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Forget the 2016 Polls: Nobody Knows Anything Yet

The campaigns and the political media are fixated on the presidential race—but actual voters aren't

S.V. Dáte

@SVDATE

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Imagine interviewing for a top-level job where the hiring committee hasn't gotten around to reading your resume, but HR keeps polling its members anyway to see if you should be brought back for the next round of interviews—and all the while, you're sinking toward bankruptcy.

Even worse, imagine that the hiring committee is instead leaning toward a TV game show host and a motivational speaker, neither of whom has any obvious relevant experience for the job.

A dozen Republican presidential candidates don't need to imagine any of this. They've been living it most of this year—the potential victims of surveys that shouldn't actually matter yet.

“The polls are not predictive of where we're going to be in three months,” said Lee Miringoff, director of the Marist Institute for Public Opinion at Marist College. “These voters right now on the Republican side are not baked in.”

This type of analysis has offered little comfort to candidates like one-time front-runner Jeb Bush, whose campaign staged a donor summit last month to calm contributors alarmed at the state of the contest. “Race will remain fluid for some time because ... voters have A.D.D.,” read one slide in the campaign’s presentation.

Three current and former governors, including Bush, languish in single digits. Three others, once considered serious contenders, have already dropped out. And all of this has come weeks and months before the first ballot is cast, and before tens of millions of dollars in advertising—much of it TV attack ads—is unleashed that will almost certainly reshape the field.

Atop the polls, meanwhile, sit developer-turned-reality-TV-star Donald Trump and retired neurosurgeon-turned-inspirational-author Ben Carson, both of whom have ridden celebrity and haven’t bothered with serious campaign structures.

Miringoff said the size of Trump’s crowds has more to do with people’s desire to see an entertaining TV star in person. “It’s a happening event,” Miringoff said. “That and going to caucus are different levels of commitment.”

At the same point in the 2012 race

(http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2012/president/ia/iowa_republican_presidential_1588.html), just over two months before the Iowa caucuses, pizza-chain executive Herman Cain had a clear lead in Iowa, while eventual winner Rick Santorum was at 4 percent.

“History suggests that these candidates don’t usually win,” said Michael Dimock, president of Pew Research Center, adding that the apparent success of “outsiders” at this point in the process is precisely because voters really don’t have that much hard information about the candidates yet.

“There’s just way too much noise in the system right now,” he said.

THE POLLING PROBLEM

A lot of that noise is inherent to polling in primary elections. While the candidates and the political consulting world pay close attention to news coverage about the presidential race, the average American does not—even in early-voting states such as Iowa and New Hamp-

shire.

This is reflected, pollsters say, in large percentages of respondents who say they still have not settled on a candidate. Dimock said most actual voters right now have perhaps a passing interest in the campaigns: “That’s a little bit different from starting to think about your choice.”

Layered onto this fundamental lack of deep voter interest are the logistical difficulties in modern political polling. More and more Americans do not have home landlines anymore, only cell phones. And those numbers, by law, must be manually dialed, driving up costs. The majority of Americans, regardless of what type of phone they have, do not answer incoming numbers they don’t recognize. These factors produce a response rate in surveys of 8 percent, compared to 80 percent or so a few decades ago.

And then there are the sample sizes, often so small that the margins of error are larger than the spreads among a host of candidates. An [ABC News/Washington Post poll](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/republicans-want-change-in-washington-and-trump-is-seen-as-biggest-change-agent/2015/11/21/813f8c14-90b8-11e5-acff-673ae92ddd2b_graphic.html) (https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/republicans-want-change-in-washington-and-trump-is-seen-as-biggest-change-agent/2015/11/21/813f8c14-90b8-11e5-acff-673ae92ddd2b_graphic.html) released this weekend had Trump leading nationally with 32 percent, Carson in second at 22 percent, and then 10 candidates ranging from Sen. Marco Rubio at 11 percent down to Sen. Lindsey Graham and former Sen. Rick Santorum at 1 percent.

But because the sample size of 423 Republican respondents produces a 5.5-point margin of error, those 10 candidates from Rubio to Santorum were statistically tied.

