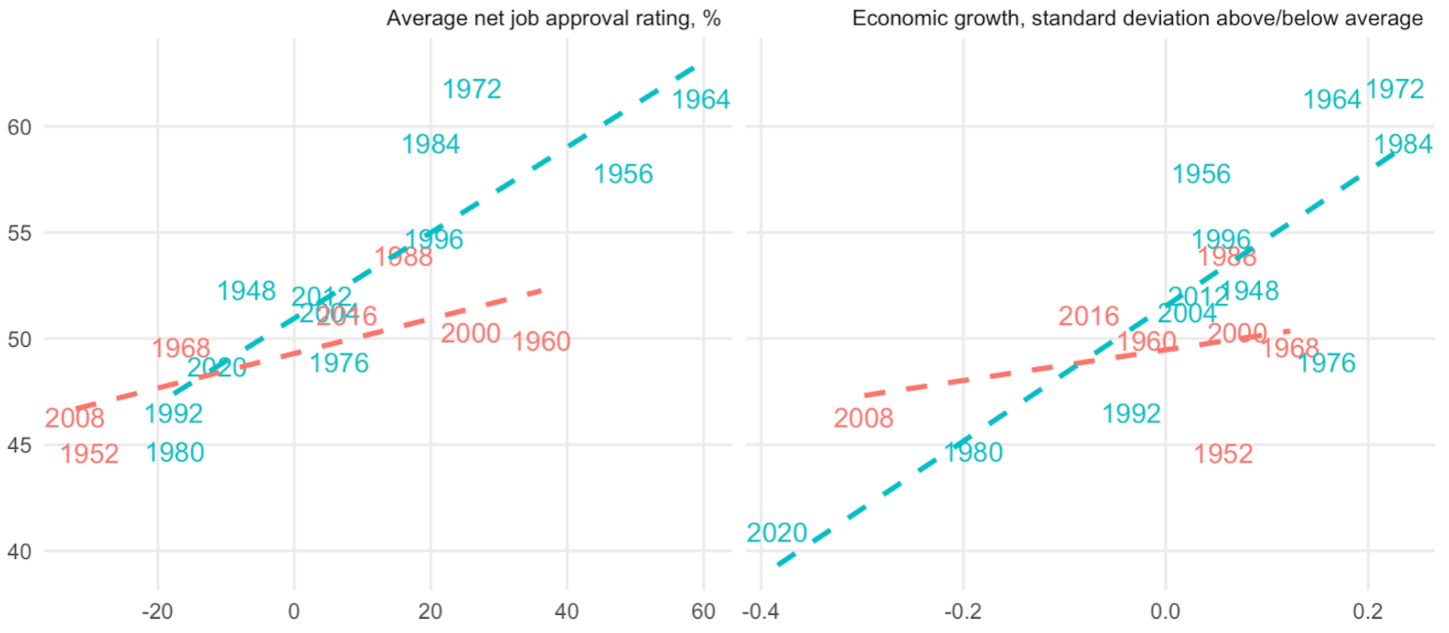
The “fundamentals” part 1: economics + incumbency



*Values at 41 days before the election
Sources: St Louis Fed; Yahoo; The Economist

(blue = incumbents)

The “fundamentals” part 2: approval + incumbency



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Break for questions

Polls (and what forecasting teaches us about them)

