

NYTimes

Exit Polls, and Why the Primary Was Not Stolen From Bernie Sanders

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The background music of my life is the steady drumbeat of tweets about how Hillary Clinton stole the presidential primary from Bernie Sanders.

It's there when I wake up in the morning. It's there when I go to sleep at night. The constant thrumming of election fraud conspiracists is like the noise made by that board game in the movie "Jumanji."

I didn't write about this during the primary season, since I didn't want to dignify the views of conspiracy theorists. But they're still going.

The allegations are remarkably consistent. They go like this: Mr. Sanders did better in the early exit polls than he did in the final result. Therefore, Mrs. Clinton probably stole the election. The exit polls are a sufficient basis to make this determination, in the eyes of the conspiracists, because exit polls are used internationally to detect fraud. They're supposedly very accurate and "well controlled" (where this phrase comes from, I don't know). Furthermore, they say, the exit polls were right on the G.O.P. side — confirming the underlying validity of the methodology and raising suspicions about the Democratic vote count.

All of this starts with a basic misconception: that the exit polls are usually pretty good.

I have no idea where this idea comes from, because everyone who knows anything about early exit polls knows that they're not great.

We can start in 2008, when the exit polls showed a pretty similar bias toward Barack Obama. Or in 2004, when the exit polls showed John Kerry easily winning an election he clearly lost — with both a huge error and systematic bias outside of the "margin of error." The national exits showed Kerry ahead by three points (and keep in mind the sample size on the national exit is vastly larger than for a state primary exit poll) and leading in states like Virginia, Ohio and Florida — which all went to George W. Bush.

The story was similar in 2000. The early exit polls showed Al Gore winning Alabama, Arizona, Colorado and North Carolina. Mr. Bush won these states by between six and 15 points. The exit polls showed Mr. Gore winning Florida by six points — leading the networks to call the race before 8 p.m. in the East.

Young Voters Love Exit Polls. Old Voters Do Not.

Younger voters are more likely to complete exit polls than older voters across all interviewer ages.

Exit poll response rate in 2004, by interviewer age.

[See the original article for the graph: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/28/upshot/exit-polls-and-why-the-primary-was-not-stolen-from-bernie-sanders.html?_r=0Age 18-29 Completion Rate]

Age 30-59 Completion Rate

Age >60 Completion Rate

Interviewer, under 24

25-34

35-44

45-54

55-64

65+

53%

56%

55%

58%

61%

60%

52%

54%

55%

60%

64%

64%

39%

42%

42%

47%

53%

54%

Source: Edison Research

The same thing happened in 1996. It was actually even worse in 1992. The exit polls had Bill Clinton winning Texas, which went to George H.W. Bush, and basically everywhere.

Now, how can this happen? There are a lot of sources for exit poll error — even more than in an ordinary poll. Here are a few:

- Differential nonresponse, in which the supporters of one candidate are likelier to participate than those of another candidate. Exit polls have limited means to correct for nonresponse, since they can weight only by visually identifiable characteristics. Hispanic origin, income and education, for instance, are left out.
- Cluster effects, which happen when the precincts selected aren't representative of the overall population. This is a very big danger in state exit polls, which include only a small number of precincts. As a result, exit polls have a larger margin of error than an ordinary poll of similar size. These precincts are selected to have the right balance of Democratic and Republican precincts, which isn't so helpful in a primary.
- Absentee voters aren't included at all in states where they represent less than 20 percent or so of the vote.

For all these reasons, exit polls can be very inaccurate and systematically biased. With this kind of history, you can see why no one who studies the exit polls believes that they can be used as an indicator of fraud in the way the conspiracy theorists do.

But why were exit polls so tilted toward Mr. Sanders? It's impossible to be 100 percent sure, but the best-known bias in the exit poll offers a very good explanation: young voters.

Young voters are far likelier to complete the exit polls than older voters, according to data from Edison Research, the organization that conducts the exit polls. The gap is particularly pronounced when the interviewers are also younger, but the gap persists even when older interviewers are conducting the exit interviews.

The exit polls try to correct for this bias by giving more weight to older respondents. The way it works is pretty novel: Interviewers guess the age of voters as they leave the polling place. Then the responses are weighted to match the age of all the voters who showed up, based on the guesses of the interviewer.

Exit Polls Show Vastly Younger Democratic Electorate

State voter history data shows a far older Democratic primary electorate in 2016 than the exit polls do.

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Age of the 2016 Democratic primary electorate.

Age 18–29 (Voter)

Age 18-29 (Exit)

Age >65 (Voter)

Age >65 (Exit)

Mich.

Tex.

Ohio*

Ark.

Fla.

N.C.*

Okla.

S.C. (18–24)

14%

12%

11%

9%

9%

9%

8%

2%

19%

20%

15%

18%

17%

17%

12%

7%

29%

28%

30%

35%

39%

32%

38%

32%

20%

18%

21%

24%

25%

19%

28%

19%

*Data does not reflect updated vote history for every county. **South Carolina data is for 18–to-24-year-old voters, not 18–to-29-year-olds.

Source: Edison Research, L2, South Carolina Board of Elections.

This could work, in theory. In practice, it falls short. There's a persistent, decades-long bias toward young voters in the exit polls — even in the final, "adjusted" data — when compared with census or voter file data.

You can see that in data from the 2012 presidential election, which I wrote about a few weeks ago. Overall, the exit polls showed that 19 percent of voters were ages 18 to 29, compared with around 15 percent in census and voter file data. Notably, the census is an extremely high-quality survey — so you can just pack away any theory that election administrators are tossing the votes of young voters in basically every jurisdiction across the country.

Why does this bias exist, despite the exit poll effort to adjust for nonresponse by age? It's hard to say; if the exit polls had the data to identify the cause, they presumably could fix it. There are at least a few possibilities — like biased guesses, trimming weights (where they're not weighting older voters enough), or the absence of old absentee voters in some states — but there's no way to be really sure.

What's clear is that this bias persisted in the 2016 Democratic primary. Voter registration files are just starting to be updated, and they all show that Democratic primary voters were far older than the exit polls suggested.

Mr. Sanders, of course, is a candidate with historic strength among young voters — so it should be no surprise that the exit polls were particularly biased in his direction. Nor should it be a surprise that the exit polls were also biased toward Mr. Obama in 2008, or Democrats in many recent elections.

I'd also note that the age bias of the exit polls wouldn't have much of an effect on the Republican results: There are far fewer young voters in the Republican primary, and there wasn't much of a split between older and younger Republicans.

There are other challenges with exit polls in the primaries. Usually, the exit polls select precincts by partisanship — ensuring a good balance of Democratic and Republican precincts. This helps in a general election. It doesn't do as much good in a primary.

If you're looking for the exit polls to identify fraud in the United States, you're out of luck. They would need to be redesigned: sampling many more precincts, calling more early voters and taking steps to boost response rates — like short questionnaires, rather than the long ones used in the United States. That's not going to happen. The news media uses exit polls to get a sense of "why" voters did what they did, not to validate the election results. It's not going to spend millions more dollars to increase the accuracy of early exit polls.

What should be telling, though, is that the news media organizations that commission the exit polls, and Edison Research, which conducts them, do not believe that their own data is good enough to call the Democratic primary results into question.