

Hillary Clinton looks like she's about to crush Donald Trump -- but it might not be so simple

[Bobkoff, Dan.](#) [The News Herald](#); Panama City, Fla. [Panama City, Fla]05 Aug 2016.

Hillary Clinton, the Democratic presidential nominee, starts August with a fast-rising lead in the polls. Lee Miringoff, the director of the Marist Institute for Public Opinion -- which produces polls for NBC News, The Wall Street Journal, and McClatchy -- says polls are as much art as science. [...]the poll results might not perfectly match what the whole population thinks.

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What a difference a month makes.

Hillary Clinton, the Democratic presidential nominee, starts August with a fast-rising lead in the polls. Averages of major surveys show her leading Republican nominee Donald Trump by roughly seven points. Some individual polls give her a double-digit advantage.

She wasn't always ahead, and there are cautionary tales: During the primaries, Clinton's big lead in one state's polls turned into a loss on election day.

It's because polls are more complicated than we like to think, and looking closer tells you everything about what we can and cannot trust.

Here's a poll from before Clinton's primary bounce: Rasmussen Reports asked 1,000 Americans in mid-July whether they would vote for Clinton or Trump. This is what it found at the time:

* Trump: 43%

* Clinton: 42%

Was Trump ahead then? Is Clinton ahead now?

It depends on whom you ask

In 1936, a magazine called The Literary Digest ran one of the biggest opinion polls of all time. It asked 2.4 million people whether they planned to vote for the incumbent Democratic president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, or his Republican challenger, Alfred Landon.

It trumpeted this prediction:

* Landon: 57%

* Roosevelt: 43%

The poll must have had one of the smallest margins of error in polling. But it was dead wrong.

Error margins apply only to the population a pollster is sampling.

This is what actually happened in the election:

* Roosevelt: 62%

* Landon: 38%

The Literary Digest fell prey to what is known as selection bias. That massive sample was made up of its subscribers and members of groups and organizations that tended to skew wealthier than the average American.

Today's pollsters are savvier, but there are still many ways that bias seeps in. For instance, a poll that calls only landlines may leave out a whole demographic of younger, cellphone-only households. Some polls are opt-in, where users of a specific website answer questions. That's less reliable than a random sampling.

"Far more important than dialing down the margin of error is making sure that whatever you're aiming at is unbiased and that you do have a representative sample," says Andrew Bray, an assistant professor of statistics at Reed College.

Some polls have well-known biases. Rasmussen, for instance, is known to skew Republican.

Lee Miringoff, the director of the Marist Institute for Public Opinion -- which produces polls for NBC News, The Wall Street Journal, and McClatchy -- says polls are as much art as science.

"Scientifically, we should get the same result," he says.

Modern polls are not immune to these issues. Some potential voters are harder to reach, and some polls skew more educated. And polls with a high percentage of potential voters who are undecided can lead to more uncertainty.

So how much can we trust today's results?

Margin of error

Pollsters and journalists tend to highlight the headline numbers in a poll. If you did that with the July Rasmussen example, you'd think Trump was leading Clinton.

Rasmussen didn't help matters by describing Trump as "statistically ahead."

It's actually not that simple.

First, you have to consider the margin of error. Rasmussen pollsters interviewed 1,000 people to represent the views of 320 million Americans. Naturally, the poll results might not perfectly match what the whole population thinks.

This Rasmussen poll has a 3-point margin of error. Here's what that actually means.

Let's take that Trump number: 43% is something called a "point estimate." This is basically the polling firm's best educated guess of what the number would be if it had asked the whole population. But it's not guaranteed to be right.

The margin of error accounts for this:

- * Because the margin of error is 3 points, the pollsters are confident that support for Trump in the total population is between 40% and 46% -- or 43% plus or minus 3 percentage points.

- * Support for Clinton is between 39% and 45%.

The point estimate (the dots in the chart above) is like fishing with a spear; you're stabbing for the right answer. The margin of error is like fishing with a net; somewhere in your catch is the true figure.

But this is not the whole story either.

