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FIRST PAST THE POLL:
A BLOG ABOUT POLITICAL STATISTICS

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Arts
with Mahurin Honors College Graduate Distinction
at Western Kentucky University

By

Michael Bradley Wascher

May 2020

CE/T Committee:

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Dr. Craig T. Cobane

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ABSTRACT

This Capstone Experience project details my efforts to become a political data journalist. I took the first major step in August 2018, starting *First Past the Poll*, my politics blog. For three semesters, this website was frequently updated with nonpartisan reports on the latest elections, deep dives on long-term polling trends, and commentary on political numbers more broadly. Hoping to buck the trend of the stodgy prose prevalent throughout politics, my stories combined academic rigor with accessible writing.

As I began to find my footing in the field, *First Past the Poll* put me in the position to become a part-time Contributing Analyst for *Inside Elections*, the nonpartisan newsletter based in Washington, D.C. During my final months of undergraduate study at Western Kentucky University, I've professionally published new articles on the company website and developed my skills even further.

The following thesis reflects upon and summarizes these experiences, providing original insight on the discipline and interspersed nuggets of advice for future electoral numberphiles.

I dedicate my thesis to the 2019-2020 Western Kentucky University Forensics team, whose competitive season was cut short due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This program's passion for speech and debate drew me to the Hill four years ago — and the intellectual edification and lifelong friendships will make it hard to leave. Fours up!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank those at Western Kentucky University who made this all possible. Dr. Turner, your guidance over these past two years, alongside the opportunities you created, have invariably improved my abilities as an analyst of polls and politics. Dr. Lasley, although I never took an “actual” class with you, and I’m not sure we formally met until my senior year, I honestly don’t know what I would have done without your expertise as I navigated this thesis, graduation, graduate school, and beyond. Dr. Cobane, your eminence in the campus’s academic community — and your vocal support of the Forensics program — remain unparalleled, and I’m honored to have you sit as the third reader on this thesis committee. Further gratitude is extended to the WKU Mahurin Honors College, the WKU Department of Political Science, and all the professors and faculty members who helped me find my passion.

Professionally, the biggest thank-you goes to my editor and boss at *Inside Elections*, Nathan Gonzales: I’ve respected your work for years, and I’ll forever be humbled by the chance to publish my pieces and begin my career. Thanks also to those who initially shared my blog and provided advice as I began posting; that early support from people in the profession gave me the confidence to continue.

VITA

EDUCATION

Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY B.A. in Political Science, Minor in Applied Statistics Mahurin Honors College Graduate Honors Capstone: <i>First Past the Poll: A Blog About Political Statistics</i>	May 2020
Saint James School, Montgomery, AL	May 2016

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Inside Elections w/ Nathan L. Gonzales Contributing Analyst	March 2020– Present
Foundation Briefs, LLC Current Affairs Analyst	Aug. 2018– June 2019

AWARDS & HONORS

Summa Cum Laude, WKU	May 2020
Outstanding First Year Student, WKU Forensics Team	May 2017

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FEATURED ORIGINAL WORKS
(IN ORDER OF CITATION)

Appearing on *First Past the Poll*:

“House Democrats are Turning Against Nancy Pelosi. Most of Them are in Red Districts”	August 13, 2018
“Generic Ballot Polls Are All Over the Place”	August 17, 2018
“Races to Watch: Ohio Governor”	October 18, 2018
“Races to Watch: Virginia’s 5th Congressional District”	October 25, 2018
“Quick Thoughts: Vulnerable GOP Senate Seats Are Seeming Less So”	October 16, 2019
“The Supposed Power of Early Campaigns”	January 10, 2019
“Chart: Comparing 2020 Democrats’ Twitter Followers to Their Polling Numbers”	March 28, 2019
“It Makes Sense That Joe Biden’s Base Makes No Sense”	May 14, 2019
“Breaking Down Pete Buttigieg’s Polling Gains”	April 12, 2019
“Amy Klobuchar Outperforms Her Benchmarks, But So Does Everyone Else”	February 6, 2019
“So Far, Early 2020 Polls Paint an Uphill Battle for Bernie Sanders”	June 5, 2019
“The Three Polling Numbers That Look Really Good for Elizabeth Warren”	September 23, 2019

