

What We Know and The Hard Work Ahead

We at Hart Research Associates take pride in the role we have played in advancing progressive candidates and causes over the past 49 years. This includes helping Democrats win the majority in the U.S. House of Representatives in 2018 and, through our work for Priorities USA and other organizations, helping Joe Biden win the presidency this year. We take satisfaction in the strategic guidance and message recommendations we have provided to our clients based on our qualitative and quantitative research.

Even though our research provided our clients with a roadmap to navigate the 2020 election and actionable data to inform their decisions, we know that many polls, including too many of our own, were off this year in assessing voting preferences. In this respect, we know that we have to do better. As voter files are being updated and the profile of the electorate becomes clear, we are undertaking a top-to-bottom review of our polls and how we conducted them. We look forward to sharing with you what we learn, and based upon that we are committed to making whatever changes are needed in our approach.

Here are some of the considerations we will be examining:

SAMPLE SELECTION: For each election we bring our best judgment to bear on which voters should be included in a likely voter universe, based on past voting history and informed expectations about the expansion (or contraction) of the electorate. Based on these criteria, we produce a very detailed estimate of how the electorate will be distributed across a wide range of demographic variables, including modeled partisanship and other political variables. Once the voter files are updated with 2020 vote history, we will be able to compare our expected universe with the actual turnout and identify where there were disconnects.

2020 saw a large expansion of the electorate relative to the turnout in 2016. Our samples anticipated this expansion, but the question remains as to whether we fully included new Trump voters as part of the expanded universe. In cases where we did not do so, we need to understand why.

Related, as part of our sampling, we are intentional in ensuring that rural communities are represented proportionally to their share of these estimates of the electorate. However, in a surge election like 2020, we must explore whether our estimates still under-represented these rural, strongly Republican voters.

Many years ago, we did not tie our sampling as rigidly to voter files as we do now, and instead we relied on methods such as random-digit dialing. While we are unlikely to abandon voter files, this is an appropriate moment to revisit fundamental questions of sampling.

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RESPONDENT PARTICIPATION: It is no secret that participation in telephone polls has declined significantly, and this obviously makes our work much more difficult. The key questions with regard to participation are (a) whether the universe of people who participate in polls is fundamentally different from those who do not, and, even more important, (b) whether there is a systematic partisan bias in who is willing to participate. We believe that partisan bias may have been a particular problem this cycle—not because of “shy” Trump voters, but rather because of “screw you” voters who view polls as part and parcel of a biased political system.

We already have explored whether there is a partisan difference in which respondents terminate an interview after it starts, and so far, have not found anything significant in this regard. However, in a world of caller ID, the response bias may manifest itself before anyone has even answered the phone.

Of course, we were concerned about response bias throughout the election, and in many cases tried to deal with it through weighting—including weighting on self-reported 2016 voting. Polls in which we more strictly adjusted for 2016 results were more accurate, but frankly we could do this in a more consistent and systematic way. In addition, weighting by 2016 vote cannot ensure that our samples of non-2016 voters are representative. And while we feel very confident in the accuracy of our voter polls in the near term, because we can ensure that we have the proper proportion of Biden and Trump voters, the utility of weighting on self-reported 2020 voting will fade over time, and is not as helpful in modeling future electorates. A major consideration in our top-to-bottom review will be our weighting procedures. These considerations apply to both our online and telephone polls.

Related to response bias, we are also looking into how the pandemic may have impacted participation in our polls, particularly in ways that could have made our data too Democratic.

We also will look at length of interview as a factor that affected respondent participation, but our initial look at termination data does not suggest this was a source of systematic partisan bias. We are concerned about surveys that are too long for reasons beyond the possibility that lower-information voters may not want to complete them; even if respondents stay on the call through the end of the poll, after a while they may be more interested in getting done as quickly as possible than in listening carefully to the questions and providing thoughtful, considered answers.

OTHER METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES: We are meticulous in drawing samples and we ask call centers to follow good methodology in identifying the order in which potential respondents are called. We suspect that these procedures are more often than not observed in the breach, especially given the difficulty of completing interviews. One important challenge we faced in 2020, exacerbated by the pandemic, was the shortage of available interviewing hours at the highest quality call centers. We are working with our trusted call center partners to address this.

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The other methodological issue we must continually confront as researchers is to ensure that our own biases and preferences do not shape the way we make our methodological choices or the way we frame questions for respondents. We must constantly remind ourselves (and our clients) that we are not in business to tell clients what they want to hear, but rather to tell them what they need to hear. And so, in everything we need to do, we must be more conscious of identifying potential sources of bias.

Is polling fundamentally broken? We do not believe so, and that is a judgment based on our recent experience, rather than simply a leap of faith. Polling, both ours and that of others, was very good in 2017 (when we polled in the Virginia governor's race), in 2018, and in the 2020 primary season. Even in 2020, in most races, we had a good and accurate handle on the fundamental dynamics shaping the elections. But were there places where we came up short? And do we need to understand why they happened? Absolutely yes. And we are committed to doing exactly that. Our top-to-bottom review will take time to complete (having updated voter files will be extremely important for the process), but we are not waiting for it to be completed before we start making changes.

We are committed to getting this right because, beyond needing estimates we can trust for how the electorate will vote, polling gives voice to how voters think about larger social and political issues, and it shows us how those opinions change over time. Polling helps us understand how people's values, beliefs, and experiences shape their views on important issues. And it provides essential feedback to elected leaders and the public at large about what voters want and what people care about.

We look forward to keeping you apprised of our progress.