Researcher Choices and Bias

Data Analysis for Journalism and Political Communication
(Fall 2025)

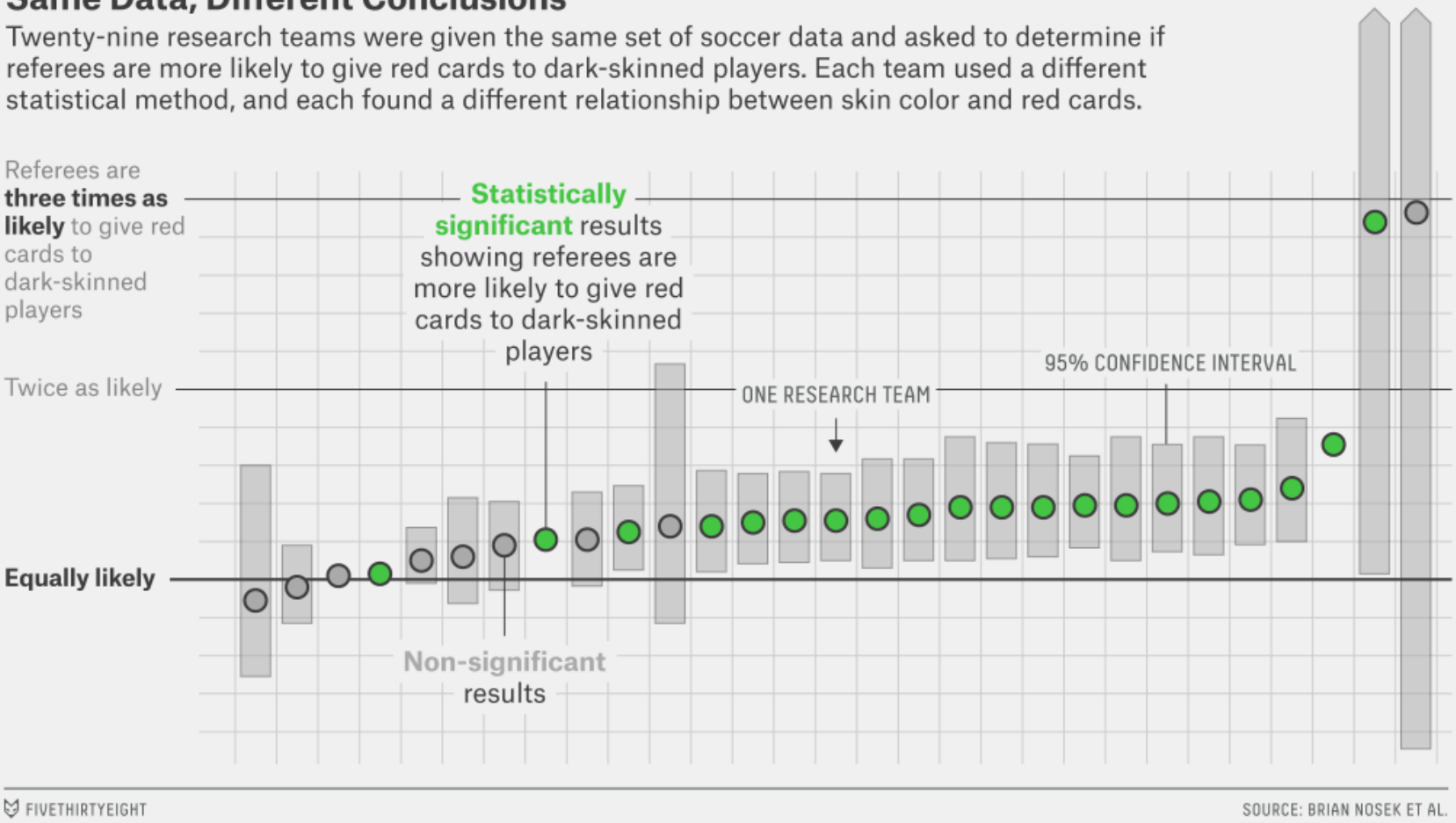
Prof. Bell

On the Supreme Court's Emergency Docket, Sharp Partisan Divides

This is apparent in the overall numbers, with the Trump administration prevailing much more often than its predecessor had — 84 percent of the time, compared with 53 percent for the Biden administration. That is perhaps unsurprising, given that the court is dominated by six Republican appointees.

Same Data, Different Conclusions

Twenty-nine research teams were given the same set of soccer data and asked to determine if referees are more likely to give red cards to dark-skinned players. Each team used a different statistical method, and each found a different relationship between skin color and red cards.



Researcher Choices

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5. What statistical analyses do I use?

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1. What is my hypothesis?
2. What do I measure?
3. How do I collect my data?
4. How much data do I collect?
5. What statistical analyses do I use?
6. How do I handle outliers, missing data, and other peculiarities?

What is my hypothesis?

Choosing a hypothesis is all about avoiding error:

- **Type I error**: False positives
  - Sending the innocent to jail - this is bad!

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Our goal is to reduce Type I error. Assume that the data is innocent (that the hypothesis is false) until it is proven guilty.

Measuring Type I Error

P-value

The chance that we would get a particular result from our test if the true answer is false

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- The p-value is our chance of committing a Type I error - sending the innocent to jail
- Common p-value cut-offs in scientific research: .01, .05, and .1 indicate **statistical significance**

Measuring Type I Error

Hypothesis: A student cheated on an exam.

P-value (chance that we conclude that student cheated, but they did not): .50

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P-value (chance that we conclude that student cheated, but they did not): .25

Measuring Type I Error

Hypothesis: A student cheated on an exam.

- The student performed much better on this exam than on previous exams
- The student finished their exam more quickly than other students

P-value (chance that we conclude that student cheated, but they did not): .15

Measuring Type I Error

Hypothesis: A student cheated on an exam.

