A poll is a *range*, not a single prediction

One mechanism of elections, examined in depth — what a poll's margin of error actually means, and why it's routinely dropped from coverage.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

How This Guide Works

This is part of **Incognati Civics**, applying the field-guide format to election administration and mechanics — the procedural layer beneath the outcome, examined the same way regardless of which party or candidate it involves. Each specimen goes deep on one mechanism, with official records, court citations, and peer-reviewed or nonpartisan scholarship listed in full on the references page.

Margin of Error Ignored in Polling

Margo Erroris

Governing precedent / case 2016 **Status** Studied extensively after state-level polling misses

OBSERVED SPECIMEN — 2016 GENERAL ELECTION POLLING REVIEW

National polls in 2016 were, on average, close to the final result within a typical margin of error — but polls in several individual states, including Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania, understated support for one candidate by more than the reported margin allowed for. A formal review by the American Association for Public Opinion Research found **state-level, not national, polling** *was the larger source of error, driven partly by undersampling non-college-educated voters.*

THE HOOK

A single headline number — "Candidate X leads by 3 points" — reads as a precise prediction, dropping the statistical range that number actually represents.

THE MECHANISM

Every poll's reported margin of error defines a range (commonly ±3–4 points at a 95% confidence level) within which the true value is expected to fall — a 3-point lead inside a 4-point margin of error is a statistical toss-up, not a clear lead.

Field mark: before treating a poll number as a prediction, check the margin of error and whether the gap between candidates is actually larger than it — many reported "leads" fall entirely inside the margin.

See the full references page for complete citations.

References

every source checkable at the link provided; DOIs given where the source has one

PEER-REVIEWED / ASSOCIATION SOURCE

American Association for Public Opinion Research, "An Evaluation of 2016 Election Polls in the U.S.," May 2017.

https://aapor.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/An-Evaluation-of-2016-Election-Polls-in-the-U.S.pdf

Official AAPOR ad hoc committee report; no single DOI assigned (association report, not a journal article).

REFERENCE SOURCE

Pew Research Center, "Understanding the 2016 Election Polls" methodology explainer.

https://www.pewresearch.org/methods/

Nonpartisan explainer on margin of error and confidence intervals in election polling.

REFERENCE SOURCE

AAPOR, "Margin of Error" glossary entry.

https://aapor.org/standards-and-ethics/disclosure-standards/

Official definition and disclosure standard for reporting a poll's margin of error.

Closing Plate · Field Method

Reading This Mechanism: A Gut Check

four questions before a headline changes what you think happened at the polls

1. **Find the margin of error**
   Every credible poll reports one — check it before treating a lead as decisive.

2. **Compare gap to margin**
   If the gap between candidates is smaller than the margin of error, it's a statistical toss-up.

3. **Check the sample and level**
   Confidence level (usually 95%) and sample size both affect how much weight one poll should carry.

4. **Look at multiple polls**
   A polling average smooths out individual-poll noise better than any single number can.

INCOGNATI CIVICS

The Series Continues

This is Specimen No. 10 of the Elections section within Incognati Civics. The full queue of twelve specimens is listed on the cover. This section joins "How Federal Laws Actually Get Created" within Civics, with local government, official data reporting, and institutional communications planned beyond it. The Incognati Atlas catalogs the underlying patterns across all of it.

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