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Weighting Polls on Party Affiliation and Past Vote

How a controversial practice has changed political polling in the U.S.

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About this research

This report explains *political weighting* – adjusting a survey to reflect the political composition of the United States as accurately as possible.

Why did we do this?

Pew Research Center does research to help the public, media and decision-makers understand important topics. In our surveys of the U.S. public, we regularly adjust, or “weight,” how much we emphasize certain groups’ responses depending on how likely they are to participate, among other factors.

This report examines best practices for weighting by political party affiliation and voting choice, particularly in the context of survey panels. It adds to the Center’s extensive body of work on [survey research methods](#). Learn more [about Pew Research Center](#).

How did we do this?

We drew on results from Pew Research Center surveys, as well as studies conducted by other researchers.

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Weighting Polls on Party Affiliation and Past Vote

How a controversial practice has changed political polling in the U.S.

A growing share of election polls in the United States – [almost 70% of national polls in 2024](#) – are now weighted on political party affiliation or reported vote choice in a previous election. This kind of political weighting is controversial. But evidence shows that it has made polls modestly [more accurate](#).

This report explains how political weighting works, how Pew Research Center does it, and some of its limitations.

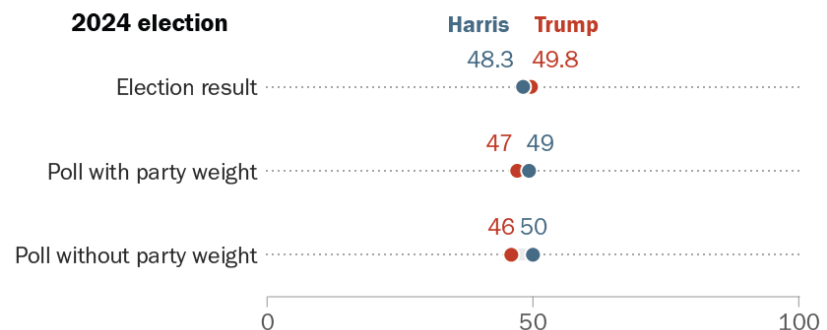
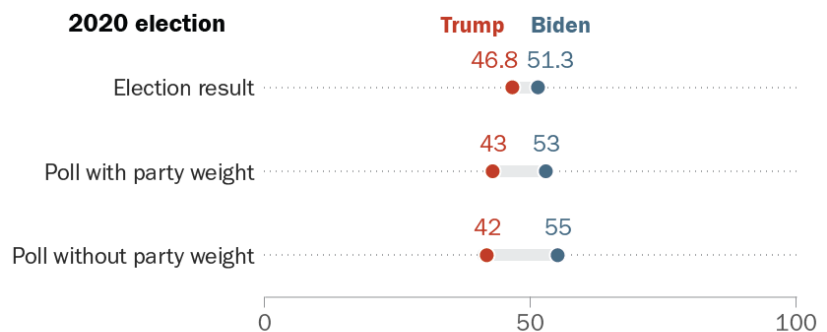
It has become more necessary to weight on party or past vote because of [growing evidence](#) that Republicans have become slightly less likely than Democrats to take part in polls. Historically, neither party's supporters were more likely than the other's to participate in polling. Whether or not that change is permanent, it is true today and requires addressing.

Note: For a primer on survey weighting and how it's used, read "[What is weighting?](#)" below.

Key takeaways

In recent years, polls weighted on political party more accurately reflect election outcomes

% of voters supporting each candidate



Note: Survey data based on adult citizens for whom reliable data on turnout and vote choice is available. Turnout was verified using official state election records. Vote choice is from a survey conducted in the month after the election.

Source: Election results from the Federal Election Commission. Pew Research Center surveys of U.S. adults conducted Nov. 12-17, 2020 (for 2020 election) and Nov. 12-17, 2024 (2024 election).

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- **Political weighting can make polls more accurate.** Weighting 2020 and 2024 Pew Research Center postelection polls on party affiliation improved accuracy by about 1-2 percentage points per candidate – or about 2-3 points on the margin between candidates.
- **Weighting on political variables has become more necessary in the past decade** for two main reasons: a [systematic bias that emerged around 2016](#) which led polls to understate Republican candidates’ share of voter support, and [poll-to-poll volatility in the balance of Republican and Democratic voters](#) driven by who participates rather than real changes in opinion. Our report examines this in detail.
- **Three common approaches are weighting on self-reported political party affiliation, self-reported past vote choice, and voter file information about party affiliation** such as party registration. Each approach has its own strengths and weaknesses, which the next section of this report goes over in more detail.
- Under certain conditions, weighting on self-reported political party has the potential to align a poll with an outdated snapshot of the country. **Panel-based surveys can neutralize this problem by keeping track of respondents’ past and present party affiliation.** Read more about this approach and its benefits, including a case study from our research.
- There’s more than one factor to consider when choosing what type of political weighting to use – if any. Pollsters need to decide whether to weight a poll on party affiliation, past vote, both or neither. This in turn is affected by the population (all adults or just voters), whether the survey includes political content, and whether an appropriate benchmark is available.

