

# POLITICAL POLLING

Data Analysis for Journalism and Political Communication  
(Fall 2024)

Prof. Bell

# WHEN POLLING MISSES



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# WHEN POLLING MISSES

# The Literary Digest

NEW YORK OCTOBER 31, 1936

## Topics of the day

### LANDON, 1,293,669; ROOSEVELT, 972,897

#### Final Returns in The Digest's Poll of Ten Million Voters

Well, the great battle of the ballots in the Poll of ten million voters, scattered throughout the forty-eight States of the Union, is now finished, and in the table below we record the figures received up to the hour of going to press.

These figures are exactly as received from more than one in every five voters polled in our country—they are neither weighted, adjusted nor interpreted.

Never before in an experience covering more than a quarter of a century in taking polls have we received so many different varieties of criticism—praise from many; condemnation from many others—and yet it has been just of the same type that has come to us every time a Poll has been taken in all these years.

A telegram from a newspaper in California asks: "Is it true that Mr. Hearst has purchased THE LITERARY DIGEST?" A telephone message only the day before these lines were written: "Has the Repub-

lican National Committee purchased THE LITERARY DIGEST?" And all types and varieties, including: "Have the Jews purchased THE LITERARY DIGEST?" "Is the Pope of Rome a stockholder of THE LITERARY DIGEST?" And so it goes—all equally absurd and amusing. We could add more to this list, and yet all of these questions in recent days are but repetitions of what we have been experiencing all down the years from the very first Poll.

**Problem**—Now, are the figures in this Poll correct? In answer to this question we will simply refer to a telegram we sent to a young man in Massachusetts the other day in answer to his challenge to us to wager \$100,000 on the accuracy of our Poll. We wired him as follows:

"For nearly a quarter century, we have been taking Polls of the voters in the forty-eight States, and especially in Presidential years, and we have always merely mailed the ballots, counted and recorded those

returned and let the people of the Nation draw their conclusions as to our accuracy. So far, we have been right in every Poll. Will we be right in the current Poll? That, as Mrs. Roosevelt said concerning the President's reelection, is in the 'lap of the gods.'

"We never make any claims before election but we respectfully refer you to the opinion of one of the most quoted citizens to-day, the Hon. James A. Farley, Chairman of the Democratic National Committee. This is what Mr. Farley said October 14, 1932:

"Any sane person can not escape the implication of such a gigantic sampling of popular opinion as is embraced in THE LITERARY DIGEST straw vote. I consider this conclusive evidence as to the desire of the people of this country for a change in the National Government. THE LITERARY DIGEST poll is an achievement of no little magnitude. It is a Poll fairly and correctly conducted."

In studying the table of the voters from

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# WHEN POLLING MISSES

The New York Times.

"All the News That's Fit to Print."

FINAL EXTRA  
Copyright, 1936, by The New York Times Company

VOL. LXXVII., No. 26,574

Special Edition for New York

NEW YORK, WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 4, 1936.

TWO CENTS IN NEW YORK | TWENTY CENTS IN OTHER CITIES | TWELVE CENTS ABROAD

## ROOSEVELT SWEEPS THE NATION; HIS ELECTORAL VOTE EXCEEDS 500; LEHMAN WINS; CHARTER ADOPTED

### FEW HOUSE SHIFTS

Democrats May Add to Vast Majorities in Both Chambers

### THREE SENATORS TURN

Barbour, Hastings and Metcalf Appear to Have Votes.

### 60 HOUSE RACES IN DOUBT

Democrats Steal 54, Republicans 44.

**NO FIRM CAVANAH**  
Democrats loose of Indiana  
and West Virginia, and the  
generally expected victories  
of the other candidates.

All the rest of the three  
Senate races are now  
widely considered won by  
the Democrats, though the  
Democrats were often  
surprised by the narrowness  
of their victories in the  
November election.

**SUPPORT OF LEHMAN**  
FAR BELOW BOASTS

Coughlin Group Appears to Have Exceeded Little Influence on the Electorate.

**EAST IN China and South Dakota**  
Democrats Retain Control.  
Reform Party Wins.

**BY J. B. MANNING**  
In the Democratic sweep  
of the Senate, the party  
retained control of the  
Senate, but lost the House  
and gained a majority in  
the House.

The latest returns give the  
Democrats 54 seats in the  
House, 44 in the Senate, and  
a majority in the 70th Congress.

Admittedly, the situation  
is far from clear-cut, and  
there are many uncertainties.

But the latest returns  
show that the Democrats  
will have a majority in  
the House, and the  
Democrats will have a  
majority in the Senate.

**RESULTS: Speaking to Victory**  
**At Hyde Park, Predicted Results Sweep**

**BY CHARLES W. DUNN**  
Editor of "The New York Times,"  
Predicting that the Democrats  
will sweep the nation, he  
said: "The people are  
decidedly fed up with  
the policies of the  
other party, and they  
are looking for a change."

The editor said that the  
Democrats will win a  
vast majority in both  
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Lindgren Congratulates  
President, Wins Re-election

**BIG CHARTER VOTE**  
8-Hour System for  
Firemen Also Wins Easily

**VOTING CHANGE APPROVED**

Brumer Is Victor Over  
Large Parity.

**ROOSEVELT TRENCH HERE**

President's Vote Margin,  
Which Reached 1,564,041,

**UNION PARTY VOTE**  
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**EAST IN China and South Dakota**  
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On the Election Today

**Firemen Also Win**  
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**LEHMAN VOTE CUT**

**BLEAKLEY GETS A**  
Surprising Total  
in the City

**SWEEP HELPS GOVERNOR**

Roosevelt Strong in Industrial Cities—Gets Big Up-State Poll.

**DEMOCRATS RETAIN**

STATE SENATE LEAD

They Are Assured of 30 Seats

of the 51, But More Than

**FAT TO WIN ASSEMBLY**

Democrats Are Master

For Assembly.

