Treasure State 2020 Polling Results: Projections & Outcomes

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Treasure State Polls

The first iteration of the Treasure State Poll involved pre-election and post-election surveys of registered, active voters around the 2018 general election in the state of Montana. The surveys were primarily administered via mail and randomly sampled individuals within state house districts. The weighted projections that resulted from the pre-election survey were predictive of the eventual vote percentages. The 2020 version of the polls followed similar procedures, but the pre-election projections were less accurate in terms of margins of victory. This was a widespread issue for survey efforts prior to the 2020 general elections. The Treasure State Poll intends to avoid pre-election polling in 2022, but understanding the reasons for the gaps is important for obtaining accurate results more generally in future polling efforts. This report investigates these gaps.

Pre-election Estimates vs. Actual Outcomes

Pre-election estimates and actual results can differ for a variety of reasons. Though procedural error is one important reason, many sources of procedural error are known and can be adjusted for before producing results. For example, we undertook measures to reduce error related to sampling bias (e.g., certain people being over- or under-represented in the data), problems with question wording, and question ordering. A second important reason is that certain modeling assumptions can end up being wrong. We discuss this factor at length below. A third important reason for differences is that the views change in the aggregate over time. For example, a meaningful number of people might change their vote intention from one candidate to another between September and November due to events, messaging, news, etc.

As shown in Table 1, we assessed six races across the 2018 and 2020 general election cycles. The predicted direction was correct in five of the six races, though many of these races would be considered statistical dead heats in the pre-election results. The 2018 U.S. House election is an example in which very late campaign dynamics could have pushed undecided voters and those who leaned Republican toward the Democratic candidate, thereby representing a shift in views in the aggregate and tightening the race. Worth noting is that most other public polls similarly over-estimated support for Democratic candidates and under-estimated support for Republican candidates in Montana races in 2020.

Table 1. Pre-election and Actual Margins for 2018 and 2020 Races

	Pre-election Margin	Actual Margin
2018 Senate (Tester-Rosendale)	+3% Tester	+4% Tester
2018 House (Gianforte-Williams)	+8% Gianforte	+5% Gianforte
2020 President (Trump-Biden)	+7% Trump	+16% Trump
2020 Senate (Daines-Bullock)	+2% Bullock	+10% Daines
2020 House (Rosendale-Williams)	+2% Rosendale	+12% Rosendale
2020 Governor (Gianforte-Cooney)	+5% Gianforte	+12% Gianforte

Notes. The margins are in percentage points. Individual results are rounded to whole numbers prior to calculation of margins. The gray row indicates the one race for which the projected direction ended up being incorrect.

Notably, the discrepancies between the pre-election margins and the actual margins were larger for the 2020 races. This document explores the reasons for the discrepancy. In terms of procedural issues, response rates from certain demographics continue to lag. In particular, individuals who are younger, male, from rural areas, and/or less educated respond at a rate that is below their representation in the population. Many of these individuals tend to be conservative and tend to vote Republican. We can (and do) use analytical weights to better represent such individuals among the respondents – a procedure that worked well in 2018. However, it would be better to get direct responses from more of them.

State-level polls throughout the country tended to underestimate support for Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump in 2020. While extensive analysis of the issue by the American Association for Public Opinion Research did not point to any clear answers,[1] the most likely seems to be that Republicans who respond to polls are fundamentally different in their orientations from Republicans who do not.[2] Moreover, certain Trump supporters who decline participation in polls due to legitimacy concerns do vote in elections. Some pollsters have taken to adding a few percentage points to Republican results to "correct" for this problem in elections that feature Trump, but there is no clear scientific basis for the practice or the precise adjustment. The hope is that different methods of reaching voters will result in more representative samples. **Consequently, we will be building and utilizing an online panel of respondents for the 2022 election survey.** Other organizations using such panels have found that they tend to better represent today's voting demographics.

The second potential cause for prediction gaps is that certain modeling assumptions ended up being incorrect. The most important of these assumptions is about the shape of the electorate. Trump complicated this assumption in 2016, as the electorate that showed up at the polls was different than any that had preceded it in recent history. In particular, he mobilized certain voters who had tended not to vote. Taking these new voters into account and assuming they would vote again in 2018 despite the lack of a presidential race, support for Trump became a weighting factor in the 2018 results. The weights worked well in 2018, so we made the same assumption for the 2020 races. However, as discussed below,

[1] https://www.aapor.org/AAPOR_Main/media/MainSiteFiles/AAPOR-Task-Force-on-2020-Pre-Election-Polling_Report-FNL_embargo.pdf

[2] https://www.politico.com/news/2021/07/18/pollsters-2020-polls-all-wrong-500050

Trump's direct involvement in a race may have again mobilized **even more new voters** in Montana in 2020.