Appearing on *Inside Elections*:

“Lesson Learned? The State of Statewide Polling”	March 25, 2020
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FEATURED ORIGINAL FIGURES
(IN ORDER OF CITATION)

Appearing on *First Past the Poll*:

- | | |
|---|-------------------|
| Figure 1: Aggregate of polls for the 2018 race in California's 48th Congressional district. | October 31, 2018 |
| Figure 2: DW-NOMINATE scores, tracking ideological voting patterns for members of Congress, of rumored 2020 Democratic candidates for president. | February 17, 2019 |
| Figure 3: Time-series chart demonstrating how some 2020 candidates received larger post-announcement polling bumps than others. | February 22, 2019 |

Appearing on *Inside Elections*:

- | | |
|---|-------------|
| Figure 4: Polling aggregates for the 2020 general election, as of early May. | May 1, 2020 |
|---|-------------|

SECTION ONE: KEY ACTORS IN POLITICAL DATA JOURNALISM

Like most who caught the political bug, it happened to me in an election year — 2016, to be exact. My earliest memory of finding unique intrigue in polling data happened after I kept the TV on Fox News immediately following one of their televised GOP primary debates (either the first or the seventh, I don't remember). Their post-debate coverage would be my first time seeing the network's on-air pollster, Frank Luntz, conduct one of his live focus groups. He'd show a handful of voters a clip of Marco Rubio sparring with Donald Trump, track their feelings in real-time, and update a jittery trendline displayed prominently across the bottom of the screen; it was unnecessarily ostentatious, yet undeniably fascinating.

Throughout the 2016 cycle, I began seeking out other electoral data points, eventually — and inevitably — stumbling upon *FiveThirtyEight*. This site, founded in 2008, is considered a standard-bearer of data journalism. Founder Nate Silver specifically set the publication apart by using novel statistical techniques, including weights to pollsters based on their previous predictive performance, as well as the broader application of sabermetrics, or baseball statistics, to politics (Sternbergh, 2008). Following an acquisition by *The New York Times* in 2010, the site also became famous for its data visualizations and accompanying reporting. After all, high-quality graphs and charts are crucial for covering events through a data-centric lens, setting high standards for clarity and aesthetics alike (Graham, 2020).

When *FiveThirtyEight* relaunched under ESPN in 2014, the *Times* responded with its dedicated data journalism offshoot *The Upshot* and hired a Nate of its own, political

analyst and polling expert Nate Cohn (Pompeo, 2015). In the half-decade since its incorporation, *The Upshot* has now matured into an important part of the newspaper's coverage and an indispensable resource for number-driven reporting. For the 2018 midterm elections, the division partnered with Siena College to provide interactive gold-standard polls that updated as new results trickled in — an idea lauded by fellow data journalism outlets (Silver 2018).

While *FiveThirtyEight* and *The Upshot* have seemingly cornered the market on rigid quantitative analysis, both are comparatively new players in the political prediction arena. Years before forecasting models regularly made front-page headlines, three other organizations influenced how readers perceive the competitiveness of any given election: *The Cook Political Report*, *Inside Elections*, and *Sabato's Crystal Ball*. This trio — founded by Charlie Cook, Stuart Rothenberg, and Larry J. Sabato, respectively — comprises the three primary “race raters.” These experts are more reminiscent of traditional political analysts than pure number whizzes, as they combine both quantitative and qualitative metrics to assess every contest for House, Senate, governor and president (Marx, 2011). Considered predictors range from fundraising totals to one-on-one interviews with candidates, all in the aim of gaining a holistic-yet-specific picture of upcoming elections.