**THE IRISH VOTE**

**DEMOCRATS SWEEP**  
JERSEY'S 16 VOTES  
SAFE FOR NEW DEAL

President Wins More Than

Majority in First State

**POLITICS**

**PHILADELPHIA IS CHARGED**

State Government Still

Democrats Win

**RESULTS: Speaking to**

**Victory Forecast**

**At Hyde Park, Predicted Results Sweep**

**POLL SETS RECORD**

**ROOSEVELT ELECTORAL**  
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NOVEMBER 14, 1936  
THIRTY EIGHT CENTS

IS  
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London Correspondent  
of the New York Times  
Comments on Page Two

Editorial Comment on Page Three

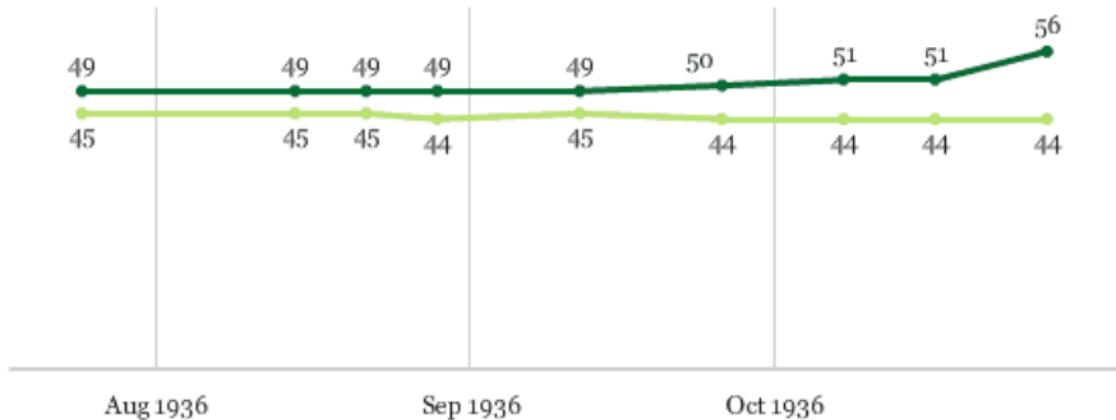
Comment on Page Three

# WHEN POLLING MISSES

1936 Presidential Trial Heats, Based on National Adults

Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt vs. Republican Alf Landon

■ % Roosevelt      ■ % Landon



Winner: Franklin D. Roosevelt with 61% of the vote

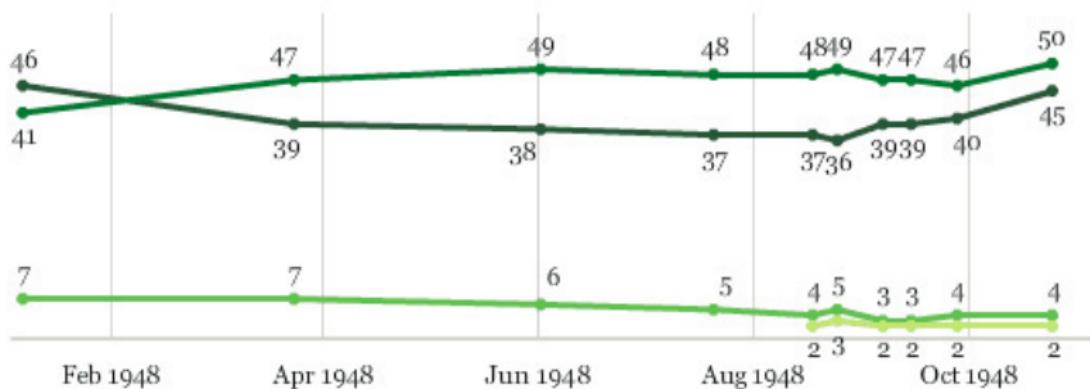
GALLUP<sup>®</sup>

# WHEN POLLING MISSES

1948 Presidential Trial Heats, Based on National Adults

Democrat Harry Truman vs. Republican Thomas Dewey  
vs. Progressive Henry Wallace vs. "Dixiecrat" Strom Thurmond

■ % Truman   ■ % Dewey   ■ % Wallace   ■ % Thurmond



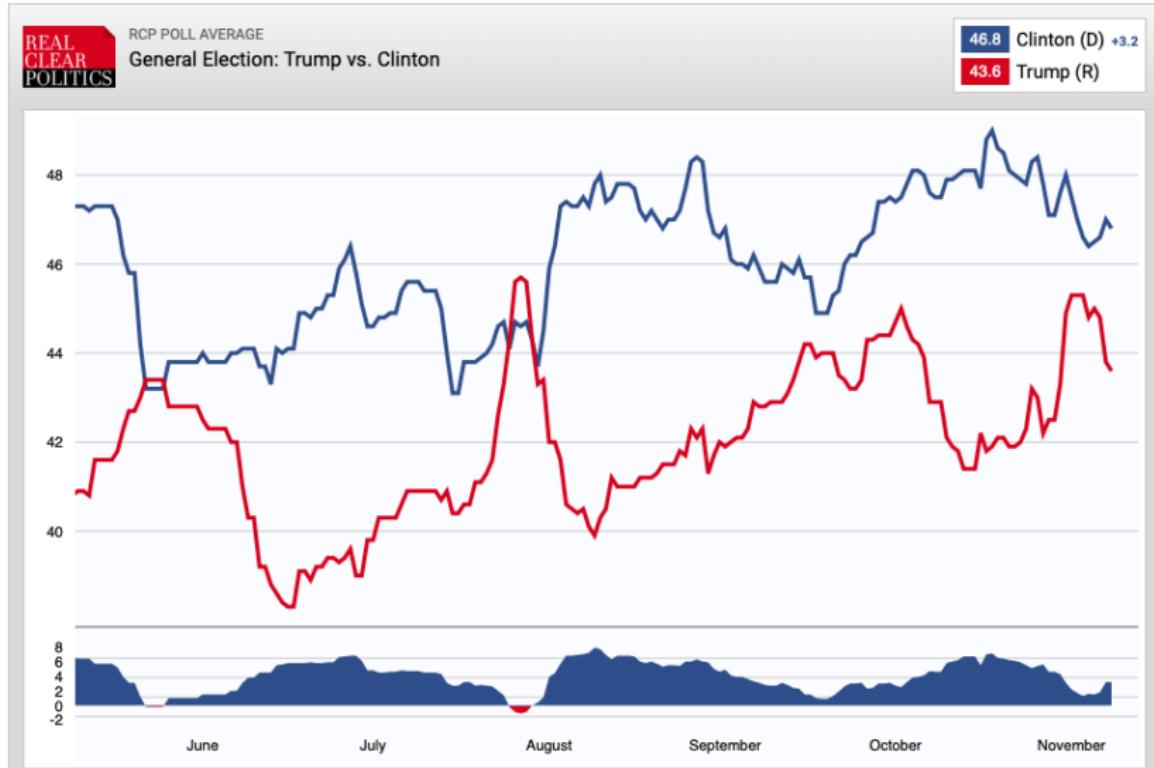
Winner: Harry Truman with 50% of the vote