Because **there are long-standing questions about [how this weighting works](#), which political [outcomes or characteristics to use](#), and a variety of [downsides](#)** to consider, this piece seeks to explain:

- Three ways to correct a poll’s political balance
- Why weighting for party affiliation is easier with a panel
- Why many polls need to adjust for party affiliation or past vote
- FAQs about political weighting and its limitations

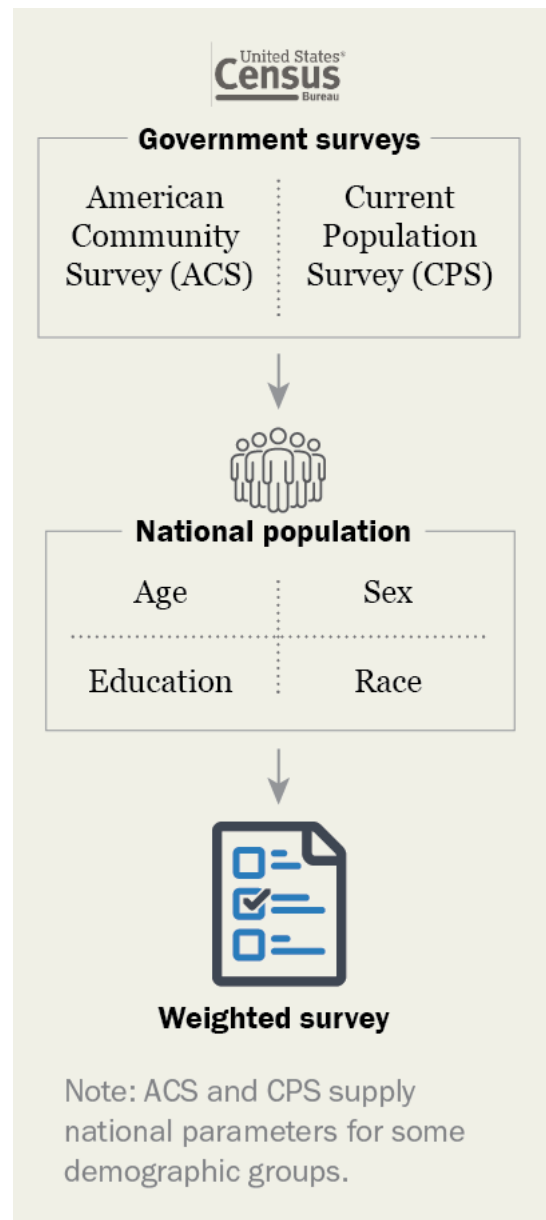
What is weighting?

Surveys are still the best way to measure what the public is thinking. But they aren't perfect. It's hard to contact people for surveys and hard to get them to cooperate. We often don't get enough people who have less than a high school education or who are younger than 30, groups that are often underrepresented compared with their share of the overall population.

One of the best tools pollsters have for dealing with this is called **weighting**. To weight a survey, we need **targets** for the characteristics that are out of balance in our sample. (A target is a template for what a survey sample *would* look like if it was selected from the population in a way that was truly random.) Weighting is the process of adjusting the raw percentages of groups in our actual survey sample so they match these target shares as closely as possible.

For a few characteristics of the population, we can compare our survey with a trusted source like the U.S. Census Bureau and use that to make sure that our survey has the right percentages (matching the makeup of the actual population) of older and younger people; White, Black, Hispanic and other racial or ethnic groups; and people with a high school education.

Unfortunately, there is no trusted government estimate of party affiliation that we can use to correct a poll's *political* balance. But pollsters, including Pew Research Center, have found ways to do this. We outline some of these approaches in the sections of this report that follow, and we address some [common questions about political weighting and its limitations](#).



3 ways to correct a poll's political balance: Party affiliation, past vote and voter file information

Pollsters vary in how they weight their survey samples on political characteristics, if at all. Their choices tend to be informed by factors such as the population being surveyed and the sample source (e.g., a list of all addresses in the United States or a list of registered voters), the focus of the poll (preelection standings or key issues), and geographic level (national, state or something else). **No one approach is clearly superior in all contexts.**

This section describes three ways to adjust a poll's political balance with weighting. Some polls use more than one of these adjustments. They're not mutually exclusive.