Given a lack of contrary information, we assumed that population change in the state would not change the distribution of Republicans and Democrats showing up to vote. Montana is fairly unique in that voters are not required to register with a party, which constitutes a disadvantage for researchers trying to engage in this type of modeling. We still do not have direct information about the assumption that new voters to the state were representative of the pre-existing partisan distribution. However, what we can assess to some extent is whether an increase in the size of the electorate is due to an increase in population or due to mobilization of existing Montanans. As shown in Table 2 below, the population of the state increased by about 38,000 individuals from 2016 to 2020, but the number of registered voters increased by about 58,000, and voter turnout increased by about 95,000 persons. While population increase may have contributed to the higher number of voters in 2020, the registration and turnout of pre-existing Montanans seem to be bigger factors. Notably, turnout among registered voters increased from 74% to 81% from 2016 to 2020.

Table 2. Increases in Montana Electorate from 2016-2020

	2016	2020	Difference
Montana Population	1,042,137	1,080,577	+38,440
Montana Registered Voters	694,370	752,538	+58,168
Montana Voter Turnout	516,901	612,075	+95,174

The next step in this investigation is to evaluate the extent to which the mobilization of Trump voters contributed to the larger-than-expected (as compared to pre-election predictions) margins of victory for Republicans in the other races in the state of Montana. Table 3 breaks down in the change in voter turnout as it relates to voting for Trump. The first column of data shows the number of additional votes cast by county in 2020 compared to 2016, while the second computes this increase as a percentage. The third column shows the additional Trump votes in the county in 2020 as compared to 2016. The fourth column facilitates assessment of whether the increase in Trump votes is due to mobilization in Trump's favor or simply due to increased voter turnout overall. This final column shows how Trump's share of the electorate changed in percentage points from 2016 to 2020. For example, Trump's share in Big Horn County increased from 44% to 46%, resulting in an increase of 2 percentage points.

Notably, Trump's overall share of the electorate remained stable from 2016 to 2020 (increasing from about 56% to 57%), while his margin of victory over the Democratic candidate actually declined (from 20 percentage points to 16). The shrinking gap is likely attributable to a more palatable Democratic candidate in Montana in 2020 (Joe Biden rather than Hillary Clinton) and declining support for third-party and write-in candidates (9% in 2016 vs. 3% in 2020). Both the Republican and Democratic presidential candidates fared better in 2020, though the improvement for the Democratic candidate was larger. However, an important observation from the table is that Trump voters increased by about 64,000 in Montana, while the electorate increased by about 95,000. Given the current hyper-partisan environment and the relative lack of split-ticket voting (e.g., partisan vote matching across races was typically 94-98% in our 2020 data), this likely means that most of the new voters ended up voting for Republicans down the ballot. This helps explain the success of the Republican Party in Montana in the 2020 election cycle. The extent to which

these new voters were mobilized by Trump or by other factors (see discussion below) remains an open question.