Feeling confident

Before the 2016 Michigan primary, it looked as if Clinton had it made. FiveThirtyEight aggregated several polls and predicted that she had a 99% chance of winning the primary. Many polls had Clinton ahead of challenger Bernie Sanders by double digits.

The polls were wrong.

Sanders eked out a narrow victory. Of the many reasons pollsters might have been off, this may be one of them: There's more to polling than the margin of error.

"The margin of error is a guidepost, but not a foolproof" one, Miringoff says.

Here's what the margin of error really means.

Pollsters typically ask roughly 1,000 people a question like: Whom do you plan to vote for? Their goal is to be 95% sure that the real level of support in the whole population is captured in the sample's range, from the low end of the margin of error to the high end.

That range is called a "confidence interval."

Let's say a pollster like Miringoff were to run that same poll 100 times. Each time, he would randomly select different groups of 1,000 people. Miringoff would expect that the true proportion -- the candidate's actual support -- would be found within the margin of error of 95 out of the 100 polls. That's why he'd say that he's 95% confident in the results.

Those five outliers are one reason elections don't always turn out the way pollsters predict.

Remember that Rasmussen poll in July showing Trump with 43% support? That 43% is thought to be the most likely reflection of reality. But the pollster is still only 95% confident that Trump's true amount of support is found between 40% and 46%.

The further you get from that point estimate, the less likely it is that you are seeing the true number. So it's more likely to be 42% than 41% -- and 40% is even less likely.

The chance that what's happening in reality is captured by a number outside the 95% confidence interval is, as you might expect, quite unlikely. The more outside it is, the more minuscule the likelihood. But it's still possible for a poll to be way off.

"If you really want to be 100% confident in your estimate, you're either going to have to ask every American or be satisfied with a huge margin of error," Bray, the Reed College statistics professor, says.

The whole point of polling is to extrapolate what a large group believes by asking a randomly selected subset of that group.

In the era of modern polling, most pollsters agree that being 95% confident in the margin of error is "good enough."

"It's a reasonably high number," Bray says. "That means we're going to be wrong one in 20 times, but for most people that's acceptable."

Many polls, such as those from the Pew Research Center, bury the margin of error in the fine print. Far fewer highlight the confidence interval. But anytime you see a poll, remember: There's a 5% chance that the poll is far different from the headline number.

Keeping it 1,000

Look closely and you'll notice that most polls question roughly 1,000 people. That holds true whether pollsters are trying to approximate voter opinion in Rhode Island (about 1 million residents) or the entire US (nearly 320 million residents).

Why 1,000?

It's a big enough number to be reasonably confident in the result -- within the margin of error 19 out of 20 times. There's a lot of variety in a group of 1,000 people, so it captures many of the elements in the larger group.

Asking more people than 1,000 leads to diminishing returns of accuracy.

For instance, sampling 2,000 people is not twice as precise as sampling 1,000. It might bring the margin of error from roughly 3 points to about 2.2 points.

In modern polling, most statisticians see sampling 1,000 people as a good compromise between a manageable sample size and acceptable confidence.

What and when

Results differ among pollsters for many reasons.

There are simple explanations, like when the polls were conducted. It can take days or weeks to conduct and analyze a poll. A lot of news can happen between the dates on which the questions were asked and the date of the results' release.

This is especially a problem with polls close to Election Day. They're generally a snapshot in the week before the election. If something happens in the final days of campaigning, those final polls may not be as predictive.

It also matters how a pollster phrases and orders questions, and whether it's a phone interview, in-person interview, or online survey. Even the interviewer's tone of voice can matter.

Then, pollsters have to decide how to analyze and weight the data, and those methodologies can vary.

But it's not just pollsters analyzing data -- and that's where we get another big problem.

Drilling down

"It's too often to throw up your arms," Miringoff says.

Here's the problem: Let's say his team interviews 1,000 people to represent the general population. In that 1,000, there are subgroups: men versus women, minorities, immigrants, young people, old people.

It's tempting to pull out those subgroups and draw conclusions about, say, support for a candidate among Latinos or women.

