Election Forecasting: How Good Is It? What's It Good For?

How Accurate Are Forecasts Using Polls? The Death of Polling May Be Greatly Exaggerated

Polls got a black eye in some recent elections but overall can be useful in forecasting (see articles here and here). Polls can be accurate within 3% plus or minus with only 1,000 to 2,000 people due to representative and randomly drawn samples.

Conclusion from **2018 midterms: 538 "Deluxe forecast" model accurate 97% of the time.**

Conclusion from **2020: 4 in 5 polls got the winner right**

Best polls use various methods, and the best use combined methods: live calling to cell phones and landlines, interactive voice response on phones, web-based and text.

Best forecasting, such as FiveThirtyEight.com, averages polls, weights results by the quality of the poll, adjusts for party lean, and if "adults," "likely voters," or "registered voters" are sampled, etc. (see methods here: https://abcnews.go.com/538/polling-averages-work/story?id=109364028)

Poll results are often added to "fundamentals," such as the overall track record of parties in that location.

How can forecasts help us set priorities?

FiveThirtyEight forecasting is updated with every new poll. I recommend checking it about once a week https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/polls/ and look for "Ave." in the upper right corner of a recent poll. You can filter by state and type of race.

In 2020, I added WI phone banking to my Michigan phone banking when polling became worse for Biden in WI than MI. I then added PA when it was considered crucial for victory. Biden's margins reflected the polls, winning by 20,000 in WI, 81,000 in PA, and 155,000 in MI.

Putting Resources Where They'll Count

It's tempting to fight against supervillains who **can't** be beaten – rather than fight villains who **CAN** be.

In 2020, Amy McGrath raised over $90 million in her race against Mitch McConnell & lost by 20 points.

Jaime Harrison raised $130 million against Sen. Lindsey Graham & lost by 10 points.

Marcus Flowers lost by 30 points to Marjorie Taylor Greene after raising more than anyone else in the country.

The DLCC raised only $51 million in 2020 for state legislative races, which are vital for redistricting, the election process, reproductive rights & gun rights. No state legislatures flipped Democratic in 2020.

(For more, see [Some Democrats fear a 2020 repeat as cash flows to long-shot candidates, Merica, 4-18-22; Why the fundraising for Marjorie Taylor Greene's rival matters, Benen 4-19-22)](#) Updated 9-22