Polls provide regular benchmarks against methodological choices

Poll-level model for aggregating opinions

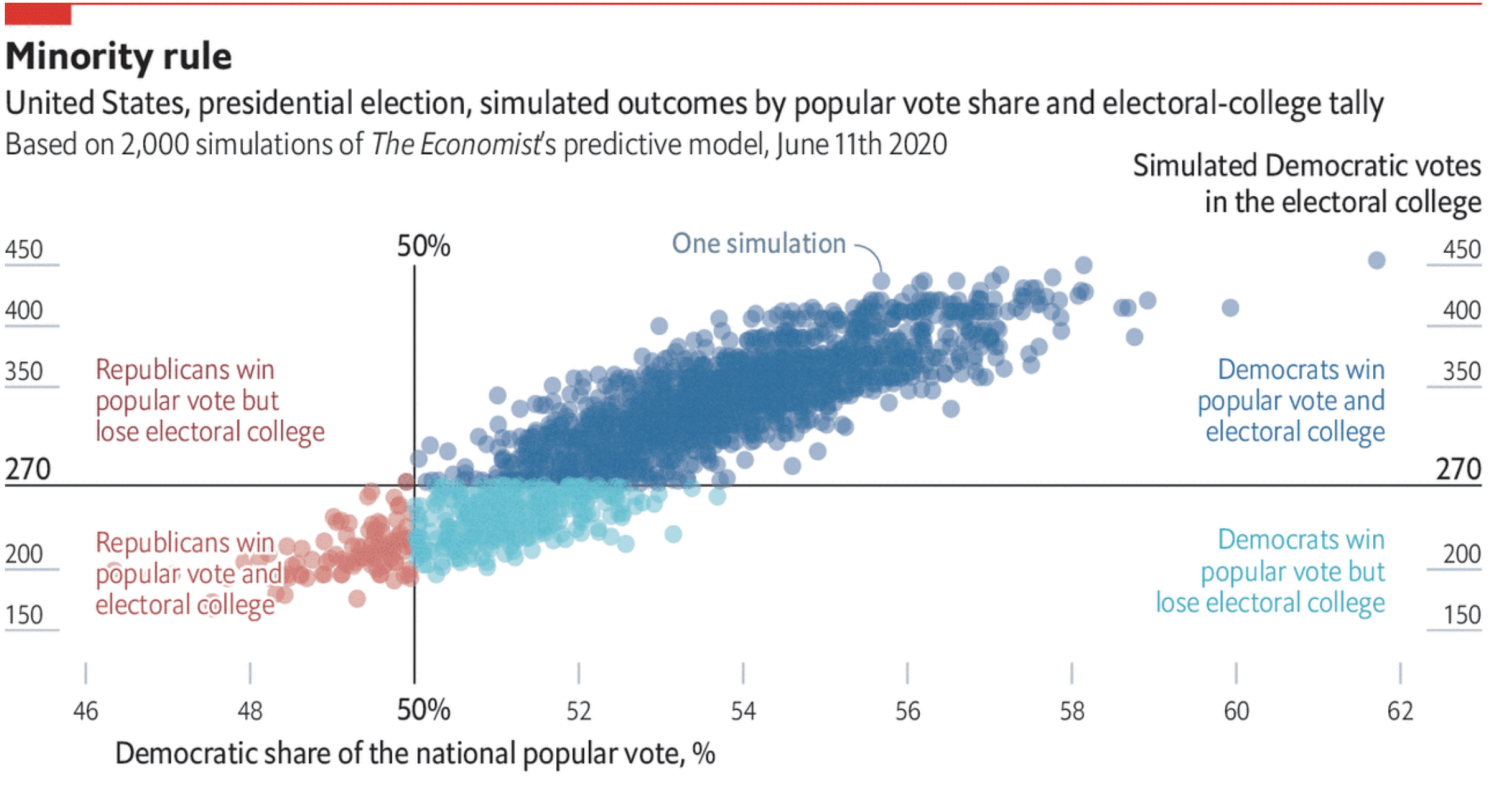
- Includes a variable for differences from mode (online/IVR/live phone)
- Includes a variable for differences from population (likely/registered voters)
- (Regular departure from the average of polls bias)

Such as weighting variables, etc

- Time-series model
  - Creates two averages: one for pollsters who use the correct weighting protocols and one for those that don't
  - Pushes the adjusted average for pollsters who don't weight correctly back toward the other