(This is part of a larger Pew Research Center report about political weighting – adjusting a survey to reflect the political composition of the U.S. as accurately as possible. For an overview and the report's key takeaways, read “[Weighting Polls on Party Affiliation and Past Vote](#).”)

Weighting on self-reported party affiliation

How it generally works:

Respondents indicate whether they consider themselves a Republican, Democrat or neither (and whether they lean to either party). After fielding, the pollster aligns the share of Republicans in the survey to match the share nationwide. They do this for Democrats as well. The result is that the survey accurately matches the benchmark shares of Republicans and Democrats.

In politics today, do you consider yourself a ...

- ☐ **Republican**
- ☐ **Democrat**
- ☐ **Independent**
- ☐ **Something else**

As of today, do you lean more to ...

- ☐ **The Republican Party**
- ☐ **The Democratic Party**

In practice, this can be tricky because none of the large federal surveys that pollsters use to obtain weighting targets measure party affiliation. Pollsters who survey U.S. adults (not just voters) sometimes use Pew Research Center's National Public Opinion Reference Survey ([NPORS](#)) or their [own address-based survey](#) for a party affiliation benchmark.

- *Examples of pollsters that have done this:* [CNN](#), [Pew Research Center](#), [Washington Post/ABC News/Ipsos](#)

Weighting on past vote

How it generally works:

Respondents who voted in a recent election report which candidate they voted for. After fielding the survey, the pollster aligns it with official election data for turnout and vote choice. A slight variation on this approach aligns the survey with a modeled estimate for how

In the 2020 presidential election, who did you vote for?

- ☐ **Joe Biden, the Democrat**
- ☐ **Donald Trump, the Republican**
- ☐ **Jo Jorgensen, the Libertarian Party candidate**
- ☐ **Howie Hawkins, the Green Party candidate**
- ☐ **Another candidate**

present-day registered voters cast their ballot in the last election.

In theory, this guarantees that the portion of the sample made up of people who voted in the last election is properly balanced with the election’s actual result.

Recently, pollsters have been researching how best to resolve wrinkles, such as participants who were not eligible to vote last time or refused to say whom they supported. Making an educated guess about how these people would have voted (what [The New York Times](#) describes as “synthetic past vote”) seems to work better than leaving them out of the adjustment.

- *Examples of pollsters that have done this:* [CBS News](#), [Echelon Insights](#), [Elon University](#), [Morning Consult](#), [New York Times/Siena](#), [Pew Research Center](#), [Washington Post/ABC News/Ipsos](#)

Weighting on political data from a registered voter file

How it generally works: While registered voter files don’t record which candidate someone voted for, they do contain various kinds of political information that can be used in weighting.

Some variables are administrative records of past behavior, such as whether someone registered to vote (and with what political party, in states that offer the option to choose a party), what mode of voting they used, and whether they voted in a partisan primary.



Some information within the voter files is modeled, that is, inferred from a combination of characteristics such as where people live, whether they have voted in primary elections, their age, gender, race and ethnicity, and other factors. In 2024, some pollsters weighted their surveys on modeled party affiliation and modeled vote choice.

- *Examples of pollsters that have done this:* [CNN](#) (state polling), [Echelon Insights](#), [Emerson College](#), [New York Times/Siena](#), [Washington Post](#) (state polling)

Each of these approaches has strengths and weaknesses that make it more appropriate for some types of surveys than others. Here is a summary table with different considerations and situations, along with the pros and cons of each weighting method.

Comparing 3 ways to weight a poll on political party or vote

	Type of weighting adjustment		
	Political party (self-reported)	Past vote choice (self-reported)	Party registration or party primary election turnout (voter file)
Does the weighting target fix the political balance for voters and nonvoters?	Yes	No. Works for voters only	No. Works for registered voters only
Does the weighting work for state/local polls?	Theoretically yes, but targets for party affiliation are harder to find at the subnational level	Yes	Yes
Is there an easily available benchmark?	No	Yes – election results	Mixed – varies by state
Risk from self-report errors?	Lower than past vote. Respondents tend to report their party affiliation accurately	Higher but still tolerable. Studies have found biases in people's recall of past vote choice and turnout, but for 2016 and after this adjustment still tends to help	None, though matching and modeling errors can occur
Stable benchmark over time?	No. The share of Americans who are Republicans and Democrats changes	Yes, unless the pollster chooses to model the election result	Mostly stable as it is an administrative characteristic
Other considerations	Requires careful timing between benchmark and poll	Can overstate similarity to prior election; recall accuracy varies by political engagement and time elapsed	Excludes voters without current contact info on registration; modeled partisanship has large errors in some states; party registration may lag actual identification

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Jump ahead [for FAQs about political weighting](#), including its shortcomings.

