Towle's Guide to Watching Election Returns for 2020

For many years, I have been handing out my election predictions and "election watching guide" to students and colleagues.   While this is primarily designed to generate discussion in my Parties and Elections course (PS312), others have indicated that they like having my write-ups on election night. My goal is to educate, generate discussion about the processes of American politics, and to have some fun. Some years, I have done very well in my predictions. In other years (like 2016), there were outcomes that I didn't see coming.

This year, we may not have a traditional "election night." Because of the pandemic, states scrambled this year to come up with more ways to vote, including vote-by-mail and early voting. While the network processes will remain the same, it will probably take much longer to have accurate results.[1]

And this year, the turnout is the big complicating factor in both counting the votes and making predictions. Either because of the polarizing nature of President Trump or because of the multiple possible methods of voting, early indications are that the voter turnout rates could be their highest in decades. Some states will have more votes by Election Day this year than they did in all of 2016!

Do not be surprised if there are still races outstanding by the end of the week.

Generally speaking, the networks and the associated press (AP) will not make their announcements on the outcome of the election in a state until all the polls have closed in that state. For this reason, I include here a guide to the poll closing times, given in EASTERN STANDARD TIME, according to when the LAST polls close in each state.

7:00pm	GA, IN, KY, SC, VT, VA		9:00pm	AZ, CO, KS, LA, MI, MN, NE, NM, NY, ND, SD, TX, WI, WY
7:30pm	OH, NC, WV		10:00pm	IA, MT, NV, UT
8:00pm	AL, CT, DC, DE, FL, GA, IL, ME, MD, MA, MS, MO, NH, NJ, OK, PA, RI, TN		11:00pm	CA, ID, OR, WA
			12:00pm	HI
8:30pm	AR		1:00am	AK

To complicate matters, however, each state has their own laws about when they can start opening and/or counting mail-in or absentee ballots. Some states can process the ballots before or during Election Day, but some have to wait until after the polls close.

---

[1] The Associated Press, as always, will coordinates the reporting of the vote tallies as they are tabulated in various states and localities across the country. These tallies are continuously reported to the major news networks. Networks use a number of techniques to determine the winner of an election even prior to all the votes being counted. In some cases, when the outcome is very obvious, the networks may announce a winner with only a small fraction (or even none) of the vote having been tallied. To do this, they rely on exit polls. Most predictions rely in part exit polls conducted by the National Election Pool (NEP). However, Fox News and the AP conduct their own data for calling elections. Each network makes their own decision about whether or not to call an election based on their data.

Fortunately, for us, *FiveThirtyEight* writers Nathaniel Rakich and Elena Mejia have created a *fantastic website that tells us what time to expect actual results from each state!* Here is the link: https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/election-results-timing/

Are we going to see a repeat of 2016?

Like everyone else, I expected a Hillary Clinton victory in 2016. Could pollsters be wrong again and we see the same thing happen?

Yes and no.

Yes, pollsters can be wrong and Donald Trump could be re-elected. But, they won't be wrong for the same reasons and in the same places. Three factors were critical in 2016:

- Pollsters did not factor in education levels when constructing their likely electorates in 2016. For some reason, college educated people are more likely to answer polls. Thus, pollsters "over-polled" college educated people. Further, until 2016, there wasn't much of an educational difference in election preference for white Americans; that is, whites without a college degree tended to vote the same way as whites with a college degree. That changed in 2016. White Americans with college degrees preferred Clinton, and those without college degrees preferred Trump. This group was both under-sampled and not accounted for correctly. This year, the better pollsters (not all of them are any good), have corrected that error; some may have even over-compensated.
- There were a lot of late undecided voters in 2016. About 15% of voters had not made up their minds as of two weeks before the 2016 election, and a sizeable majority ended up choosing Trump. This year it was closer to the 5% to 7% range.
- And, to be sure, most of the "errors" were not really errors. That is, the outcomes for Trump were within pollster margins of error, but in the other direction than expected. And Trump's margins of victory in PA, WI, and MI were all under 1%.

Okay, so this year the polls will all be correct, right?