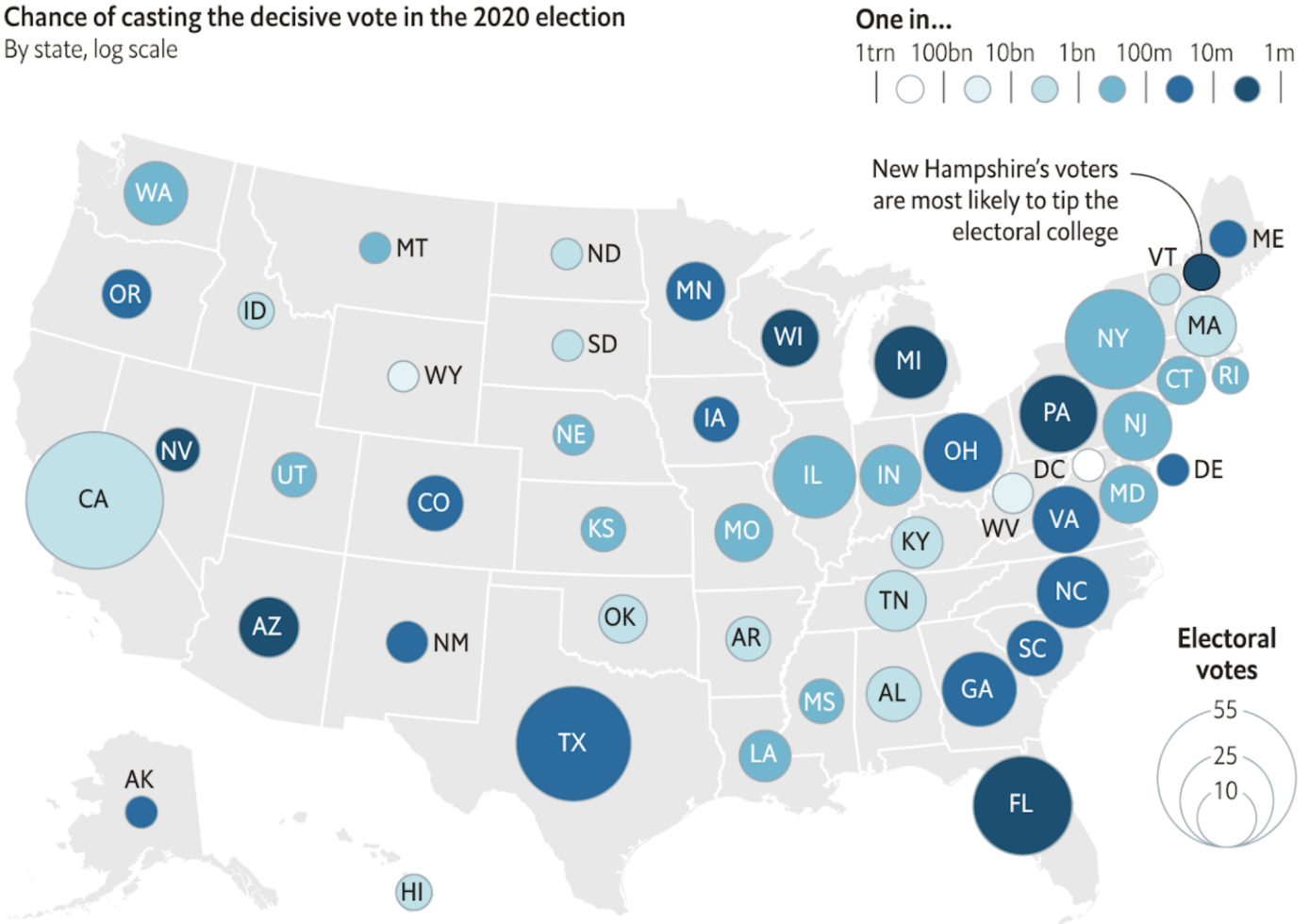
Break for questions

Learning from predictions: electoral college bias