GALLUP<sup>®</sup>

# WHEN POLLING MISSES



# THE 2016 ELECTION POLLS



# THE 2016 ELECTION POLLS

- ① The polls weren't that wrong

# THE 2016 ELECTION POLLS



The Polls Are All Right

CYCLE	NATIONAL	STATE	COMBINED
<b>2016</b>	<b>3.1</b>	<b>5.2</b>	<b>4.8</b>
2012	3.3	3.7	3.6
2008	2.3	3.9	3.6
2004	2.2	3.5	3.2
2000	3.9	4.6	4.4
1996	6.4	4.8	5.3
1992	4.6	5.2	5.1
1988	3.5	5.0	4.6
1984	5.4	4.5	4.7
1980	8.9	8.6	8.6
1976	2.5	3.8	3.4
1972	2.6	4.6	4.3
<b>Average</b>	<b>4.1</b>	<b>4.8</b>	<b>4.6</b>

Pollsters that are banned by FiveThirtyEight because we know or suspect that they faked their data are not included in the averages. Averages are weighted based on the number of polls a particular firm conducted.

# THE 2016 ELECTION POLLS

- ① The polls weren't that wrong
- ② The polls were wrong due to non-response bias, a form of selection bias

## TYPES OF MISSING DATA

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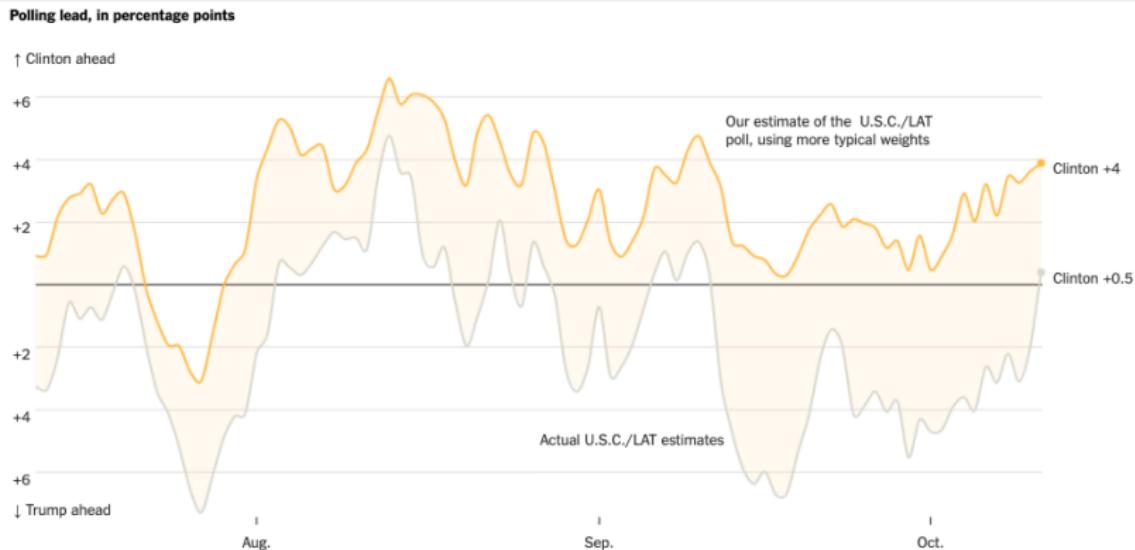
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The New York Times



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- **Missing Not at Random (MNAR)**: Missing outcomes are correlated with the outcome that is being measured
  - ▶ MNAR data is a challenge because the only thing that predicts what data is missing is the fact that it is missing

