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What the Polls and Projections Missed in Florida: Themselves An Open Letter to Pollsters and Media about the 2016 Election

By Mary K. Garber, June 2017

In the months since the 2016 presidential election, political scientists, pollsters, and journalists have sought to find out why the polls and projections were so off the mark. Leading into and even on the very day of the election, the consensus was that Hillary Clinton was inevitably headed to victory over Donald Trump. Trusted experts were nearly unanimous in their opinion that she would be the next president. So what happened? How could they have been so wrong?

A number of explanations have been offered. The most pervasive one is that FBI Director Jim Comey's announcement that more Clinton e-mails were being investigated derailed the Clinton campaign just as it had nearly reached victory. Others have discounted the so-called "Comey Effect," insisting that the poll numbers for Clinton based on pre-Election Day voting were simply too optimistic.

I can't speak to what happened in other states, but I am reasonably confident that I understand what happened in Florida—at least in south Florida—that resulted in Trump's unexpected win in this pivotal state. And the main factor wasn't James Comey, although he certainly played a part, nor was it the pre-Election Day poll numbers, which for the most part are borne out by the post-election data. Rather, the evidence suggests that the principal culprits were the polls, predictions, and projections themselves, as presented by the media. The media's consistent and confident prediction of a Clinton victory seems to have undermined those very projections. What is particularly worrisome now is the absence of any real investigation by the media into how their conduct may have altered the outcome of the election. If we want to avoid future disasters, we need to understand this one.

Florida's Strange Results in the Presidential Race

On the morning of November 8, 2016, most polls and projections were that Hillary Clinton would take Florida by 2 to 3 percentage points. This was based on incredible turnout during early voting and on vote-by-mail in Clinton strongholds, especially in south Florida. Thus, it

was a shock to most Floridians when the results were announced election eve, and Trump had won 49.0% to 47.8%.¹ Although the margin was small, it represented a huge turnaround.

Were the polls simply wrong about Clinton's share of the vote in early voting and vote by mail? A look at the results by method of voting shows that Clinton did, in fact, win early voting statewide by a very substantial margin--about 6 percentage points.² Furthermore, for the first time since its inception in 2004, early voting became the most popular method of voting for Florida voters. In actual numbers, 60 percent more Floridians voted early in 2016 than in 2012.³ Thus, Clinton's margin in early voting took on even greater significance. She bolstered this lead by winning even among vote-by-mail balloters who historically have favored Republican candidates, although her lead was slim.

Altogether, with about 70% of the votes already cast, she was ahead by roughly 3 percent. No wonder nearly everyone believed that she was on her way to victory. After all, she didn't even need to do very well on Election Day. But Election Day was a disaster for Clinton. She lost to Trump by more than 11 percentage points (Trump, 53% to Clinton, 42%), a huge and unexpected reversal.

But we can answer at least one question at this point: Did the polls simply overstate Clinton's lead on ballots cast pre-Election Day? No, it seems that their predictions were fairly accurate. But if that is the case, what could have caused Election Day results to be so radically different from pre-Election Day results? There are really only two possibilities: (1) some event completely changed voters' opinions about Clinton and Trump in a matter of a few days; or (2) the voters who showed up on Election Day were fundamentally different from those who voted early.

Miami-Dade, Broward, and St. Lucie – What their Data Indicate

Over the last few months, I have examined election data from three south Florida counties – Miami-Dade, Broward, and St. Lucie. Miami-Dade and Broward counties are the two most populous counties in Florida; together, they represent about one of five voters in Florida's 2016 presidential election. The faulty projections were, at least in part, based on pre-Election Day data from these counties that showed higher turnout for Clinton than for Obama in 2012 when he narrowly won the state based on his performance in south Florida. Later, I decided to see how the findings from these two large majority-minority counties would hold up in St. Lucie County – a much-smaller, majority white, usually reliably Democratic, south Florida county that voted for the Republican presidential candidate for the first time since 1992.