- The student performed much better on this exam than on previous exams
- The student finished their exam more quickly than other students
- The student's roommate saw them up all night studying before the exam

P-value (chance that we conclude that student cheated, but they did not): .40

Measuring Type I Error

Hypothesis: A student cheated on an exam.

- The student performed much better on this exam than on previous exams
- The student finished their exam more quickly than other students
- The student's roommate saw them up all night studying before the exam
- The student missed the same questions as other students

P-value (chance that we conclude that student cheated, but they did not): .75

The Scientific Method

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- We follow the scientific method: Theory $\Rightarrow$ Hypothesis $\Rightarrow$ Test $\Rightarrow$ Analyze $\Rightarrow$ Report
- But in practice, no analysis plan survives contact with the data

Are Democrats or Republicans Good for the Economy?

Use (a recreation of) FiveThirtyEight's online tool to test what you think is the best approach to answering the question. There are no right or wrong answers - just select the model you think is best, and report your results in the form:

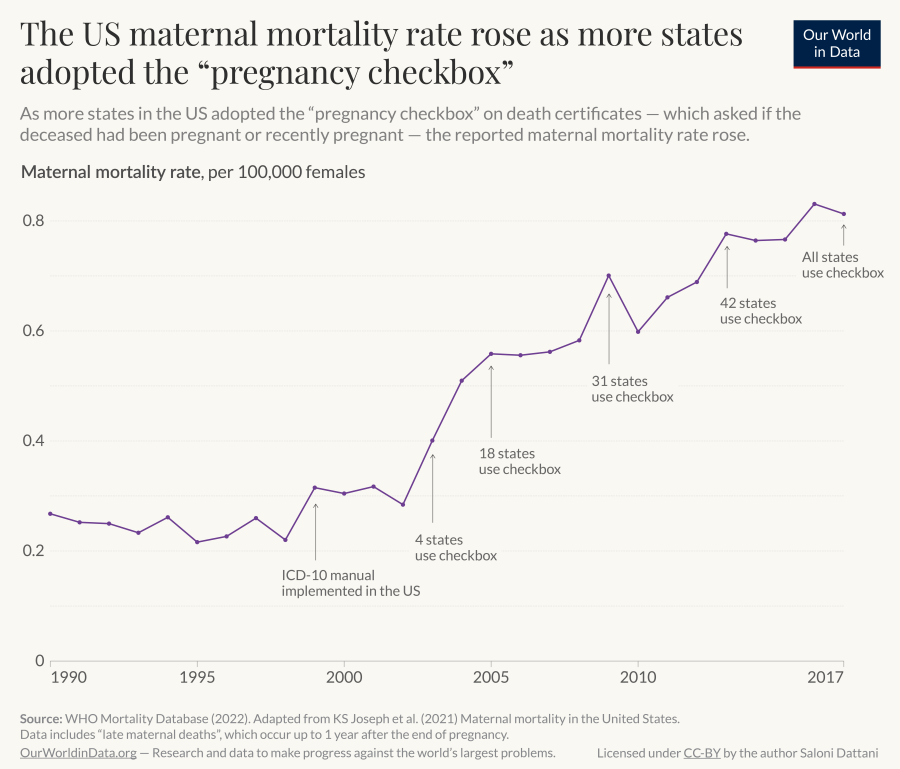
https://bit.ly/smpa2152

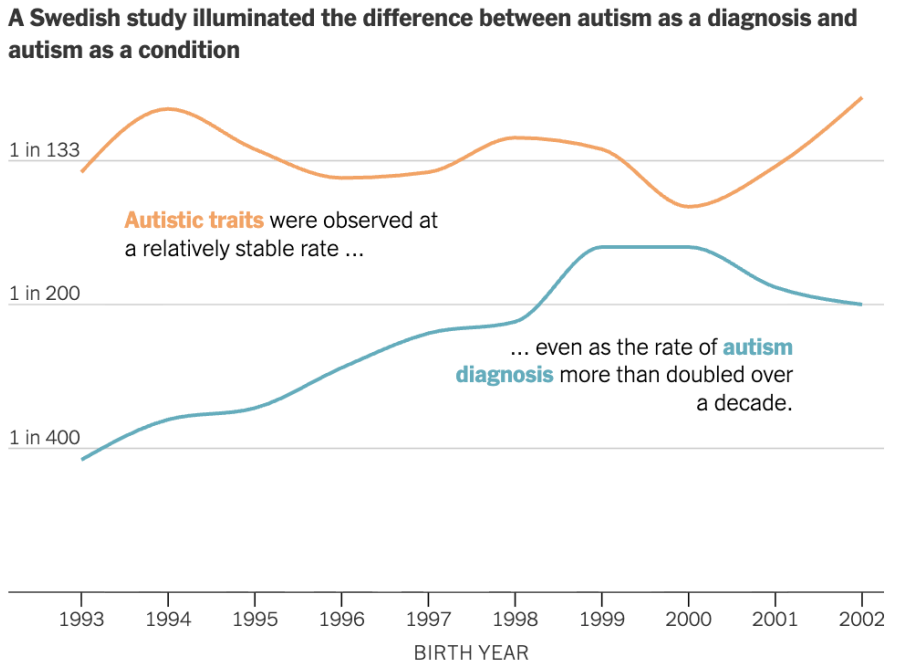
(The link to the tool is on the form.)

What do I measure?

Operationalization

The process of defining a measurable version of a concept.





