

Tyler Morning Telegraph

Don't become obsessed with polls

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One of the most tedious elements of election season is the constant barrage of polls. Cable news shows trot out every new number and endlessly analyze what it means.

But let's keep polls in perspective. They are not destiny, nor are they meaningless.

"Trump is up," writes the Cato Institute's Michael Tanner. "No, Hillary is up. Is Gary Johnson surging? Hey, is that Jill Stein? Political junkies are obsessed with polls, and almost every day brings a new one to feed our fix. But before we get too excited over the latest ups and downs, here are a few things to keep in mind."

First, he says, don't pay attention until mid-September - at the earliest.

"The closer we get to the election, the more accurate polls are likely to be," Tanner writes. "Right now, the vast majority of Americans are paying little or no attention to politics. Consider that 34.9 million Americans watched Donald Trump's acceptance speech, and 33.3 million watched Hillary's. There was undoubtedly a huge overlap. But even if there was no overlap, that means half of those who will vote this November did not watch either one."

And don't pay much attention to the national polls.

"While most polls are based on national samples, we don't elect a president through a national vote, but through 50 state contests," he writes. "If Hillary is running up her numbers in California, or Trump is winning big in Texas, that can distort the results. One can overstate this, of course, since 2000 was the first election since 1888 in which the winner of the electoral vote lost the popular vote."

That means that state polls can be far more indicative of how the race is going.

"How is Trump performing in states like Pennsylvania and Ohio?" Tanner asks. "Is Clinton outperforming in states like Arizona and North Carolina? Who has the advantage in Florida? And it is in state-by-state races that third-party candidates can make a big difference. Could Johnson, or Stein for that matter, tip a state one way or the other? Remember, it was likely a combination of Ralph Nader and Pat Buchanan that gave Florida to Bush in 2000. Is it possible that a candidate like Johnson could even win a state in the libertarian West?"

And Tanner warns against "confirmation bias."

"We can always find a poll that looks good for the candidate we support," he says. "And we all know that certain polls skew Republican, while others skew Democratic (usually by 2 or 3 points). There will undoubtedly be outliers leading to excited headlines about a 'shock poll.'"

And, yes, the pollsters have certainly gotten it wrong more than once in recent years. Still, if you look at the aggregate, such as the RealClearPolitics average, you can get a pretty good idea of where the race is headed.”

Another solid source is the website FiveThirtyEight.com. It’s run by a former sports statistician who turned his skills to politics.

Polls are interesting, but they’re not the real thing.