

Republicans deluded by ‘skewed’ polls

By Eugene Robinson



Conservative activist circles are abuzz with a new conspiracy theory: Polls showing President Obama with a growing lead over Mitt Romney are deliberately being skewed by the Liberal Mainstream Media so Republicans will be disheartened and stay home on Election Day.

This is denial and self-delusion but not of the harmless kind. It’s a false narrative that encourages the Republican Party to take the wrong lessons from this election, no matter the outcome.

The whole atmosphere surrounding the presidential race is different since the party conventions. The Obama campaign has begun warning supporters about the perils of overconfidence. Romney, meanwhile, wages a daily battle to keep the words “beleaguered” and “embattled” from latching onto his candidacy.

The reason for the change is that polls indicate Obama’s once-slim lead has grown beyond the margin of error. A Pew Research Center national poll last week showed Obama up by eight points. The most recent National Journal poll showed the president with a seven-point lead. On Wednesday, even the Gallup daily tracking poll — which has consistently measured the race as extremely close — had Obama up by six.

The Rasmussen daily tracking poll, however, saw the race as still tied. Why the anomaly? Because the Rasmussen firm weights its sample to achieve what it believes to be a representative balance of Democrats and Republicans. While other pollsters also ask about party affiliation, most of them weight their samples to reflect the nation’s demographic profile and do not seek a specific balance between R’s and ■.

That’s the discrepancy that gives rise to the conspiracy theories. The polls that show Obama with a substantial lead also show an electorate comprising substantially more Democrats than Republicans. It stands to reason, say the theorists, that these surveys would overestimate the vote for Obama and underestimate the vote for Romney; only if you adjust the results to more equally balance party affiliation can you get an accurate picture.

Those dastardly liberals in the media — and, apparently, in most of the major polling organizations — must have decided to give this false picture of the race to discourage conservatives and make them resigned to an Obama victory.

“They’re trying to wrap this up before the debates even start because I think they’re worried about the debates,” radio host Rush Limbaugh told his audience. “I think they’re trying to get this election finished and in the can by suppressing your vote and depressing you so that you just don’t think there’s any reason to vote, that it’s hopeless. They want you making other plans.”

An anti-Obama Web site called UnSkewedPolls.com has reweighted a number of recent polls and concluded that Romney actually has a lead of nearly eight points.

So why is Romney acting like a man who's behind rather than comfortably ahead? Because he's smart enough to know that the conspiracy theory is nuts.

The problem is that party affiliation can be weak and changeable. Voters who describe themselves as Democrats one month can call themselves Republicans or independents the next. In this sense, it's not something polls can assume as a precondition. It's something polls discover.

That's why the conspiracy theory is so dangerous for the GOP. If pollsters look at a demographically representative sample of registered or likely voters and find fewer Republicans than might be expected, it could be that voters who once might have called themselves Republicans no longer feel comfortable with the label.

There is ample polling data to suggest why this might be the case. Whoever wins in November, it is clear that, while the past four years have been rough on the president's image, the impact on the Republican brand has been nothing less than brutal.

Voters blame the GOP more than they blame Obama and the Democrats for the gridlock and brinkmanship that have characterized much of the president's time in office. The Republican Party has taken stands on issues such as abortion and immigration that big segments of the electorate find extreme and unacceptable. Moderate Republicans, as a political species, are all but extinct.

If a polling sample shows Democrats outnumbering Republicans by, say, 32 percent to 24 percent (with most of the rest calling themselves independents), GOP partisans shouldn't worry about a conspiracy. They should worry that this is a snapshot of how Americans feel about the two major parties.

It's not the polls, it's the policies. Now *that's* a reason for Republicans to be depressed.

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