JULY 2025

Improving Polling Accuracy in 2025 and Beyond

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Background

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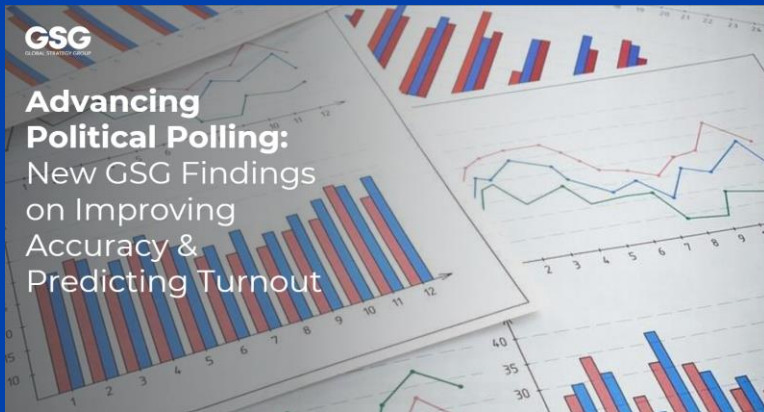
GSG is committed to consistently innovating our research and improving accuracy

- **Thought leadership reports**
  - Democracy in the Balance
  - Eye on the Economy
  - Melting Pot
  - Latino Lens
- **Advanced statistical analysis**
  - Factor analysis, regressions, segmentation, TURF, and more
- **Adaptive Interviews**
  - A new, AI-moderated interview platform to conduct one-on-one interviews with survey respondents
- **The subject of today's discussion: Continuous accuracy research and refinement**

DEMOCRACY IN THE BALANCE

Public attitudes in a shifting political landscape

[GSG'S DEMOCRACY IN THE BALANCE 2025]

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Advancing Political Polling: New GSG Findings on Improving Accuracy & Predicting Turnout

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GSG's response to 2020 presidential polling challenges led to midterm success and a roadmap for 2024

Election Day 2020

Polls across the industry underestimated Trump and down ballot Republicans.

Late 2020 to 2021

GSG conducted a **rigorous internal analysis** of nearly 30,000 interviews to identify the cause of polling error; study **found the main cause of 2020 polling error** to be non-response bias.

Late 2021 to 2022

GSG collaborated on a months-long multi-method research study to **explore ways to further reduce non-response bias.** This identified a correlation between political engagement and non-response bias.

Election Day 2022

GSG saw significant error and bias reduction compared to 2020.

Election Day 2024

GSG polling was very accurate and a significant improvement from 2020.

June 2021

GSG implemented **new internal practices** including, weighting to presidential vote recall and new attitudinal variables.

Vote Recall

Thinking back, in the November 2020 general election for President, who did you vote for? Or did you not vote in that election?

ROTATE 1 AND 2
1. Voted for Democrat Joe Biden
2. Voted for Republican Donald Trump
3. Voted for someone else
4. Did not vote

Spring 2022

GSG added **additional standards** controlling for political engagement.

Political Identity

How important is politics to your personal identity?

1. Very important
2. Somewhat important
3. Not too important
4. Not at all important

Applying findings to 2024

After midterm success, we still knew there was a hard-to-reach bloc of voters during presidential years. Using these insights to counter identified problems made us better equipped to handle them and allowed us to better **control for engagement and partisanship** with new 2024 voters.

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Over the past 3 General Election cycles, GSG has continued to make improvements in reducing error

