

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Is Pennsylvania in Play?

Or is Ohio lost to Romney?

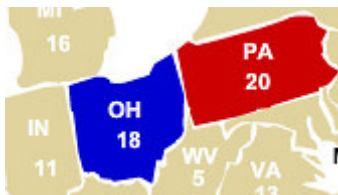
By JAMES TARANTO

September 27, 2012

(Note: We'll be traveling tomorrow, to return Monday.)

A pair of recent presidential polls by [Voter Survey Service](#) find an extremely close race in Pennsylvania, with President Obama leading Mitt Romney by just 48% to 47% and 47% to 45%. Pennsylvania hasn't voted Republican for president since 1988, and the closest margin since then was in 2004, when John Kerry, the haughty, French-looking Massachusetts Democrat who by the way served in Vietnam, beat George W. Bush by just 2.5%. If Pennsylvania is as close as VSS suggests, Obama will have a hard time winning re-election.

A [New York Times](#) poll finds Obama leading Ohio by 53% to 43%. Ohio has voted for the presidential winner in every election of the past half-century, and Obama carried it by 4.6% in 2008. If he wins by 10 points, he ought to be re-elected in a landslide.



Can both these polls be right? Probably not. There's no reason to think Ohio and Pennsylvania have wildly diverged in their politics since 2010, when Republicans won big in both states. If Ohio has moved back toward the Democrats, Pennsylvania almost certainly has too. If Obama is a prohibitive favorite in Ohio, it's vanishingly unlikely that Pennsylvania is in play--and vice versa.

So what's going on here? "There appears to be a bimodal distribution of the polls," writes The Weekly Standard's [Jay Cost](#). "All told, we see a statistically significant relationship between

Obama's margin and the Democratic advantage in partisan identification. . . . They are not converging around a single point. Instead, some (notably Rasmussen, Purple Strategies, Survey USA, and Mason-Dixon) see Obama ahead by just 1 to 3 points in the key swing states, while others (notably the Washington Post, Fox News, PPP, and NBC News/Marist) see an Obama lead that ranges between 4 and 8 points. And the difference looks to be built around how many Democrats are included in the polling samples."

Sure enough, in the [Times poll](#), 35% of Ohio participants said they were Democrats, to just 26% Republicans. That's a difference of 9 points, wider than the 8-point gap in party ID that [exit pollsters](#) found in 2008. The Times poll also has Obama leading in Florida, 53% to 44%, and Pennsylvania, 54% to 42%. The party ID gap is 9 points in Florida and 11 points in Pennsylvania, up from [3 points](#) and [7 points](#), respectively, in 2008.

As VSS notes in the blog post defending its Pennsylvania poll, most other Keystone State surveys are closer to the Times poll than to its own. The Philadelphia Inquirer recently found Obama leading by 11%, and Muhlenberg College by 9%. Here's VSS's explanation:

First, our ratio of interviews conducted with Republicans and Democrats in our recent polls (49D-43R) gives Democrats a 6-point advantage based on the fact that Democrats outnumber Republicans in actual registration. . . .

Second, our ratio of younger to older voters reflects turnout that is likely to be slightly higher with older voters given the lack of enthusiasm from younger voters. . . .

Third, recent polls showing a double-digit lead for Obama are not believable, and are probably using the 2008 voter turnout as the basis of their survey model. It is simply unrealistic to think Obama can or will win the Keystone State by the same double-digit margin he won by four years ago when you consider that most state and national polls continue to show most voters unhappy with the direction of the country after two straight years of unemployment at 8% or higher.

Cost agrees: "If it comes down to whether or not this will be a repeat of 2008 . . . then my money is on no."

There are other demographic peculiarities in some of these polls as well. At the Daily Caller, [Brandon Gaylord](#) of HorseRacePolitics.com looks at the Marist poll of five swing states (Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Ohio and Virginia) and finds that it is expecting a large drop-off in evangelical voters in four of them, and a large increase in voters making under \$50,000 and

decrease in those making over \$100,000 in all five. (Higher-income voters tend to be more Republican).

Gaylord's explanation: "I think the problem is that pollsters are so focused with ensuring that Democratic-leaning groups--especially minorities--are fairly represented in their polls that they're failing to ensure that Republican-leaning groups are also fairly represented in their polls."

BattlegroundWatch.com makes a related point, noting that not only was minority turnout way up in 2008, but white turnout was down:

Every voter turnout rate by race (relative to eligible population) was up versus 2004 except the white vote according to Pew Research. . . . Blacks were up +4.9%, Hispanics were up +2.7%, Asians were up +2.4%. But the percentage of White voters who showed up at the polls relative to who was eligible dropped -1.1% . . . This has nothing to do with minorities making up more or less of the electorate. This is simply saying from 2004 to 2008 White voter registration (which actually dropped 104k) and actual turnout of White voters (which increased 500k) did not keep up with voting age White population increases.