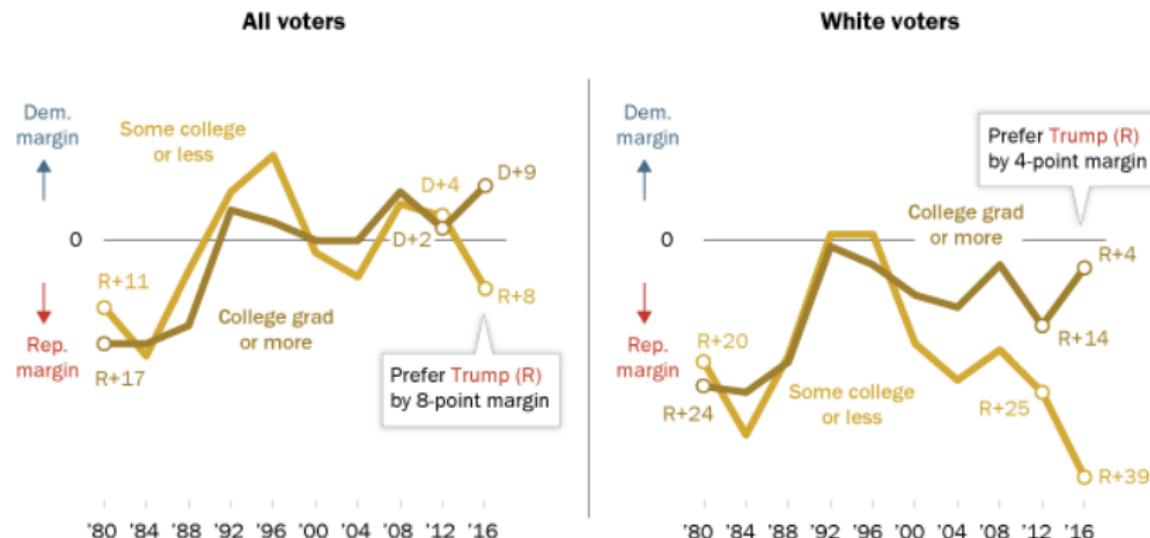
# THE 2016 ELECTION POLLS

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- ② The polls were wrong due to **missing at random (MAR)** non-response bias by education

# THE 2016 ELECTION POLLS

## Wide education gaps in 2016 preferences, among all voters and among whites

Presidential candidate preference, by educational attainment



Source: Based on exit polls conducted by Edison Research for the National Election Pool, as reported by CNN. Data from prior years from national exit polls. In 1980, race was coded by the interviewer instead of being asked of the respondent.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

# THE 2016 ELECTION POLLS

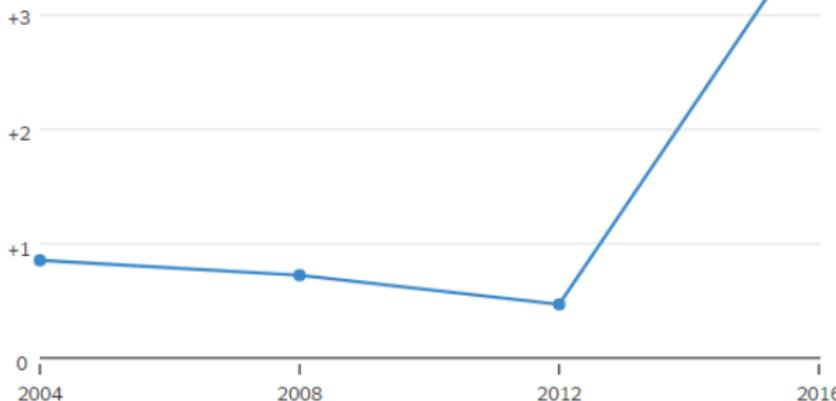
## Education Weighting Vastly More Important in '16

A poll that didn't weight by education might have been imperceptibly more Democratic-leaning in past elections, but was notably biased in 2016.

The effect of neglecting to weight by education in a typical national survey (pct. margin)

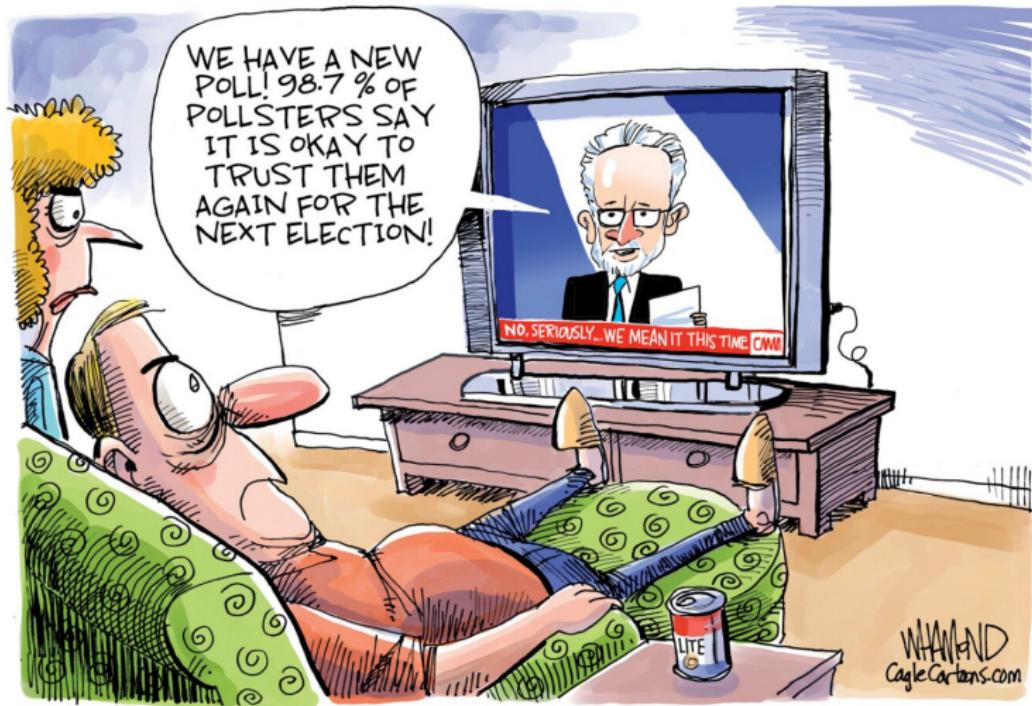
+4 Dem.

