

Accuracy of Polls

-by William Adams (11/3/16)

Election polls can be closely accurate or grossly inaccurate. The difference comes down to the methods used.

As telephone technology and usage changes in America, so changes polling methods. If polling organizations fail to adapt to the changing times, their polls become inaccurate and their organization quickly becomes irrelevant. As more people move away from landlines, diversity in polling requires more strategy.

Due to its abundance across American homes, the landline “home” telephone was the pollsters best friend starting around the 1960s. With a fixed location inside the home and an easily identifiable location via area codes and central office codes (the first three digits in a seven-digit phone number) pollsters could easily pool individuals for specific areas.

Unfortunately for polling organizations, landline usage is in a sharp decline in the United States.

Over the last 10 years, nearly half of adult Americans have cut loose their landlines and have went with cellphones only, according to Pew Research.

On the surface that cuts the polling populace in half for those solely using landlines, but there is a greater loss created by the lack of landlines.

According to government estimates, Americans who have a cellphone, but no landline, are disproportionately young and nonwhite. That creates a large hole in polling data and renders polls untrustworthy and useless.

If polling organizations were to continue to solely rely on landlines, they would be eliminating large demographics of Americans that could easily swing the results of elections.

According to Cornell University, the 2012 presidential election was decided by young, nonwhite voters. Barack Obama dominated the nonwhite vote as well as the vote of those under the age of 45. Conversely, Mitt Romney carried the white vote and the vote of those over the age of 45. Landline exclusive or heavy leaning landline polls would have shown Romney winning the election.

Most polling organizations have realized the issues with sticking with landline phones and have made adaptations to their collection methods.

While some still include landline phones, many organizations have added cellphone numbers or online surveys to their methodology. Those that include cellphones have found their results to be quite accurate.

According to Pew, cellphone additions come with the added advantage of having a real human having a conversation with the people they are polling. The results have been so positive via cellphone that Pew says most estimates are "virtually unchanged when landlines are excluded."

In other words, polls will be able to live on long after the landline is put to rest by the majority of the voting populace.

So while various 2016 presidential polls show varying results, polling organizations who focus on diverse pools of respondents can still produce trustworthy and accurate polls. The key is to examine the polling methods as much as the numbers they produce.

Americans will find out on November 8 which polls were the most accurate, as voters elect the 45th President of the United States.