¹ Florida Department of State, Division of Elections, Election Results Archive accessed at <https://results.elections.myflorida.com/Index.asp?ElectionDate=11/8/2016&DATAMODE=>

² Smith, Daniel, Florida Presidential Vote by Method, 2016, posted January 19, 2016 at www.electionsmith.com.

³ Unless otherwise stated, all data on turnout and results were derived from the Florida Division of Elections website, state voter registration and voter history data disks, or from county elections offices reports on turnout and results.

First, were the pre-Election Day projections for Broward and Miami-Dade wrong? No, as we saw on the statewide results, they were absolutely on target. An examination of pre-Election Day turnout and results shows that Clinton really was on track for winning big in these two counties. Turnout was much higher than in 2012. In response to visits to early voting locations by both Obama and Clinton, Democrats turned out in record numbers to vote during the last few days of early voting. Both Miami-Dade and Broward set records for the most people voting in a single day *twice* over that final weekend. On Sunday, more than 53,000 people voted in Miami-Dade, breaking the record of 43,000 voters in a single day set on the previous Friday. More than 42,000 people voted at early voting in Broward on Sunday, also breaking the record for a single day that had been set the previous Friday.⁴ This enthusiastic response took place more than a week *after* FBI Director Comey's announcement on October 28th that more Clinton e-mails were being investigated. Clearly, Democrats in these counties were not deterred by the Comey announcement; indeed, it may have spurred them to get out and vote.

This incredible turnout at early voting was a boost to Clinton's chances because these two majority-minority counties contain a large portion of the Democratic voters in Florida (one in four). Latino voters, who were solidly behind Clinton, made up more than half of Miami-Dade's registered voters. And Broward contained more Democratic voters than any other Florida County. The election results confirmed that this optimism was justified. In Miami-Dade, Clinton took 65% of the early vote; in Broward, she did even better, with 70% of the early vote.

In both counties, Clinton also won on vote-by-mail ballots, although her percentage of the vote dipped by 5 points in each of the two counties. But this is precisely what would be expected since early voting is usually favored by Democrats and vote-by-mail by Republicans.⁵ The percentage of voters who voted by mail also increased slightly in both counties, but was much less than those choosing early voting.

Altogether, going into Election Day, Clinton's statewide prospects looked good, based on her performance in these two huge counties that represented a substantial portion of the Florida electorate and an even greater share of the Democratic vote.

Election Day

But on Election Day, turnout plummeted. In both counties, the percentage of voters who chose to vote at the polls dropped to its lowest point since the advent of early voting in 2004. In 2012,

⁴ Nico Pitney, "Florida's Early Vote Ends with Record Turnout in Democratic Strongholds," *Huffington Post*, November 7, 2016. Accessed at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/florida-early-vote-2016_us_58200106e4b0e80b02cae01c.

⁵ Although both Broward and Miami-Dade had very high rates of unreturned absentee ballots, Broward's rate was the worst in the state. Furthermore, in the month before the election, numerous newspaper articles reported that many Broward citizens who requested absentee ballots never received them, despite numerous calls to the elections office. For a discussion of Broward's absentee ballot woes, see FFEC's report on Broward County at http://www.ffec.org/ffec_reports.htm

nearly half (45%) of Broward's voters cast their ballots on Election Day; in 2016, only a quarter of its voters went to the polls on Election Day. The situation was similar in Miami-Dade where the percentage of the vote cast at the polls on Election Day fell to 22%.

In Miami-Dade, Clinton's percentage of the vote on Election Day ballots was about 6 points lower than her share of early voting ballots, but nearly identical to her percentage on vote-by-mail ballots. This distribution was very close to expectations, given historical partisan voting patterns in Florida. But in Broward County, Clinton's percentage of the vote dropped drastically on Election Day—a full 14 points from her early voting share (from 70% to 56%) and 9 points from vote-by-mail (65% to 56%). The same was true in St. Lucie County where Clinton's share of Election Day ballots was only 39%, a drop of 13 points from early voting (52%) and 9 points from vote-by-mail (48%).

