

Why it's not surprising that 2024 polling is close

Analysis by [Philip Bump](#)
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To fervent supporters of the parties' two leading candidates for the 2024 presidential nominations, the idea that the race might be close seems either baffling or inaccurate. There's no way, they argue, that a guy who has been [insert negative descriptor] could win the presidency! Particularly when running against a guy who [insert positive descriptor]! It simply makes no sense!

But it does, for several reasons. Foremost among them, in fact, is that partisans feel so strongly about the two leading candidates.

We will stipulate at the outset that, while the 2024 contest appears as though it will be a rematch between President Biden and former president Donald Trump, there is no guarantee it will be. Trump, for example, still needs to get past the Republican primaries — though both current polling and recent history suggest that he will.

In a recent Wall Street Journal poll, Biden and Trump were tied at 46 percent nationally. Polling from YouGov, conducted for the Economist, had a 1-point Trump advantage, with both candidates polling in the low 40s. Close.

Particularly given that a Washington Post-ABC News poll conducted at about the same point in the 2020 cycle had Biden leading Trump by 16 points. How was that poll so different from this one?

One aspect of the difference is that these were different polls from different pollsters. More importantly, though, these were different polls of different races taking place in very different circumstances. In early September 2019, Biden wasn't even the Democratic nominee, and while he was leading in the polls, his path to the nomination would prove to be quite uncertain.

What we see when considering polls from the same point in each cycle since 2000 is that polling has been close largely when partisans are expressing their support for their party's candidate. In 1999 and 2003, Democrats were wobbly on their party's eventual nominee. That early Democratic uncertainty and big

leads for George W. Bush didn't translate into big margins of victory for Bush in the general election results. These early polls have not proved to be terribly predictive of eventual results.

Notice that there were two factors at play in Biden's big 2019 lead: double-digit support for Biden from Republicans and a huge advantage among independents. Biden's position against Trump now is in part a function of relatively soft support from members of his own party, something that Democrats keep hand-wringing about, for good reason.

Again, though, we can point to hardened partisan positions when considering close races, even this far out from the general election. That this is apparent first in Obama's elections is telling. This era was also the period in which partisan views of presidential approval started to split.

This is another reason that the 2024 polling is close: People already have strong views of both Trump and Biden. Views of Biden are much firmer now than they were in 2019, given that he's now been president for more than two years. (In August 2019, 15 percent of respondents in a YouGov poll said they had no opinion of Biden; now, only 3 percent say that.)

Were Democratic support of Biden firmer and if Trump's lead among independents were narrower, the 2024 general election polling conducted by YouGov would probably show a Biden lead. But the race would still be close, closer than those polls from two decades ago, for the simple reason that partisan views of candidates have calcified.

Particularly of *these* candidates.