 The Upshot

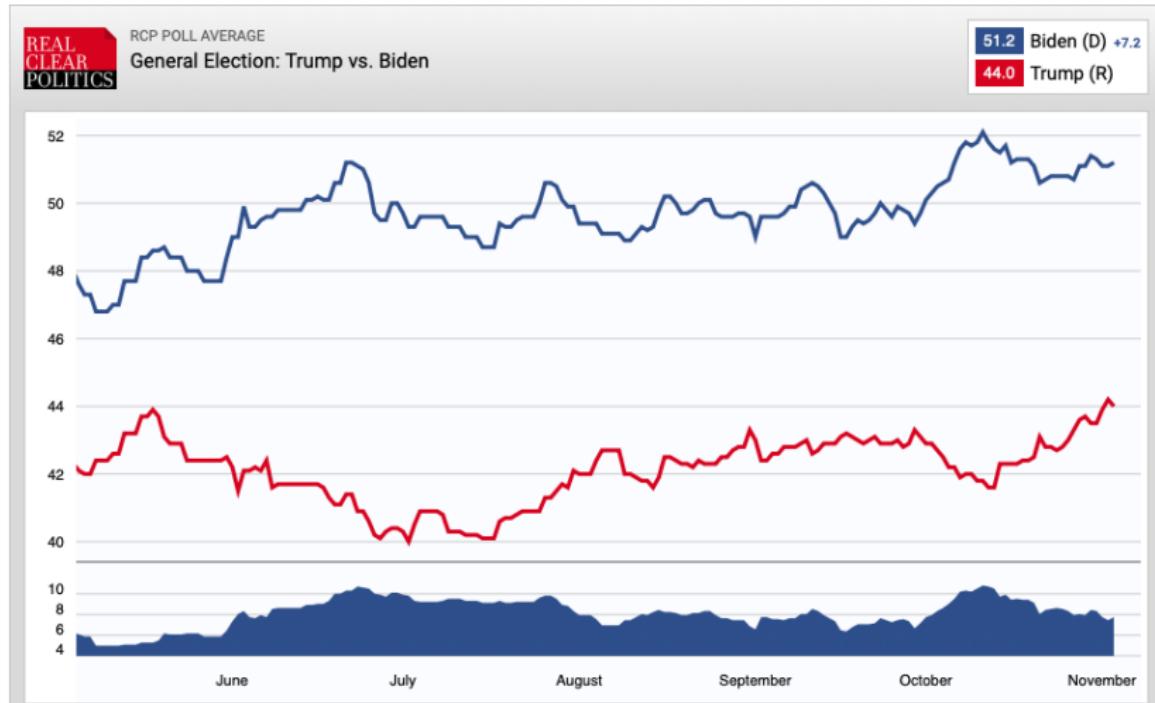


Source: Upshot analysis of surveys from the Roper Center, Pew Research and New York Times/CBS News. 2004 N=12,904, 2008 N=21,387, 2012 N=20,079. "Typical national survey" is an R.D.D. survey of adults with a self-reported likely-voter screen, weighted by race, education, age, sex, region and telephone usage.

# THE 2020 ELECTION POLLS



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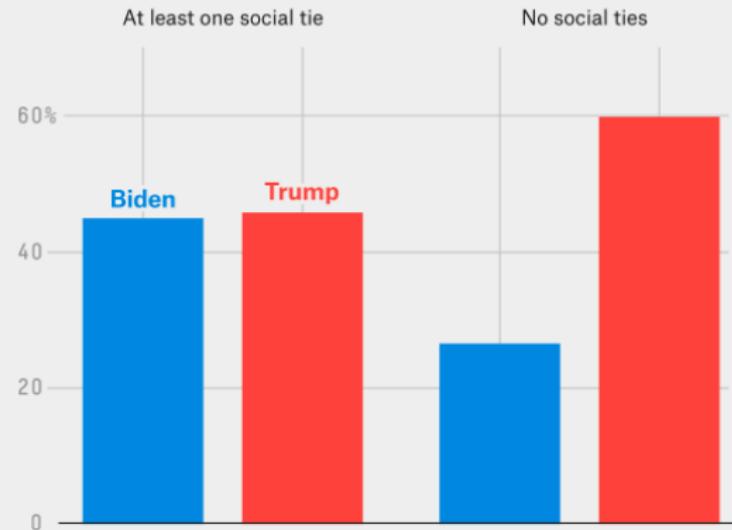
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# THE 2020 ELECTION POLLS

## Socially disconnected voters back Trump

Share of white voters with and without social networks that said they supported Donald Trump or Joe Biden in a pre-election survey



To determine one's social network, respondents were asked to name people with whom they had "discussed important personal matters or concerns" in the previous six months.

FiveThirtyEight SOURCE: SURVEY CENTER ON AMERICAN LIFE, AMERICAN NATIONAL SOCIAL NETWORK SURVEY SEPT. 2020

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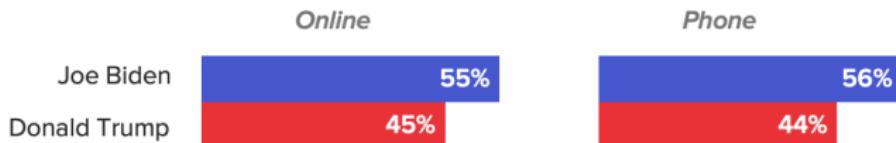
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  - ▶ "Shy Trump voters" theory

# THE 2020 ELECTION POLLS

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If the 2020 presidential election were held today, for whom would you vote?



MORNING CONSULT®

Source: Morning Consult

Study conducted Sept. 10-14, 2020, among 1,698 respondents online and 1,244 respondents by live telephone.

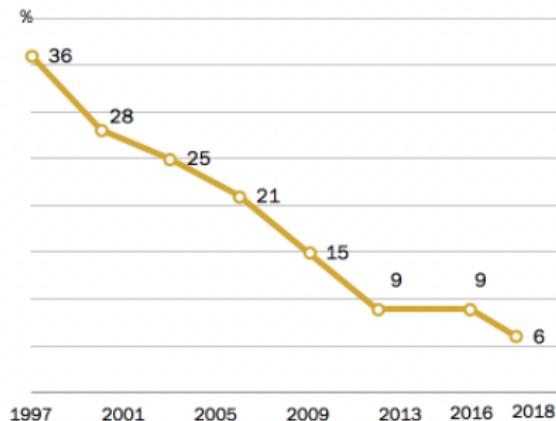
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  - ▶ "Shy Trump voters" theory
  - ▶ Trump voters are less likely to respond to surveys

# THE 2020 ELECTION POLLS

**After brief plateau, telephone survey response rates have fallen again**

*Response rate by year (%)*



Note: Response rate is AAPOR RR3. Only landlines sampled 1997-2006. Rates are typical for surveys conducted in each year.

