

A Guest Editorial Commentary:
The Polling Failure in the 2008 Democratic Primary in New Hampshire: An Analysis
by
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Polling failures are common in U.S. politics, as everyone who has seen the famous picture of Harry Truman holding up a copy of the Chicago Tribune with the headline “Dewey Defeats Truman” knows! When such failure occurs, it is important to analyze the reason for failure, so as to improve polling for future use. All politicians routinely say: “I don’t pay attention to the polls,” in reality, modern politics, is massively, massively dependent on polling, so polls must be as accurate as possible.

Earlier Polling Failures: 1936 to 1948

Two well-known earlier failures of polling were the 1936 Literary Digest poll which incorrectly predicted that Alf Landon would defeat Franklin Roosevelt and the 1948 Gallup and Roper poll that incorrectly forecast that Thomas Dewey would defeat Harry Truman. In both cases, post-election analyses showed that there were critical flaws in the methodology of their polls. With respect to the Literary Digest poll, the polling was limited to those who had telephones. However, 1936 was at the height of the Great Depression and many lower-income families had had to cancel their phone services which meant that those who still had phones were massively and disproportionately better-off voters, who in 1936 voted heavily Republican. In the case of the 1948 polls, the assumption of that time was that voters did not change their views in the last two weeks of the campaign, and as such, the last polls in 1948 were two weeks before the election. So the polls did not pick-up the large, last minute shift of popular support to Truman.

The New Hampshire Poll: Two Flawed Assumptions

In the case of the 2008 New Hampshire polls, prediction of a double digit win for Senator Obama, which all the polls forecast, was based on two assumptions that in retrospect were badly flawed: First, Failure to appreciate a Key Fact about U.S. Politics Today: The 24-Hour News Cycle. The assumption of recent polling has been that events in the last few hours before an election seldom have much impact. This assumption overlooks a key factor about modern American media: the fact of “saturation” news coverage. Twenty years ago, before 24-hour news and before the internet, a given story would be reported once or twice a day on newscasts- now, the same story would be continually repeated for hours on end. In the case of the New Hampshire primary, the bit “shift” of voters was among women voters. In the Iowa caucuses, five days before the New Hampshire primary, Obama won the women’s vote 33% to 30% over Clinton. In New Hampshire, Clinton won the women’s vote 47% to 35% over Obama. Post-election in-depth interviews indicated that the key factor in this shift was the reaction of the overwhelming male media reporters to the incident of Senator Clinton getting emotional a few hours before the primary. Put, mildly, these male reporters went ballistic with this story. The night before the primary, the news coverage of this “tearful” incident by male reporters can only be called “the feeding frenzy of the great white sharks.” Why male reporters reacted this way I will leave to my psychiatrist friends but most women were massively turned off by this “feeding frenzy.” In consequence, many of these women “switched” to Hillary at the last minute. (We have a saying in my home state of Kentucky: “I can say my sister is ugly, but you can’t!” The same situation “played out” with male reporters attacking a prominent woman politician. By the way, my sister is NOT ugly and if you say she is, I’m going to punch you in the nose!

Second, Failure to appreciate the reality of lying in Black vs. White electoral contests. This is a most sensitive issue in contemporary U.S. politics. In the play Hamlet, there is the line, “conscience does make cowards of us all.” In modern U.S. politics, “Political correctness does make cowards of us all.” Specifically, because of the pervasive impact of “political correctness,” an impact reinforced by the “PC Police,” people are extremely reluctant today to admit to even a hint of racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, etc. Even David Duke of the Ku Klux Klan insists he is not a racist: He says he is simply “Pro-White.” As a result, some time, political scientists like me have noted that in Black vs. White electoral contests, the black candidate always does significantly better in the polls than he or she does in the actual election returns. (See the attached article from the January 16, 2008, KC Star). After the Iowa caucuses, in which the polls did

accurately forecast an Obama victory, people assumed that the “racial disparity in polling” no longer existed. This analysis overlooked a key factor. In the Iowa Democratic caucuses, people had to publicly state their candidate preferences. In New Hampshire the vote was by secret ballot. So, in retrospect, it is clear that in New Hampshire many people told pollsters that they were going to vote for Obama because they wanted to be seen as “politically correct” but did not actually do so in the primary.

Conclusion

I think the key lesson to be drawn from the polling failure in New Hampshire is to realize that political conditions change over time and that social science methodologies like polling must be prepared to change with them.

Editor’s Note: *Ernest Evans, Ph.D., is a Political Scientist and graduate of Yale University. This prolific writer and author of numerous scholarly works is an Adjunct Faculty of many years with the KCKCC, Leavenworth Campus. My sincere thanks for this timely commentary on the current presidential politics which continues to challenge conventional wisdom and past, polling precedents.*