Finally, many additional individuals and outlets have inspired my blog. Journalists including Harry Enten of CNN (and formerly *FiveThirtyEight*), as well as Ariel Edwards-Levy of *The Huffington Post*, manage to blend in-depth analysis with personality and wit, adding special appeal to their work primarily centering on polls. Moreover, archives on sites such as Ballotpedia and RealClearPolitics provide seemingly

endless troves of data to analyze and history to learn, allowing anyone to be an expert so long as they have the time and drive. By reading the content from these reporters and familiarizing myself with these online tools, I eventually developed a concrete idea of my own website's purpose.

SECTION TWO: MY OWN WORK

Approximately twelve months of closely (and silently) following politics gave me the motivation to begin a blog in the summer of 2018, just before my third year of undergraduate study at Western Kentucky University. After acquiring a basic Wordpress membership and deciding on a nice design template, I registered the domain firstpastthepoll.com — an obvious portmanteau of “first past the post,” the winner-take-all electoral system in the United States, and “poll.” My first-ever article on *First Past the Poll* was published on August 13, 2018 and detailed Democratic leadership disagreements in the run-up to the midterm elections.¹ My second story, an explainer on generic ballot polls, came out just four days later.²

As November's contests neared closer, new posts were released at a frequency nearing three times a week — there would be over 500 Senate, House, and Gubernatorial elections on November 6th, a lot of ground to cover. During this time, I published a “Races to Watch” series, highlighting notable down-ballot races from Ohio's governor to Virginia's seventh Congressional district; these were supplemented by occasional “Quick

¹ “House Democrats are Turning Against Nancy Pelosi. Most of Them are in Red Districts,” *First Past the Poll*, August 13, 2018.

² “Generic Ballot Polls Are All Over the Place,” *First Past the Poll*, August 17, 2018.

Thoughts” updates.^{3:4:5} In most posts, I designed self-made graphics, such as tables of polling aggregates.

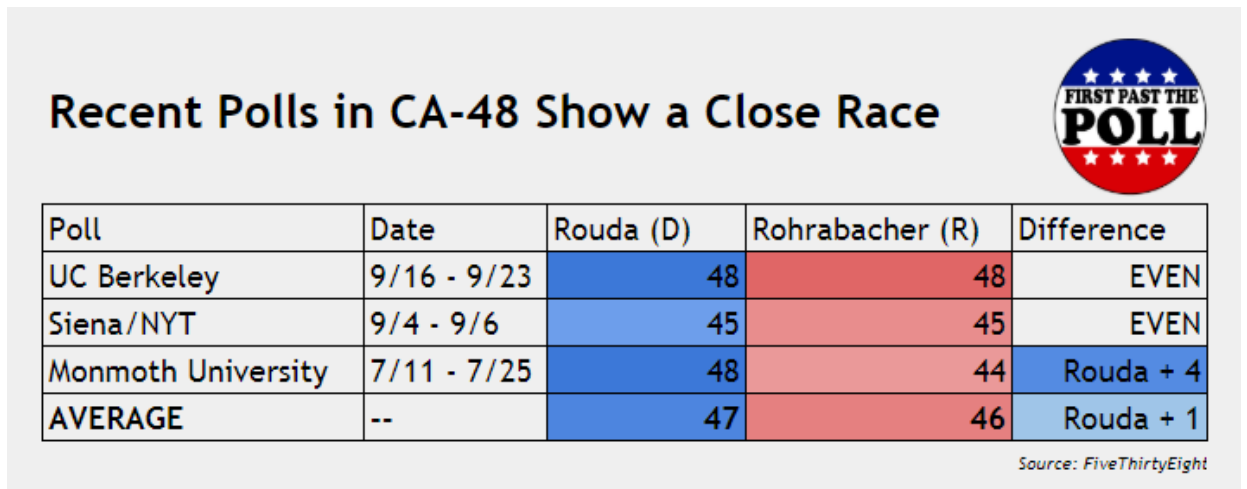


Figure 1: Aggregate of polls for the 2018 race in California’s 48th Congressional district

This data was visualized using several different software packages. During my time at WKU, I became familiar with four major statistical programs — R, Stata, SPSS, and SAS — and improved my facility with spreadsheet editors Microsoft Excel and Google Sheets. On top of building skills via coursework, I invested personal time in learning how to use R and Excel for political data purposes, relying upon free instructional courses, self-sought textbooks, and online advice forums.