John Dick, founder of the polling and research firm Civic Science, said such dependence on obviously imprecise surveys is actually doing voters a disservice. “It is categorically irresponsible, in my opinion,” Dick said.

Now add in the even-bigger challenge of determining how closely the sample of those surveyed will reflect the relatively small universe of those people who actually vote in primaries and caucuses. Pollsters determine who is likely to vote in these contests primary by asking

them—which brings up the related problem of people who answer their phones and who agree to take a survey and then tell the pollster they will vote when history suggests they will not.

In the ABC/*Washington Post* survey, for example, 63 percent of the registered voters taking the poll said they are “certain” to vote in their state’s primary or caucus, while another 14 percent said they would “probably” vote. A [Fox News poll](http://www.foxnews.com/politics/interactive/2015/11/20/fox-news-poll-2016-matchups-syrian-refugees/) (<http://www.foxnews.com/politics/interactive/2015/11/20/fox-news-poll-2016-matchups-syrian-refugees/>) released on Sunday similarly had 79 percent of respondents saying they are likely to vote.

If 77 or 79 percent of registered voters truly wind up voting in their primaries, it would shatter turnout records across the country. In 2012, only 11 percent of those eligible to vote nationally voted in a primary or caucus. Among Republicans, less than a third of those who turned out for nominee Mitt Romney in the November general election had bothered showing up to an earlier caucus or primary.

“There’s not a good match from likely voters in preelection polls to those folks who are actually going to turn out,” said Cliff Zukin, a Rutgers University political-science professor and a past president of the American Association for Public Opinion Research. “The lower the turnout, the more error. ... So you have to take it with a grain of salt.”

(This phenomenon of telling pollsters the “socially desirable” thing is not unique to voting. Churches would be far more crowded each Sunday and charities would be significantly better funded if those responding to surveys were being completely honest. “A lot of it is human nature,” said Pew’s Dimock. “People want to think well of themselves.”)

None of these problems would matter that much if early polls were merely entertainment, fodder for political news and the junkies who follow it. But unfortunately for many of the GOP candidates, there is one other group that closely follows the imprecise polling and its attendant news coverage: the donors whose checks keep the campaigns going.

“There is a desire from all of us, but particularly donors, to have a level of precision in polling that’s really impossible,” Dimock said, adding that many donors see their contributions as investments. “You want to have an impact with it, which means not putting it on a

losing bet.”

Donor angst, in fact, spurred the pro-Bush Right to Rise super PAC to start airing \$1 million in national cable TV ads on Fox News last month—exactly one day after the group’s strategist, Mike Murphy, was quoted in a *Bloomberg* article

(<http://www.bloomberg.com/politics/features/2015-10-20/mike-murphy-of-right-to-rise-explains-his-theory-that-jeb-bush-is-still-the-candidate-to-beat>) ridiculing the idea of spending money for national TV ads this early in the primary season.

A VICIOUS CYCLE

Yet even calming down donors skittish about weak polling is part of a normal presidential campaign season. What’s made this campaign different is that imprecise polling has also been used to generate thresholds that have relegated candidates to far-less-viewed secondary debates.

The Marist Poll’s Miringoff said it was that decision by the Republican National Committee and the networks televising the debates that led him and his media partner, McClatchy, to stop conducting horse-race polling for the summer

(<http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/politics-government/election/article29787529.html>).

“It was just a bad use of polls by the media at a time when people didn’t know these candidates at all,” Miringoff said. “We were happy not to be part of that.”

Of the seven candidates in the first “kids’ table” debate in August, two have left the race entirely. Another three—Graham, former New York Gov. George Pataki and former Virginia Gov. Jim Gilmore—have over subsequent debates been dropped from even the lower-tier event.

At a recent candidates forum sponsored by the Republican Party of Florida, Gilmore called the system “ridiculous” because low standings were keeping the candidates from participating in the main debates—which in turn reinforced the poor standings in the polls.

Gilmore even asked those attending his Sunshine Summit speech to support him where it really counted: in public opinion surveys. “Start to tell the pollsters, because it seems to be all about polling, that you’re for Jim Gilmore,” he said.