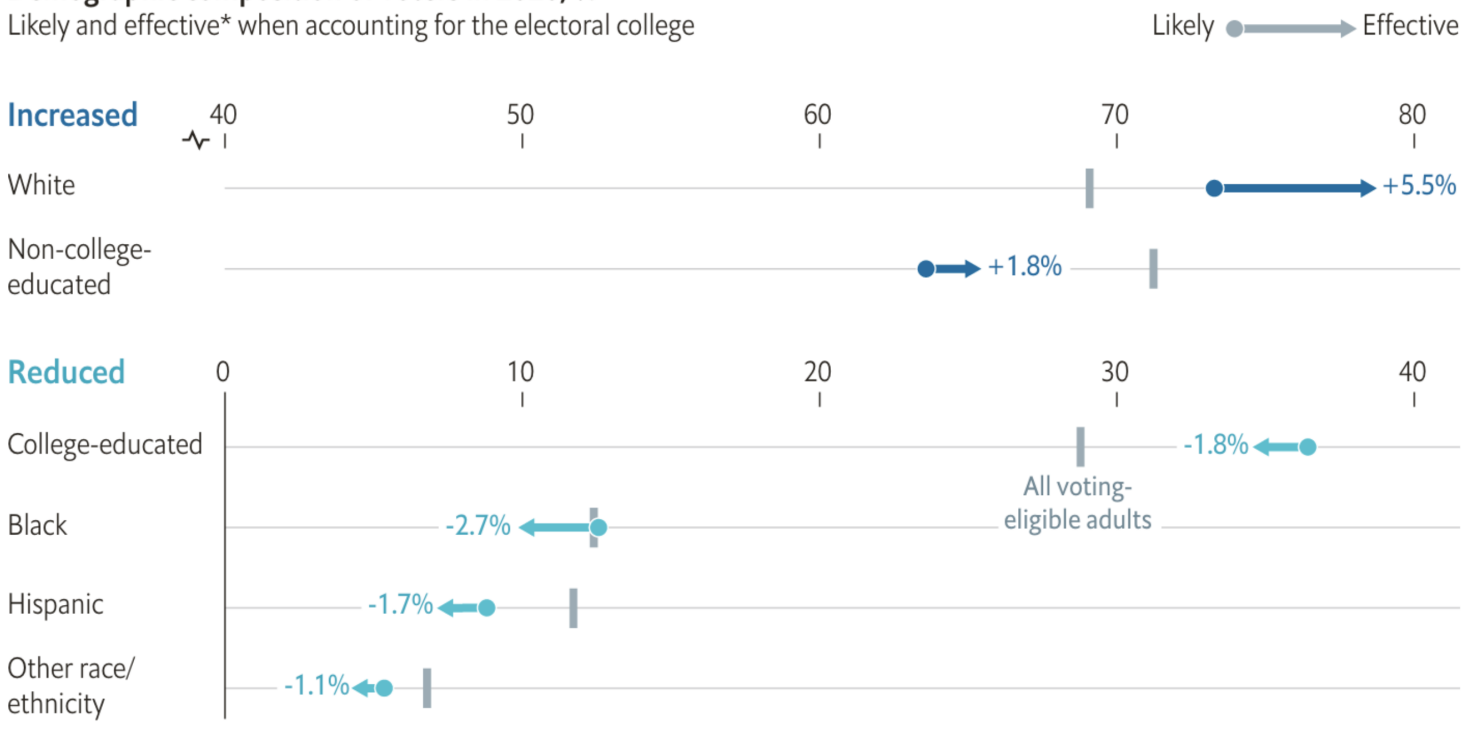
→ The electoral college splits voting power unevenly across states

