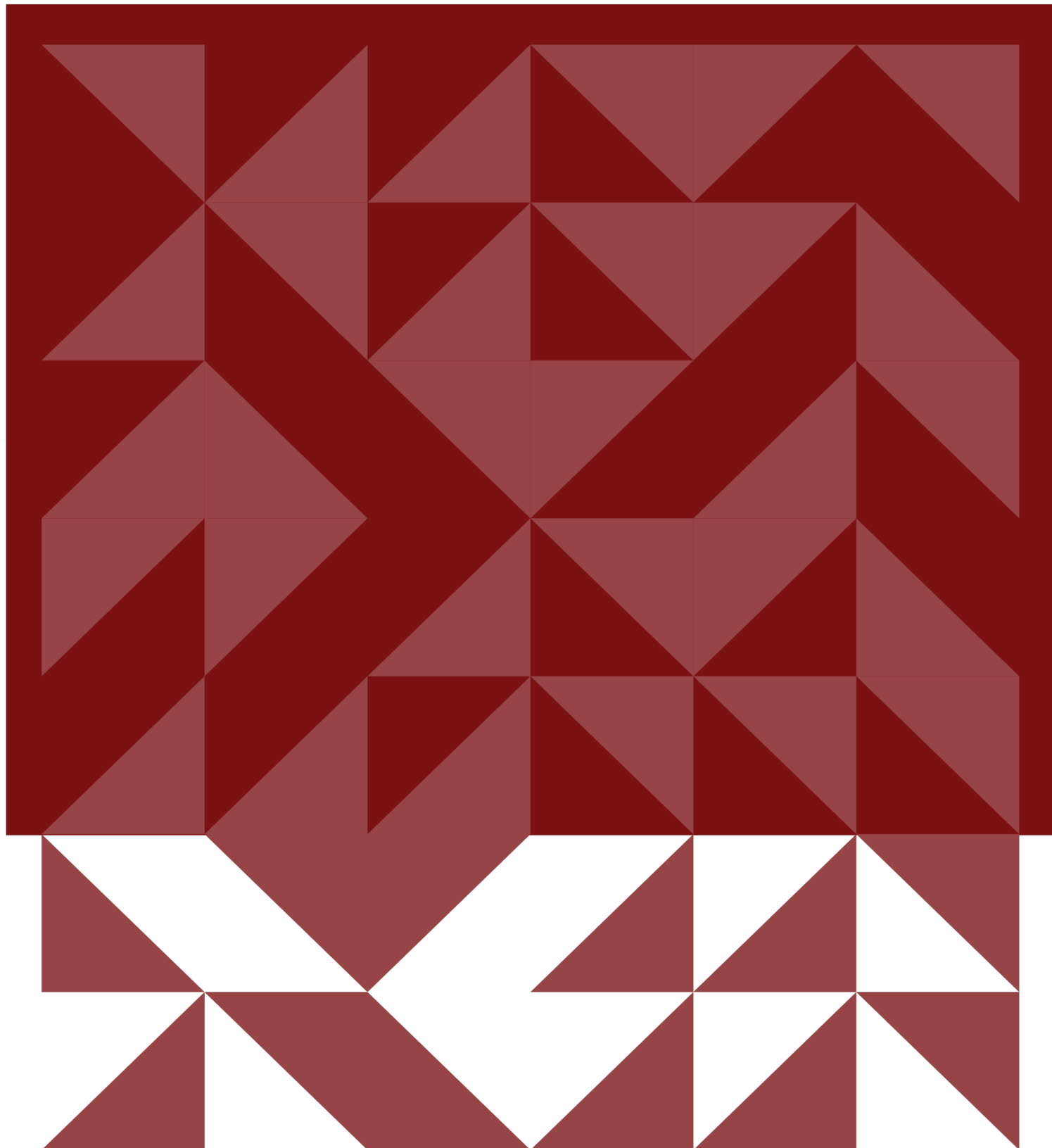




Opinion Polls: From a Mirror of Electoral Sentiment to an Instrument for Shaping It

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The role of opinion polls in electoral competition extends beyond identifying voters' preferences. Published figures inform party calculations, funding decisions, media priorities, and the public's assessment of whether participation is worthwhile. A candidate placed in the lead may gain an advantage that extends beyond the news value of the findings, as the perception of being most likely to win helps attract resources and support. The rival candidate, meanwhile, faces pressure to demonstrate continued viability before voters have had an opportunity to choose. At this point, polls begin to help shape the environment they are ostensibly intended merely to observe, turning expectations about the future into a factor influencing the decisions that bring it about.

This shift becomes more consequential as the interests of political campaigns, media organisations, polling firms and the platforms circulating their findings intersect. A single figure can serve several purposes: a candidate uses it to demonstrate broadening support, a donor reads it as an indication of whether spending is worthwhile, and the media presents it as a headline account of the contest's trajectory. This overlap allows polls to be used to create a political impression that may go beyond what their data warrant, whether through the choice of questions and samples, the selective publication of findings, or the conversion of a narrow lead into a narrative of certain victory. The risk increases when the apparent scientific authority of the process lends the interests behind it a persuasive force that direct campaigning would struggle to achieve.