But each of those subgroups is, in effect, its own sample, and those samples can be very small. That means the margin of error for each subset can be huge.

Take this poll from Pew: In the sample, there were only 146 black respondents. The margin of error for that subgroup is more than 9 points!

You can't learn much by looking at a group with a 9-point error margin.

Why aggregating is good

If you combine results from multiple polls taken at the same time, you can think of it as one huge poll. That drives down the overall margin of error and can make you more confident in the predictive power of the polls.

In the real world, different polls are conducted in different ways, so you can't think of an aggregated poll as truly one big sample. But this is also a virtue because it reduces the effect of pollster biases and errors. FiveThirtyEight, The New York Times, and RealClearPolitics all run averages with different weightings and methodologies.

Ahead or tied?

OK, so now that you know a lot more about polls, what should you think when a race is tight? The answer is not straightforward.

Let's say that a poll comes out showing Clinton with 51% support and Trump with 49%. The margin of error is plus or minus 3 points. Are the two candidates statistically tied, or is Clinton slightly ahead?

In purely statistical terms, most would consider this example a "statistical dead heat." Either candidate could be ahead.

"It's pretty significant editorially," Miringoff says. "It's not significant statistically."

That said, that doesn't mean Clinton's lead in this hypothetical example is completely insignificant.

"If I was running for office, I'd rather have 51 than 49," Miringoff says.

Remember point estimates? In this scenario, 51% is still the pollster's best guess at Clinton's true level of support. That's higher than Trump's. If a series of polls shows Clinton with a slight edge -- even within the margin of error -- then it can suggest an advantage. A series of polls is more convincing than any single poll.

Feedback loop

Finally, for as much as we want to believe that polls are a scientific reflection of reality, polls can also affect reality.

Here's one example: Polls that show candidates falling behind can galvanize their supporters to get out to vote.

The media may also focus on polling trends, leading to changes in public opinion about which candidates are viable or worth supporting.

Polls don't happen in a vacuum.

Word count: **1997**

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Understanding a poll's margin of error:: [Final Edition]

[McKnight, Peter](#). [The Vancouver Sun](#); Vancouver, B.C. [Vancouver, B.C.]03 June 2006: C5.

1. [Full text](#)
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Abstract

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Further, there's nothing magical about the 95 per cent confidence interval -- it's used by convention, not because it's of any inductive merit. Ipsos-Reid could have chosen the 85 per cent confidence interval, which would have reduced the margin of error to roughly plus or minus two percentage points, and hence Conservative support would be estimated at between 41 and 45 per cent. Similarly, the 85 per cent confidence interval in the study from two months ago would peg Conservative support at between 36 and 40 per cent.

These non-sampling errors -- and there are many more -- can have a larger effect than sampling error on a poll's accuracy. Yet when we rely exclusively on the margin of error to tell us how accurate a poll is, we are making the implicit assumption that no non-sampling errors have been made.

To be sure, polling companies employ a variety of sophisticated procedures to help them avoid non-sampling errors. But since, unlike sampling error, non-sampling errors are not easily quantified, the margin of error remains the only measure of a poll's accuracy that pollsters usually provide. Hence, it's not surprising that many people overestimate its importance.

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OPINION I If we want a clear picture of a poll's accuracy we need to take a comprehensive look at the entire methodology

The ink was barely dry on The Vancouver Sun's report about Canadians' increasing support for the federal Conservatives when the phone calls and letters started.

Our story, which was based on a recent Ipsos-Reid poll, said that Conservative support is "soaring" across the country. After all, the pollsters concluded that the Conservatives currently enjoy the support of 43 per cent of Canadians, up from 38 per cent two months ago.

Certainly, one can argue that an increase of five percentage points hardly amounts to "soaring" support -- and some people who accused us of shilling for the Conservatives did so argue -- but that wasn't what exercised our more mathematically inclined readers.

No, said our critics, the real problem was that we failed to consider the "margin of error" -- plus or minus 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20 -- which means Conservative support could be anywhere from 39.9 to 46.1 per cent.