Not necessarily. *If there is a likely error this year, it is figuring out who is voting*. Each pollster has their own "likely voter" model that they use when reporting poll results. But it is clear from early voting that the turnout is going to be much higher than expected. Did the pollsters fully capture this level of turnout? I doubt it. So, this leaves a question: who are all the people who are voting who don't usually vote? What is motivating them? And will they vote the same way as everyone else?

Finally, what to watch for on election night!

Expect some "head fakes"

Florida and North Carolina law allows officials to start processing early ballots as they get them. This means that they should be able to create some very early counts that will be reported early. The early reports will show Joe Biden winning, because Democrats are more likely to vote early. As the in-person ballots are counted, expect the numbers to move more in Trump's favor. My guess is that heavily populated counties in Florida that are still processing mail-in ballots late in the evening will be the ones we have to watch to know the outcome of this important state. In North Carolina, if the results are razor-close we won't know for a week: NC accepts ballots as late as November 12. The good news? We probably will have a nearly complete result from Florida sometime during the night.

For Michigan and Pennsylvania, watch for the opposite pattern. Early votes will likely be for Trump. As the mail-in ballots are processed over the course of the next several days, Trump's lead will shrink or disappear. In Pennsylvania, expect lawsuits to stop the counting; Republicans have already been to court twice over the issue of how late PA can accept ballots that were sent but not received by Election Day.

Be patient: this could take all week.

We may have to wait until the end of the week. If that happens, expect a lot partisan jockeying about *which ballots not to count*. Republicans are already preparing for lawsuits in PA and MN.

Results to watch early:

Florida, Florida, Florida! If Donald Trump loses in Florida, it will be very hard (and almost impossible) for him to eke out enough votes to win the election. Here is a tip from David Wasserman of the Cook Political Report: watch *SUMPTER COUNTY* (the US county with the highest average age). If Donald Trump gets under 65% of the vote there, then he is not doing as well with older white voters and that could make just enough of a difference (in Florida and elsewhere). Another county to watch is *PINELLAS COUNTY*. This county is very similarly divided as the rest of the nation. In fact, since 1980 it has almost always voted the same way as the rest of country.

Georgia: Georgia has only voted for a Democrat for president once its native son Jimmy Carter last ran in 1980. Yet prominent pollsters have shown this as a close race this year. If Biden wins, he has a huge head start to winning the presidency.

Arizona and North Carolina: Here is what to watch. Both states will announce most votes by Tuesday evening. If either is extremely close, then we will have to wait until around Friday for the last votes to determine the outcome of the state. However, if one candidate has enough of a lead that the outstanding votes won't matter, then this state will tell us a lot. Basically, Trump probably will have a hard (but not impossible) time winning without Arizona or North Carolina; if he loses Florida and either Arizona or North Carolina on Tuesday, then there is no realistic path for him to be reelected.

<div align="center">

Okay, fine. You want my predictions

</div>

My state-by-state predictions are on the next pages.

Here is a summary of my predictions:

- **Joseph Biden will be elected president with 322 electoral votes to Donald Trump's 216.[2]**
- **Biden will win with 52.6% of the popular vote. Trump will have 44.3%.**
- **The Democrats will take over the Senate by gaining four senate seats, for a total of 51.[3]**
- **The Democrats will gain 8 seats in the House of Representatives, and will maintain control the House by a margin of 243 to 192.**

---

[2] Here is a funny coincidence. In 2016 I predicted 322 electoral votes for Hillary Clinton. The odd thing is that it was not the same combination of states that I have below, just the same total.

[3] See my comments on the last page, where I list seven other states where I expect very narrow wins for the Republican. If I'm wrong, that could give the Democrats a much wider margin.