³ “Races to Watch: Ohio Governor,” First Past the Poll, October 18, 2018.

⁴ “Races to Watch: Virginia’s 5th Congressional District,” First Past the Poll, October 25, 2018.

⁵ “Quick Thoughts: Vulnerable GOP Senate Seats Are Seeming Less So,” First Past the Poll, October 16, 2018.

As my focus for *First Past the Poll* shifted to the 2020 Democratic primary, I had the opportunity to expand my analysis to the battle for the Oval

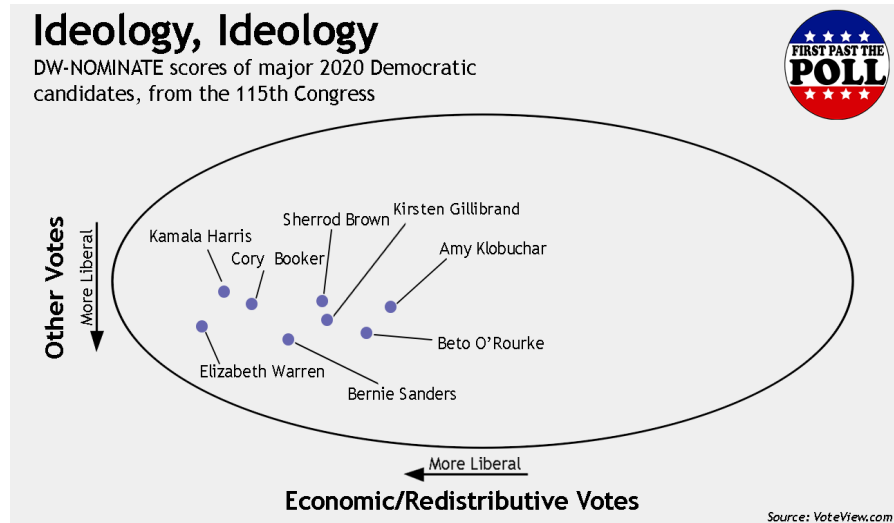


Figure 2: DW-NOMINATE scores, tracking ideological voting patterns for members of Congress, of rumored 2020 Democratic candidates for president

Office. Word counts doubled in length to address large-scale political myths in articles including “The Supposed Power of Early Campaigns” and “Comparing 2020 Democrats’ Twitter Followers to Their Polling Numbers.”^{6;7} I additionally profiled presidential hopefuls such as Joe Biden, Pete Buttigieg, Amy Klobuchar, Bernie Sanders, and Elizabeth Warren.^{8;9;10;11;12} In terms of data visualization and statistical rigor, these were my most demanding articles up until that point, as I ventured past traditional tables and experimented with time-series and other two-axis charts.

⁶ “The Supposed Power of Early Campaigns,” *First Past the Poll*, January 10, 2019.

⁷ “Chart: Comparing 2020 Democrats’ Twitter Followers to Their Polling Numbers,” *First Past the Poll*, March 28, 2019.

⁸ “It Makes Sense That Joe Biden’s Base Makes No Sense,” *First Past the Poll*, May 14, 2019.

⁹ “Breaking Down Pete Buttigieg’s Polling Gains,” *First Past the Poll*, April 12, 2019.

¹⁰ “Amy Klobuchar Outperforms Her Benchmarks, But So Does Everyone Else,” February 6, 2019.