This relationship shows that the transition from polls as a mirror of electoral sentiment to an instrument for shaping it is bound up with how knowledge is produced, distributed and used. Misleading the public may involve fabricated figures, but it can also occur when accurate findings are stripped of context and used to influence public calculations. Understanding this transition requires tracing how a revisable estimate becomes a source of influence over electoral competition, then examining the costs that arise when political reality is expected to conform to its published portrayal.



01 Shaping Expectations and Reshaping Electoral Choice

The capacity of polls to influence behaviour begins with voters' need to know what others are doing. Individuals do not decide in a vacuum: they weigh their confidence in a candidate's programme against their assessment of that candidate's prospects of reaching office and their ability to prevent an opponent they reject from winning. Polls supply information that directly informs this calculation, changing the value voters attach to the available options even when their underlying positions remain stable. A voter may prefer a small party but vote for a larger one because it appears better placed to achieve the desired objective. Publishing the ranking of candidates therefore intervenes in the conditions under which choices are made, giving polls a political impact broader than simply persuading someone to change their opinion.



This mechanism takes shape when reported popularity becomes evidence of competence or social acceptance. Some undecided voters may infer that a candidate's lead reflects information or qualities they have overlooked, using the choices of others to reduce the effort involved in research and comparison. An experiment published in 2014 illustrates this susceptibility: when reported support for a policy in a hypothetical poll rose from 20% to 80%, participants' average support for it increased by approximately 8.1 points on a scale from zero to 100. The finding shows how knowledge of prevailing opinion can become part of the process of forming a personal view, particularly when an individual lacks an established position on the issue.

The route of influence differs when voters seek to avoid wasting their vote. The rules of the contest encourage them to consider whether their choice can produce an outcome, rather than solely how closely it reflects their convictions. These calculations become more important in closely contested constituencies, two-round elections and contests in which entry to parliament depends on crossing an electoral threshold. A single poll may alter supporters' assessment of a party's ability to cross that threshold, prompting some to abandon it or mobilise support to save it. Here, the power of polling lies in its ability to coordinate the actions of individuals who do not communicate with one another but read the same signal and expect others to read it too.

This coordination extends to the decision to participate. If victory appears assured, some voters may see less value in the effort required to cast a ballot, while a sense of threat may mobilise others. A change in voting times in French territories west of mainland France offered an opportunity to test the effect of knowing the outcome in advance. A study published in 2015 compared voting after estimates of the mainland results became available with voting before their release, estimating a decline in turnout associated with prior knowledge of approximately 11 percentage points. This case highlights the importance of when information becomes available: the perceived state of the contest may affect how many people vote, and thus the balance between political forces, even without a substantial transfer of votes between candidates.

Media presentation amplifies these signals when it compresses an estimate into a definitive judgement. A statement indicating a narrow lead in voting intention differs from one assigning a candidate a high probability of victory: the latter adds assumptions about turnout, the distribution of votes and measurement error. An 80% chance of winning does not mean that a candidate has the support of 80% of voters, yet presenting both percentages in the same visual format may obscure the distinction. A study published in 2020 found that presenting win probabilities increases the sense of certainty and that, when those probabilities convey a less competitive race, participation may weaken. Turning a probability into a categorical headline thus becomes part of the explanation for behavioural change, rather than simply a linguistic simplification of the finding.



This effect is linked to the expressions of support and silence visible in the public sphere. The 'spiral of silence' theory explains why some individuals withhold their opinions when they believe these places them in a minority vulnerable to isolation. Polls can shape their perception of the size of that minority, influencing their willingness to defend a candidate or declare support. A political tendency may become less visible in public debate without declining to the same extent at the ballot box, while the most visible position appears more widely representative than it actually is. A gap then opens between the distribution of convictions and the distribution of voices that are heard, which political actors can exploit to present their own position as society's natural expression.