Principles of Good Operationalization

1. Unambiguous

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2. Parsimonious

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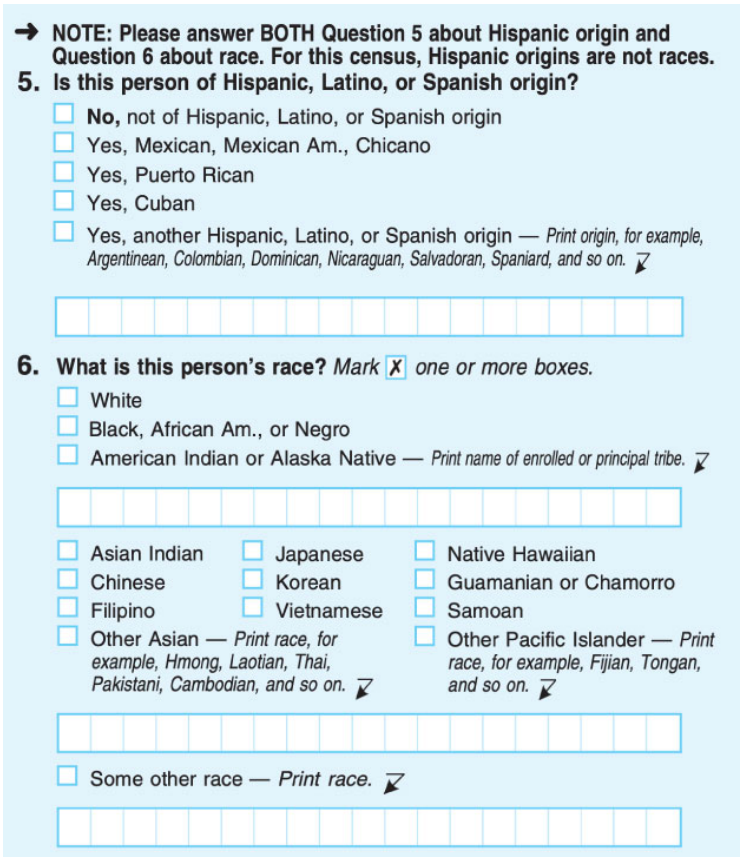
3. Accurate



➜ **NOTE: Please answer BOTH Question 5 about Hispanic origin and Question 6 about race. For this census, Hispanic origins are not races.**

5. Is this person of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?

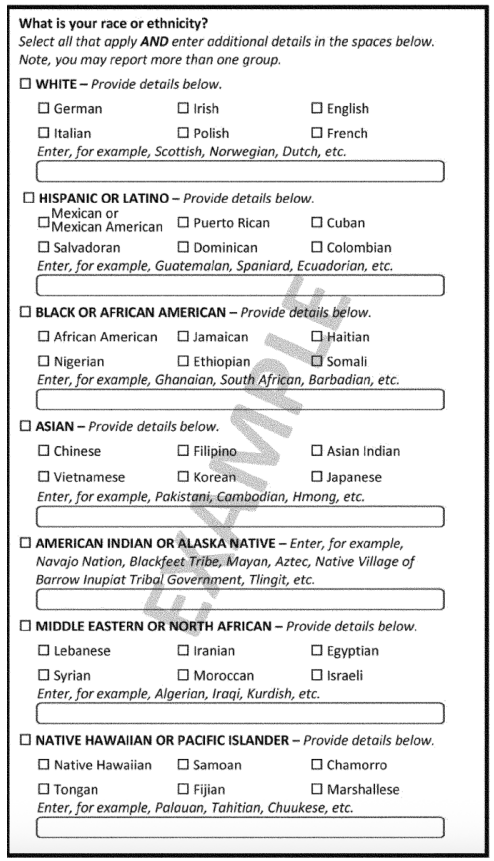
- ☐ **No,** not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
- ☐ Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano
- ☐ Yes, Puerto Rican
- ☐ Yes, Cuban
- ☐ Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin — *Print origin, for example, Argentinean, Colombian, Dominican, Nicaraguan, Salvadoran, Spaniard, and so on.*

6. What is this person's race? *Mark* ☒ *one or more boxes.*

- ☐ White
- ☐ Black, African Am., or Negro
- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native — *Print name of enrolled or principal tribe.*

- ☐ Asian Indian
- ☐ Chinese
- ☐ Filipino
- ☐ Other Asian — *Print race, for example, Hmong, Laotian, Thai, Pakistani, Cambodian, and so on.*
- ☐ Japanese
- ☐ Korean
- ☐ Vietnamese
- ☐ Native Hawaiian
- ☐ Guamanian or Chamorro
- ☐ Samoan
- ☐ Other Pacific Islander — *Print race, for example, Fijian, Tongan, and so on.*

- ☐ Some other race — *Print race.*



What is your race or ethnicity?
Select all that apply ***AND*** *enter additional details in the spaces below.*
Note, you may report more than one group.

☐ **WHITE** – *Provide details below.*
☐ German ☐ Irish ☐ English
☐ Italian ☐ Polish ☐ French
Enter, for example, Scottish, Norwegian, Dutch, etc.

☐ **HISPANIC OR LATINO** – *Provide details below.*
☐ Mexican or Mexican American ☐ Puerto Rican ☐ Cuban
☐ Salvadoran ☐ Dominican ☐ Colombian
Enter, for example, Guatemalan, Spaniard, Ecuadorian, etc.

☐ **BLACK OR AFRICAN AMERICAN** – *Provide details below.*
☐ African American ☐ Jamaican ☐ Haitian
☐ Nigerian ☐ Ethiopian ☐ Somali
Enter, for example, Ghanaian, South African, Barbadian, etc.

☐ **ASIAN** – *Provide details below.*
☐ Chinese ☐ Filipino ☐ Asian Indian
☐ Vietnamese ☐ Korean ☐ Japanese
Enter, for example, Pakistani, Cambodian, Hmong, etc.