Similarly, assuming that the previous poll had the same margin of error, Conservative support two months ago was between 34.9 and 41.1 per cent. Now, since the ranges of the two polls overlap, we can't really conclude that support has increased at all, let alone soared.

Or so our critics claimed. And they were certainly right about one thing: All too often, journalists dutifully report a poll's margin of error, and then completely ignore what significance it might have. But our critics' slavish attention to the margin of error is just as much of a problem.

To see this, we need to look at the mechanics of polling. In an ideal world, we would ask every voter in Canada which party they support, but in a world of limited resources we can't poll everyone, so we ask a sample of people -- typically 1,000 -- and generalize those results to the population.

But samples can be subject to error. Even with a random sample -- that is, one where every voter in the population has an equal chance of being polled -- it's still possible to get an inaccurate result because, through sheer bad luck, the opinions of people in the sample might not be representative of the opinions of the population as a whole.

In effect, the margin of error provides a measure of this sheer bad luck, or "sampling error," and is accompanied by a "confidence interval." Most polls use a 95 per cent confidence interval, and this is what the "19 times out of 20" refers to.

And here's what it means: If we were to repeat the Ipsos-Reid poll thousands of times, drawing different random samples of 1,000 people from the population, we would no doubt get different results, because not all samples are exactly the same. So, some polls would estimate that Conservative support is at 42 per cent, plus or minus 3.1 percentage points, others would peg it at 44 per cent and so on.

The 95 per cent confidence interval, combined with the margin of error, tell us that 95 per cent of these thousands of polls will produce an estimate of Conservative support that is within 3.1 percentage points of the true value, while five per cent will be off by more than 3.1 points.

This doesn't, however, tell us anything specific about an individual poll. We have no way of knowing whether the Ipsos-Reid poll would be among the 95 per cent which are within 3.1 percentage points of the true value of support, or among the five per cent which aren't. In other words, we can't be certain that Conservative support is between 39.9 and 46.1 per cent, let alone that it's exactly 43 per cent.

Further, there's nothing magical about the 95 per cent confidence interval -- it's used by convention, not because it's of any inductive merit. Ipsos-Reid could have chosen the 85 per cent confidence interval, which would have reduced the margin of error to roughly plus or minus two percentage points, and hence Conservative support would be estimated at between 41 and 45 per cent. Similarly, the 85 per cent confidence interval in the study from two months ago would peg Conservative support at between 36 and 40 per cent.

Now notice what's happened here: The ranges of the two polls no longer conflict, which means our critics would be forced to acknowledge that there might really have been an increase in Conservative support.

Yet the data haven't changed -- only our way of quantifying sampling error has. This is why overreliance on the margin of error is as bad as underreliance: It leads us to automatically dismiss any changes that are within the margin of error at the 95 per cent confidence level, even though those changes sometimes reflect actual changes in the population.

Further, and more important, sampling error is only one factor affecting the accuracy of a poll. There are also myriad non-sampling errors, such as non-response -- people of certain political persuasions may be less (or more) likely to answer a pollster's question -- bias in the wording or order of the questions, and interviewer bias.

These non-sampling errors -- and there are many more -- can have a larger effect than sampling error on a poll's accuracy. Yet when we rely exclusively on the margin of error to tell us how accurate a poll is, we are making the implicit assumption that no non-sampling errors have been made.

To be sure, polling companies employ a variety of sophisticated procedures to help them avoid non-sampling errors. But since, unlike sampling error, non-sampling errors are not easily quantified, the margin of error remains the only measure of a poll's accuracy that pollsters usually provide. Hence, it's not surprising that many people overestimate its importance.

The solution, of course, is not to ignore the margin of error, as many journalists do, but to understand just what it can and can't tell us. And if we really want a clear picture of the accuracy of a poll, we need to ask for more information, to take a comprehensive look at the poll's entire methodology, to colour outside of the margins.

A Justice's Use Of Statistics, Viewed Skeptically: [National Desk]

[Silver, Nate](#). [New York Times](#), Late Edition (East Coast); New York, N.Y. [New York, N.Y.]08 Mar 2013: A.16.

