

The pitfalls of prediction – for candidates and the country

POLITICS

BY JOHN LAPPIE



Christmas is two months away as I write this. When the holiday nears, many children, excited with anticipation, will pick up a box from underneath their tree and shake it to arrive at their best guess at what's inside.

As wishful thinking is human nature, many a child will joyously decide it's exactly what they want and will later have to conquer their disappointment when it turns out to be a sweater. (Mom, if you're reading this, I promise I liked the sweater you got me last Christmas.)

Many Americans, unable to contain their excitement (or anxiety) about the election, are shaking the box to forecast their jubilation or despair. Obsessing over polling averages, diving into the crosstabs of polls, listening to "leaks" from the campaigns, looking up early voting figures or tracking the spending and travel of Harris and Trump. Many will excitedly believe that they will get

exactly what they want.

Shaking the box is unreliable at the best of times, as the premature prediction of Harry Truman's defeat in 1948 infamously demonstrated. It leads campaigns astray. In 2012, Mitt Romney's campaign team was convinced the polls were skewed in Obama's favor and "unskewed" them to show a big Romney win. This not only got up the hopes of Romney's supporters, it got up Romney's own hopes, too; he didn't even have a concession speech prepared. Tempting fate if I ever saw it.

Polling can also set the stage for incredulity at the outcomes. In 2004, John Kerry supporters, based on partial exit polls on election day morning, decided Kerry was going to win, only for Bush to edge him out, leading to conspiracy theories remarkably similar to those Republicans embraced in 2020, though less widespread since Kerry gracefully conceded the next day.

Sometimes shaking the box can break what's inside it. In 2016, Hillary Clinton's campaign was so convinced she would win that it paid little attention to Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania — states Trump flipped narrowly to give him the

electoral college victory. Voters who disliked both candidates (but disliked Trump more) may have sat out, assured that Clinton would win and that there was no need to hold their nose.

If shaking the box is unreliable at the best of times, it's worth remembering these are not the best of times.

There are risks to predicting the results of one election based on those of the previous election; voters, issues and candidates do change. The 2020 race was a pandemic election. If Democrats aren't voting early at the same rate in 2024 as in 2020, what does that mean? I have a Ph.D. in political science, so I feel fully qualified to say that I have no idea. It may mean their enthusiasm is lower, which is good for Trump. Or it may mean a lot of people who voted early last time only did so because of the pandemic, in which case it means nothing.

Historically, polling is our best guide, but it has taken a beating of late. Polls were inaccurate in 2016 and 2020, underestimating Trump. In the 2022 midterms, the polls underestimated Democrats. Legitimate pollsters have tried to adjust for what went wrong in recent years, but there's no way to know

if they've succeeded.

Some will try to divine the future based on campaign leaks. But many a "leak" is let loose as part of a campaign's propaganda efforts. If Democrats anonymously say Harris is behind, it could be because they're worried, or because the Harris campaign wants to avoid Hillary's fate and keep lukewarm supporters motivated out of fear of another Trump administration. If Trump's team is boasting of inevitable victory, that could be a reflection of the candidate's legendary ego, or they may want their supporters to think victory is inevitable, to lay fertile ground for conspiracy theories about a "rigged" election if Harris wins.

Or maybe Republicans are just optimists and Democrats are just pessimists, which was true in 2022 and had no bearing on the results. A joyful vote for Trump and an anxious vote for Harris count just the same.

My advice: Be patient, and don't shake the box.

Here's hoping I heed my own advice.

NUMBER

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