PREDICTIONS – the Electoral College

State	Electoral votes for:	
	Donald Trump	Joseph Biden
Alabama	9	
Alaska	3	
Arizona		11
Arkansas	6	
California		55
Colorado		9
Connecticut		7
Delaware		3
DC		3
Florida	29	
Georgia		16
Hawaii		4
Idaho	4	
Illinois		20
Indiana	11	
Iowa	6	
Kansas	6	
Kentucky	8	
Louisiana	8	
Maine -- statewide		2
Maine -- districts		2
Maryland		10
Massachusetts		11
Michigan		16
Minnesota		10
Mississippi	6	
Missouri	10	
Montana	3	
Nebraska -- Statewide	2	
Nebraska -- districts	2	1

State	Electoral votes for:	
	Trump	Biden
Nevada		6
New Hampshire		4
New Jersey		14
New Mexico		5
New York		29
North Carolina		15
North Dakota	3	
Ohio	18	
Oklahoma	7	
Oregon		7
Pennsylvania		20
Rhode Island		4
South Carolina	9	
South Dakota	3	
Tennessee	11	
Texas	38	
Utah	6	
Vermont		3
Virginia		13
Washington		12
West Virginia	5	
Wisconsin		10
Wyoming	3	
Total	**216**	**322**

TOWLE ELECTORAL COLLEGE AND SENATE PREDICTIONS 2016

State	Democrat or Independent with Dems — Shaded below indicates a race THAT MIGHT BE worth watching. Italics below indicates an incumbent	Republican	Towle Predicts:	Shading in the cells below indicates a predicted party change.		
				Current Party	Predicted Party	Party Switch?
Alabama	*Doug Jones*	Tommy Tuberville	Tuberville	D	R	D➔R
Alaska	Al Gross (I)	*Daniel Sullivan*	Sullivan	R	R	
Arizona	Mark Kelly	*Martha McSally*	Kelly	R	D	R➔D
Arkansas		*Tom Cotton*	Cotton	R	R	
Colorado	John Hickenlooper	*Cory Gardner*	Hickenlooper	R	D	R➔D
Delaware	Chris Coons		Coons	D	D	
Georgia SPECIAL	Warnock, et al	*Kelly Loeffler*	RUN-OFF, to R	R	R	
Georgia	Jon Ossoff	*David Perdue*	RUN-OFF to R	R	R	
Idaho	Paulette Jordan	*Jim Risch*	Risch	R	R	
Illinois	*Dick Durbin*	Mark Curran	Durbin	D	D	
Iowa	Theresa Greenfield	*Joni Ernst*	Ernst	R	R	
Kansas	Barbara Bollier	Roger Marshall	Marshall	R	R	
Kentucky	Amy McGrath	*Mitch McConnell*	McConnell	R	R	
Louisiana	Adrian Perkins	*Bill Cassidy*	Cassidy	R	R	
Maine	Sara Gideon	*Susan Collins*	Gideon	R	D	R➔D
Massachusetts	*Ed Markey*	Kevin O'Connor	Markey	D	D	
Michigan	*Gary Peters*	John James	Peters	D	D	
Minnesota	*Tina Smith*	Jason Lewis	Smith	D	D	
Mississippi	Mike Espy	*Cindy Hyde-Smith*	Hyde-Smith	R	R	
Montana	Steve Bullock	*Steve Daines*	Bullock	R	D	R➔D
Nebraska	Chris Janicek	*Ben Sasse*	Sasse	R	R	
New Hampshire	*Jeanne Shaheen*	Corky Messner	Shaheen	D	D	
New Jersey	*Cory Booker*	Rik Mehta	Booker	D	D	
New Mexico	Ben Ray Lujan	Mark Ronchetti	Lujan	D	D	
North Carolina	Cal Cunningham	*Thom Tillis*	Cunningham	R	D	R➔D
Oklahoma	Abby Broyles	*James Inhofe*	Inhofe	R	R	
Oregon	*Jeff Merkley*	Jo Rae Perkins	Merkley	D	D	
Rhode Island	*Jack Reed*	Allen Waters	Reed	D	D	
South Carolina	Jaime Harrison	*Lindsey Graham*	Graham	R	R	
South Dakota	Daniel Ahlers	*Mike Rounds*	Rounds	R	R	
Tennessee	Marquita Bradsaw	*Bill Hagerty*	Hagerty	R	R	
Texas	MJ Hegar	*John Cornyn*	Cornyn	R	R	
Virginia	*Mark Warner*	Daniel Gade	Warner	D	D	
West Virginia	Paula Swearengin	*Shelley Moore Capito*		R	R	
Wyoming	Merav Ben-David	*Cynthia Lummis*		R	R	