Survey panels can make political party affiliation weighting easier

One challenge pollsters face when weighting surveys based on people’s self-reported political party affiliation is that [the population target can change](#) fairly quickly. One year, Americans may be evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats. The next year, politics may shift and one party clearly outnumbers the other in supporters.

Weighting to the shares of Republicans and Democrats nationwide has the potential to align a poll with an outdated snapshot of the country. This can happen if there is political change between when the benchmark survey was fielded and when the current poll was fielded.

(This is part of a larger Pew Research Center report about political weighting – adjusting a survey to reflect the political composition of the United States as accurately as possible. For an overview and the report’s key takeaways, read “[Weighting Polls on Party Affiliation and Past Vote](#).”)

An underappreciated fact about polling is how survey panels can neutralize this problem. The key is understanding that with a panel, there can be *two* measurements of political party affiliation for each panelist:

- One measured contemporaneously with the benchmark (in the past)
- Another measured in the current poll (in the present)

Pollsters can use the *past* measurement in weighting, so that the benchmark and weighting variable are apples to apples (i.e., party affiliation measured for the population and in the survey of interest at roughly the same point in time). For reporting and analytic purposes, though, pollsters use the *current* measurement. That way, their analysis reflects current public opinion, not public opinion from months ago.

Here is a real-world example from Pew Research Center’s [American Trends Panel](#):

In early and mid-2025, we measured political party affiliation for all panelists, whether in the Center’s [National Public Opinion Reference Survey \(NPORS\)](#) benchmarking survey itself – for those new to the panel in 2025 – or just after NPORS came out of the field for current panelists. At the time, NPORS found Americans were about evenly split (46% Republican or leaning Republican and 45% Democratic or leaning Democratic).

Fast forward to spring 2026. There had been a record-long federal government shutdown and debate over the administration's tariff and immigration enforcement policies, among other national news stories. It was possible that some Americans' political party identification shifted during this period from spring 2025 to spring 2026.

From May 26 to June 1, 2026, the Center conducted another panel survey (described here as the May 2026 poll) and re-asked party affiliation. At that point, we had *two* party affiliation measurements from the same people: the past measurement contemporaneous with the benchmark and the current measurement from the latest poll.

Per standard practice, we weighted the May 2026 poll on party affiliation as well as other variables.

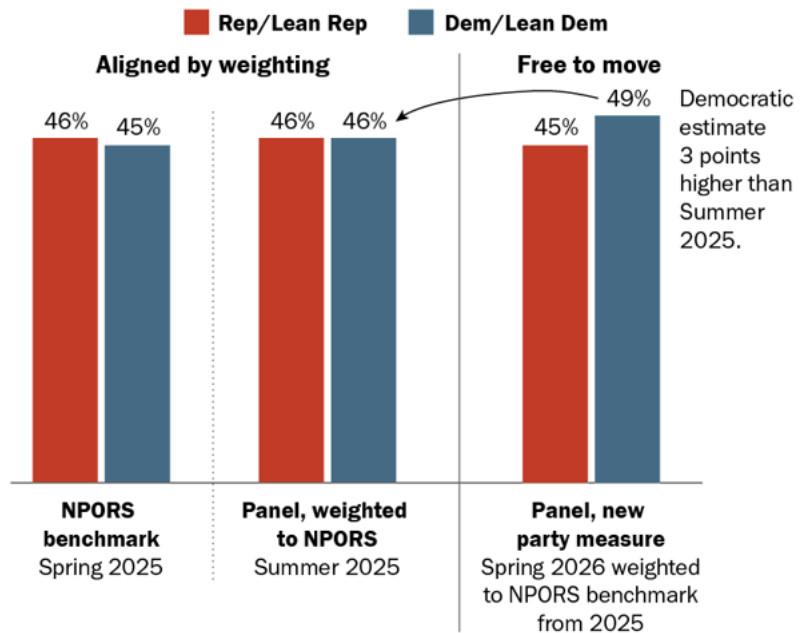
Critically, the *past measurement of party affiliation* (from summer 2025) was aligned with the benchmark taken at about the same time (2025 NPORS).

