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Description

All polls are accompanied by warnings that the numbers may be off by a few points, which pollsters call the margin of error. But in elections where one or more of the candidates is African-American, pollsters also may need to account for a 'margin of lying.' In several elections, white voters may have lied to pollsters about which candidate they support in order not to appear racist.

Keywords


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Do Respondents Lie in Polls for Fear of Being Labeled Racist?

TOM BROKAW, anchor:
Race has proved to be a sensitive issue in several of this year's political campaigns. So sensitive, that people responding to pre-election surveys, to polls, may not tell the truth. NBC's Lisa Myers tonight on what that means.

Mr. HARVEY GANTT (Democrat Senate Candidate): This is going to be a close race. You know, I think it's--it's--right now is probably a dead heat. Every single vote counts.

LISA MYERS reporting:
The latest polls do show Democrat Harvey Gantt in a dead heat with Republican Senator Jesse Helms, but Gantt has been warned that some white voters may be lying to the pollsters. The reason? Race.

Mr. BRAD COKER (Mason-Dixon Research): The person who's lying to us is someone who may live in a suburban area of the state, middle management, white collar job. Doesn't want folks to think he's a racist. So he's telling us not the whole truth.

MYERS: Telling interviewers that he's undecided, when he may already intend to vote for the white candidate. It happened last year in Virginia. Polls indicated it would be an easy victory for now-governor Douglas Wilder. It turned out to be a cliffhanger. Voters who put themselves in the undecided column voted 9:1 to one for Wilder's white opponent.

Mr. GEOFFREY GARIN (Garin-Hart Strategic Research): It's a hidden vote. It's--it's a hidden voter for--for one candidate who's using the undecided column to hide out.

MYERS: There was a huge hidden vote earlier this month for David Duke in Louisiana. Only four in 10 Duke voters had admitted to pollsters that they intended to vote for the former Ku Klux Klansman. Pollsters say many of these voters are genuinely torn between racial feelings and doing what is socially
acceptable.

Mr. GARIN: There are a lot of people who are willing to tell you, `I'm against a black candidate' or `I'm against David Duke.' It's the people who are a little bit more educated, who are a little bit more sensitive to those conflicts who don't always give you the straight answer in the poll.

MYERS: Pollsters use various devices to try to trick voters into revealing their true intentions.

Unidentified Pollster: Tell me if you have a favorable, an unfavorable or a neutral opinion of that person.

MYERS: In fact, some had warned of the hidden Duke vote. Still, even the best pollsters have been embarrassed by lying voters. The worst was in 1978, when Massachusetts Senator Edward Brooke began Election Day having been told by his pollsters that he would win. He lost by 10 points.

Mr. ALEX GAGE (Brooke Pollster): Well, I was so convinced my career as a political pollster had come to an end.

MYERS: All polls are accompanied by warnings that the numbers may be off a few points. It's called the margin of error. In elections where race is a factor, there should be another warning; call it `the margin of lying.' Lisa Myers, NBC News, Washington.