

Media's Over Reliance on Pre Election Polls Endangers our Democracy

By: Eliot Dix

The only consistent prediction we can gather from pre election polling is that inevitably, it will fail. With Americans responding to polls at significantly lower rates since they were introduced after the Great Depression, the question is begged whether polling services are really still a positive force to uphold democracy. Polls have become the center of attention for media outlets covering the election. They appear to create a lens in which to view the opinions of other American citizens, posing on the surface as a useful tool to facilitate a democratic election process.

What happens when the perceived value of these polls plummet due to inaccuracy and public dissatisfaction? Jill Lepore cited a 2013 study in her New York Times article that found three out of four Americans suspect poll bias. Pollsters like FiveThirtyEight are equipped to handle criticism, and refer to their expected margin for error when needing to extinguish public frustration. Social scientists frequently use quantitative polling data to generalize theories about the social world. While non-responses to polling attempts are historically high, smaller sample sizes do not have too much effect on the outcome of the calculated predictions for pre-election polls. The levels of inaccuracy come with the territory, and exist in all forms of quantitative research. George Gallup is a godfather of survey sampling in America, who recognized that pre election polls were by no means perfect, and "...must predict not only public opinion in respect to candidates, but also predict just what groups of people will take the time to cast their ballots." He saw election polls as an interesting and legitimate activity, but believed they served no real social purpose. Despite current polling capability and accuracy reaching heights unimaginable during Gallup's career, their consistent shortcomings on the national stage prove how well his opinions have aged. Pre election polls certainly have their place as an incidental piece of the nationwide conversation, but where democracy becomes threatened is in the oversaturation of poll news coverage.

Horse race coverage fueled by pre election polls grasps the public and fixates their attention on "the score." This obsession is known to overemphasize the sheer competitiveness of the election, and deviate the focus from actual policy and candidate intention. It seems trivial to spend so much time calculating and comparing the results of "Who would you vote for if you

voted today?” or other polls covered by news media whose intention is to capture the attention of the viewer. Public opinion polls rooted in quantitative social science are devalued when the media coverage of polls is designed to create a horse race media storm. Polls not conducted by academics and the government provide a very important service to democracy. Public opinion polls allow individuals throughout the political spectrum to gain a trustworthy and accurate understanding of how the ‘other side,’ operates. There is a direct correlation however, between failing election polls, and a decline in people's willingness to respond to academic public opinion polls. The dissatisfaction of the public after being continuously misled by pre election polls has dangerously decreased the effectiveness of opinion polling, widening the rift between parties. Outside of the election, it has become increasingly difficult to understand what other Americans think.

Policy makers often rely on public opinion polls as a way of communicating with the American public. Recently in New Jersey marijuana legalization was voted on and passed on the primary election ballot. The rejoicing of the citizens came to a screeching halt when it was uncovered that the “user fee,” taxes associated with the purchase of marijuana would go to funding law enforcement. Viral outcry and protest to the Governor forced legislation to reevaluate the bill. I bring this up to beg the question of how the initial bill was able to blind side the New Jersey voters. When public opinion is so clearly against this allocation of funding, was the initial bill really drafted democratically? Did horse race coverage of marijuana legalization polls, (Will they? Won't they?) distract viewers from the contents of the bill? Was government run public polling unable to gauge the opinions of New Jersey voters adequately? There were likely other factors at play here besides polling, I acknowledge that; though this seems like an opportunity where lawmakers either failed in, or were unable to, use public opinion polling in a way that aids democracy. Luckily the sovereignty of the people prevailed in this instance, creating enough awareness around the disapproval of this marijuana tax bill to get it adjusted. But how can we prevent the failures of media polling from disrupting democracy in this way?

The time may have come to incorporate institutional pressures to reduce the impact pre election polling has on voting behavior, and the transparency of public opinion. Some European countries have employed the use of embargoes on pre election polling for different amounts of time before crucial points in the election. Complete ban of pre election polling information has created civil unrest on a number of occasions. Honduras in 2017 had a 30 day embargo period

that resulted in violent protest and claims of fraud from both sides of the vote. I wouldn't recommend keeping the American public in the dark completely for any period of time, as claims of fraudulent activities from both parties have emerged after the election in both 2016 and 2020. Something about closing the curtain to conduct the final weeks of an election behind the scenes does seem like it would be met with criticisms of being un-American, and just generally fishy. America could benefit from some institutional pressures to consolidate polling maybe a week or two before the election. Today there are so many polls created nationwide, as colleges and marketing firms benefit from the publicity they gain from producing them. With such a variance of poll origin, methodology, and a number of other factors influencing their results, it opens the door for news media to hand pick polls that display the results their viewership desires. Perhaps by enforcing embargoes on smaller pollsters as election day approaches, while consolidating the data from the largest and most historically accurate polling organizations, a controlled set of data could emerge as the basis for pre election coverage in the critical period just before November's first Tuesday.

The media and survey researchers have a codependent relationship. Without the media there would be no way for opinion researchers to communicate their findings. The World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR) insists that professional organizations maintain control over poll production. This is important to maintaining a sense of autonomy, Americans likely wouldn't be too keen on the idea of the government having complete control over opinions. I believe there is a healthy balance where government intervention in close proximity to the election does not undermine the survey researchers operating under a Code of Conduct to ensure poll quality. I believe a government enforced controlled data set combining a few of the largest and most historically accurate polling organizations could have a restorative effect on the damage to our democracy. If this data set contained polls that questioned the electorate more specifically about policies, a deeper version of the American public opinion could emerge. Perhaps Media coverage could have a triumphant return to policy discussion, citizens wouldn't be overwhelmed by contradicting candidate polls and may learn to trust and engage with poll researchers in the future. With a consolidated "final poll," in the days leading up to the election, American's can develop an understanding of how other Americans think, before quickly jumping to accusations of fraudulent activity once the election is decided against their favor. Public opinion polls are part of the fabric of our democracy when it comes to The

Election. It's a lot harder to hide corruption in an election if public opinion polls show a wildly different outcome than what the government reports. It's safe to say public opinion polls partially function to hold the government accountable. These beneficial qualities are inaccessible when news media outlets over-rely on mathematical outcome predictions to increase public fascination with the race. The people simply end up let down, discouraged, and as a result, unheard. Polls are polls, warts and all. In their simplest forms they provide democratic benefits, though we must not over indulge.