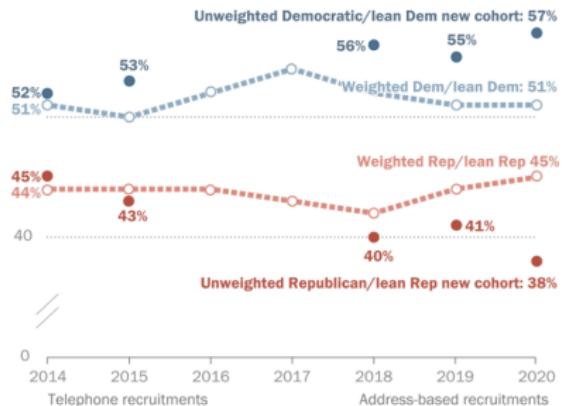
Source: Pew Research Center telephone surveys conducted 1997-2018.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

# THE 2020 ELECTION POLLS

## More recent recruitment cohorts have been less Republican than early ones

% of newly recruited panelists who are Republican or lean to the Republican Party (unweighted)



Note: All ATP surveys are weighted on partisanship in addition to other variables listed in Appendix A. The 2017 cohort is not shown because it featured an unusual sample design that is not comparable to those displayed. Political party identification was not measured on the panel in 2014, and so the figures for the 2014 cohort come from a survey fielded March 10 to April 6, 2015. All other figures in this analysis are based on surveys fielded in the year shown.

Source: Surveys of U.S. adults conducted March 10-April 6, 2015, Nov. 30-Dec. 21, 2015, Oct. 25-Nov. 8, 2016, Sept. 14-28, 2017, Sept. 24-Oct. 8, 2018, Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019, and Aug. 3-Sept. 20, 2020.

\*Confronting 2016 and 2020 Polling Limitations\*

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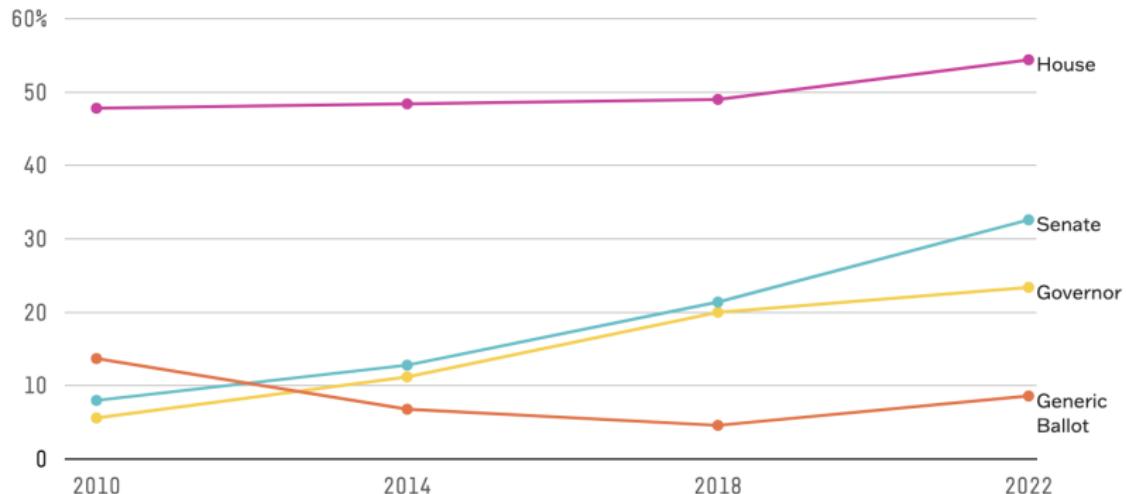
# THE 2022 ELECTION POLLS

- ① Republican-aligned pollsters were over-represented in polling averages, creating an expectation of a “red wave”

# THE 2022 ELECTION POLLS

## A larger share of polls are coming from partisan sources

The share of polls of the generic ballot and U.S. Senate, U.S. House and governor races conducted or sponsored by campaigns or partisan organizations in midterm elections, 2010-2022

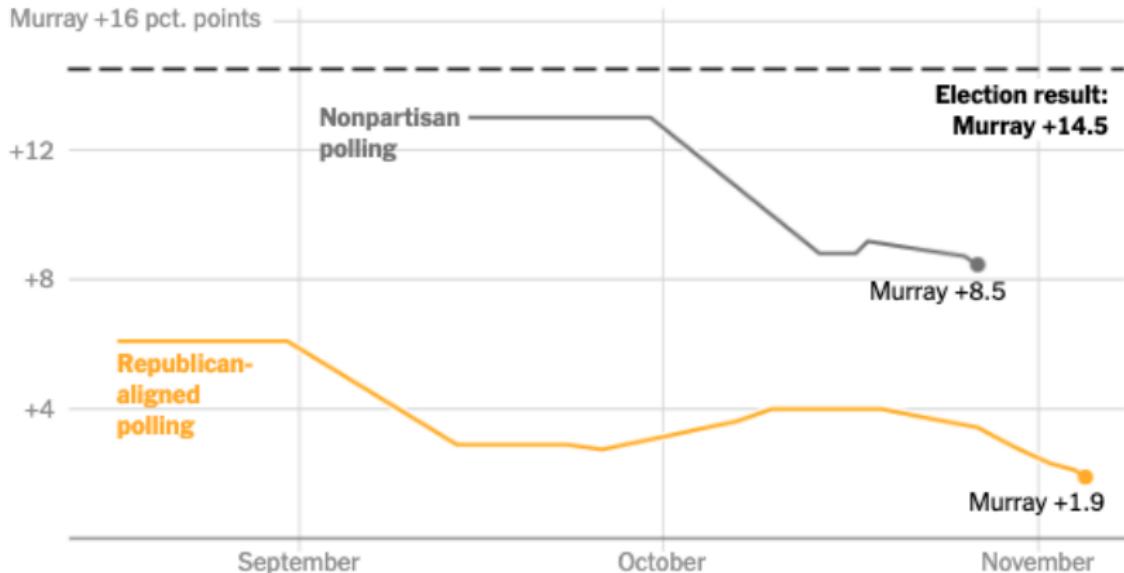


Based on polls whose final date in the field was between 180 and 15 days before the midterm election.