The New York Times
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[...]several things can be said in Chief Justice Roberts's defense.

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In oral arguments before the Supreme Court last week, Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. introduced a statistical claim that he took to imply that an important provision of the Voting Rights Act has become outmoded.

Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, which is being challenged by Shelby County, Ala., in the case before the court, requires that certain states, counties and townships with a history of racial discrimination get approval (or "pre-clearance") from the Department of Justice before making changes to their voting laws. But Chief Justice Roberts said that Mississippi, which is covered by Section 5, has the best ratio of African-American to white turnout, while Massachusetts, which is not covered, has the worst, he said.

Chief Justice Roberts's statistics appear to come from data compiled in 2004 by the Census Bureau, which polls Americans about their voting behavior as part of its Current Population Survey. In 2004, according to the Census Bureau's survey, the turnout rate among white voting-aged citizens was 60.2 percent in Mississippi, while the turnout rate among African-Americans was higher, 66.8 percent. In Massachusetts, conversely, the Census Bureau reported the white turnout rate at 72.0 percent but the black turnout rate at just 46.5 percent.

As much as it pleases me to see statistical data introduced in the Supreme Court, the act of citing statistical factoids is not the same thing as drawing sound inferences from them. If I were the lawyer defending the Voting Rights Act, I would have responded with two queries to Chief Justice Roberts. First, are Mississippi and Massachusetts representative of a broader trend: do states covered by Section 5 in fact have higher rates of black turnout on a consistent basis? And second, what if anything does this demonstrate about the efficacy of the Voting Rights Act?

One reason to be suspicious of the representativeness of Mississippi and Massachusetts is the high margin of error associated with these calculations, as noted by Nina Totenberg of NPR.

Like other polls, the Current Population Survey is subject to sampling error, a result of collecting data among a random subsample of the population rather than everyone in the state. In states like Massachusetts that have low African-American populations, the margin of error can be especially high: it was plus-or-minus 9.6 percentage points in estimating the black turnout rate in 2004, according to the Census Bureau. Even in Mississippi, which has a larger black population, the margin of error was 5.2 percentage points.

As a general matter, I would prefer that everyone be more careful when citing statistical data, and be more explicit about describing the potential sources of error and uncertainty associated with the calculations. But the headline associated with Ms. Totenberg's article at NPR makes a strong claim: it asserts that Chief Justice Roberts has "misconstrued" the data by ignoring the margin of error.

In fact, several things can be said in Chief Justice Roberts's defense. Ms. Totenberg cites 2010 voting rates in her article, when the difference in black turnout between Mississippi and Massachusetts was within the margin of error. But Chief Justice Roberts appears to be referring to a lower-court brief that cited 2004 data instead, when the difference was larger and outside the margin of error.

Furthermore, estimating the degree of uncertainty associated with a statistical estimate is not quite so straightforward as it might seem. There is no bright line at which a particular piece of statistical evidence goes from being meaningful to meaningless.

For example, in a poll of 1,000 people, a candidate who is ahead 52-48 has a 90 percent chance of holding the lead (assuming that there are no other sources of uncertainty apart from sampling error). A candidate who is up 53-47 has a 97 percent chance of holding the lead.

If one applies the conventional definition of the margin of error, which usually refers to a 95 percent confidence interval, then the second candidate's lead would be described as being outside the margin of error while the first candidate's would be within it. Nonetheless, the first candidate is still nine times more likely to lead his opponent than to trail him. Conversely, while we can be somewhat more confident about the second candidate's lead, there is still some chance (3 percent) that he actually trails in the race and that the poll was an outlier. Statistical certainty exists along a continuum of probabilities and not in absolutes; I am therefore reluctant to endorse arguments that rely on semantic distinctions about how terms like "margin of error" or "statistical significance" are applied.

Another problem is that sampling error refers to only one potential source of uncertainty in a poll. In surveys of voting behavior, for example, some voters give erroneous responses: lying about whether they voted, misremembering whether they did so or being uncertain about whether their ballot was ultimately counted. This measurement error is in addition to sampling error and will not be accounted for by the margin of error. Further errors can be introduced by the polling method: since some people are more likely to respond to surveys than others, the sample may be biased in some way rather than being truly random. Thus, the true degree of uncertainty in a polling result is usually larger than implied by the margin of error alone.