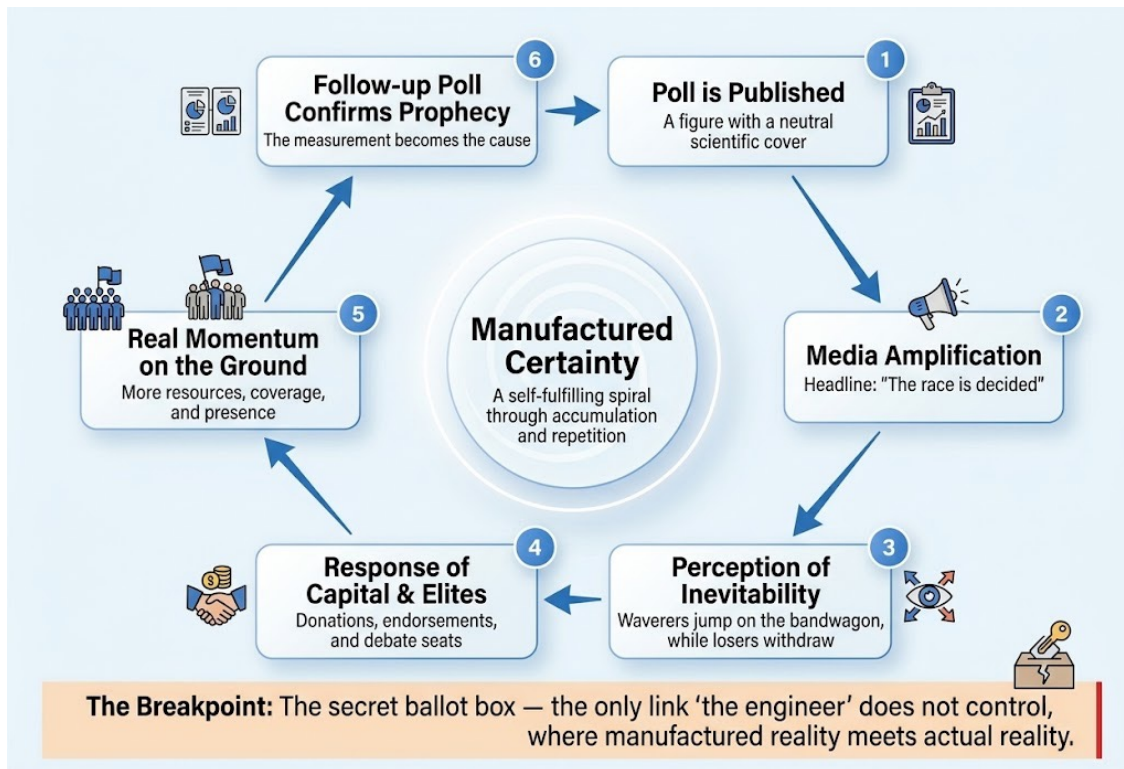
These shifts reorder the relationship between political programmes and perceived electability. When coverage is dominated by movements up and down the polls, part of the debate turns towards which candidates can remain in contention, leaving less room to discuss what they would do in office.

Candidates may find themselves compelled to spend time defending their prospects rather than explaining their programmes or to adjust their priorities to match the issues that surveys place at the forefront. In this sense, shaping electoral sentiment extends beyond changing the final choice: it includes determining the questions around which competition revolves, the candidates deemed worthy of attention and the alternatives regarded as viable. This process does not require prior agreement among all those involved. Media outlets may seek an engaging headline, donors an opportunity to make an impact, and parties a way to protect their seats before their decisions converge around the same figure. The front-runner gains additional attention and uses it to expand their presence; the increase then appears in a subsequent poll as though it independently confirms an earlier trend. This feedback loop shows how a forecast can help create some of the conditions that make its fulfilment more likely—a problem Herbert Simon addressed early on when examining the effects of published predictions on the behaviour of the people whose actions they predict.

Figure 1 shows how a published forecast can become a factor influencing media coverage, the allocation of resources, and voters' calculations, with these responses then reflected in a subsequent poll. Through this interaction, observing electoral sentiment becomes intertwined with helping to shape it.



Figure 1: The Feedback Loop Between Opinion Polls and Electoral Sentiment



Source: Author's analysis, drawing on the previous studies

How actors respond remains linked to what each seeks from the information. The capacity to influence lies in reshaping their calculations, while control over the final outcome remains limited. This makes the question of how the published picture is produced more pressing: the more a figure influences behaviour, the greater the value of controlling the questions that generate it, the findings selected for publication and the timing of its release to the public.



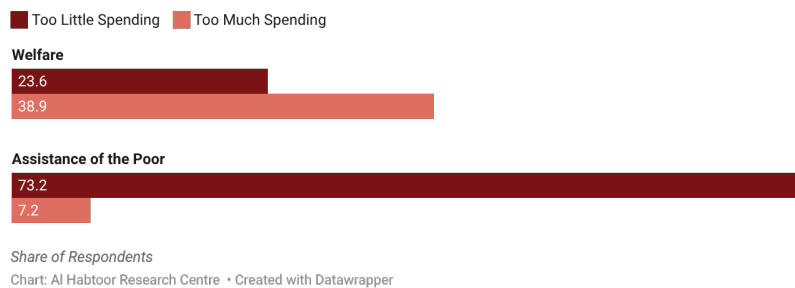
Producing the Numbers and the Interplay of Interests

The electoral picture begins to take shape before any percentage is announced, when decisions are made about what people should be asked and who should be included in the sample. The choice of issues places some concerns at the centre of attention while leaving others outside the debate; the findings are then used as evidence of society's ordering of priorities. Pierre Bourdieu drew attention to this power when he challenged the assumption that everyone has a ready-made opinion on every issue and that responses reflecting different levels of knowledge and interest can be combined into a single percentage. The political significance of this critique becomes clear when answers to questions formulated by a particular organisation are presented as a spontaneous expression of the public's own agenda.



