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PULSE OF THE PEOPLE

Voters Know Themselves Better Than the Pollsters Do

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Yesterday's elections provide further ammunition for the idea that we should pay less attention to polls of voters' intentions, and more to polls asking them who they think will win.

It's an idea supported by work that I've done with my former graduate student David Rothschild of Microsoft Research. And surveys of voters' expectations have become a key tool in our election forecasting arsenal here at The Upshot. So far, the evidence points to that being a good choice.

Our analysis suggests that surveys of voters' expectations were, once again, more accurate than the standard survey of voters' intentions most often used by pollsters.

The evidence for this claim comes from a New York Times/CBS News/YouGov poll of about 100,000 likely voters taken in mid- to late

October. I'm zeroing in on this poll in particular because it was the only one to systematically ask voters both who they thought would win in their state, and whom they intended to vote for. This allows for particularly clean comparisons, as measures of voters' expectations and intentions are based upon the exact same people answering the exact same survey, with the only difference being the set of answers analyzed.

The norm among most election-watchers is to focus almost exclusively on whom voters say they intend to support. However, this focus led to three missed calls in Senate races, as surveys of voters' intentions suggested (wrongly) that the Democrats would win in Colorado, Iowa and North Carolina. For sure, some polls did a little better, and some did a little worse, but this performance is roughly representative of the state of public opinion three weeks ago. Statistical models, like Leo and its competitors, are also largely based on polls of voters' intentions, and so they too made similar projections in mid-October.

By contrast, if you focused instead on whom voters thought likely to win, you would have correctly picked the Republican, Cory Gardner, to beat the incumbent Democrat in Colorado, and you would have been even more confident in forecasting victory for Joni Ernst, the Republican in Iowa, who won handily.

Why is this true? Asking voters about their expectations allows them to reflect on everything they know about the race — which way they currently intend to vote, how likely they are to vote, whether they're persuadable, the voting intentions of their friends and neighbors, and their observations about bumper stickers, yard signs, the resonance of a candidate's message and the momentum they sense in their communities. By contrast, asking voters only about their intentions leaves this other knowledge untapped.

All told, surveys of voters' expectations picked the Senate winner in every state except one. More impressively, they did so three weeks ago. The one miss was in North Carolina, where both the questions asking about voters' expectations and their intentions narrowly but wrongly suggested that the Democratic incumbent, Kay Hagan, would beat the Republican

challenger, Thom Tillis. (Also, neither polls of voters' expectations nor their intentions saw any hint that the Virginia Democrat, Mark Warner, would face such a difficult fight for re-election.)

Moreover, voters' expectations yielded fewer false signals. For instance, while pollsters analyzing voters' intentions had suggested that both Kansas and Kentucky might yield competitive Senate races, voters were confident that the Republicans would win both races easily. And they were right.

Surveys of voters' expectations outperformed those of voters' intentions by an even greater margin in governors' races.

Five Republican candidates — in Massachusetts, Michigan, Maine, Illinois and Maryland — won governorships despite being behind in the polls of voters' intentions, and an independent candidate who also trailed in those polls, Bill Walker, was ahead in Alaska.

But the surveys of voters' expectations did forecast Mr. Walker's lead, and the victories notched by the Republican incumbents Rick Snyder of Michigan and Paul LePage of Maine.

In other words, surveys of voters' intentions missed the outcomes of governors' races in six states, while the exact same survey focusing on voters' expectations missed in only three.

Perhaps the most interesting case study here is the Alaska governor's race, where most voters expected Mr. Walker to win, despite polls of voters intentions saying otherwise. The poor showing of standard polls there had been foreshadowed by various analysts, who argued that it is a difficult state to survey accurately. It is no surprise, then, to learn that Alaska voters know themselves better than the pollsters do.

Alaska is also particularly interesting, because it represents the leading edge of the problem that all pollsters face. Generating representative samples in an era of high cellphone penetration, low response rates, and demographic and linguistic diversity are increasingly the problems they will face in the mainland United States, too.

As it becomes harder for pollsters to take the pulse of the electorate, perhaps we should ask the voters to take it instead.

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