While the drop in percentage from early voting is huge, what is really unusual is the difference in vote share between vote-by-mail and at the polls on Election Day. Democratic candidates usually do much better during early voting than either on vote-by-mail or on Election Day, but it is highly unusual for a Democratic candidate to do better on vote-by-mail than on Election Day, especially in a predominantly Democratic county. For example, in 2012, Obama received about the same percentage of the vote on Election Day as on vote-by-mail in both St. Lucie and Broward Counties. In Miami-Dade in 2012, Obama's percentage on the vote on Election Day was actually considerably *higher* than it was on vote-by-mail ballots.

While I don't want to make any unequivocal claims, I did not find any evidence that the difference was due to Democratic voters changing their minds about Clinton. On the contrary, in Miami-Dade, the percentage of voters who chose Clinton was the same for vote-by-mail and Election Day, despite the lower turnout. In Broward and St. Lucie counties, the ratio of Clinton votes to Democratic voters—that is, the number of votes she got for every Democrat who turned out—remained remarkably constant across methods of voting. While this is certainly not conclusive, it suggests that the voting behavior of Democrats pre-Election Day and on Election Day did not differ substantially.

In both Broward and St. Lucie, the sharp difference in the results appears to be attributable to two circumstances—(1) Democratic turnout dropped sharply, and (2) no-party-affiliation (NPA) voters shifted their support from Clinton to Trump.

Does the second finding mean that large numbers of non-affiliated voters changed their minds about Hillary Clinton? Perhaps some did, but racial and ethnic differences between NPAs who voted early and those who voted on Election Day were probably the main factor. This also explains why Clinton's percentage of the vote on Election Day in Miami-Dade was not lower than her percentage on vote-by-mail ballots. Miami-Dade is majority Latino, and Latino voters, regardless of their partisan affiliation, supported Clinton. Consequently, Clinton not only won

among Democrats in Miami-Dade, but also among NPAs and even a large number of Republicans. Thus, when turnout dropped on Election Day, her percentage of the vote did not change. In Broward and St. Lucie Counties, the majority of Republicans and NPAs were non-Hispanic whites. The absence of Democratic voters in these counties, to a large extent, meant the absence of minority voters.

An examination of the NPA voters in St. Lucie confirms distinct differences between those NPAs who voted during early voting and those who voted on Election Day. Three-quarters of the Election Day NPAs were non-Hispanic white, while only two-thirds of early voting NPAs were white. A much higher percentage of early voting NPAs than Election Day NPAs were black and Hispanic. And a slightly higher percentage of early voting NPAs were female.

But the principal question remains: What happened between Sunday, with its record-setting crowds at early voting, and Tuesday, with its greatly diminished turnout among Clinton supporters? What happened to dissuade Clinton supporters—both Democrats and NPAs—but not Trump supporters from turning out to vote?

Certainly, the huge crowds at early voting may have siphoned off some Democrats who would have otherwise voted on Election Day, as some analysts have suggested. But the numbers are simply not large enough to explain the sharp decline in participation by Clinton supporters on Election Day. Before the polls opened on Election Day, her campaign knew exactly who had not yet voted and whether they were likely to show up at the polls. The decline in participation was much sharper than expected.

What can explain the decline is a factor not considered by the statistical models—that voters would believe that Clinton had already won. On Monday morning, voters heard about the record attendance at early voting on the previous day. They also heard that the examination of Clinton e-mails had ended with no new findings. Combined with the nearly universal belief that Clinton was well ahead in Florida, these developments seemed to remove any final uncertainty about the outcome of the election. Perversely, it seems all this good news for Clinton may have resulted in disaster for her.

Conclusions

While this was a very unusual, even unprecedented election, it still was governed by the norms of human behavior and reason. For Election Day results to be so radically different from pre-Election Day required some profound change. The idea that FBI Director James Comey's announcement was sufficient to make that kind of difference just doesn't make sense. Coming at the beginning of the early voting period, the announcement's effects should have been most noticeable immediately, and most of the evidence suggests that they probably were. But the subject of Clinton's e-mails was not new. Presumably, most Democrats had come to terms much earlier in the campaign with whether or not they thought it was important. For Democratic

voters in Florida, the shock of the announcement seems to have worn off fairly quickly. If anything, it may have motivated them to go to early voting since it reactivated the possibility of a Trump victory, which had largely been written off by most political observers.