☐ **AMERICAN INDIAN OR ALASKA NATIVE** – *Enter, for example, Navajo Nation, Blackfeet Tribe, Mayan, Aztec, Native Village of Barrow Inupiat Tribal Government, Tlingit, etc.*

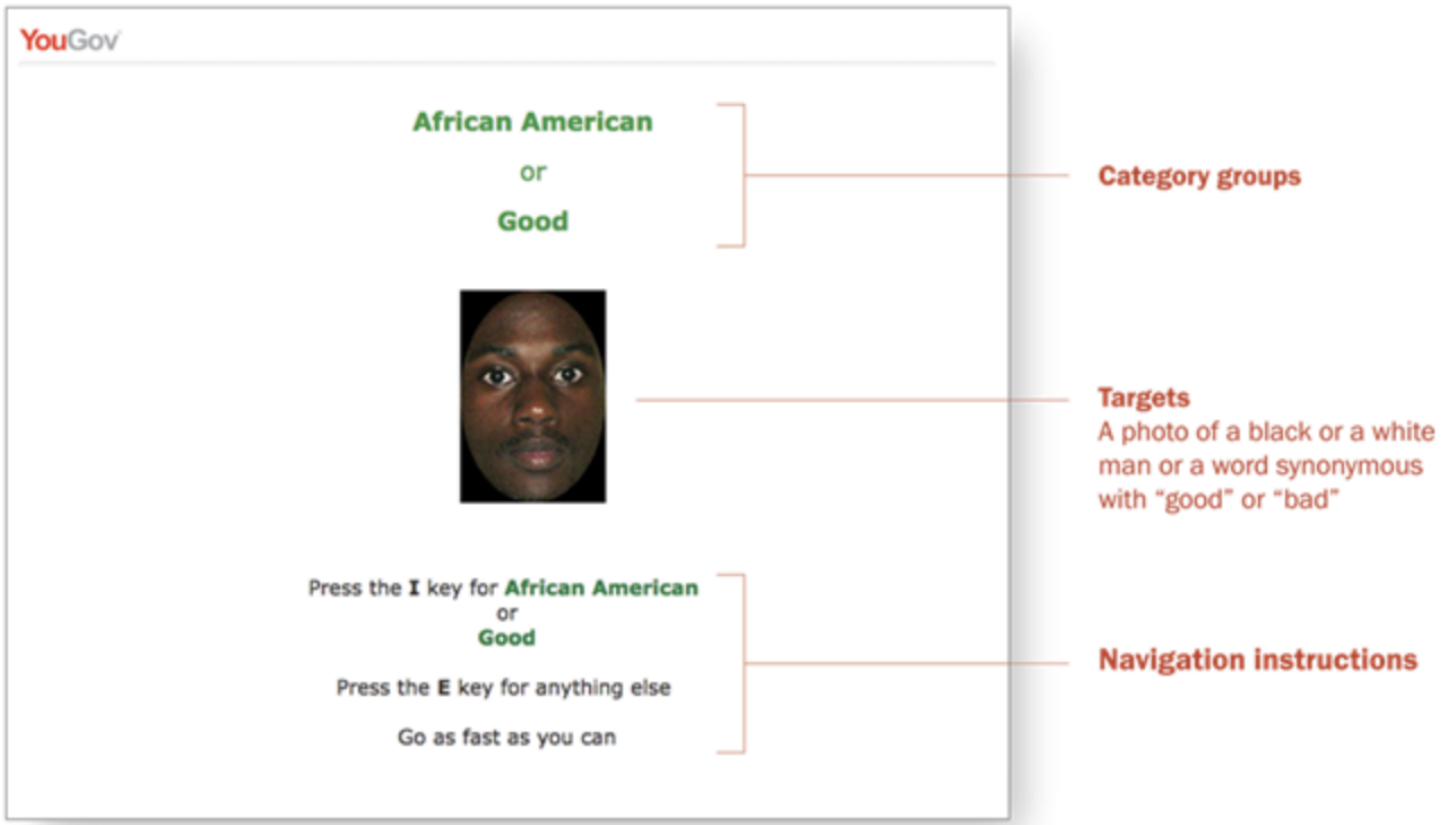
☐ **MIDDLE EASTERN OR NORTH AFRICAN** – *Provide details below.*
☐ Lebanese ☐ Iranian ☐ Egyptian
☐ Syrian ☐ Moroccan ☐ Israeli
Enter, for example, Algerian, Iraqi, Kurdish, etc.

☐ **NATIVE HAWAIIAN OR PACIFIC ISLANDER** – *Provide details below.*
☐ Native Hawaiian ☐ Samoan ☐ Chamorro
☐ Tongan ☐ Fijian ☐ Marshallese
Enter, for example, Palauan, Tahitian, Chuukese, etc.