Average Error

- 2020: 3.0
- 2022: 2.2
- 2024: 1.7
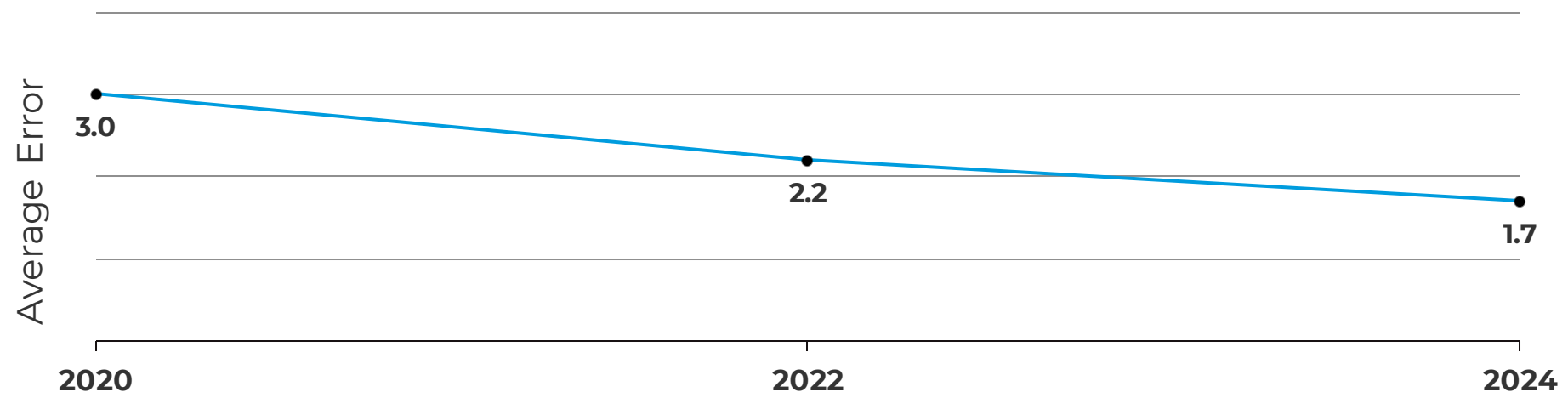
Average Bias		2020	2022	2024	
All Candidates		+2.8	-0.1	+0.6	
• *Statewide*		*+3.0*	*+0.8*	*+1.0*	
• *Congressional*		*+3.3*	*-0.2*	*+0.4*	

Average Error		2020	2022	2024	
All Candidates		3.0	2.2	1.7	
• *Statewide*		*3.1*	*2.3*	*1.6*	
• *Congressional*		*3.5*	*2.1*	*1.4*	

Using two-way vote share

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Non-response bias was the major source of polling error in 2020, though any accuracy analysis must be mindful of all possible sources of error

Non-Response Bias

The main cause of polling error in 2020. People who responded to polls were attitudinally different than those who did not respond to polls in ways that our normal partisan and demographic controls did not account for. In addition to partisan non-response, non-response related to engagement was a concern leading up to 2024.

Turnout Error

An additional, smaller contributing factor of polling error in 2020. Pre-election projections slightly underestimated Republican turnout, but our analysis suggests turnout error contributed to a smaller amount of the problem as compared to non-response bias. In lower turnout elections, turnout error is often a larger issue.

Late Movement

A potential cause of error in any campaign. People may change their minds between the final poll and Election Day based on ads or events. May manifest in base consolidation, undecideds deciding, or vote shifting.

Sampling Error

A potential cause of error in any poll but won't impact ALL polls in the same way. Every poll has a margin of error, but this is not a reason for multiple polls and large aggregate data sets to be wrong in the same direction.

2024 Accuracy Review

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Scope of 2024 Analysis in this Section

Data was collected by GSG

Statewide pre-election polls across 10 states

- **37,970 post-Labor Day interviews in these states**
  - Reweighting analysis covers 21,729 interviews from the final one to two surveys for each client
- **23 surveys**
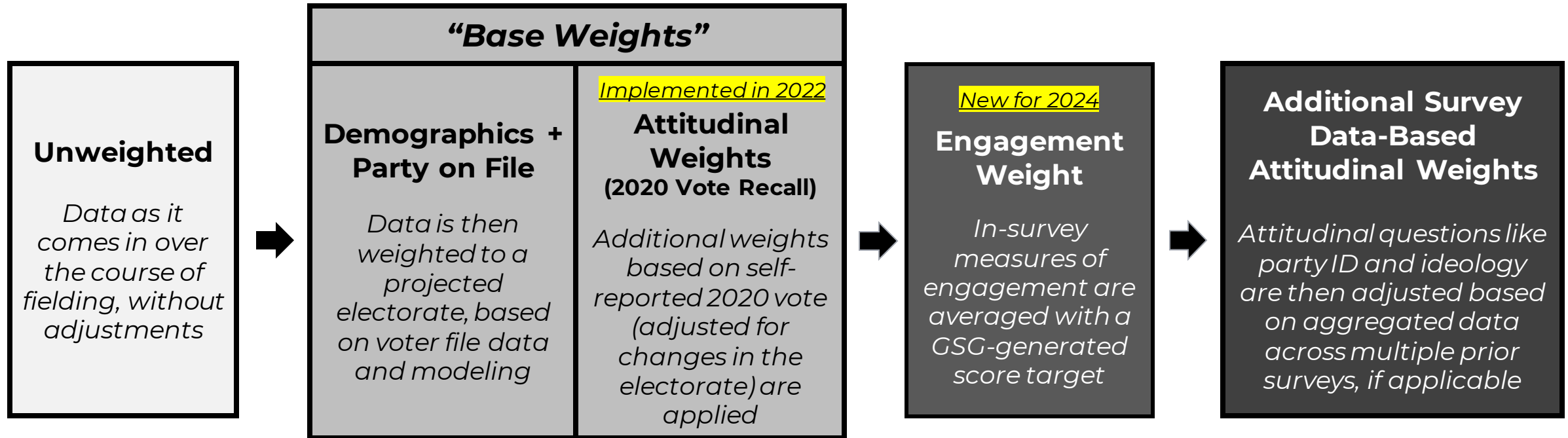 - Mix of phone, text, and a small amount of voter-file matched panel

