

Of all major polling organisations, Gallup got the result most spectacularly wrong – with Romney ahead. Here's likely why.

- - [Harry J Enten](#)
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 - Gallup was very wrong.
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Their final poll had [Mitt Romney](#) defeating President Obama by [1 percentage point](#), after giving Romney a lead as high as [7pt](#) during the final month of the campaign. It seems now their final poll could end up being [nearly 5pt](#) off the mark.

To understand what went wrong, let's talk about where Gallup *didn't* go astray.

First, 50% of Gallup's respondents in its [nightly tracking poll](#) were reached on cellphones, so they weren't missing cellphone owners (who, as a whole, tend to lean Democratic). This 50% actually has to be weighted down to be closer to the [one-third of Americans](#) who have only cell service, as in the [network exit poll](#).

In the National Journal, Steven Shepard noted in a [great article](#), which sums up the general critiques of Gallup, that the firm had fewer young voters than the exits. Gallup's final poll had 18 to 29 year-olds only at 13% of the electorate, as opposed to the 19% of the [exit polls](#), which seems like a huge difference considering that young voters went for Obama by 23 percentage points.

Believe it or not, this youth voter disparity is likely *not* the cause of Gallup's problems. Gallup's 2008 electorate had young voters at only 14%, while the [exits were at 18](#). As I've pointed out in the past, exit polls [usually have more young voters](#) than pre-election data.

This year, for instance, Pew Research saw young voters drop from 15% of the electorate in [2008](#) to 13% in [2012](#), the same as Gallup. That didn't stop Pew from projecting Obama to win by 3pt – very close to the final margin. Two other criticisms seem to be closer to the mark.

Gallup's likely voter sample had white voters at 78% of the electorate. The issue here isn't that Gallup had more whites as a percentage of the electorate than the exit polls, which is usually the case for [pre-election surveys](#). Gallup's racial breakdown problem has more to do with the fact that this 78% matches 2008. Although other pre-election polls also had a higher percentage of whites than the exits, they all showed a drop in the white percentage of the electorate from 2008.

The ABC/Washington Post, for example, had whites at 78% of the electorate in 2008, just like Gallup, but they showed whites creeping down to between 74.5% and 75% in 2012. That's a drop of 3-3.5pt. Had Gallup shown a decrease as the ABC/Washington Post poll did, Obama would have led in their final poll by 2pt, instead of trailing by 1pt.

Why did Gallup have too many whites? It seems the most likely answer at this point that Gallup's likely voter screen cuts off too many minority registered voters. Remember that likely voters are those registered voters who a pollster thinks are ones that will come out and vote. Gallup's final *registered voter* poll had Obama defeating Romney by 3pt – near perfect.

It probably doesn't come as much surprise that Gallup's registered voter model was, by my calculation, near where the likely voter sample should have been, based on other pre-election firms' samples: about 74-74.5% whites.

Gallup's wide gap between the registered and likely voter screens has bitten them in the past, as well. In 2010, Gallup's final [registered voter](#) generic congressional ballot had [Republicans](#) leading by 4pt. The [likely voter](#) result gave Republicans a 15pt lead. The ultimate national House vote was Republicans by 6.6pt. The registered voter result, then, too, was far more accurate.

Advocates against the likely voter screen as the culprit might point out that Gallup and Pew employ very similar likely voter screens. Pew also had a 4pt difference between their registered and likely voter results. The difference is that Pew's registered voter screen had Obama leading by 7pt, instead of Gallup's 3pt.

It's not a bad counterargument, yet I find some fault with this line of thinking. Gallup's registered voter universe has the same percentage of whites as Pew and most other [pre-election likely voter samples](#). Gallup's registered voter sample, therefore, seems to be acting like a likely voter screen in terms of the ethnic makeup of the electorate. Why should their likely voter screen be more likely to slice off more Democratic-leaning minorities, given that Gallup theoretically has already cut off the ones unlikely to vote (which left a registered voter universe of as-likely-to-vote whites and nonwhites)?

Just look at other pollsters. The [final surveys](#) from CNN/ORC, Ipsos, and YouGov all had the 2pt difference between registered and likely voters. Fox News only had a 1pt registered and likely voter gap.

And look at Gallup itself. There was only a [1pt difference](#) between Gallup's likely and registered voter 2012 generic ballot. Given that the overall racial breakdown of the vote in the congressional and presidential ballots was pretty much identical in [other surveys](#), the generic ballot and presidential race differences in Gallup are staggering. Had Gallup's presidential poll seen the same 1pt gap, it would have had a final margin of Obama winning by 2pt – the same margin as my hypothetical adjustment above to bring Gallup's racial breakdown into line with other pre-election surveys.

Thanks to this small likely and registered voter gap on the generic ballot, Gallup's final 2012 likely voter generic ballot was perfect, with the [Democrats](#) winning by 1pt. Applying a likely voter adjustment of 1pt to a higher 5pt in 2010, which is more conceivable in a lower minority and youth turnout midterm election, instead of 11pt, would have also made their 2010 final likely voter survey more accurate than the registered voter numbers. This suggests that a likely voter screen isn't a bad thing; it just can't be as tight.

Alas, I can't say my analysis about what caused Gallup's problems is conclusive. There will be more investigations in future days, both on Gallup and on other pollsters who may not be trusted next time around. I can only hope that all pollsters strive to make their data as accurate as it can be.

[Note: Gallup has in the past had an issue where the likely voter screen was vulnerable to changes in voter enthusiasm. That caused [wild swings](#) in the likely voter survey during the campaign, even as the registered voter sample stayed static. This year, the gap between the registered and likely voters was consistent through the campaign.]