EXAMPLE

Principles of Good Operationalization

1. Unambiguous
2. Parsimonious
3. Accurate
4. Reliable



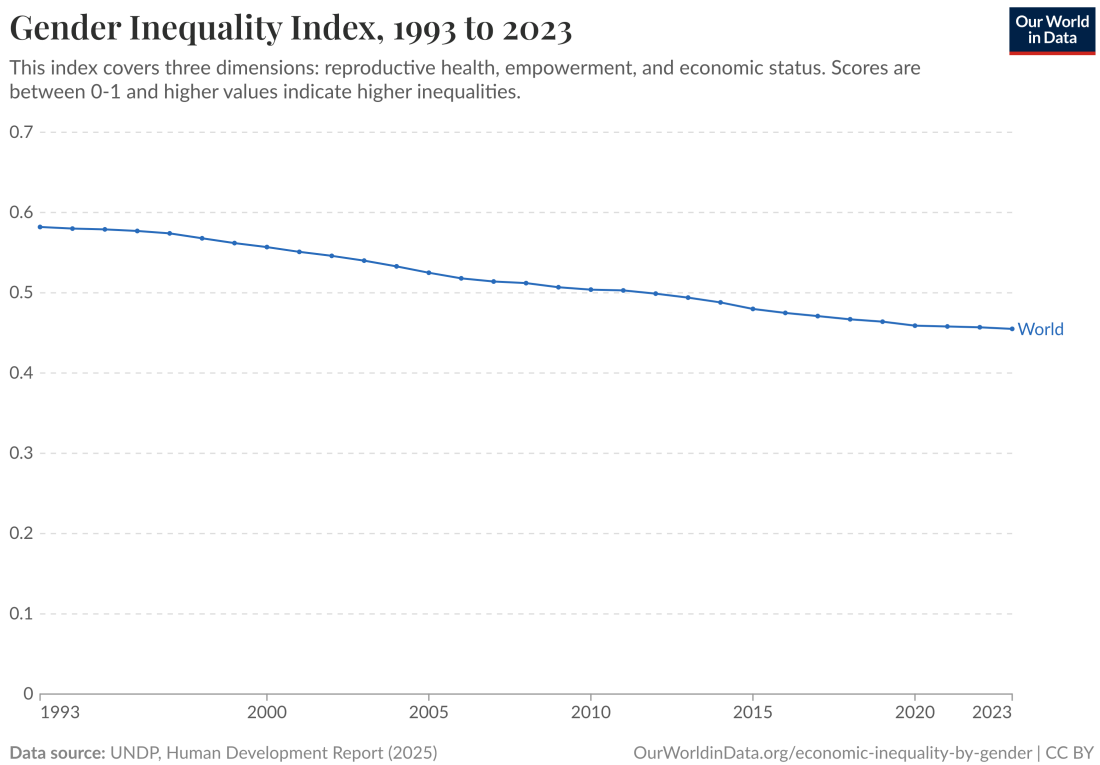
Principles of Good Operationalization

1. Unambiguous
2. Parsimonious
3. Accurate
4. Reliable
5. Feasible

Principles of Good Operationalization

Index (or Scale) Variable

An index (or scale) variable is a type of proxy measure in which the researcher combines multiple sources of data into a single representation of the concept under investigation using a pre-defined mathematical operation.



Exercise: Operationalization

1. You want to measure how happy people are
2. You want to measure people's driving ability
3. You want to measure the political ideology of a member of Congress

How do I collect my data?

Data Generating Process

The rules and procedures that produce the data one is interested in

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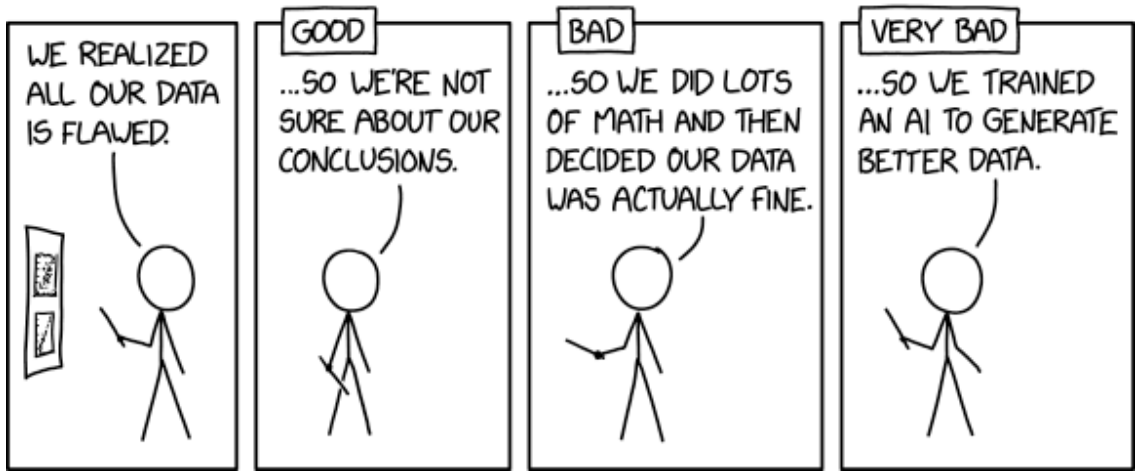

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Data Generating Process

The rules and procedures that produce the data one is interested in

- No amount of statistical wizardry can compensate for bad data
- The gold standard of data generating processes is the **random sample**

Sampling

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- The key to any data analysis project is a quality sample, which is determined by two elements:
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  2. The **sample size** is sufficiently large

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The probability of any given unit being drawn from the population is uniform (the same)

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- A failure of each unit to have a uniform probability of being drawn from the population is known as **selection bias**
- Units are "selecting" into our data because they are more observable than other units
- Selection bias reduces our **generalizability** to the population because the data is not representative of the population

Random Sample

Can I randomly sample 10 students from this class to generalize to:

- the population of GW students?

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- the population of SMPA students?

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Can I randomly sample 10 students from this class to generalize to:

- the population of GW students?
- the population of SMPA students?
- the population of Data Analysis students?