Comments on some key senate races:

Alabama – This might be the only senate seats that the Democrats lose this year. (See Michigan for another possibility.) Incumbent Democrat Doug Jones was elected on a bit of a fluke, but this is Alabama and he is running against a former Auburn football coach. 'nuff said

Alaska – This race should be getting more attention. But part of the problem is that it is hard to do polling in Alaska. I think that the Republican incumbent Daniel Sullivan will keep his seat, but Independent Al Gross just might surprise. Alaskans are an independent lot. BTW, Gross has said that he will caucus with the Democrats, so this would be a Democratic pick-up. I don't think he will win, but this would be a surprise that won't surprise me.

Arizona – Democrat Mark Kelly versus incumbent Republican Martha McSally. McSally lost her most recent statewide race, and then got appointed to this seat. She embraced Trump tightly, and I don't think that will play well in the shifting sands of Arizona. Expect a Democratic pickup.

Colorado – The popular former governor Democrat John Hickenlooper is running against Republican incumbent Cory Gardner. I suspect that his will be a Democratic party pickup.

Georgia – there are actually two senate races here, but one is a "special" election. The other is between Jon Ossoff and Incumbent Republican David Perdue. Under Georgia law, a senator has to have 50% of the vote or there is a runoff. I expect Ossoff to come close to 50%, but not quite make it. If I'm right, I will guess that he will lose in the low-turnout runoff. Still, there is a possibility for a Democratic pickup, so watch this one closely.

Iowa – I expect this one to be close, with incumbent senator Jodi Ernst winning by a tiny margin. But watch this one. This could also be a Democratic surprise.

Kansas – why is this even here? Kansas is a reliably Republican state. But the Democrats have run a better campaign and their candidate Barbara Bollier will come close. If it is a great night for the Democrats, tune in. Otherwise, expect the Republican Roger Marshall to win.

Maine – Susan Collins will be the last of the New England Republicans, I'm guessing. She has been in the Senate for 24 years, but doesn't quite fit Maine, the Republicans, or the Democrats. I expect Maine Speaker of the House Sara Gideon to win.

Michigan – if the Republicans have a good night, this is a state where they could pick up a senate seat against Democratic incumbent Gary Peters. I don't think they will, but watch this one if Republicans are doing well overall.

Mississippi – I don't know why no one is watching this race! It is closer than what we usually see in Mississippi. If the Democrats are having a phenomenal night, Democratic challenger Mike Espy might just beat incumbent Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith. I don't think he will, but as with Alaska, this would be a surprise that won't surprise me.

Montana – Okay…I know that Republican incumbent Steve Daines is leading in the polls. But Montana has a history of surprises, including their last Senate race that went to a Democrat. The Democratic challenger Steve Bullock is the Governor of the state. I predict that he wins.

North Carolina – what a mess. Thom Tillis was in trouble for being too close to Trump in a "purple" state. The Democrats had a squeaky-clean golden child candidate in Marine Cal Cunningham….until his extra-marital affair was discovered.   At the same time, Tillis caught covid-19 at the Rose Garden event, which added to the sense that he is too close to the president. I think Cunningham will win despite his scandal. Tillis is no longer in step with NC.

South Carolina – Incumbent Republican Lindsey Graham went from being a John McCain wannabe and side-kick to Trump's most loyal supporter. He is in serious trouble as a result. I'm guessing that he survives, but this would be another "non-surprise" if he loses to Democrat Jaime Harrison.

Texas – why is this state here? Well, Democratic challenge MJ Hegar has been running closer to incumbent John Cornyn than anyone expected. To make it even more complicated, the turnout in Texas this year has been HUGE! (As of this writing, their early vote is already bigger than their entire 2016 vote….with three days to go.) What does that mean? I'm not sure, but I think it means don't count out Hegar yet. I'm calling it for Cornyn, but watch this one.