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Reading Response 2

Thinking about polls in 2020

In "The Evolution of Election Polling in the United States," D. Sunshine Hillygus concludes with skepticism about the impact of polls, stating that polls have "lost some of their luster" despite the number of polls "sharply increasing" (Hillygus 976). As the article was written in 2011, I was left wondering whether we have seen this conclusion play out in the last decade. There is no doubt that polls have continued to increase with the growth of the internet. However, a dilemma has emerged, where the standard probability-based telephone poll has been stymied by an increasing lack of response, and online opt-in polls are a methodological mess. My goal is to understand polling in the 2020 election based on the ideas presented in the reading.

Hillygus begins the article by stating the three main functions of polls--forecasting elections, understanding voting behavior, and planning campaign strategy. Throughout the article, it becomes clear that actually achieving this goal is a messy and complex process. In a probability sample, all people in the target population have an equal chance of being selected; in other words, there is some level of methodological transparency (Pew Research Center). Most probability polls are conducted over the phone, but with the internet, non-probability (or opt-in) polls are much more common than phone polls now. The upsides of this method are that it is cheaper, people can take the survey in private, and they can collect a wider range of information (Pew Research Center). The downside is that the internet is an open playground--there is no way to draw a random sample of internet users like we can do with people's phone numbers (thanks to the Federal Communications Commision) (Pew Research Center). Further, as the article points out, respondents do not necessarily "provide honest answers" to many questions, such as vote intention (Hillygus 966). This brings me to the validity of polls, and what went wrong in 2016. Many people postulate that the failure of polls in 2016 to predict Trump's victory is indicative of their lack of validity in the current election cycle.

All polls rely on different methods of weighting--basically “boosting or shrinking responses from people with certain demographics” to match census data and data about expected turnout (10news.com). Numerous sources, including 538 and the NYT, claim that a large reason for this is because polls did not correct for overrepresenation of college graduates, thus underrepresenting Mr.Trump’s support in key swing states in the Rust Belt (Nate Cohn). Nate also explains how the polls for the popular vote were actually in line with most elections in terms of accuracy; Hillygus bolsters this point in the article when discussing how elections are usually split pretty close in the popular vote and thus not as hard to predict as the electoral college.

So, what does all this mean for 2020? Should we trust the polls this time around? The answer, in line with Hillygus, is perhaps still a healthy dose of skepticism. However, there is evidence that pollsters have improved their methodologies over the last few years. Five thirty eight “contacted 21 well-known pollsters to find out how they adjusted their methodologies” in the context of COVID-19 and in response to the 2016 election (Skelley et al). In terms of COVID, 538 stated that they have better incorporated uncertainty in their models, in terms of voter turnout, changing economic circumstances in the country, and covariance between state COVID rates and election outcome (Silver). Outside of COVID, pollsters told 538 that they were “weighting their samples by education” now, with some polls even “weighting for education *within* racial groups” (Skelley et al). In addition, NBC News/WSJ polls weight by “the share of respondents from urban, suburban and rural areas” (Skelley et al). Many pollsters emphasized contacting people by cell phone rather than landline to help gather a wider portion of the population. Still, the pollsters’ main concern was unpredictability in terms of COVID, including day-of-election issues of closed polling sites and spikes in cases.

The good news is that there appears to be strong efforts to improve polling methodologies on and offline for the upcoming election. Still, going back to Hillygus’s opening statement, the causal relationship between voting behavior and election results is very hard to determine. We can conclude that polls do provide an imperfect but easily digestible snapshot of voter preferences that is incredibly

useful as we get close to election day. It can help campaigns plan their last-ditch efforts to gain voters as well as help citizens understand the current political leanings of different regions. And finally, while pollsters do not always make their methodology explicit, there are many sources for assessing the bias of polls that are easily accessible for those who want it.

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