He blamed both the television networks for giving what he called unlimited airtime to Trump for the purpose of boosting their ratings, which Gilmore said further lifted Trump's standing in the polls, as well as the RNC for allowing it to happen.

(The networks and the RNC have defended their formats as driven by the large field of candidates and the impossibility of including all of them in a single debate.)

“You have this circular thing going on here where the polling nationally is deciding who gets in the debates,” Gilmore said at a news conference following his speech. “And the polling nationally is decided by who the media choose to promote. And then they get on the stage, and they get more attention and more poll numbers.”

THE GROUND GAME

Regardless of how things stand in late November, though, both pollsters and campaign strategists agree things will likely look very different on the eve of the opening contest in Iowa on Feb. 1.

At campaign events in Iowa and New Hampshire, a number of those supporting Trump said they had not voted previously in caucuses and primaries. An operative from a rival campaign said Trump cannot win Iowa unless he brings in vast numbers of new voters to the caucuses, much the way President Obama did in 2008. But unlike Obama, Trump has not invested in the sort of organization needed to do that.

As for Carson, he has invested in hardly any campaign structure at all. In his most recent Federal Election Commission filing, he reported spending \$169,000 for staff. In contrast, Sen. Ted Cruz and Sen. Marco Rubio reported \$563,000 and \$592,000, respectively.

“Carson's got just nothing on the ground, except that he's got evangelical support that's self-organizing,” said Fergus Cullen, a former chairman of the New Hampshire Republican Party.

Front-runner Trump, meanwhile, is likely to see millions of dollars, if not tens of millions of dollars, of TV ads attacking him—an assault that will almost certainly drag down his numbers. Indeed, the only time Trump declined in Iowa polls coincided exactly with the period the conservative group Club for Growth ran \$1 million worth of anti-Trump ads in Iowa

[this autumn \(http://www.nationaljournal.com/s/91342/why-is-trump-falling-iowa-group-points-its-1-million-attack-ads?](http://www.nationaljournal.com/s/91342/why-is-trump-falling-iowa-group-points-its-1-million-attack-ads?)

[q=None&a=S.V.%20D%C3%A1te&t=&c=None&s=None&e=None](http://www.nationaljournal.com/s/91342/why-is-trump-falling-iowa-group-points-its-1-million-attack-ads?q=None&a=S.V.%20D%C3%A1te&t=&c=None&s=None&e=None)). The super PAC supporting Ohio Gov. John Kasich has already said it will spend \$2.5 million to attack Trump, and other candidates and outside groups are likely to follow.

Unless Trump decides to spend seriously from his own bank accounts—and so far he has not; his campaign has largely been funded by [purchasers of his hats and T-shirts \(http://www.nationaljournal.com/s/90948/how-donald-trump-capped-off-his-fundraising?q=None&a=S.V.%20D%C3%A1te&t=&c=None&s=None&e=None\)](http://www.nationaljournal.com/s/90948/how-donald-trump-capped-off-his-fundraising?q=None&a=S.V.%20D%C3%A1te&t=&c=None&s=None&e=None)—he could easily lose both of the first two states, giving fresh momentum to those candidates who do well there.

“His whole campaign is built on leading in the polls,” Cullen said. “So when he loses, I don’t know how he comes back.”

And if any candidate has reason to hope for a Trump decline and a return to normal GOP presidential politics, it is Bush, who has invested heavily on the idea that turning out supporters using voter lists in the early-primary states is the way to win the nomination—and who has the most to lose if the race is instead based on celebrity and performance art.

“Nobody who leads the polls at this point is likely to become president or even their party’s nominee,” Bush’s top strategist Sally Bradshaw said. “The one unknown is just how large the field remains after February. Candidates will need resources to go the distance and play in March. Jeb will have those resources, and we are prepared to play the long game.”

Pew’s Dimock is not ready to guess which candidate or candidates will emerge from the current field. At the same time, he is also not persuaded that today’s state of affairs represents any sort of fundamental shift in presidential politics. “There are things that are different this cycle, but there are many things that feel the same,” he said.