



## What we don't tell pollsters

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In a preface to this column piece, it's an honor to have Reade give me space to write — particularly when I consider that my first job out of school was reporting for the Camden Herald back then.

Politics will be the subject of this column, but before I get there, I would like to address the 800-pound gorilla in the room, which is my conviction for failing to register as a foreign agent following the Mueller probe charges. I served my sentence, but will always carry the memory of it in my official record.

We live in a day where it is a Pavlovian reflex to blame. For me, the temptation was strong. After all, the President was calling the investigation that tore my life apart a “witch hunt,” and a sham. Regardless, I never challenged by guilt.

My crime of omission was not filling out a form, but my crime was writing. The offenses laid out by the government in its indictment of me included drafting opinion pieces and otherwise advocating for my Ukrainian client, a politician and "oligarch." I knew the registration requirement existed and previously registered for other clients, but in the case I pleaded guilty, I convinced myself the law didn't apply to me.

One oddity in my case that helped me accept it was the fact that the chief prosecutor, Robert Mueller, was a member at my church in Washington. We didn't know each another, but up until my arraignment, we attended the same service (for optics, I de-conflicted after my pleading). Somehow this impressed the belief that we are all children of God, but how we bear our sins is ultimately up to us.

My father used to write a column for The Camden Herald called “Errors and Omissions.” Now that I confessed to mine, I look forward to getting back to the political business, especially now. I will do my best to uphold Reade's standard of respectful and informed debate.

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Almost 20 years ago, I found myself briefing a retired KGB colonel who went into politics on a recently conducted poll of Russian public opinion. He listened to me as I ran through the slides and waited until the end to ask how I could be sure respondents were telling the truth.

“We have ways,” I held myself back from saying, but explained how sampling and methodology can give people even in a semi-free state the license to speak their minds.

No, he said, these are people who know you know where they live, how many children they have and their approximate incomes, and you are asking them about politics, he said. Don’t bet on it.

Until recently, I wrote off the old colonel as someone from a by-gone time. But as I read the responses to a polling question fielded across the U.S. last week, I’m reminded of his reaction. Americans don’t fear the gulag, but we fear social ostracism. That could account for some variance in some polls. Before Brexit, some Britons lied to pollsters on the question because they didn’t want to sound unsophisticated.

In the same week Bari Weiss quit the New York Times and Andrew Sullivan quit New York Magazine, each said their ideologies were no longer welcome at either prestigious outlet. Neither writer is outside the mainstream, which draws more notice to these bellwethers.

Quantitative research reflects the same thing.

More than half of respondents said freedom of speech does not exist in America, because people fear retaliation for their views, including loss of a job among lesser reprisals. Only 34% say freedom of speech exists and protects them, a poll fielded earlier this month by the CATO Institute.

Looking closely, more than two-thirds of Republicans feel freedom of speech is threatened. But what is even more interesting about this poll is that conservative and moderate Democrats are both more inclined to agree that self-censorship is a problem today.

One reason for this may be the diminishing connection with “truth.” Both politicians and the media bear much responsibility for this, but so do we. In a short period of time, we have gone from suspecting our political leaders of playing fast and loose with truth to no longer expecting anything truthful to be heard from them. Our news industry, as Weiss’ and Sullivan’s resignation letters express, has also regressed, to the era of the partisan press.

“People are no longer looking for information, just for affirmation,” a Democrat consultant from Louisiana complained to me the other day. In elevating the level of politics to that of warfare, today’s practitioners sacrifice the concept of truth as the proverbial first victim. Indeed, as a Republican operative from Alabama told me, “our political debates do not start from an honest place.”

Polling took some hits in recent years, but it cannot be expected to measure specific outcomes. It can only point to trends, and other than Rasmussen, every poll in America these days seems to be saying the same thing, and that reflects the current momentum.

On the presidential level that appears much clearer than in the top Senate races (though Trump’s new campaign manager criticizes how polls are sampling Republicans, and even suggested Trump can still win Maine).

Maine, Montana and North Carolina all remain too close to call right now. Thinking just of our own state, I believe the respondent error variance — or lying to pollsters — under counts Susan Collins’ actual support. Two difficult and arguably unpopular votes she cast for Kavanaugh and against convicting Trump have hurt her among Independents and Democrats. The savage

campaign waged by the national Democratic Senate committee over Maine airwaves can't be helping.

But as Trump taught us, when you insult the man, you insult the supporter. Collins' supporters aren't the kind to worry that much about packaging. For the most part, they're hardworking, no-nonsense people who, like her, try to gather the facts before making a decision. One key question is whether there are enough of them for her to push back a strong tide.

One of the latest public polls conducted by a Democrat firm, showed Collins only four points behind her challenger, Sara Gideon. A more recent poll by Colby College pegged the gap one point wider. 11 to 12% were unsure how they'll vote, and while there's vocal dissatisfaction with Collins, those with the most intense antipathies have already been counted. If the next poll doesn't show that gap widening, it's worse news for Gideon than for Collins.

My retired KGB colonel may have been right about Russians, and to some extent everyone else. So long as we are afraid — even gently — to speak our minds, it would be too much to ask a pollster right now to be perfect.