

Election Projections - How the Election is Called

BACKGROUND

- There are 6 major news outlets that make election projections: ABC, CBS, CNN, FOX, NBC, and the Associated Press (AP). They base their projections on a combination of polling data and raw votes.
- Until 2016, the 6 outlets, known as the “National Election Pool” (NEP), collaborated on polling. (Before 2000, this collaboration was called the “Voter News Service.”) In 2016, Fox and AP left the NEP. In 2018, the AP said it would use an [election voter survey in place of exit polls](#). According to [AEI](#), Fox is also using the AP’s approach.
- In September, [the National Task Force on Election Crises sent a letter](#) to NEP, the AP, and Fox asking about their election projections processes. Below are some of the findings from their responses.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT HOW THE OUTLETS WILL MAKE PROJECTIONS THIS YEAR

- **Absentee ballots make exit polling less reliable.** NEP’s model this year will expand phone polling (which was already done in states with high numbers of absentee voting). The AP will use [Votecast](#), a phone survey that was tested in 2018. The sample sizes of both polling methods are similar, but the AP’s survey is more evenly distributed than the NEP’s, which is over-indexed in swing states.
- **Decision desks are designed to be insulated from pressure** from various sources, including affiliates who are paying for the service, newsroom executives/bureau chiefs, and outside parties (e.g., candidates and political parties).
 - NEP members have policies that create independence for their decision desks.
 - [The AP doesn’t make projections](#), and instead only calls the race when a candidate no longer has a path to victory.
 - Based on reporting by the [NYT](#) and [statements](#) by the head of Fox’s decision desk, we are reasonably confident that Fox will make projections based solely on the numbers, not outside influence.
- **The outlets are planning to use “expected vote” percentages instead of “precincts reporting” to help provide context for initial results (which may shift as the night goes on).**
 - At a PEN America event, [CNN shared](#) that all of the outlets are planning to use “expected vote” percentages, which will also include estimates of outstanding absentee ballots.
 - [Fox shared](#) that it is working on data visualizations to help voters understand how much of the vote is still out and is planning to update its “expected vote” figures as we get a better sense of turnout on Election Day.

- We may still see a blue shift/red mirage as results come in because three swing states (PA, MI, WI) do not begin counting until Election Day. This could possibly undermine voter confidence.
- **Premature claims of victory remain our biggest concern.**
 - President Trump has already indicated that he plans to claim victory on Election Night, even if votes are still being counted.
 - Twitter and Facebook plan to label premature claims of victory and note that votes are still being counted.
 - At the PEN America event, the outlets said they would report on such claims but also provide context.
 - A Slate article explained that Fox’s Election Night coverage will be led by news journalists, not opinion contributors. (And it’s worth noting that opinion contributors were not included in Fox’s 2018 election coverage.)

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

- Blue shift/red mirage—when the initial returns seem to favor one party (i.e., Republicans), but then shift over time (to favor Democrats) as more votes are counted.
- Premature claims of victory.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- ✓ Be patient.
- ✓ Avoid sharing returns or graphics of results that don’t say how much of the vote still needs to be counted.
- ✓ Don’t amplify premature claims of victory, even to dispute them.
- ✓ Focus on the legal process of canvassing, counting, and certifying votes—as this process determines election outcomes, not the loudest voices on TV or social media.
- ✓ Share information only from trusted sources like state and local election administrators.