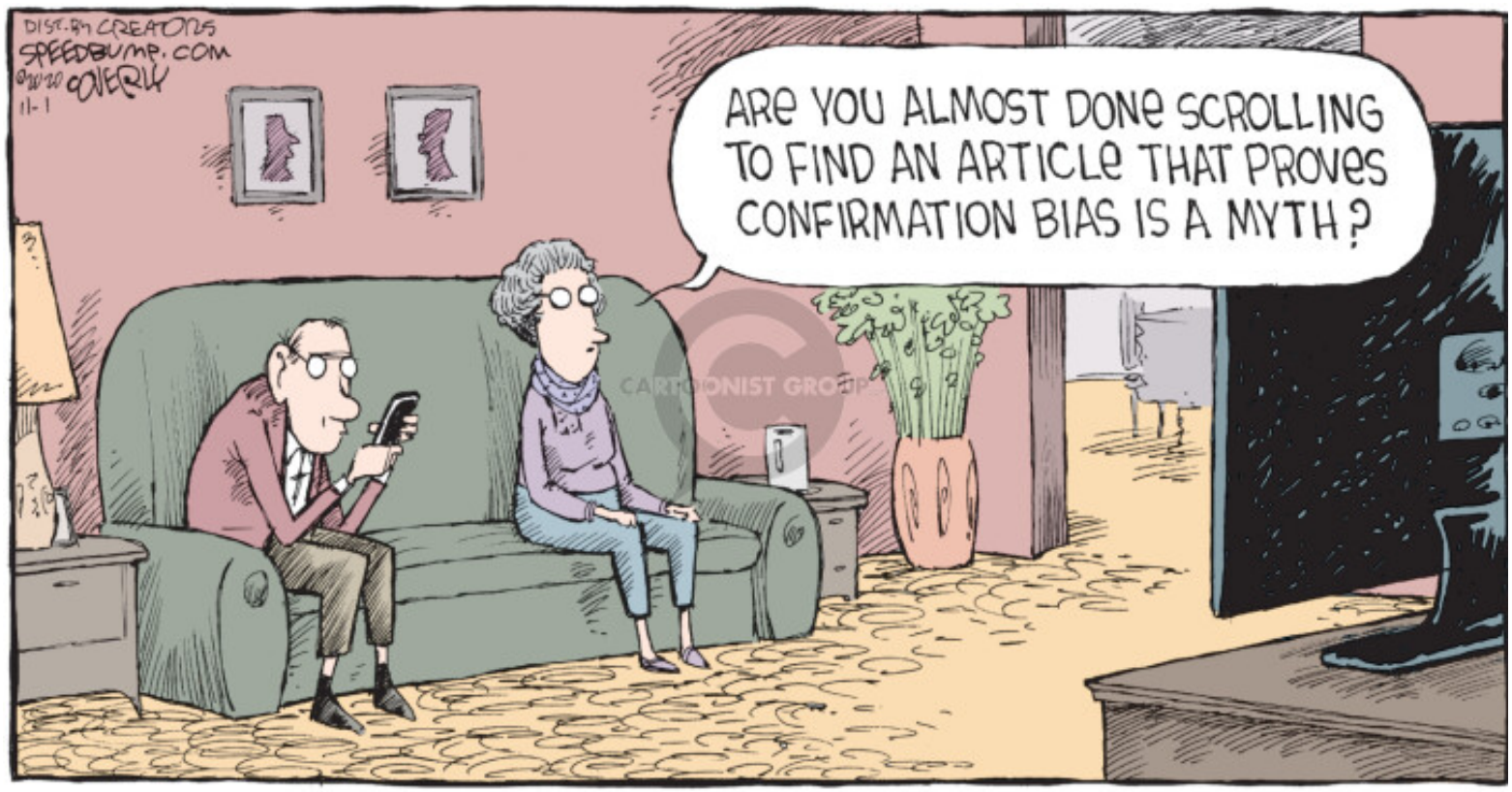
Exercise: Selection Bias

Biases in Research

1. Confirmation bias
2. Desirability bias
3. Authority bias
4. Availability bias
5. Certainty bias

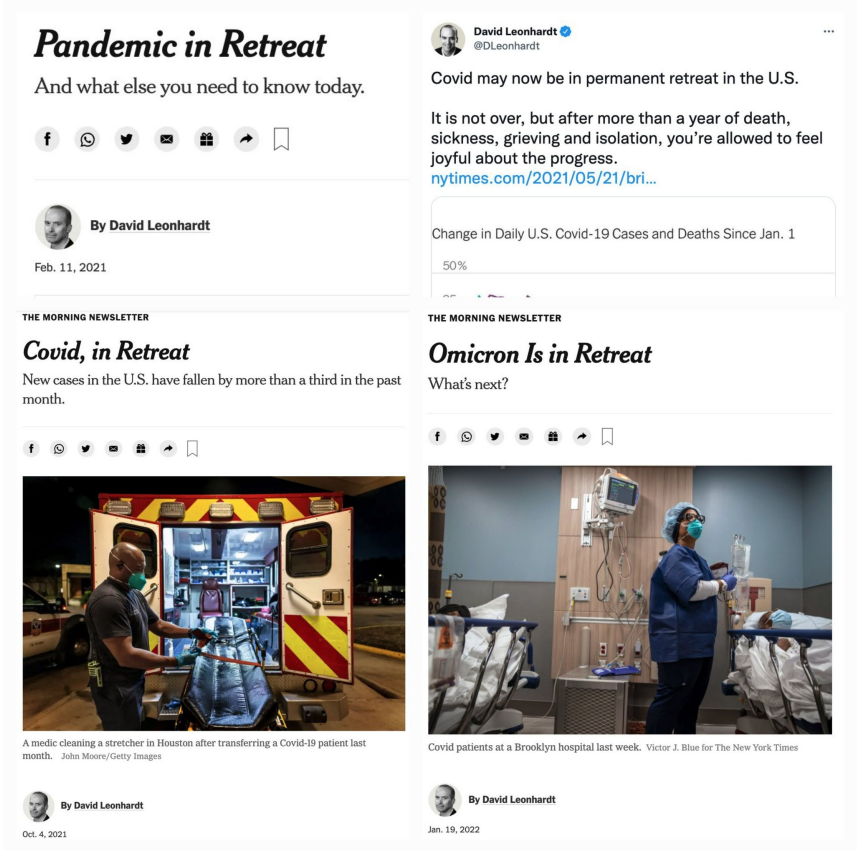
Confirmation Bias

We privilege evidence that supports our existing beliefs and discount evidence that challenges those beliefs.