Congressional District pre-election polls across 8 districts

- **11,650 post-Labor Day interviews in these districts**
  - Reweighting covers 4,500 interviews from the final survey for each client
- **8 surveys**
  - Mix of phone and text

The primary focus is on Presidential vote in the states, and Presidential and House votes in the districts
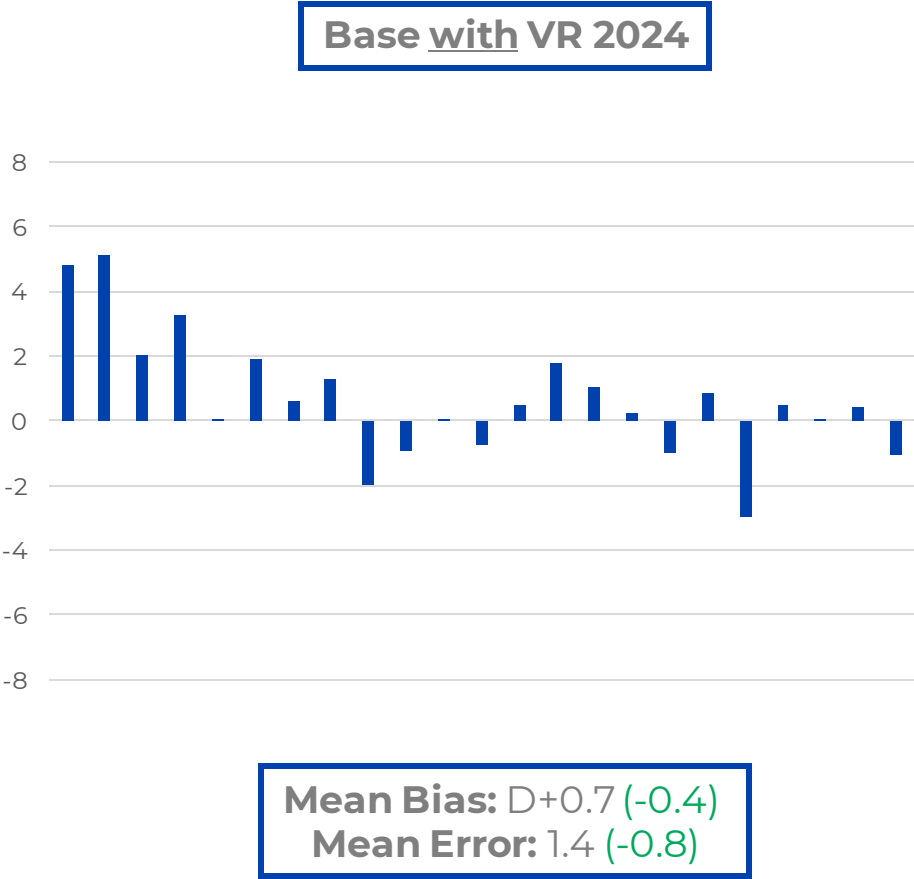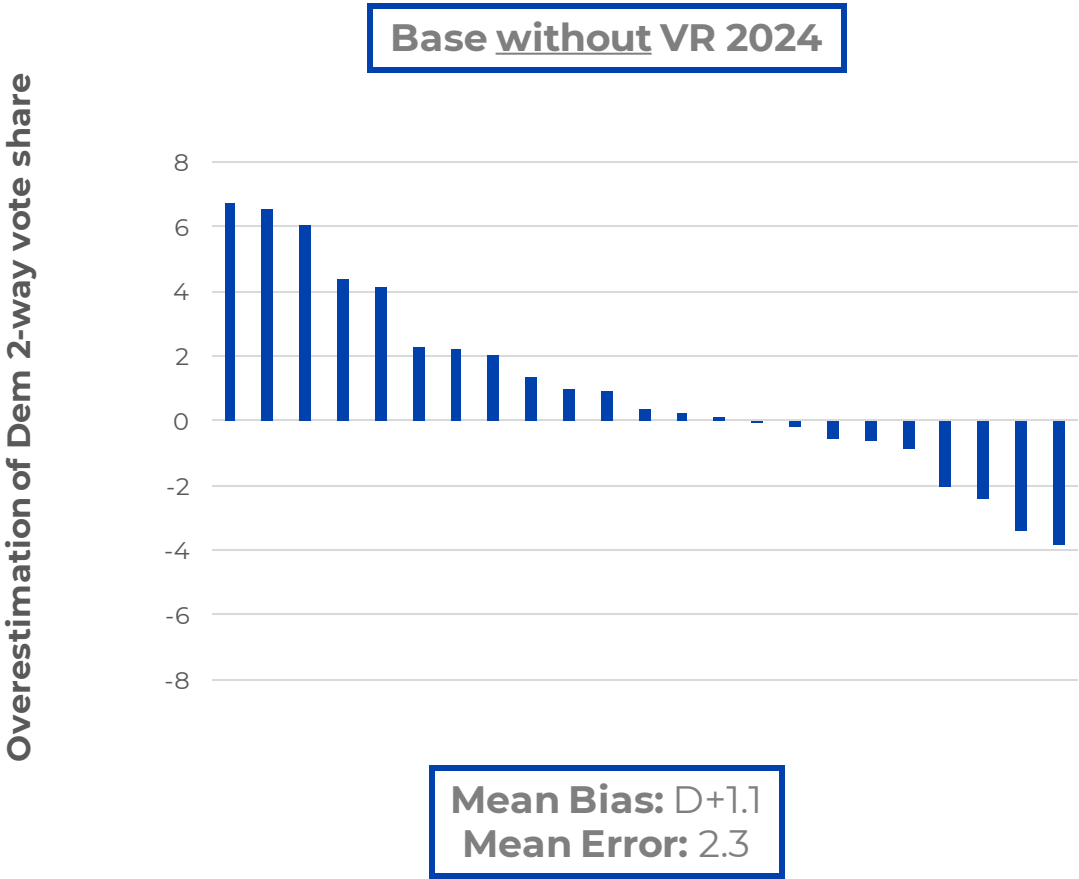
- This analysis uses a mix of two-way follow up and multi-candidate votes