What can account for the radical difference in results is a radical difference in the electorate. And that seems to be the theory best borne out by the evidence. The media constantly pushed the idea that a Clinton win was inevitable. Indeed, even the Comey announcement seemed to assume that Clinton would be the next president. With the huge turnout at early voting in response to Clinton and Obama campaigning and the announcement that the new e-mails turned out to be nothing, it seemed that no obstacles remained to her victory.

As we all learned in Psychology 101, negative motivations are stronger than positive ones. This applies to elections as well. Voters are much more motivated to turn out in numbers to prevent the election of a candidate they dislike than to promote the election of one they like. Trump and Clinton were the two most unpopular presidential candidates in modern history. Their sky-high unfavorability ratings meant large groups of voters were focused on preventing their election. After the success of the last days of early voting and end of the FBI investigation, those potential Clinton voters who were more anti-Trump than pro-Clinton must have been re-assured that he was not a threat and thus felt no urgency about getting to the polls. If they did go to the polls, they may have been emboldened to vote for a third party, write-in a name, or skip the race, confident that no dire consequences would ensue. (The Election Day results in all three counties show that third-party votes, write-ins, and undervotes were higher than on pre-Election Day ballots.) As the day wore on, these attitudes were confirmed by the so-called real-time projections which continued to predict a Clinton victory up to and even after the polls had closed. On the other hand, voters who mainly wanted to prevent Clinton's election were, no doubt, highly motivated by the projections. They turned out in force.

The Lessons of History Ignored

Obviously, this is not the first time polls and projections have been wrong in Florida. In the infamous 2000 election, the media called Florida for Gore early in the evening. That call had to be quickly retracted after it was apparent that it was based on data entry errors. Later, they called the election for Bush, based on wildly inaccurate numbers from Volusia County and an underestimation of outstanding absentee ballots in south Florida. By the time they finally admitted that it was a dead heat, all sides felt cheated and suspicious. The ensuing disaster tore apart the nation. In 2004, exit polling led Kerry supporters to believe that he was winning. When he didn't win, his supporters suspected foul play. Both occasions led to considerable media soul-searching and a decision not to call elections before the polls closed.

In 2016, this came to an end. In September, a new organization called VoteCastr announced that it would publish estimated vote totals at intervals on Election Day in selected battleground states. The published information would be actual numbers, not just vague percentages,

qualified with large margins of error. These numbers would look like actual results, even though they wouldn't be based on even a single cast and counted ballot. But as awful as this idea was, VoteCastr was merely emblematic of a larger trend—that is, a belief that polling techniques and computer statistical modeling had become so sophisticated as to be nearly infallible. The possibility of gross errors appears to have been discounted and with it the need to be mindful of the consequences. But, of course, in this case, the problem wasn't that the models were wrong. It appears that the polls and predictive turnout models got early voting and vote-by-mail right in Florida. What they failed to take into account was their own effect on the process. They were themselves the missing variable.

Last September, I wrote an opinion piece about the VoteCastr experiment and its potential for disaster: ⁶

While predictive turnout models are extremely useful to political campaigns, they are equally problematic when used in place of actual results. These statistically constructed models allow campaigns to track whether their voters (as defined by the model) are turning out in the numbers needed for success. In the final days of the campaign, this kind of information allows them to focus their resources for maximum effectiveness. Precise accuracy is not obtainable, but it is not required.

But accuracy is necessary for reporting results. And regardless of their sophistication, these predictive models can still be wrong. Not only is it possible that their assumptions are wrong, but the mere publication of the information could change voter behavior in ways not foreseen by the model.

Indeed. Now what do we plan to do about it?

⁶ Full text of the letter is available at http://www.ffec.org/ffec_reports.htm.