FiveThirtyEight

SOURCE: POLLS

# THE 2022 ELECTION POLLS



Source: New York Times analysis of Washington Senate race polls aggregated by FiveThirtyEight. Notes: Trends are calculated with a 14-day average. Polling groups considered Republican-aligned include those identified by The New York Times and FiveThirtyEight. Polling groups considered nonpartisan are those not known to be aligned with or funded by a political party. By Jason Kao

# THE 2022 ELECTION POLLS

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- ② Pollsters engaged in **herding** – adjusting the results of their findings to more closely match the results of other polls (or not releasing outlying polls at all) – to avoid being wrong

# THE 2022 ELECTION POLLS



John Anzalone

@JohnAnzo

I appreciate this statement acknowledging  
[@MonmouthPoll](#) was an outlier. But I disagree with "In the end we must put out the numbers we have." When our firm comes out of the field and we believe we have an outlier we shit can the numbers and redo the poll at our expense. Period

**M** [MonmouthPoll](#) @MonmouthPoll

Statement from poll director @PollsterPatrick regarding this week's poll:

<https://t.co/n4aZibDUej>

3:10 PM · Aug 28, 2019

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261 Likes 56 Retweets

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- ③ Something is unique about elections in which Donald Trump is a candidate

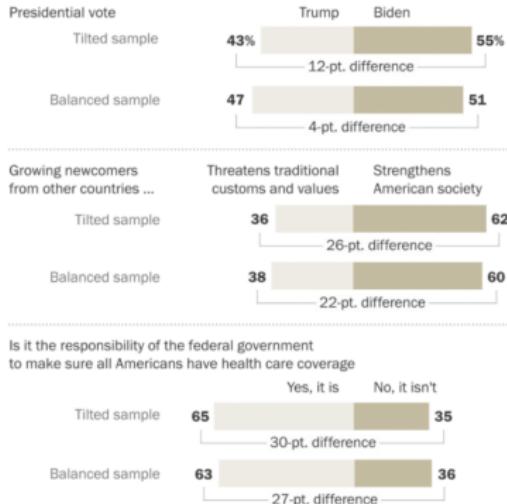
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- ③ Something is unique about elections in which Donald Trump is a candidate
  - ▶ Issue polling seems to be unaffected by biases influencing horse race polling

# THE 2022 ELECTION POLLS

## A large overstatement of voter support for Joe Biden has a minimal effect on measures of opinion about issues

% supporting each option in two different samples, one that is too Democratic and the other correctly balanced



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted July 27–Aug. 2, 2020.  
“What 2020’s Election Poll Errors Tell Us About the Accuracy of Issue Polling”

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# CAN WE TRUST THE 2024 POLLS?

- Not much evidence of herding

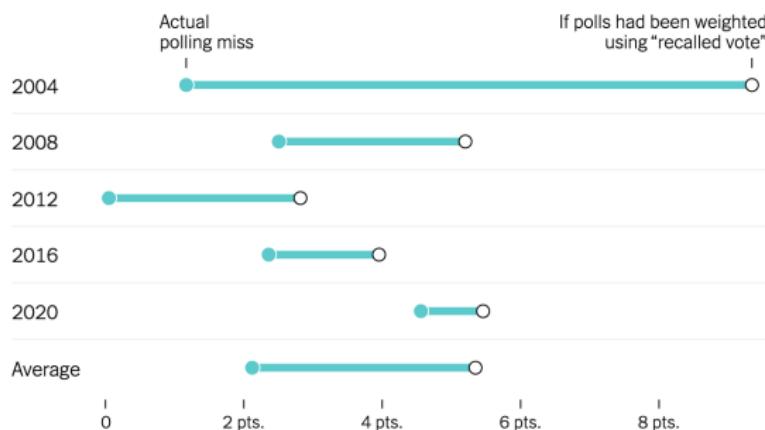
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- Pollsters are trying new techniques to address partisan non-response, like weighting on recalled vote (controversial)

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## Polling misses in presidential elections



Source: Upshot analysis of polls from 2004 to 2020 archived at the [Roper Center](#)

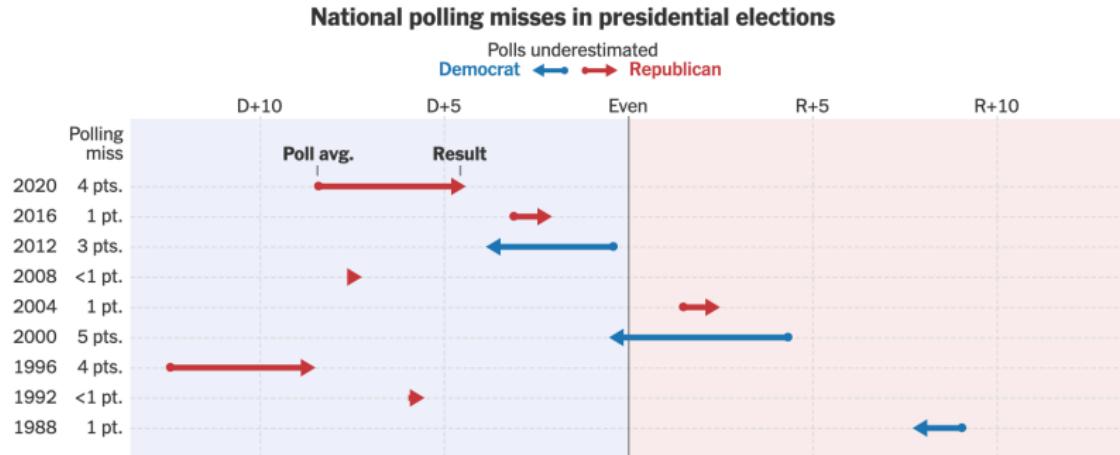
Harris' surge in the polls has people wondering if we might see a **pro-Trump polling error** for the third presidential cycle in a row. An anecdote from Siena College's pollster is revealing:

Levy told me that, in 2020, the people working the phones for Siena frequently reported incidents of being yelled at by mistrustful Trump supporters. "In plain English, it was not uncommon for someone to say, 'I'm voting for Trump—fuck you,'" and then hang up before completing the rest of the survey, he said. (So much for the "shy Trump voter" hypothesis.) In 2020, those responses weren't counted. This time around, they are. Levy told me that including these "partials" in 2020 would have erased nearly half of Siena's error rate.

# CAN WE TRUST THE 2024 POLLS?

- But there is no guarantee that the polling error will be in the same direction or magnitude as 2016 or 2020.

# CAN WE TRUST THE 2024 POLLS?



Note: Arrows show the weighted national polling average margin compared with the final national popular vote margin.

Source: New York Times

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- The polling error could also be bigger. Some researchers suggest that the margin of error should be doubled to account for uncertainty due to response bias and other measurement error.

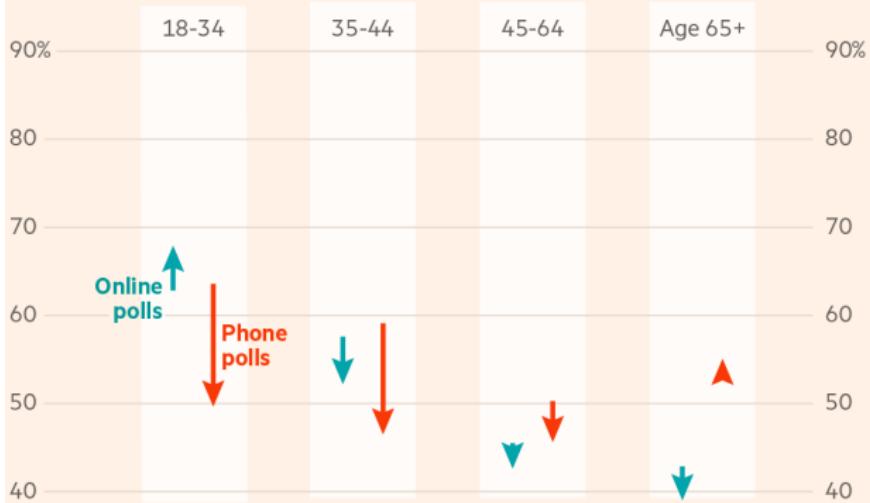
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- There is already some evidence that 2024 polls are exhibiting unusual variability.

# CAN WE TRUST THE 2024 POLLS?

The decline in support among young voters is exclusively a **telephone poll** phenomenon

Change in Biden's share of two-way vote in pre-election polls (2020 vs 2024), by demographic and survey methodology



Source: FT analysis of polls from Stack Data Strategy, YouGov, NYT/Siena, CNN/SSRS, Quinnipiac, Emerson College and HarrisX. FT graphic by John Burn-Murdoch / @jburnmurdoch  
© FT

# CAN WE TRUST THE 2024 POLLS?

- But there is no guarantee that the polling error will be in the same direction or magnitude as 2016 or 2020.
- The polling error could also be bigger. Some researchers suggest that the margin of error should be doubled to account for uncertainty due to response bias and other measurement error.
- There is already some evidence that 2024 polls are exhibiting unusual variability.
- You won't know all of the ways the polls might be wrong until Election Day.

# WRITING GOOD SURVEYS

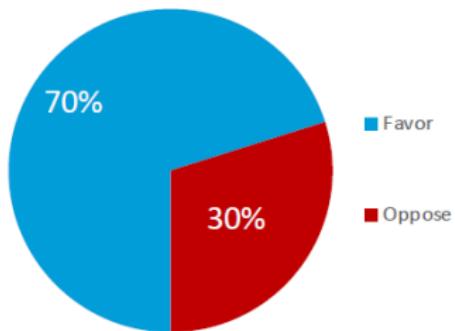
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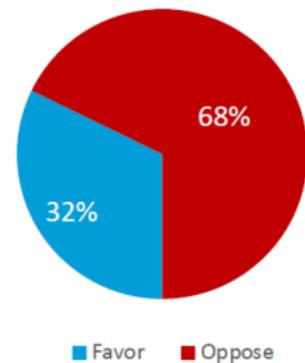
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- The goal of survey design is to *minimize* cognitive load and *maximize* specificity, but these two goals are often in tension

# WRITING GOOD SURVEYS

Do you favor or oppose a permanent ceasefire in Gaza?



Would you favor or oppose that ceasefire if it meant that  
Hamas was allowed to continue to hold hostages and  
Hamas were to continue to run Gaza?



Source: Harvard IOP Youth Poll

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- As with data visualization, we have to assume that we have a limited amount of the respondent's attention
- The goal of survey design is to *minimize* cognitive load and *maximize* specificity, but these two goals are often in tension
- When the cognitive load on respondents is too high, they are likely to engage in **satisficing** or exit the survey entirely (known as survey attrition).

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- ⑤ Mental coin-flipping

# How Can We Avoid SATISFICING?

Methods 101: Question Wording (Pew Research Center)

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- ⑧ Pre-test your survey

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AJ Thurston, PhD  
@AJThurston

...

So that later in my survey where I use a different measure that has 1 = low and 5 = high my survey will look even better by contrast, then, just to crush participants spirits, we ask them to enter their phone number for a follow-on survey using a slider input:

Please enter your phone number:



2158559745