When reporting results from the May 2026 poll, researchers used the current political party affiliation measurement. **That current measurement was not used in the weighting.** In other

words, the poll was allowed to capture real change in Americans' political views since the benchmark survey (and the past panel measurement) was fielded. The measurement from the May 2026 poll was 45% Republican or leaning Republican and 49% Democratic or leaning Democratic (similar to the 4 percentage point gap of 43% Republican or leaning

Weighting the panel to a party benchmark does not prevent a later measurement from showing change

% of U.S. adults who identify with or lean toward each party



Note: Shares do not add to 100% because some respondents identify with neither party or did not answer.

Source: 2025 National Public Opinion Reference Survey (NPORS). American Trends Panel surveys conducted July 8-Aug. 3, 2025, and May 26-June 1, 2026.

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Republican and 47% Democratic or leaning Democratic found in the [2026 NPORS survey](#), which was taking place around the same time).

That example demonstrates how it's possible to both align a poll with a party affiliation benchmark and allow the current poll to get a new measurement. This is only possible, however, with a survey panel or reinterview with the same respondents.

For one-off surveys, there is no past measurement taken contemporaneously with a benchmark survey. Typically, all a pollster can do is gather a current measurement of political party. This situation is not bad, per se. It just means the pollster's options are more limited.

They could weight to a party affiliation estimate obtained from some external source, such as NPORS or an average from other polling organizations. Arguably, that choice prioritizes bias reduction over being able to report a party affiliation estimate from the pollster's new poll, assuming that the estimate from an external source is judged to be more accurate. Alternatively, the pollster could refrain from weighting on party affiliation and report a party affiliation estimate from the poll.

Only when there is a prior measurement for the same respondents, as with a panel, can a pollster do both.

Jump ahead for [FAQs about political weighting](#), including its shortcomings.

Why many polls need to weight on party affiliation or past vote

There are two big reasons why many pollsters now weight their surveys on political characteristics such as party affiliation or past vote, when this wasn't common practice a decade ago: to correct for a [systematic bias that emerged around 2016](#) and to protect against [poll-to-poll volatility driven by who participates](#) rather than real changes in opinion. Both challenges have been exacerbated by the decline in survey response rates.

(This is part of a larger Pew Research Center report about political weighting – adjusting a survey to reflect the political composition of the United States as accurately as possible. For an overview and the report's key takeaways, read "[Weighting Polls on Party Affiliation and Past Vote](#).”)

A root cause: Low response rates make surveys more vulnerable to errors

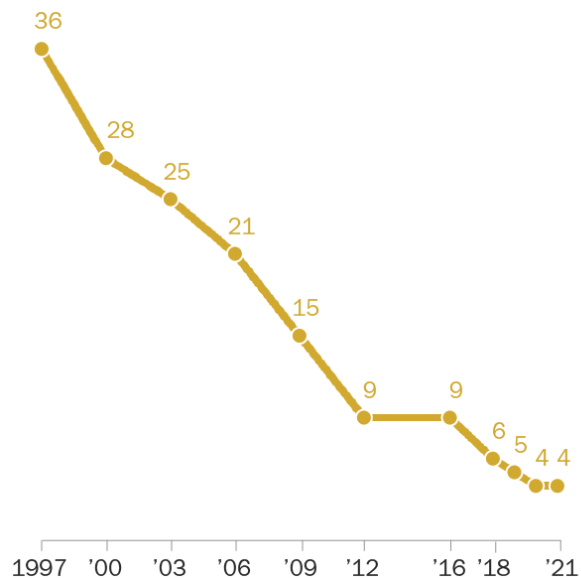
The biggest obstacle surveys face today is that it has gotten much harder to reach people and persuade them to consent to an interview. The nature of the problem is evident in the trend for Pew Research Center's telephone survey response rates over the period between 1997 and 2021.

Response rates dropped from 36% in 1997 to the low single digits in recent years. The New York Times/Siena telephone poll [reported a 0.4% response rate in 2022](#). Overall participation rates in online surveys are not very different. The Center's [American Trends Panel](#) surveys have a [response rate of about 3%](#) when considering the response rates of the recruitment surveys, invitations to enroll in the panel and wave-to-wave nonresponse.

The fact that most people selected for surveys cannot be reached or do not respond increases the potential for nonresponse bias when

Pew Research Center telephone survey response rates

Response rates by year (%)



Note: Response rate is AAPOR RR3. Only landlines sampled for 1997-2006. Rates are typical for surveys conducted each year. Source: Pew Research Center telephone surveys conducted 1997-2021.