The debate might be more constructive if we return to the substantive questions that I posed earlier. First, are the voting rates in Massachusetts and Mississippi representative of a broader trend? If so, it seems wrong to suggest that Chief Justice Roberts misconstrued the data merely because he failed to mention the margin of error. But if Massachusetts and Mississippi are outliers, then the chief justice may be guilty as NPR contends. One might draw a parallel to last year's election campaign, when some Web sites consistently highlighted polls that showed Mitt Romney performing well, ignoring the broader consensus of polls that had President Obama with the lead for most of the campaign in most swing states. Cherry-picking the evidence in this way is the greater statistical sin, in my view, since it involves making misleading rather than merely imprecise claims.

In fact, it would be dangerous to infer very much from Massachusetts and Mississippi. In 2004, for instance, while Mississippi was reported to have strong black turnout, black turnout was poor in Arizona and Virginia, which are also covered by Section 5.

In the chart below, I have aggregated the 2004 turnout data into two groups of states, based on whether or not they are covered by Section 5. (I ignore states like New York where some counties are subject to Section 5 but others are not.) In the states covered by Section 5, the black turnout rate was 59.2 percent in 2004, while it was 60.8 percent in the states that are not subject to it. The ratio of white-to-black was 1.09 in the states covered by Section 5, but 1.12 in the states that are not covered by it. These differences are not large enough to be meaningful in either a statistical or a practical sense.

So did Chief Justice Roberts misconstrue the data? If he meant to suggest that states covered by Section 5 consistently have better black turnout rates than those that aren't covered by the statute, then his claim is especially dubious. However, the evidence does support the more modest claim that black turnout is no worse in states covered by Section 5. There don't seem to be consistent differences in turnout rates based on whether states are covered by Section 5 or not.

The bigger potential flaw with Chief Justice Roberts's argument is not with the statistics he cites but with the conclusion he draws from them.

Most of you will spot the logical fallacy in the following claim:

No aircraft departing from a United States airport has been hijacked since the Sept. 11 attacks, when stricter security standards were implemented. Therefore, the stricter security is unnecessary.

As much as I might want to be sympathetic to this claim (I fly a lot and am wary of the "security theater" at American airports), it ought not to be very convincing as a logical proposition. The lack of hijackings were in part a product of an environment in which airport security was quite strict, and says little about what would happen if these countermeasures were removed. The same data might just as easily be cited as evidence that the extra security had been effective:

No aircraft departing from a United States airport has been hijacked since the Sept. 11 attacks, when stricter security standards were implemented. Therefore, the stricter security is working.

Similarly, the fact that black turnout rates are now roughly as high in states covered by Section 5 might be taken as evidence that the Voting Rights Act has been effective. There were huge regional differences in black turnout rates in the early 1960s, before the Voting Rights Act was passed. (In the 1964 election, for example, nonwhite turnout was about 45 percent in the South, but close to 70 percent elsewhere in the country.) These differences have largely evaporated now.

How much of this is because of the Voting Rights Act, as opposed to other voter protections that have been adopted since that time, or other societal changes? And even if the Voting Rights Act has been important in facilitating the changes, how many of the gains might be lost if the Section 5 requirements were dropped now?

These are difficult questions that the Supreme Court faces. They are questions of causality -- and as any good lawyer knows, establishing a chain of causality is often the most difficult chore in a case.

Statistical analysis can inform the answers if applied thoughtfully. But statistics can obscure the truth when they become divorced from the historical, legal and logical context of a case.

This is a more complete version of the story than the one that appeared in print

DID SOUTH ST. PETERSBURG'S POVERTY RATE FALL AS FAST AS RICK KRISEMAN SAID? EVIDENCE THIN

[Graves, Allison](#). [Tampa Bay Times](#); Tampa Bay [Tampa Bay]27 June 2017.