Question wording affects the meaning a respondent brings to mind. Data from the 2018 US General Social Survey provide a clear example: 23.6% considered spending on 'welfare' too low, compared with 73.2% when the expression 'assistance to the poor' was used. The two phrases evoke different political associations despite the proximity of their subject matter. This gives the organisation framing the question scope to choose wording more likely to elicit a favourable response, then present the finding as a judgement on the policy as a whole. The public is misled when the wording disappears from circulation, leaving readers with a figure that appears to have broad significance even though the response was tied to a specific description. Figure 2 compares the distribution of responses to the two formulations, illustrating the importance of presenting the question alongside the finding.

Figure 2: Differences in Responses by Question Wording in the 2018 US General Social Survey



Source: 2018 US General Social Survey; Smith and Son (2019), Table 1, p. 14.

Embedding a campaign message in the question offers another means of influence. An individual may receive a call that appears to be research but contains negative information about a candidate intended to change their position. The American Association for Public Opinion Research describes this practice as 'push polling', distinguishing it from legitimate research that tests the effects of messages. The problem becomes apparent when a response elicited after the presentation of influential information is published as though it were an opinion held beforehand, removing from the account a factor that helped produce the result. The guise of research gives this practice an advantage: respondents treat the question as a request to establish their position, while the question itself may be working to change it.

The scope for consequential decisions expands as people become less willing to participate. Response rates in Pew Research Center's standard telephone surveys fell from 36% in 1997 to 9% in 2012, then to approximately 6% in 2018. This decline requires greater effort to reach absent groups and increases the importance of the assumptions used to compensate for their absence. The problem becomes more sensitive if refusal to participate is associated with trust in institutions or political affiliation: a sample may match the population in age and education while still differing in the characteristics that determine voting behaviour. The public therefore needs to know how representativeness was constructed, rather than simply the reported sample size.



Weighting shapes this picture by assigning different weights to responses according to estimates of the electorate's composition and the likelihood that its members will vote. An exercise published by The New York Times in 2016 demonstrated the extent of this discretion: five teams analysed the same data from a poll of 867 voters in Florida, producing estimates ranging from a lead of four percentage points for Hillary Clinton to a one-point lead for Donald Trump. The differences arose from decisions about weighting and the identification of likely voters. The case shows that the final figure reflects analytical choices as well as interviews, and that the ability to scrutinise these choices is essential to understanding the result. The scope for steering the findings increases when assumptions are adjusted to produce a desired picture or when methods change without readers knowing why the figures have shifted.

The funder enters this process through its ability to define the question, commission the research and select which findings to publish. A campaign may fund several surveys and release the most favourable results or select a subsidiary question that gives it an advantage and make it the headline of the entire report. The published data remain genuine in such cases, but the picture they present of the evidence as a whole may be misleading. This overlap is illustrated by the British Polling Council's statement of 4 September 2026 concerning JL Partners polls associated with Reform UK, which recorded breaches of client disclosure rules. The episode shows how the public loses part of its ability to assess a message when findings linked to an interested party are presented as an independent assessment of public opinion.

The power to select then passes to the media organisations and platforms that republish the figures. An old finding may be presented after the candidates have changed; a single poll may be chosen over a broader series that points in a different direction; or two different samples may be compared to generate a story about a sudden shift.

Repeated publication adds another appearance of strength: readers may encounter the same result through several sources and mistake them for independent measurements that corroborate one another. Those able to commission research and amplify its circulation can influence the information environment without monopolising the production of every poll. The advantage lies in controlling the visible portion of the evidence and giving it greater prominence than contradictory findings.

Artificial intelligence adds opportunities for manipulation within the data collection process itself. A study published in 2025 tested a language-model agent's ability to pass checks used to assess whether respondents were engaging seriously with a survey. It succeeded in 99.8% of 6,000 attention checks. A hypothetical calculation covering seven US national polls showed that adding between 10 and 52 synthetic responses could be enough to change the leading candidate, at a cost of approximately five cents per response.



These figures describe a technical vulnerability to manipulation, but they also raise a direct political problem: a small number of responses can alter the portrayal of a close race if quality controls treat them as human contributions. The cost of verification may rise even as the cost of producing a convincing response falls.

The distance from the public takes a different form when artificial models are openly used in place of respondents. Pew Research Center tested this approach across approximately 300 questions and three survey waves, recording a mean absolute error of 12.4 percentage points in a report published in September 2026. The simulated approval rating for Trump's performance stood at 46%, compared with 34% among humans in the comparison sample. This gap shows that the ability to simulate individual characteristics is insufficient to represent people's opinions. The problem arises in the circulation of such products when the fact that they are simulations is no longer disclosed and their findings enter public debate under the same label as research that asked real people.

This distance reaches its greatest extent when measurement is absent altogether. In August 2026, the American Association for Public Opinion Research condemned the production of fake polls whose producer admitted to fabricating them and presented them as a social experiment. A media outlet, some polling aggregators, and a political candidate subsequently circulated them. The ability of fabricated figures to pass through these channels shows how trust can transfer from a publisher's reputation to material whose origins have not been verified. Despite their differences, these cases combine the power to produce a figure with the power to present it as public opinion. Their full effect emerges when the picture received by the public becomes a criterion for allocating opportunities for visibility, funding, and influence.