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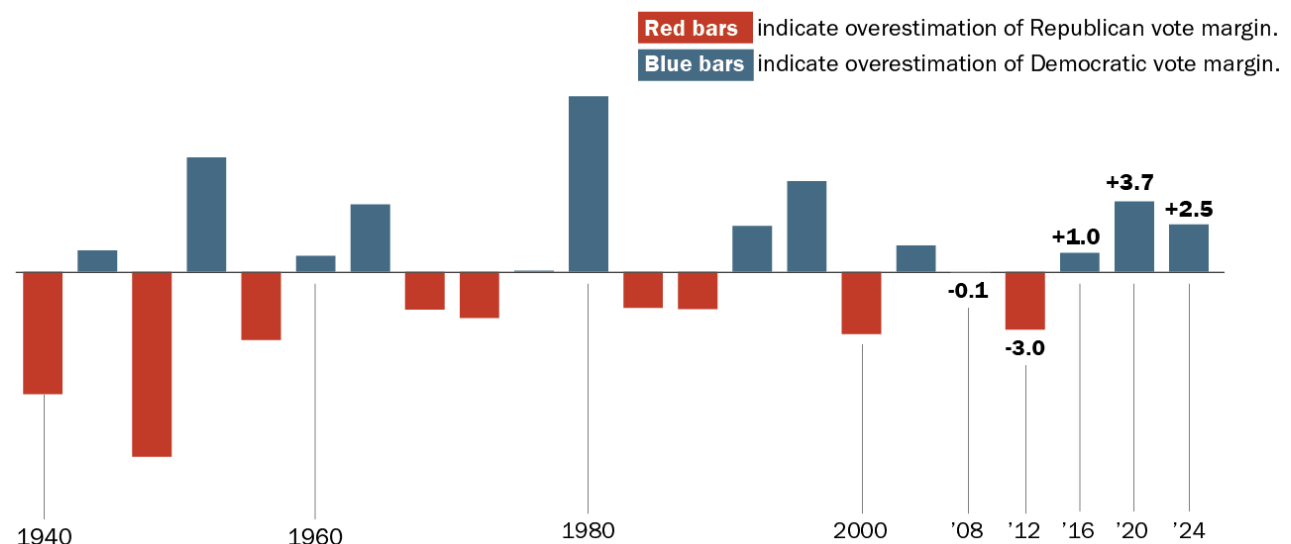
participants differ from nonparticipants in ways that are not corrected by weighting.

Recently, pollsters have been fighting a systematic bias

There is [growing evidence](#) that Republicans have become slightly less likely than Democrats to take part in polls – especially in presidential elections – which may have led to underestimates of the strength of Donald Trump and other Republican candidates in 2016, 2020 and 2024. The problem appears to have been less serious in the midterm elections of 2018 and 2022, but even in 2022 some [polls underestimated support](#) for Republican candidates. Pollsters have a name for this issue: *partisan nonresponse bias*.

Polling errors in U.S. presidential elections

Bars represent average signed error of national polls



Note: Bars represent the average signed error on the margin (i.e., the estimated difference in support between the Republican and Democratic candidates) in national presidential polls.

Source: American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) Task Force on 2024 Pre-Election Polling.

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Historically, well-designed polls have a good track record producing estimates close to the eventual election outcomes, both in the U.S. and elsewhere in the world. This may be surprising to some readers, who have read about or recall spectacular errors like those in 1948, when polls incorrectly predicted that Republican Thomas Dewey would defeat President Harry Truman, or in 1980, when polls suggested the election would be close. (It wasn't: Republican Ronald Reagan defeated incumbent President Jimmy Carter by nearly 10 percentage points.)

But for a long time after 1980, polling got better. Polls in the 2000, 2004, 2008 and 2012 presidential elections were pretty accurate. The 2000 and 2012 elections featured slightly larger errors than 2008, and in both years the polls slightly overstated the *Republican* candidate's support.

In this environment of mostly small polling errors that ran in both directions, Trump's 2016 victory was shocking to many people. National polling slightly overstated Hillary Clinton's vote share, but state polls in key battleground states had more sizable errors.

Polling in the 2020 election was even worse, again with a Democratic overstatement. A [postelection review](#) of the polls by the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) stated, "The 2020 polls featured polling error of an unusual magnitude: It was the highest in 40 years for the national popular vote and the highest in at least 20 years for state-level estimates of the vote in presidential, senatorial, and gubernatorial contests."

In 2024, more pollsters [weighted on party affiliation or recalled vote](#). The polling errors were generally [smaller than in 2020](#), though the [errors ran in the same direction](#). For a third presidential election in a row, [most polls underestimated support for Trump](#).