1. [Full text](#)
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Abstract

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Rick Kriseman on Thursday, June 15th, 2017 in during a Q&A with reporters inside City Hall
The ruling: MOSTLY FALSE Mayor Rick Kriseman is trying to win over voters in his reelection bid with a pitch about falling poverty in a lower income neighborhood. According to the report, approximately 48 percent of the population in this zone live in poverty. Pinellas County, Jacksonville, Florida, the United States, and Tampa -- showed a smaller reduction in the black poverty rate, between a drop of 4.8 percentage points to a gain of .2 point, respectively. The Census Bureau data shows that about 17,000 African-Americans were in poverty in 2015. "To dismiss the year over year Census report about the number of people in poverty as statistically insignificant overgeneralizes the complexities of real-time poverty eradication," he said. For a statement that contains an element of truth but ignores critical facts that would give the reader a different impression, we rate this claim Mostly False. * * * Sources: Email exchange, Benjamin Kirby, mayor's communications director, June 19-23 Email exchange, Jacob Smith, mayor's campaign manager, June 19 Interview, Gypsy Gallardo, CEO of The 2020 Plan, June 20 Email exchanges, Melissa Radey, associate professor Florida State University, College of Social Work, June 21-23 Email exchange, Joshua Wilde, University of South Florida economist, June 21 Interview, Brigitta Shouppe, campaign spokeswoman Brigitta Shouppe, June 22 Interview, Jewel Jordan, public information officer for the U.S. Census Bureau, June 22 Tampa Bay Times, "Tampa Bay's poor begin to share...

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The statement:

"We are seeing poverty being reduced in south St. Pete at a number larger than the national average, the state average, county or Tampa and Jacksonville."

-- Rick Kriseman on Thursday, June 15th, 2017 in during a Q&A with reporters inside City Hall

The ruling: MOSTLY FALSE

Mayor Rick Kriseman is trying to win over voters in his reelection bid with a pitch about falling poverty in a lower income neighborhood.

Kriseman, who faces former Mayor Rick Baker, says significant strides have been made since he took office, particularly in south St. Petersburg.

"We are seeing poverty being reduced in south St. Pete at a number larger than the national average, the state average, county or in Tampa, Jacksonville," Kriseman said after signing his qualifying papers inside City Hall.

This area of town is significant to Kriseman, who helped with efforts related to the 2020 plan, a five-year plan to reduce poverty by 30 percent in a portion of south St. Petersburg.

This isn't the first time Kriseman has made this point, so we decided to find out if poverty really is going down in south St. Petersburg.

Kriseman's claim rests on shaky evidence that doesn't tell the whole story.

--

Kriseman's data is about population, not geography

In order for this claim to be true, the poverty rate in south St. Petersburg would have to be dropping faster than in those other areas he named.

But Kriseman's evidence for the claim is imprecise.

Instead of providing data for that area, Kriseman pinpointed the poverty rate of the African-American population in the entire city of St. Petersburg between two years.

Kriseman's staff relied on a 2013 Pinellas County report that highlighted south St. Petersburg as one of five at-risk communities, areas marked by "high concentrations of poverty and a small return to the taxbase."

According to the report, approximately 48 percent of the population in this zone live in poverty. The demographic breakdown of those who live in poverty is as follows: 63 percent are African-American, 27 percent are white, 5 percent are Hispanic, and 5 percent are of another race.

City staff said given that the majority of residents in that zone are African-American, addressing poverty among African-Americans is a priority for the mayor.

So to support his claim, Kriseman compared the poverty rate for the entire St. Petersburg black population (which should go without saying, does not entirely live in south St. Pete) against the rates of other big cities, the state and the country.

Even with that allowance, the numbers don't hold up.

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Kriseman's evidence not statistically significant

Kriseman's team sent PolitiFact Florida two sets of data from the Census Bureau's 2014 and 2015 American Community Survey for the African-American population. (The 2016 numbers will not be released until September.)

According to that data, the black poverty rate in St. Petersburg decreased by 8.5 percentage points between 2014 and 2015, from 34.9 percent to 26.4 percent.