Table 3. Increase in Montana Voter Turnout from 2016 to 2020

	Added Votes Overall	Added Votes %	Additional Trump Votes	Trump Vote Share Change (% points)
Beaverhead	652	13%	570	0%
Big Horn	426	10%	354	+2%
Blaine	353	13%	201	0%
Broadwater	871	27%	825	+2%
Carbon	1,044	17%	720	0%
Carter	58	7%	97	+3%
Cascade	**4,634**	**13%**	**3,683**	**+1%**
Chouteau	307	11%	212	-1%
Custer	557	10%	548	+1%
Daniels	36	4%	69	+3%
Dawson	392	9%	438	+1%
Deer Lodge	543	12%	423	+3%
Fallon	64	4%	96	+1%
Fergus	494	8%	600	+2%
Flathead	12,352	26%	8,081	-1%
Gallatin	15,989	29%	7,894	0%
Garfield	87	12%	111	+3%
Glacier	454	9%	264	+2%
Golden Valley	4	1%	49	+5%
Granite	268	14%	227	+1%
Hill	575	9%	479	+1%
Jefferson	**1,276**	**18%**	**1,168**	**+3%**
Judith Basin	111	9%	168	+4%
Lake	3,184	23%	1,792	-1%
Lewis & Clark	**6,888**	**19%**	**4,514**	**+2%**
Liberty	108	11%	123	+3%
Lincoln	**2,227**	**23%**	**1,943**	**+2%**
Madison	1,230	25%	894	-1%
McCone	51	5%	94	+4%
Meagher	116	11%	104	0%
Mineral	506	24%	498	+5%
Missoula	10,730	17%	4,097	-1%
Musselshell	410	16%	456	+3%
Park	1,985	20%	1,045	-2%
Petroleum	13	4%	20	0%
Phillips	164	7%	213	+1%
Pondera	197	7%	232	+2%
Powder River	46	4%	86	+1%
Powell	331	11%	326	+1%
Prairie	33	5%	47	0%
Ravalli	**5,491**	**24%**	**4,304**	**+1%**
Richland	876	18%	892	+2%
Roosevelt	259	7%	199	+1%
Rosebud	210	6%	233	0%

Sanders	**1,565**	**25%**	**1,374**	**+1%**
Sheridan	131	7%	162	+1%
Silver Bow	**1,790**	**10%**	**1,369**	**+3%**
Stillwater	786	16%	801	+3%
Sweet Grass	299	14%	245	-1%
Teton	405	12%	438	+3%
Toole	51	2%	99	+1%
Treasure	8	2%	22	+2%
Valley	298	7%	437	+4%
Wheatland	97	10%	121	+3%
Wibaux	44	8%	53	0%
Yellowstone	**13,098**	**18%**	**9,852**	**+1%**
Totals:	**95,174**		**64,362**	**+1%**

Notes. Red rows are counties won by Trump in 2020, while blue rows are counties won by Biden. Key counties in this analysis are bolded. Trump's overall share of the vote increased only from 56% to 57% from 2016 to 2020.

A number of counties are key when looking more closely at county-level vote totals. These counties, where Trump increased both his number of votes (1,000+) and share of the vote, are bolded in Table 3. The counties are Cascade, Jefferson, Lewis & Clark, Lincoln, Ravalli, Sanders, Silver Bow, and Yellowstone. While turnout increased in other noteworthy counties, like Gallatin and Missoula, this increased turnout did little to change the distribution of support for Republicans and Democrats and corresponding Trump vote share.

Regardless of why new voters showed up at the polls, we can examine their likely effect on the race for the U.S. Senate. The final margin was 55.0% for Steve Daines, the Republican candidate, to 45.0% for Steve Bullock, the Democratic candidate. If you remove the added Trump and non-Trump voters from the Republican and Democratic candidates (in Table 3), respectively, the margin becomes 52.7% to 47.3%. Therefore, the newly mobilized voters account for about half the gap between the two candidates (i.e., the gap decreases from about 10 to 5 percentage points). In the U.S. House race, the final margin was 56.4% for Matt Rosendale, the Republican candidate, to 43.6% for Kathleen Williams, the Democratic candidate. Removing the added Trump and non-Trump voters in this case shrinks the gap to 54.3% to 45.7%, reducing the gap by about a third. While the added voters are clearly an important part of the story, they do not provide a complete explanation for the discrepancy between the pre-election numbers and the final tallies.

The final cause to consider is that a sizeable number of individuals changed their minds between the time the survey was in the field (September 2020) and the election in early November. However, our data show *very few* survey respondents changing their minds about candidates between those two time periods. Our data also show that a fair number of "unlikely" voters in the pre-election sample actually ended up voting in the election. Rather than a change in positions, then, these people engaged when it looked like they might not do so.

Conclusions

In the final analysis, the estimation complications seem to stem primarily from problems with producing representative samples and potentially from changing demographics in the state. A certain type of Republican is not being captured in polling efforts and may have different views from those who are being

captured. Further, some unlikely voters prior to the election ended up casting ballots. The hope is that changes to methods will allow for more representative samples. Further, certain assumptions require reevaluation. Changes in turnout seemed to favor Republicans in 2020. These changes probably owed in part to strong Republican voter mobilization efforts, but changes to the partisan makeup of the state's residents in the midst of significant population growth is a potential piece of the puzzle that will require better answers, as well.