Desirability Bias

We prefer evidence that supports a conclusion we want to be true and discount evidence that undermines that conclusion.



Pandemic in Retreat

And what else you need to know today.

By David Leonhardt

Feb. 11, 2021

THE MORNING NEWSLETTER

Covid, in Retreat

New cases in the U.S. have fallen by more than a third in the past month.

A medic cleaning a stretcher in Houston after transferring a Covid-19 patient last month. John Moore/Getty Images

By David Leonhardt

Oct. 4, 2021

David Leonhardt
@DLeonhardt

Covid may now be in permanent retreat in the U.S.

It is not over, but after more than a year of death, sickness, grieving and isolation, you're allowed to feel joyful about the progress.
nytimes.com/2021/05/21/bri...

Change in Daily U.S. Covid-19 Cases and Deaths Since Jan. 1

50%

THE MORNING NEWSLETTER

Omicron Is in Retreat

What's next?

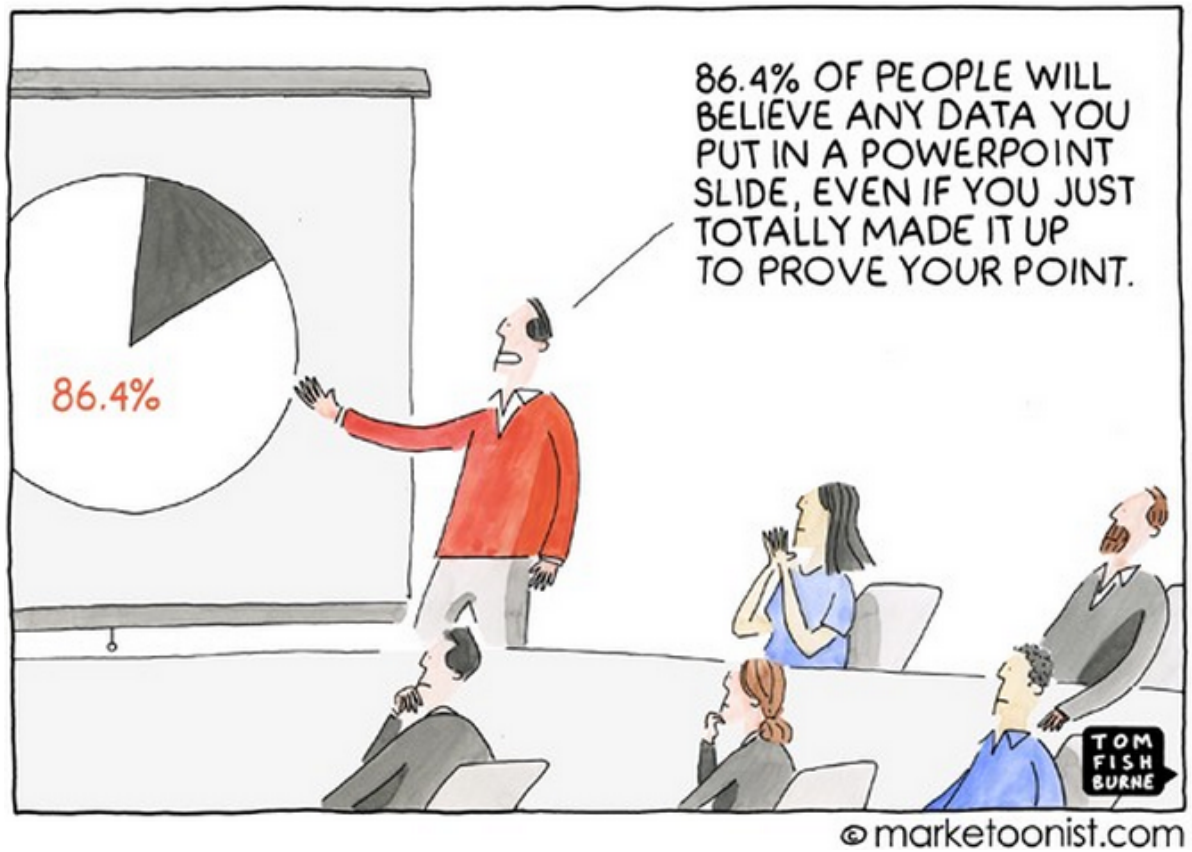
Covid patients at a Brooklyn hospital last week. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