The other areas Kriseman mentioned -- Pinellas County, Jacksonville, Florida, the United States, and Tampa -- showed a smaller reduction in the black poverty rate, between a drop of 4.8 percentage points to a gain of .2 point, respectively.

(The numbers listed on the graph represent percentage points -- not the percentage.)

(Graph provided by city staff.)

This data may look convincing, but it's not as certain as Kriseman describes.

Most importantly, the data neglects the large margin of error in census data.

Based on our calculations, the difference in the number of African-Americans in poverty -- for St. Petersburg as well as the other locations -- was statistically unchanged from 2014 to 2015.

In other words, there's no way to know for sure if poverty went up or down, because the change in the poverty rate is within the margin of error.

The margin of error fluctuates from year to year. In 2015, the margin of error for data from the Census Bureau was plus or minus 25 percent, or 4,131 people. For 2014, the margin of error was plus or minus 17 percent, or 3,459 people. Those margins are significant.

The Census Bureau data shows that about 17,000 African-Americans were in poverty in 2015. With the margin of error, the estimated range is between 12,566 and 20,828.

The range of African-Americans in poverty in 2014 is between 16,596 and 23,514.

Taken together, the estimates show that the number of African-Americans in poverty could have held steady, or even increased from 17,000 to 20,000. We just don't know with a margin of error this wide.

(graph)

Joshua Wilde, an assistant professor of economics at the University of South Florida, said Kriseman was using the best data available despite its imperfections. While he couldn't say this for sure, he said there was a strong chance that poverty fell in south St. Petersburg among African-Americans between 2014-15. He calculated the p-value -- a statistical indicator based on the confidence interval -- to determine the chance poverty fell based on numbers provided by the Census Bureau.

"Once you peel back the layers of the onion on the numbers, it turns out the best numbers we have are just highly uncertain," he said.

Still, Melissa Radey, a Florida State University professor who specializes in poverty research and data, said it would be better to have more years when looking at trends in poverty.

"Making statements about trends is not appropriate with only two years of data," Radey said.

Even looking at additional years for those locations, there really is no takeaway trend.

(graph)

Kriseman stuck by his conclusion despite the uncertainty in the numbers.

"To dismiss the year over year Census report about the number of people in poverty as statistically insignificant overgeneralizes the complexities of real-time poverty eradication," he said.

He cited a 2016 Tampa Bay Times article that highlighted Census Bureau data that showed that overall poverty rates in the Tampa Bay area have dropped to their lowest levels since the Great Recession. More specifically, the article said that poverty among African-Americans in Pinellas County dropped significantly from 2014-15.

The article, however, did not specifically look at the south St. Petersburg population.

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Our ruling

Kriseman said, "We are seeing poverty being reduced in south St. Pete at a number larger than the national average, the state average, county or Tampa and Jacksonville."

The statement is flawed from the start. To support his claim about south St. Petersburg -- which is not entirely comprised of black residents -- Kriseman referred to data about the city's overall black population, not even narrowed down to the south side.

That data has problems. At face value, 2014 Census data showed a decrease in the poverty rate for the city's African-American population through 2015. But that ignores critical facts, including the wide margin of error for Census city data that indicates there is no discernable difference between the years Kriseman highlighted. A more comprehensive look at five years of data does not show a strong trend either way.

For a statement that contains an element of truth but ignores critical facts that would give the reader a different impression, we rate this claim Mostly False.

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Sources:

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Email exchange, Jacob Smith, mayor's campaign manager, June 19

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Email exchange, Joshua Wilde, University of South Florida economist, June 21

Interview, Brigitta Shouppe, campaign spokeswoman Brigitta Shouppe, June 22

Interview, Jewel Jordan, public information officer for the U.S. Census Bureau, June 22

Tampa Bay Times, "Tampa Bay's poor begin to share in economic recovery, survey shows," Sept. 16, 2016

Report, "Update on The Economic Impact of Poverty Report for the Pinellas County Board of County Commissioners," October 2013

U.S Census Bureau, 2010-2015, American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, accessed June 21-22