Turning Expectations into Political Influence and Financial Gain

Shaping expectations carries greater weight when it becomes linked to material decisions that change candidates' ability to compete. Candidates need funding to reach the public, visibility to become better known to voters, and evidence of support to persuade backers to continue investing in them. Polls sit between these needs, allowing a perceived position in the race to be converted into actual resources. Two candidates may begin with similar capabilities, only for the gap between them to widen because one appears more likely to win and therefore receives additional opportunities that help to reinforce that impression. The influence conferred by a figure becomes part of the explanation for the candidate's subsequent political strength.



The rules for the 2023 US Republican primary debates show how measurement becomes an institutional condition for visibility. The first debate required candidates to reach 1% in qualifying polls through specified national and state-level routes, alongside 40,000 unique donors. The thresholds rose to 3% and 50,000 donors for the second debate, then to 4% and 70,000 for the third, and 6% and 80,000 for the fourth. The number of participants on stage fell from eight to seven, then five and four, although the reasons for absence and exclusion varied. These rules present a less well-known candidate with a dilemma: the debate is needed to broaden their visibility, yet access requires an existing level of visibility and support. Figure 3 brings together the changing qualification thresholds and participant numbers across the four debates.

Figure 3: Qualification Thresholds and Participant Numbers in the 2023 US Republican Primary Debates

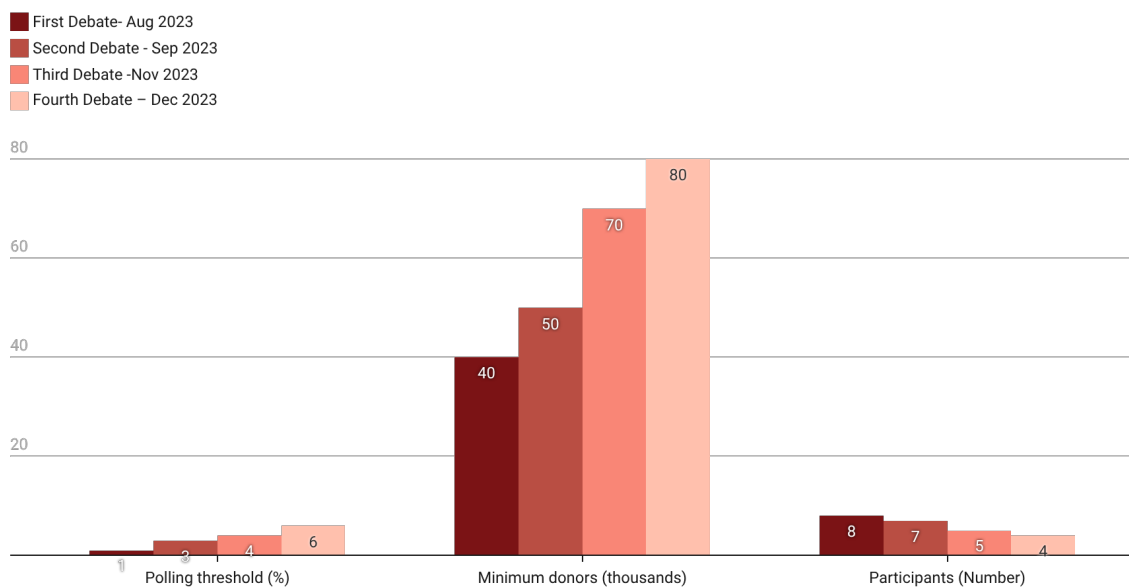


Chart: Al Habtoor Research Centre • Created with Datawrapper

Source: Republican National Committee rules and Associated Press and Axios coverage of the four debates



This arrangement creates the capacity to exclude alternatives before they have been tested with a wider audience. When used as a condition of entry, a percentage ceases merely to describe a candidate's position and becomes a factor determining whether that position can change. Such incentives may encourage campaigns to concentrate on raising the required indicator or to intensify spending during a particular polling period, rather than allocate their efforts according to the longer-term requirements of the contest.

Organising bodies can reduce the effects of this cycle through multiple, clearly defined qualification criteria. Its existence nevertheless reveals how far the power of polling extends beyond the direct relationship between researcher and respondent. Measurement may influence the range of options voters encounter before it influences their choice among them. Funders interpret these indicators in terms of opportunities for influence and the anticipated political return. A donor may support a leading candidate because they consider that candidate more likely to reach office, or direct money towards a close contest because their contribution could change the outcome. An experimental study involving 7,335 donors whose donations had been verified found that alignment in policy positions, district competitiveness and the opponent's positions affected respondents' stated willingness to fund hypothetical candidates. This finding helps explain the range of messages a campaign may choose to emphasise: proclaiming a lead to demonstrate that it merits support, or highlighting danger to persuade a funder that delay could result in an avoidable defeat. The timing of a result's presentation and the audience to which it is directed become part of its financial value.