¹¹ “So Far, Early 2020 Polls Paint an Uphill Battle for Bernie Sanders,” *First Past the Poll*, June 5, 2019.

¹² “The Three Polling Numbers That Look Really Good for Elizabeth Warren,” *First Past the Poll*, September 23, 2019.

Around this time, I also began taking my political takes to Twitter. The decision came after building up the courage to reach out to approximately a dozen different data journalists and political experts — those who responded seemed to all agree that social media was

practically mandatory.

Indeed,

Twitter

provides

access to

breaking

news and

reactionary

opinions otherwise not available, to the degree that some of my blog posts cited tweets just as frequently as news reports or academic papers. The site is surprisingly effective at building good writing habits for parsimony and clarity as well.

More critically, Twitter paves the easiest path for connecting directly with the individuals and organizations I had long respected. Apart from threads about historical polling trends or commentary on data journalism’s trajectory as a field, I tweeted new articles on *First Past the Poll*, tagging as many journalists as I could in the process. This gratuitous self-promotion eventually led to a handful of helpful conversations with those professionals: some shared my content, while others followed me outright. Though my numbers are still small in comparison, @BradWascher now garners an average of over

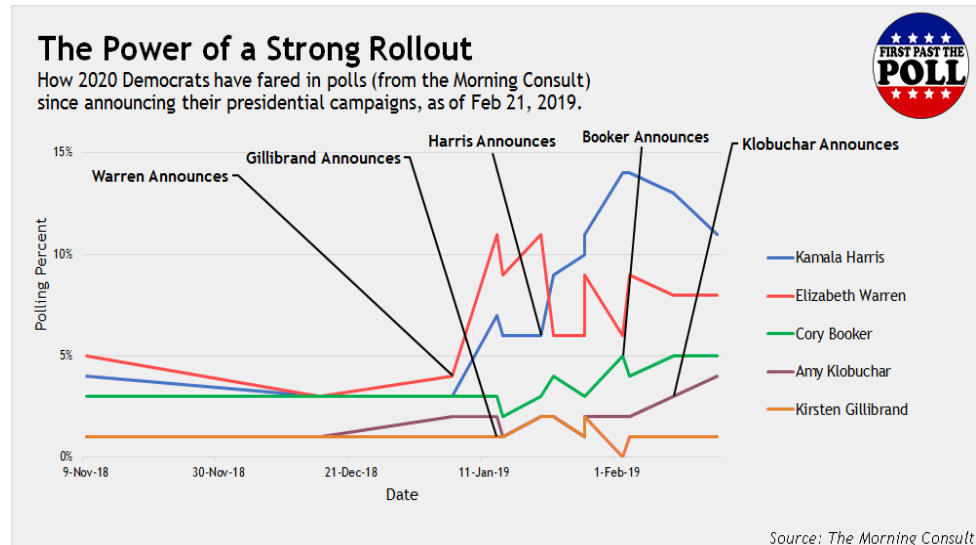


Figure 3: Time-series chart demonstrating how some 2020 candidates received larger post-announcement polling bumps than others.

20,000 monthly interactions, and over 40,000 have seen the blog’s content.

Thanks to these joint efforts on *First Past the Poll* and Twitter, I eventually came into contact with *Inside Elections*, the aforementioned race-rating publication headed by Nathan Gonzales and founded by Stuart Rothenberg. After sending in my application (and completing a nerve-racking interview), I was fortunate enough to join their team as a Contributing Analyst in March 2020. My first story for the site was a retrospective look at state-level polls in 2016 and 2020.¹³ As a regular columnist, I also assist in calculating the Baseline index, a score developed by *Inside Elections* that tracks how districts and states tend to vote; in Gonzales’s words, Baseline “captures a clear picture of a congressional district or state’s political performance by accounting for all federal and state executive election results” (Gonzales, 2019). Overall, my contributions here function as the logical extension to my blog, refining and professionalizing along the way.

