

## Trump, Truth and Polling

With the dust still to settle, this morning my friends asked me for my opinion about what the US election means for us as a society and for the polling industry. I'm posting a slightly cleaned up version of my email back to them because they encouraged me to turn my thoughts into a blog post, so I did.

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**From:** Phil Riggins <[phil.riggins@bandrcollective.com](mailto:phil.riggins@bandrcollective.com)>

**Date:** Friday, November 6, 2020 at 10:49 AM

**To:** ...

**Subject:** Re: Twisting in the wind

First, if Trump does lose, I think he will go off into the wilderness and come back, resurrected in 2024, like an old TV series that they think still has life in it. Americans like a good comeback story. He may go on a diet. He may shave his head like Col. Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*. He may go on the View with Whoopi Goldberg. Who knows.

I think the bigger issue is that Trump isn't the problem. Society is. Both sides today think there is one truth and one set of correct values or views of reality. We convince ourselves that our view is the right one because to admit most of what's going on in the world is a big fat unknown is too frightening. We can't know for sure what is really happening on the other side of town let alone around the other side of the world. How can we know what the truth is? Twitter accentuates every minor ripple into major news. Technology has given us a false sense of our own power over the void. The truth is really, really hard to know. Factchecking is a prime example of people trying to create new ways to know the truth because our old ways are discredited. We want the truth, but we can't handle the fact that truth is elusive. Life is about ambiguity and uncertainty. And that's not easy for people to cope with.

We have gotten to this weird place where everyone has chosen a side, including the people who were supposed to be the arbiters of truth, and people can't accept there is more than one way to be. Trump is just the grifter who took advantage of this. We think people who we disagree with are morons and deplorables. We have lost the ability to just disagree and accept that we don't know it all. That's why we have politics. Politics is how we come together to create a reality we can live in together. We don't have to agree on everything, but we can at least agree on some things. Now, without trust and acceptance of difference, even that reality is under threat.

With respect to the pollsters and how they did this election cycle: the day of reckoning for the industry has been coming for a while. I think the credibility of political polling is increasingly suspect. Polling has changed a lot due to online panels of paid poll takers and the fact that people don't trust institutions. With political polling in the US at least I think people lie, tell you what you want to hear, or just stay quiet. People use their common sense to get through the day. If they really are a Trump supporter, they may think that if they admit it people will criticize them or worse. At the moment, we don't tolerate difference well (see above) and common sense tells people to keep their mouths shut.

Truly listening to people, bringing them into the conversation, is more valid and vital for good decision making. It works. You have to create a safe place where people don't feel judged or feel they have to watch what they say. Understanding their reality means checking your reality at the door and just listening.

It's good that political pollsters get a good swift kick. They deserve it. The sector needs to take a long, hard look at itself. Just like in the last cycle, there will be a review of what happened and the pollsters will say "we didn't do so bad after all". But I believe the damage is done. Again. The pollsters called a blue wave, just like in 2016, and this time Trump came close to upending Biden's train. Hindsight will be 20/20 as always. We see what we want to see. Pollsters will adjust their models and keep asking the same questions. We will let them because we need something to hang on to. In these dark times, we will take any "truth" we can find. There is a better way, but I will save that conversation until we can have it over a beer.

And with that I had better start working 😊

Stay sane.