The crisis surrounding Joe Biden's candidacy in 2024 reveals how assessments of electability intersect with the power of donors and party leaders. Following his debate on 27 June, pressure mounted over his performance, age and campaign prospects. On 12 July, Reuters, citing The New York Times, reported that donors had frozen approximately \$90 million in pledges to Future Forward, the independent political action committee supporting him, for as long as he remained at the top of the ticket. He subsequently announced his withdrawal on 21 July. At such moments, polls matter as a shared language through which the viability of continuing a campaign is debated alongside broader considerations. Expectations of defeat may become a source of pressure that changes the identity of the candidate when accompanied by a decline in supporters' willingness to bear the cost of their remaining in the race.

This logic extends to relationships within parties and alliances. An internal faction may use a poll to persuade the leadership to replace a candidate or to justify withdrawing in favour of another contender it considers better placed to prevent an opponent's victory. Party leaders may use favourable figures to settle a nomination dispute and present their decision as a response to voters' wishes. These uses become particularly powerful when members find it difficult to access the full data or commission an independent alternative poll. Disagreement over how to interpret the public becomes a dispute over who has the authority to define its position. Control of information consequently influences the distribution of power within a political organisation as well as competition between organisations.



The financial value of expectations extends further when markets use them to assess future policies and government stability. In India in 2024, after voting had concluded, numerous exit polls projected a substantial victory for Narendra Modi's alliance, with some estimates exceeding 350 of the 543 seats. The Sensex rose by approximately 3.4% on 3 June, then fell by around 5.7% the following day as it became clear that the alliance had secured 293 seats, while the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) alone had won 240, below the majority threshold of 272. The shift in expectations was associated with a revised assessment of the government's ability to implement its policies, making the reassessment of the electoral picture simultaneously a revaluation of financial assets.

This case shows that a poll's effects can continue after voters are no longer able to change their votes. Electoral information acquires value as an input into buying and selling decisions, and learning it before others becomes a potential source of advantage. A disparity may emerge between a public relying on abbreviated findings available to everyone and institutions able to purchase more detailed data or obtain them earlier. The issue then extends beyond the accuracy of the figure to equitable access and beyond the possibility of influencing voters to the opportunity to benefit from decisions others make on the basis of an incomplete picture.

This disparity featured prominently in the controversy following the UK's 2016 referendum on leaving the European Union over the sale of private polls to hedge funds. In September 2018, following a Bloomberg investigation, the House of Commons Treasury Committee called for changes to the rules to address conflicts of interest arising from the release of market-sensitive information to private clients before the public. The episode reveals how an advantage can rest on more accurate or earlier knowledge, while other market participants bear the cost of incomplete information. This imbalance becomes more significant when publication rules restrict what the public can know without preventing those able to pay from continuing to purchase private research.

Prediction markets provide another route for turning expectations into a financial product and then presenting that product to the public as a judgement about the future. Recorded trading volume in Polymarket's market for the winner of the 2024 US presidential election reached approximately \$3.69 billion. This measures the volume of contracts traded, not the number of voters or the amount of money deposited on a one-off basis. Prices reflect participants' expectations, the size of their positions, and available liquidity. They may contain useful information, but they do not represent a sample of society's preferences. When media coverage uses these prices as an expression of the electorate's will, a participant's capacity to influence the market becomes conflated with their capacity to represent voters.



These pathways combine political advantage, generated by directing resources and visibility, with financial gain, generated by pricing future outcomes or possessing earlier knowledge of them. Some of these benefits may materialise even if the eventual result differs: a candidate may already have secured additional coverage, excluded a rival or raised funding during a period when perceptions were favourable. This time gap explains why waiting until polling day is insufficient to hold the published picture to account. Voting can correct the ranking of candidates, but it does not automatically restore opportunities allocated on the basis of earlier expectations of their chances, nor does it undo the effects of decisions made by the public and funders during that period.



The Repercussions of Disinformation and the Limits of Electoral Safeguards

The deeper costs of shaping electoral sentiment emerge when a carefully curated portrayal of the race becomes the basis for decisions by those promoting it. Campaign managers need to identify weaknesses in order to address them, while mobilisation efforts need to project the ability to win. If these purposes become conflated, campaign leaders may select reassuring findings and reallocate resources on the basis of an assessment that understates the risks. The short-term advantage secured by a narrative of electoral strength can then weaken preparedness for the contest, because information that helps persuade the public is not necessarily sufficient to manage a campaign. Keeping internal research independent of publicity requirements is therefore a matter of sound decision-making before it is one of public credibility.

Hungary's April 2026 election provides a clear illustration of the risks posed by divergent information environments. Shortly before the vote, a Publicus poll put Tisza at 52% against Fidesz's 39% among decided voters, while figures from Nézőpont showed Fidesz leading by 46% to 40%. The final results gave Tisza 53.18% of the list vote and 141 of the 199 seats, against 38.61% and 52 seats for the Fidesz alliance. The polls used different definitions of their target electorates, but the direction and scale of the divergence show how relying on a single set of figures could have produced a fundamentally different understanding of the contest.