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Our weighting process

Unweighted

Data as it comes in over the course of fielding, without adjustments

"Base Weights"

Demographics + Party on File

Data is then weighted to a projected electorate, based on voter file data and modeling

Implemented in 2022
Attitudinal Weights (2020 Vote Recall)

Additional weights based on self-reported 2020 vote (adjusted for changes in the electorate) are applied

New for 2024
Engagement Weight

In-survey measures of engagement are averaged with a GSG-generated score target

Additional Survey Data-Based Attitudinal Weights

Attitudinal questions like party ID and ideology are then adjusted based on aggregated data across multiple prior surveys, if applicable
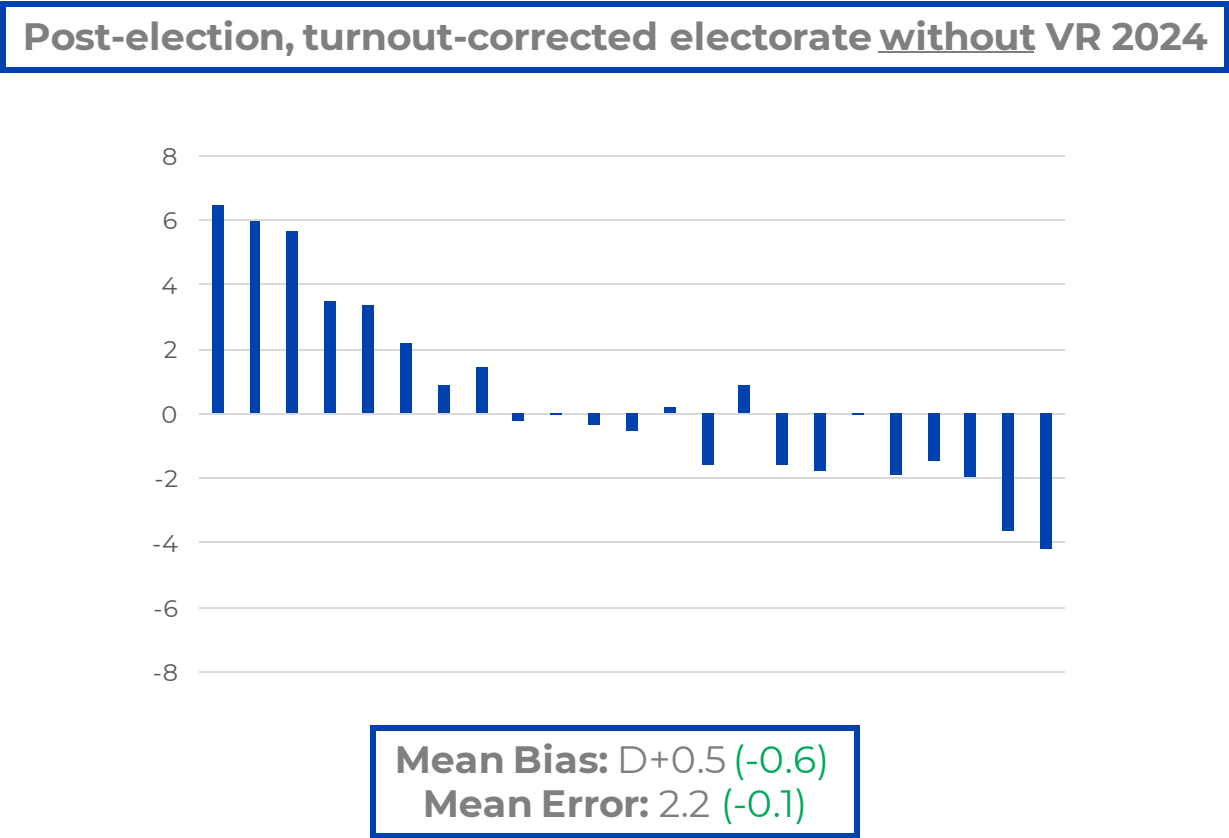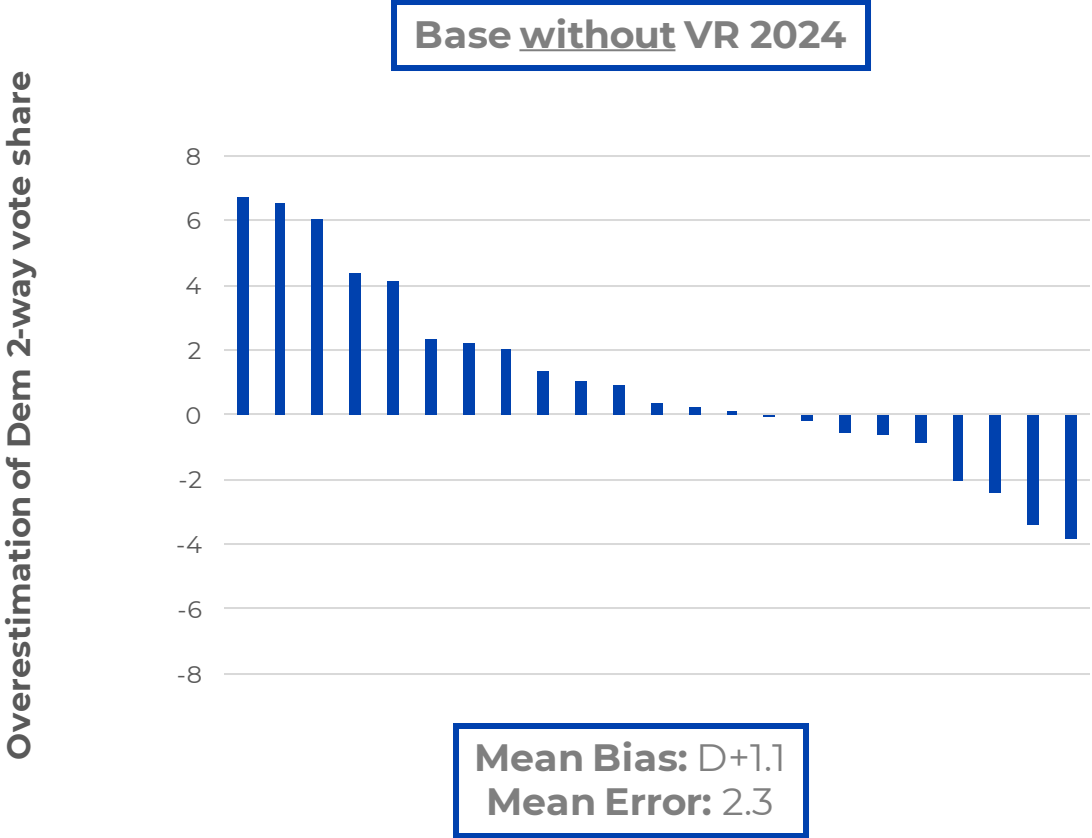
Impact of Vote Recall in 2024: Using base weights in our pre-election models, adding vote recall weights reduces both error and bias