It's important to keep in mind that the *absolute* size of these errors is usually small – for example, an average of less than [5 percentage points on the margin](#) between the candidates. But in a closely divided country where elections have been decided by razor-thin margins, errors of this size are highly consequential.

In the current polling environment, careful weighting on political outcomes tends to help. It reduces the overrepresentation of Democrats, increases the estimated share of Republicans and in turn increases polling accuracy compared with election outcomes.

Another reason for weighting on party affiliation: Bouncing poll numbers

Pollsters who conduct surveys by telephone have long noticed that party affiliation trends (and support for one party's candidate or the other) are "noisy." They tend to bounce up and down over time, often for no obvious reason.

But some of these bounces do appear to have a reason. For example, pollsters usually see a rise in support for a presidential candidate after the candidate's nominating convention – a so-called [convention bounce](#) (though these have been much smaller in recent elections). Do these bounces really reflect changing opinions on the part of voters? Perhaps, but they [sometimes dissipate](#).

Similarly, highly visible positive and negative campaign events (e.g., [perceptions](#) that President Barack Obama did poorly in his first debate with Mitt Romney in 2012, or the 2016 [Access Hollywood revelations](#) about Trump’s comments about women) tend to be followed by shifts in the polls. Both candidates “recovered” and ultimately did better on Election Day than their polls suggested they would.

Political analysts argue that such shifts do not reflect enduring change in party affiliation or candidate choice, but rather mostly reflect a temporary fall-off in the [willingness of a candidate’s partisans to take part in polls](#).

Pollsters with access to survey panels that include information about their panelists’ party affiliation could see that events in the campaign were associated with their [willingness to take part in surveys](#) conducted shortly afterward. This seems to be especially consequential as response rates to polls have fallen dramatically over the past several decades. (This is one reason the type of weighting we employ for the American Trends Panel can be critical, as it specifically addresses differential partisan nonresponse.)

This phenomenon is likely most common during periods of heightened public attention to politics, such as a presidential campaign. But it illustrates the hazards of trying to estimate party affiliation with surveys that have very low response rates. For many pollsters, a safer route is to adjust the political balance of their poll so that the relative shares of Republicans and Democrats remain relatively stable and broadly representative, rather than swayed by the latest news.

Jump ahead for [FAQs about political weighting](#), including its shortcomings.

FAQs about political weighting in polling and its limitations

There are good arguments against weighting surveys to match how people voted in past elections or an independent estimate of political party affiliation. We know because [we've made many of those arguments](#) over the years! However, the steep decline in survey response rates and the rise in differential partisan nonresponse have made those arguments less accurate or relevant today.

This report summarizes the evidence that weighting on past vote or party affiliation in the current era tends to improve accuracy over just weighting on core demographics like age, gender and education. It is worth highlighting the limits of this practice, as it is not a panacea.

(This is part of a larger Pew Research Center report about political weighting – adjusting a survey to reflect the political composition of the United States as accurately as possible. For an overview and the report's key takeaways, read "[Weighting Polls on Party Affiliation and Past Vote](#).")

Does weighting on past vote or party affiliation improve *all* estimates in a poll?

No. [Pew Research Center studies](#) finding [support for this practice](#) focus on the *average* accuracy level across a range of estimates. We find that, on average, weighting on party affiliation improves accuracy. But there are many questions where it makes no meaningful difference, and a small number of questions (such as personal finances) where it can lead to [somewhat lower accuracy](#) than just weighting on core demographics.

Does weighting on past vote or party affiliation make estimates perfectly accurate?

No. Weighting on party affiliation tends to make political poll estimates *more* accurate, but it does not make them perfect.

One sobering finding was that having an accurate share of Republicans was not sufficient for estimating Donald Trump's 2020 vote share accurately. The American Association for Public Opinion Research's [2020 election postmortem](#) found that "Polls weighted by partisanship and 2016 past vote were not more accurate, on average, than those weighted using only standard demographics. Weighting on partisanship and past vote may have reduced polling error, but it did not solve the issue." The implication was that weighting up Republicans to be represented proportionally does not work if the Republicans *in the poll* are not representative of Republicans *in the population*.

Should all surveys weight on political balance?

Probably not. This practice makes sense for low-response-rate surveys probing political attitudes and behaviors. It may not be helpful for surveys probing topics that have nothing to do with politics. There is a statistical reason for this. A weighting adjustment improves an estimate *if* the adjustment measure (e.g., party affiliation) is related both to who participates and to the key concept (e.g., vote choice) being measured in the survey. If these things are not related, the weighting adjustment will not do any good.