Within this drop of White voter turnout, over 3x as many men as women comprised those voters staying home in the election. This happened for any number of reasons ranging from a disinterested national party to a disorganized Presidential campaign to a demoralized voting block [sic]—all are true. But the bottom line is one of the advantages Barack Obama enjoyed in 2008 was that a meaningful percentage of white voters simply stayed home in 2008.

There's no guarantee that won't happen again, and some in the media seem to be seizing on the polls showing huge Obama leads precisely in order to demoralize Republicans. Which is not to say that skepticism about the polls would justify Republican complacency. Obama doesn't need a 10-point margin in Ohio to win re-election. He won quite comfortably in 2008 with a considerably narrower margin.

Morsi to Obama: Drop Dead

Mohamed Morsi, Egypt's new president, spoke at the U.N. yesterday and delivered what one might construe as a rebuff of President Obama's defense of free speech the preceding day, the Washington Post reports:

"Egypt respects freedom of expression," said Morsi, who was the candidate of the Muslim Brotherhood movement once banned by the U.S.-backed secular dictatorship of Hosni

Mubarak. But "not a freedom of expression that targets a specific religion or a specific culture."

"The obscenities that I have referred to that were recently released as part of an organized campaign against Islamic sanctities are unacceptable," Morsi said in reference to that stupid YouTube video.

But does Obama really disagree with this? Rereading his "defense" of free expression, we're not so sure. When we discussed it yesterday, we didn't notice one particularly telling line:

We [protect free expression] so because given the power of faith in our lives, and the passion that religious differences can inflame, the strongest weapon against hateful speech is not repression; it is more speech--the voices of tolerance that rally against bigotry and blasphemy, and lift up the values of understanding and mutual respect.

"The answer to offensive speech is more speech" is a standard First Amendment piety, and an excellent one. But that reference to "the voices of tolerance that rally against bigotry and blasphemy" is downright Orwellian.

The idea of "voices of tolerance" objecting to "bigotry" makes sense (although in practice, people who think of themselves that way are often quite intolerant and bigoted themselves). But this may be the first time a leftist has made opposition to *blasphemy* a test of tolerance.

One wonders what Obama would make of this story from Morsi's Egypt, reported by the Washington Post:

Egyptian blogger Alber Saber appeared in court here Wednesday, standing in a cage, pale and skinny, wearing jailhouse whites, his head shaved. He flashed a V for victory sign with his fingers to the spectators. His mother wept.

The 27-year-old computer science major from a Coptic Christian family, a few credits shy of his college degree, was arrested two weeks ago on charges of disdainning religion and ridiculing religious beliefs and rituals.

After a mob of his neighbors laid siege to his home, and after he was arrested by police, media reports suggested that Saber had posted a link to the infamous YouTube video "Innocence of Muslims" on Facebook.

The arrest points to stark differences in laws and attitudes regarding freedom of expression, especially as applied to religion, in the Middle East and the United States.

Saber's lawyers deny that he had anything to do with the video, although they concede that he did ruminate on social media sites about the meaning of religion. Showing contempt toward what Egyptian statutes call the "heavenly" religions--Christianity, Islam and Judaism--is punishable by up to five years in prison.

If you take Obama at his word, he wouldn't approve of Saber's prosecution. The answer to speech is more speech. But if Saber were merely shunned or shouted down by those who "rally against blasphemy," would Obama and his supporters really be prepared to defend the proposition that they are the "voices of tolerance"?

Can SAT Scores Be Raised?

"We get almost no return for our education 'investment,' " writes Neal McCluskey of the Cato Institute. We're inclined to agree, but we're not sure his reasoning is sound. McCluskey notes that despite skyrocketing public-school spending per pupil--which has more than doubled after inflation since 1970--average SAT scores have barely budged, even declined slightly:

There are important provisos that go with drawing conclusions about the nation's education system using the SAT. Most notably, who takes it is largely self-selected, and growing numbers of people sitting for it--some of whom might not have bothered in the past--could lower scores without indicating the system is getting worse. That said, . . . no likely amount of self-selection or changing test-takers can account for the overwhelming lack of correlation between spending and scores.

But if the SAT is essentially an IQ test, you'd expect average scores to remain relatively constant, with variance based mostly on changes in the composition of the test-taking population, regardless of educational spending *or the quality of schools*.

To be sure, McCluskey notes that the same trend has been in evidence with the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which is supposed to test learned skills as opposed to innate cognitive ability. So maybe he's right after all--or maybe the NAEP isn't what it's advertised to be.