This comparison helps identify what might be termed 'self-deception' within a campaign. Favourable figures may recur in meetings and media coverage until they cease to be merely an argument directed outwards and become an internal assumption that is difficult to challenge. Those drawing attention to contrary evidence may appear to doubt the party's prospects, while those affirming its lead gain greater acceptance. Leaders' capacity to learn weakens when questioning a forecast is treated as a challenge to organisational cohesion. The Hungarian case illustrates the risks of selective reliance on evidence, although establishing that any organisation deliberately distorted its findings would require evidence about its working practices. The consequences of a biased portrayal extend beyond the question of intent to the decisions made on its basis.



Distinguishing between the causes of failure prevents every error from becoming a ready-made political accusation. The American Association for Public Opinion Research’s review of the 2024 elections recorded a mean absolute error of 3.3 percentage points in the margin between the two parties across 611 polls covering presidential, congressional and gubernatorial races in the final two weeks, compared with 5.3 points in 2020 and 5.2 in 2016. An average pro-Democratic bias of 2.7 points nevertheless persisted.

In Great Britain in 2024, the Labour–Conservative gap in the average of the final polls was 17.2 percentage points, compared with an actual margin of 10.3 points. Figure 4 compares estimates of party support with the parties’ actual vote shares.

Figure 4: Final Polling Averages and Actual Results in Great Britain, 2024

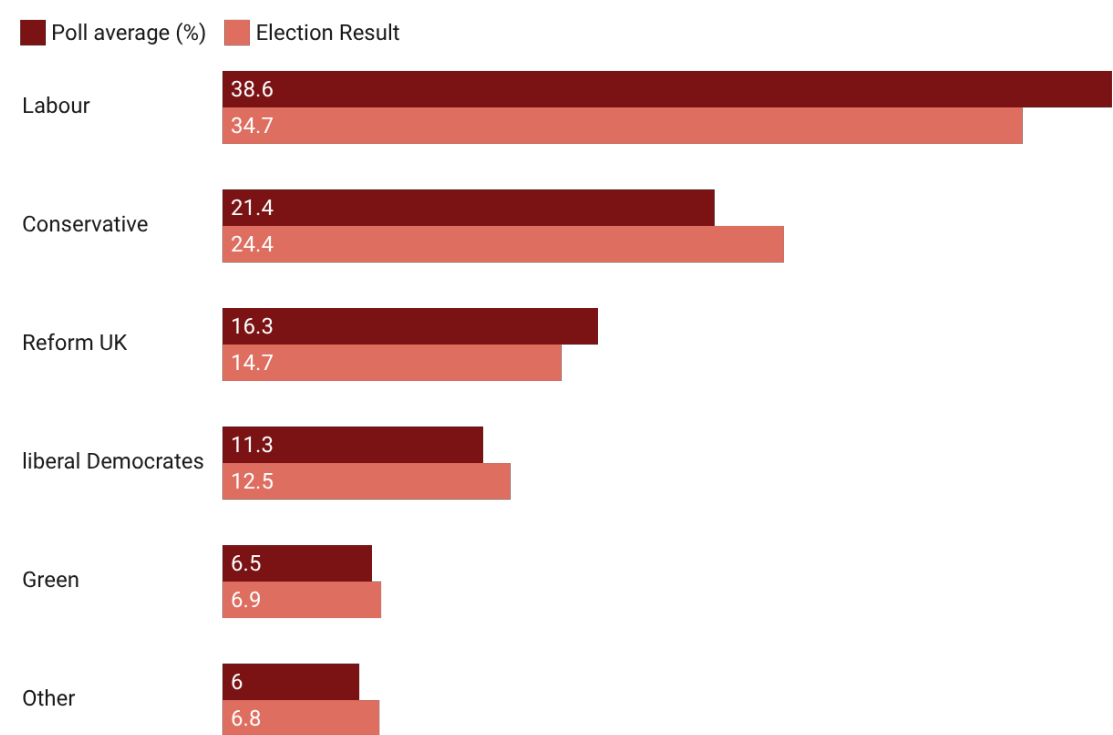


Chart: Al Habtoor Research Centre • Created with Datawrapper

Source: British Polling Council, ‘The Performance of the Polls in the 2024 General Election’, 8 July 2024

These two comparisons show improvements in some aspects of measurement alongside persistent errors with political consequences. They make an assessment of methods and the cumulative record more useful than judging the entire industry on a single outcome.

Addressing these errors requires an understanding of the difference between people who conceal their views during an interview and those who decline to participate at all.



The former case calls for stronger privacy protections and improvements to the context in which questions are asked; the latter requires reaching absent groups and reviewing assumptions about their representation. Pollsters may use weighting by party affiliation or past vote to reduce imbalances. In September 2026, the Pew Research Center reported that around 70% of US national polls in 2024 had used these variables. The quality of the adjustment nevertheless depends on whether respondents represent non-respondents within the same political group and on how accurately they recall their previous behaviour. This problem underscores the fact that transparent assumptions are part of a figure's value, particularly when decisions extending beyond research depend on it.