At Pew Research Center, we find partisanship is associated with many topics we study. There are partisan differences in everything from religion and news consumption to attitudes about science and technology. It makes sense, then, for us to use a weighting adjustment to ensure we have the right shares of Republicans and Democrats in our polls. For researchers studying topics wholly disconnected from politics, it may be unnecessary to weight on party affiliation or past vote.

On a cautionary note, some surveys may *appear* nonpolitical but still contain outcomes related to politics. For example, some [health-related polls significantly overestimated COVID-19 vaccination rates](#) in 2021. Those surveys did not weight on party affiliation. Considering that [Democrats were significantly more likely than Republicans to be vaccinated](#) for COVID-19, the absence of that weighting adjustment may very well have contributed to the overestimation error.

One other potential benefit of weighting on past vote is that this weight typically ensures that the relative share of voters and nonvoters in the sample reflects the population. Surveys typically overrepresent voters because they are more interested in politics and more willing to take a survey about the topic.

Should pollsters weight on party affiliation forever?

Probably not. Weighting adjustments reflect shifting patterns in how the public relates to surveys. Currently, there are both [political reasons](#) and [structural factors](#) for why polls tend to have a harder time reaching Republicans than Democrats. But, just as this has not always been the case, [those dynamics could change in the future](#). It's possible that several years from now Republicans and Democrats will be about equally likely to respond to a poll. If that happens, weighting on party affiliation may be unnecessary.

Does this mean pollsters should give up trying to get representative samples?

No. The goal of public opinion polling is to accurately represent the voices and views of the public – not just the people who are easiest to reach or most likely to respond. That means obtaining

samples that reflect the full diversity of the population remains a core principle of high-quality polling.

Weighting on a political outcome can improve accuracy, but it does not fully remove the error in polls. That's why rigorous polling still requires pollsters to follow established best practices, including recruiting representative samples and making participation easy and attractive for people from all walks of life.

Does it matter how the survey was conducted?

Yes. Weighting on party affiliation makes the most sense for typical polls. Most political polls tend to have very low response rates, and there is evidence that those who refuse to respond differ politically from those who participate.

High-response-rate surveys, especially those offering offline response options, may not need to weight on party affiliation. To take an extreme example, we are not aware of any evidence that the Census Bureau's American Community Survey – a [\\$250 million survey](#) with compulsory participation and a roughly [83% response rate](#) – should be weighting on party affiliation.

Does weighting on a political outcome always work?

No. Any weighting approach, like a partisanship adjustment, may not improve accuracy in all situations. Indeed, if a pollster forces a poll's current political makeup to match an outdated benchmark, errors could increase.

Shouldn't polls themselves be able to produce an accurate estimate of party?

According to this argument, a pollster's *current poll* is the best available measure of the shares of Republicans and Democrats in the country. Aligning the poll with an external benchmark of party affiliation is unnecessary. An important piece of this argument is that “yes, polls need to be weighted – but *only* on core demographics like age, race, education, geography and gender.”

That view dominated the industry for decades, and it appeared justified by polling's generally good record in forecasting elections. Even as [response rates declined](#) in the 1990s and 2000s, people's [political views did not seem to affect their willingness to participate in polls](#).

Fast forward to today, and there is mounting evidence that is no longer true. One study found that [Democrats were significantly more likely than Republicans to participate](#) in 2020 preelection surveys – even after controlling for factors such as age, gender, race and urban vs. rural. [Other](#)

[studies](#), including [one from Pew Research Center](#), found that weighting just on core demographics yielded less accurate estimates than when an adjustment for party affiliation was included.

This raises the question of *why* adjusting on core demographics no longer suffices. The answer is that the traditional demographic characteristics no longer reliably identify who is refusing to take surveys these days. For example, if the White men ages 50 and older who participate in a poll are more Democratic than those who refuse, then the traditional approach of just weighting on things like race, gender and age falls flat. The poll will have a Democratic bias even after demographic weighting.

Party affiliation is an attitude. Doesn't that make it a poor weighting variable?

It's true that weighting on party affiliation is more challenging because it is fundamentally an opinion – and like any opinion, it can change. This prospect of change makes timing more critical for party weighting than weighting on more stable outcomes or ones that change slowly and predictably, such as the population's age distribution. Pollsters weighting on party affiliation need to time their survey measure as closely as possible to the benchmark. As explained in an earlier section of this report, this timing can be much more practical for surveys fielded on a panel than for one-time (or “cross-sectional”) surveys.

While the attitudinal nature of party affiliation makes weighting more challenging, it is not impossible. Most importantly, there is compelling evidence (presented earlier in this report) that political polls tend to be more accurate with such an adjustment than without one, despite the challenges.

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