By David Leonhardt

Jan. 19, 2022

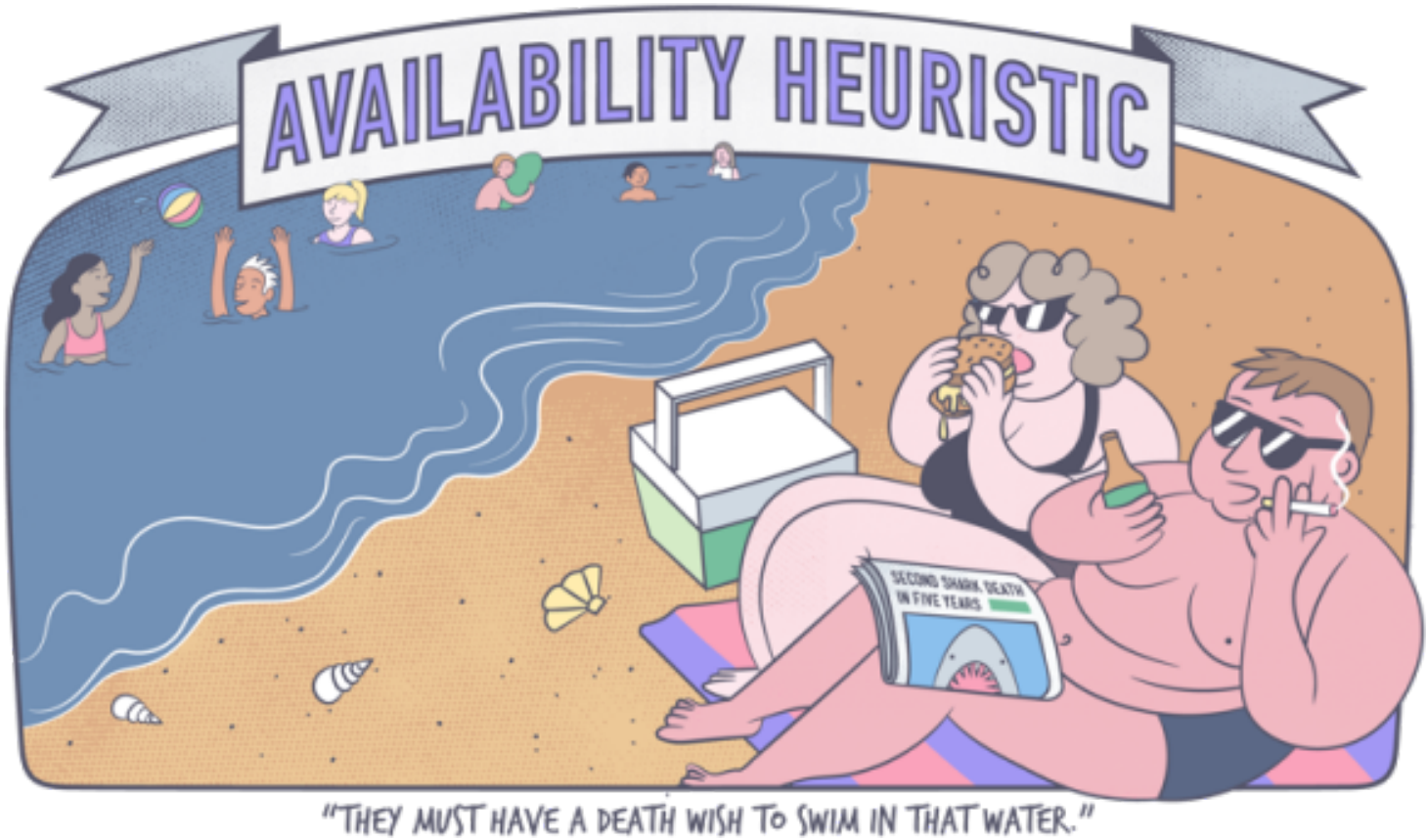
Authority Bias

We give greater weight to evidence offered by people in positions of authority.



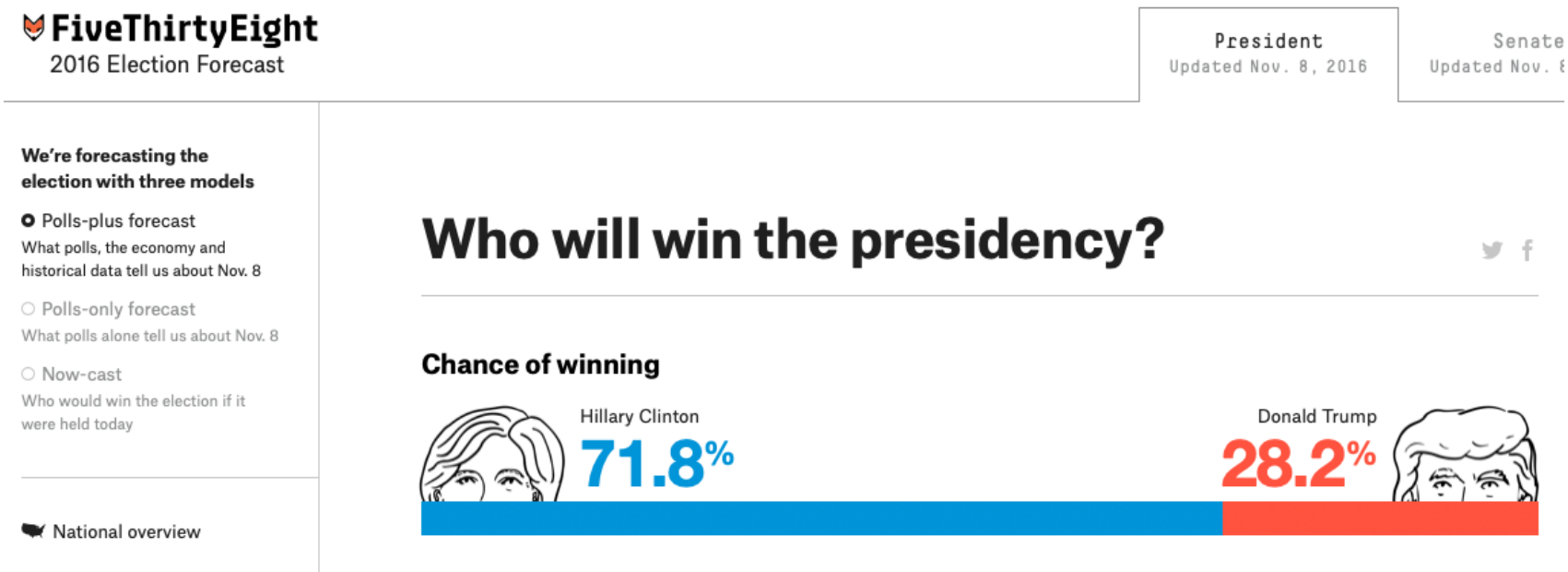
Availability Bias

We give greater weight to evidence that is most memorable.



Certainty Bias

We over- and under-state probabilistic evidence.



Retro Report (2021) - What's In a Number?