



# The 2020 Polling Cycle: Five Take-aways for Insights Professionals

By Jeff Resnick

Each election season, I listen to the banter of political pundits to feed my addiction as a political junkie and satisfy my intense curiosity about whether pollsters will get it right or wrong. For almost seven years I had the privilege of working closely with the talented professionals at CNN on what was then the CNN|ORC Poll. I fully understand the challenges inherent in the estimation of which candidates will win and which will lose.

All considered, the polls performed better than early initial verdicts conveyed. This election cycle took place during a year like no other. It was marked by divisive politics, the dissolution of trust, and the ravages of the coronavirus, all of which put the electorate to the test. The enormous shift to mail-in ballots delayed the final tallies, complicating a comparison to the final poll predictions. *Despite these upheavals, the polls basically got it right.*

I am sure that detailed forensic analysis will identify areas for improvement. Continuous improvement should be the mantra for any industry. However, this election cycle also provides object lessons about industry practices we should reinforce and continue to strengthen. Here are a few points to keep in mind.

## **The challenge of predicting attitudes and behaviors with precision should inspire us to prepare clients for the uncertainty around any important number.**

We must make sure our clients fully understand the potential variation around research outcomes and use that premise as a starting point for planning around contingencies. *Solid guidance, based on a likely range of possible outcome scenarios, provides great value to clients.*

## **Make certain there is sufficient clarity about and representation of sub-groups that may nuance decisions.**

Research dollars and added care to fully understand a critical subgroup are important investments. Statistical weighting is not a complete panacea for underrepresented groups. Unfortunately, the “weighting up” of a small number of respondents to represent a larger population can lead to erroneous results based on extrapolation from a very small sample subset. All too often “hindsight” reveals that skimping on the assessment of key subgroups is penny wise but pound foolish. *Critical decisions require a detailed examination of important subgroups whether these are based on demographics, ethnicity, geographic location, or factors such as customer/non-customer status.*

## **Ensure that your questions mean exactly what you intend them to mean.**

Question language that lacks clarity supplies the answer to a question other than the one we intended to ask. We should exert as much effort in the wording of survey questions as we do in the analysis of the results. All too often the effort put forth into the development of survey questions falls short of the ideal, or even the desired. *Words matter, make them count*

## **We need to take measures to fully understand the “why” behind the numbers.**

Research too often disassociates qualitative efforts from survey results. Numbers do not tell the whole story. The greater the understanding of the attitudes driving survey numbers, the better the insight to the correct interpretations of those results. Blending qualitative insight with quantitative data will often lead to a better decision. *We must leverage techniques that allow the intelligent integration of these two approaches.*

## **Let’s aim for more interaction and shared learning between adjacent disciplines.**

Political polling, anthropology, behavioral analysis, and other disciplines provide excellent opportunities to sharpen our own craft – if we take the time to observe and learn from practitioners in fields of inquiry aligned with ours. Active dialogue with these practitioners, particularly around forensics relating to their own efforts, can be an important source of insight for our own discipline. *If we fail to leverage the experience of allied disciplines, we impede our own progress and effectiveness.*

Polling results remind us that survey research remains a very effective tool for making predictions, risks and limitations notwithstanding. We need a variety of data resources to understand and anticipate consumer behavior, but those who would have us believe that survey research has outlived its usefulness or even passed its prime are clearly mistaken.

## About the Author



### **Jeffrey T. Resnick, Chief Operating Officer**

Jeff brings over 30 years of experience as an insights industry leader, management executive, and trusted advisor to executive level clients across a broad range of industries. He is an accomplished business strategist whose professional focus includes reputation risk assessment and management, key account management, political polling, sales and marketing strategy, as well as the development and leverage of customer advisory boards.

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