Snapshot in Time: 2020 General Election Polling Averages
(as of May 1, 2020)



What was the national polling average...	Date	Margin	Biden %	Trump %	Difference in Margin: Today – Then
Today	5/1/20	Biden +6.2	48.2	42	---
2 Weeks Ago	4/17/20	Biden +5.5	47.3	41.8	Biden +0.7
1 Month Ago	4/1/20	Biden +6.1	50.4	44.3	Biden +0.1
3 Months Ago	2/1/20	Biden +5.4	50.2	44.8	Biden +0.8
6 Months Ago	11/1/19	Biden +8	50.7	42.7	Trump +1.8
1 Year Ago	5/1/19	Biden +6.4	47.2	40.8	Trump +0.2

Highlights	Date	Margin	Biden %	Trump %
Biden’s ↑ Support	9/18/19	Biden +11.8	52.9	41.1
Biden’s ↓ Support	4/13/20	Biden +5.5	47.3	41.8
Trump’s ↑ Support	2/21/20	Biden +4.8	50.4	45.6
Trump’s ↓ Support	9/19/19	Biden +11.7	52.7	41
Widest Margin	9/18/19	Biden +11.8	52.9	41.1
Thinnest Margin (tie)	1/13/20	Biden +4	48.2	44.2
Thinnest Margin (tie)	1/23/20	Biden +4	48.5	44.5

Average in Key States	Total	Margin	Biden %	Trump %
Arizona	13	Biden +4.4	48.6	44.2
Florida	15	Biden +3.2	46.5	43.3
North Carolina	15	Trump +0.3	46.7	47
Wisconsin	15	Biden +2.7	46.7	44
Michigan	16	Biden +5.5	46.5	41
Pennsylvania	10	Biden +6.7	48	41.3
Average	84	Biden +3.7	47.2	43.5

Sources: RealClearPolitics, Polls

Figure 4: Polling aggregates for the 2020 general election, as of early May.

¹³ “Lesson Learned? The State of Statewide Polling,” *Inside Elections*, March 25, 2020.

SECTION THREE: REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION

The goals of *First Past the Poll* were primarily to hone my skills and secondarily to build a portfolio. No matter whom I asked — journalists, professors, friends — the consensus agreed that a blog was both prudent and practical. They left out a third adjective: fun.

Candidly, when this industry isn't cutthroat, it is demanding. Distinct from more regimented vocations, the workload of political analysis ebbs and flows with the electoral season's breaking news. That ceaseless influx of information is enough to appease even the most curious minds. In some regards, data journalism is a conglomeration of the core subjects in primary and secondary school: writing aptitude is undoubtedly bolstered, mathematics are represented through the constant appearance of statistics, historical and civic knowledge are prerequisites for giving broader context to new developments, and the scientific method is used to tackle virtually any article. This is an exciting endeavor for those interested in creative, interdisciplinary research.

All that said, not everything in my personal journey has panned out perfectly. Notice, for instance, a paucity of internships: I applied for positions throughout my third year of college but received only rejections. Journalism places a high emphasis on real-world experience, and by waiting to start blogging until halfway through college, I had yet to even step foot in a newsroom. To make up for my less-conventional C.V., guidance from WKU faculty members proved invaluable. My advisor, Dr. Joel Turner, allowed me to host the Political Science Department's podcast, as well as explore and interpret university survey data. Opportunities from my instructors opened countless new doors, turning one of my biggest setbacks into a bonus.

Eighteen months and hundreds of thousands of words later, I'm still finding my voice as a political data journalist. After surveying the work of others, I recognize the value of being academic but still accessible, a benchmark I set for every story. With this reflection comes a fuller understanding of my specific strengths and interests: I'm clearly fond of public opinion polls, and I also enjoy learning about election forecast modeling, American electoral history, and media consumption habits. As my interests change over time, though, one truth stays constant — what was born as a vague ambition inspired by Fox News focus groups has morphed into a hobby, passion, and career.

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