Chance of casting the decisive vote in the 2020 election
By state, log scale



→ White voters get a boost from the electoral college

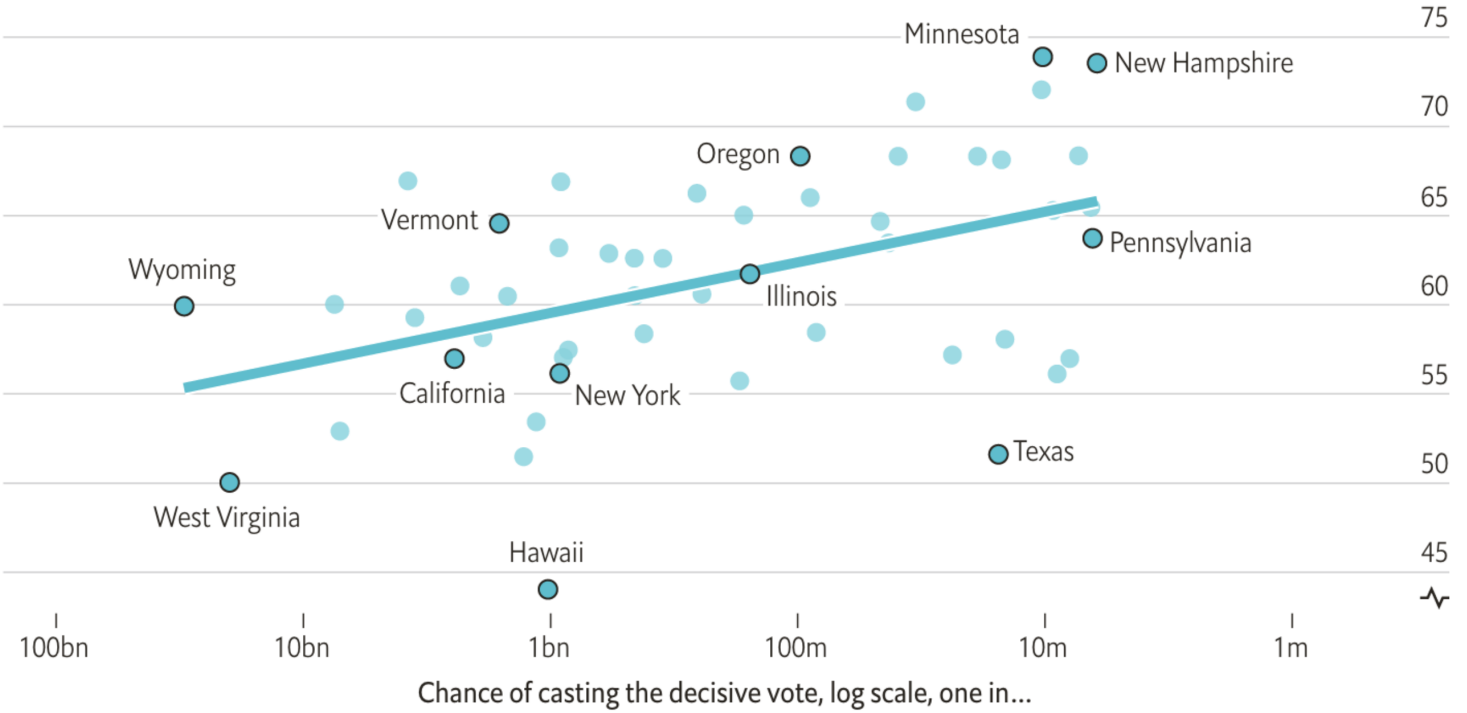
Demographic composition of voters in 2020, %
Likely and effective* when accounting for the electoral college



*Composition weighted by how likely a voter in each state is to decide the outcome of the election

→ The electoral college discourages voting in uncompetitive states

State turnout v chance of casting the decisive vote in the 2020 election
% of voting-eligible population



Q&A time

Thank you!

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These slides were made with the `xaringan` package for R from Yihui Xie. They are available online at https://www.gelliottmorris.com/slides/2020-09-24-cornell-kreps/