The damage intensifies when the gap between forecast and outcome becomes a dispute over institutional legitimacy. A campaign may exploit a polling error to claim that every unfavourable measurement is fabricated, or invoke an earlier forecast of victory to portray defeat as evidence of electoral fraud. This logic insulates the narrative from scrutiny: when events accord with it, the narrative is deemed correct; when they do not, the discrepancy is treated as evidence that the institution responsible for the outcome is corrupt. Repeated exposure to this pattern may erode the public's shared basis for distinguishing between professional error, fraud and a valid election result. The integrity of a vote is assessed through its procedures, records and evidence; a result that departs from a forecast calls for scrutiny of that forecast and its underlying assumptions.

The independence of polling faces a similar pressure when an unwelcome finding becomes grounds for punishment. Ann Selzer's Iowa poll before the 2024 election showed Kamala Harris leading by three percentage points, whereas Donald Trump won the state by a margin of approximately thirteen percentage points. On 23 September 2026, an Iowa court dismissed the lawsuits against Selzer, the Des Moines Register, and associated parties on grounds concerning the protection of political speech and the legal bases of the claims. The intersection between polling error and litigation highlights the importance of protecting the right to publish an estimate open to scrutiny while maintaining the pollster's professional responsibility to explain its failure. If the cost of departing from the consensus rises, organisations may avoid uncomfortable findings, reducing the diversity of information available to the public.

These risks require conflicts of interest to be addressed in both the production and publication of polling figures, so that readers can identify the funder and the organisation conducting the poll, the wording of questions, the timing of interviews, the method of selecting participants and the weights applied. Professional standards recognise the importance of such disclosure, but its impact depends on the information remaining attached to the findings as they circulate. A full methodological report on the original website is useful, yet essential information still needs to appear in news reports, charts and short posts. Disinformation is difficult to contain if context disappears at the very point when a figure begins to reach a wider audience.



Regulatory experience demonstrates the scope for linking publication to obligations that can be scrutinised. Brazilian rules require electoral polls intended for public release in an election year to be registered at least five days before publication, together with information on commissioning, funding, methodology, the sample and the questions. In September 2026, France's polling commission extended the application of the existing law to polls on proposals and issues connected with the 2027 presidential campaign, even when they did not directly address voting intentions. Both approaches recognise that a poll's influence begins with how it is produced and how it defines the issues at stake in the contest. The value of registration and disclosure lies in enabling scrutiny and accountability; neither amounts to official certification of the accuracy of every finding.

Rules governing publication also need to account for unequal capacities to purchase information. A report published in 2023 by ESOMAR and the World Association for Public Opinion Research, drawing on experiences across 157 countries, found restrictions on the publication of pre-election polls in 46% of them, alongside 24 countries that did not permit election polling at all. A short publication blackout may reduce the opportunity to release a figure that cannot be examined before voting. Extending it, however, may deprive the public of more recent information while well-resourced actors continue to obtain it. Effective protection requires balancing verifiability with equal access, targeting sanctions at fabrication, concealed interests and proven distortion, while protecting openly disclosed professional judgements from punishment merely because they prove wrong.

05 Conclusion

These dynamics show that safeguarding voters' choices requires preserving society's capacity to scrutinise the picture presented to it of its own views. The media bear responsibility for distinguishing between voting intentions and the probability of victory; polling organisations for explaining their assumptions; and regulators for preventing either the monopolisation of information or the use of oversight to benefit a political actor. Institutions using opinion polls in Arab contexts need to incorporate these safeguards into their efforts to build trust, including disclosure of funding, independent evaluation and protection of participant confidentiality. These conditions become more important when polls extend to measuring satisfaction with public policy and are used to justify decisions affecting society as a whole.

Ultimately, the significance of the shift from mirror to instrument lies in the power of a polling figure to change the conditions under which electoral sentiment develops. It may begin as a selective portrayal of support, then redirect public attention, influence the allocation of resources, and give one side greater scope to shape the circumstances that the next poll will measure. The outcome remains open to voters' responses and their capacity to defy expectations, but the effects preceding the vote have already become part of the contest.



Opinion polling retains its value when it expands people's understanding of their choices and the conditions surrounding them. It becomes an instrument of disinformation and self-interest when its provenance and limitations are concealed, and it is used to persuade voters that choices they have yet to make have already been settled on their behalf.

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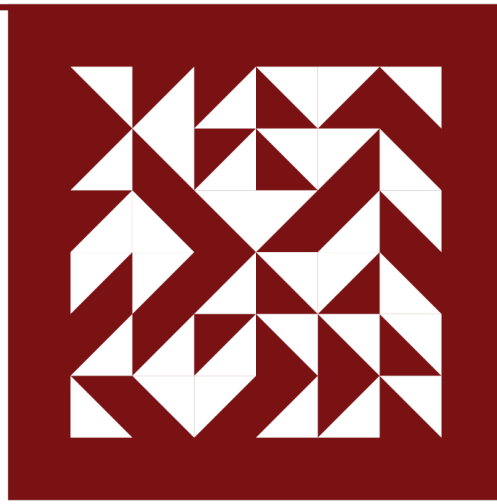
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