Presidential Vote in Statewide Polling

Base without VR 2024

Base with VR 2024

Overestimation of Dem 2-way vote share

Mean Bias: D+1.1
Mean Error: 2.3

Mean Bias: D+0.7 (-0.4)
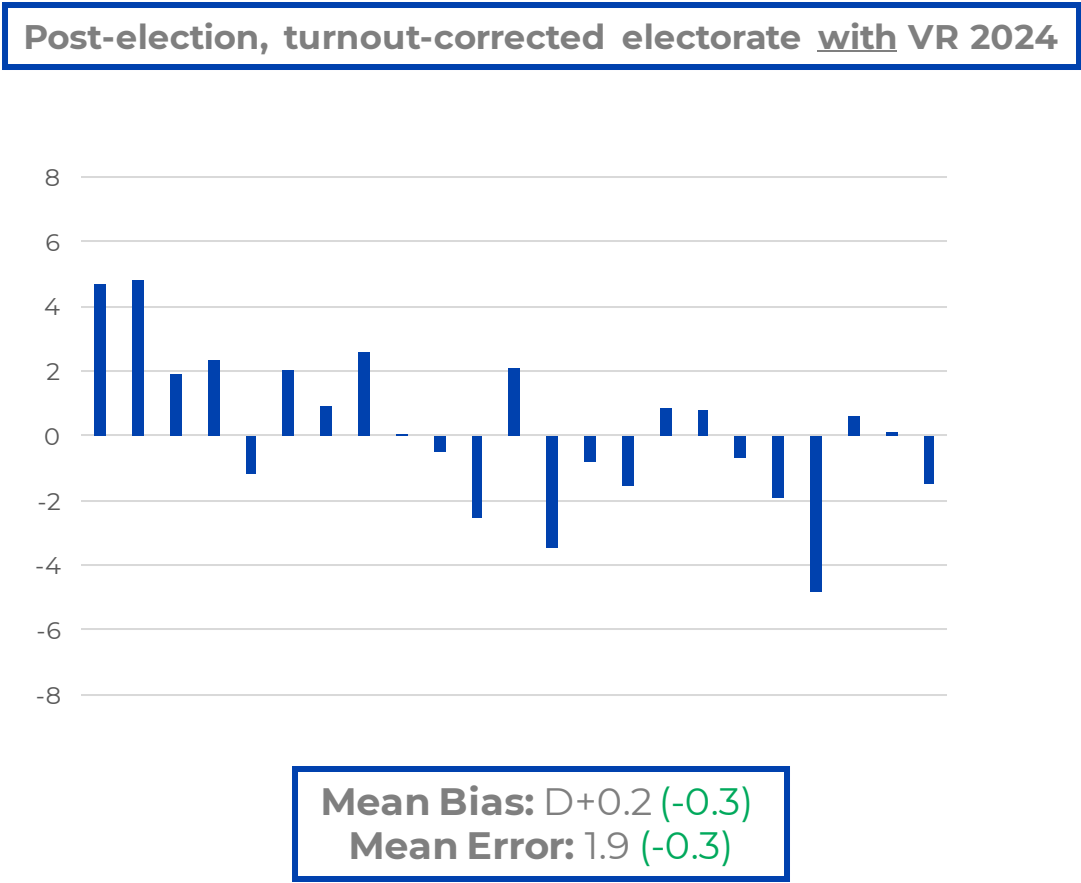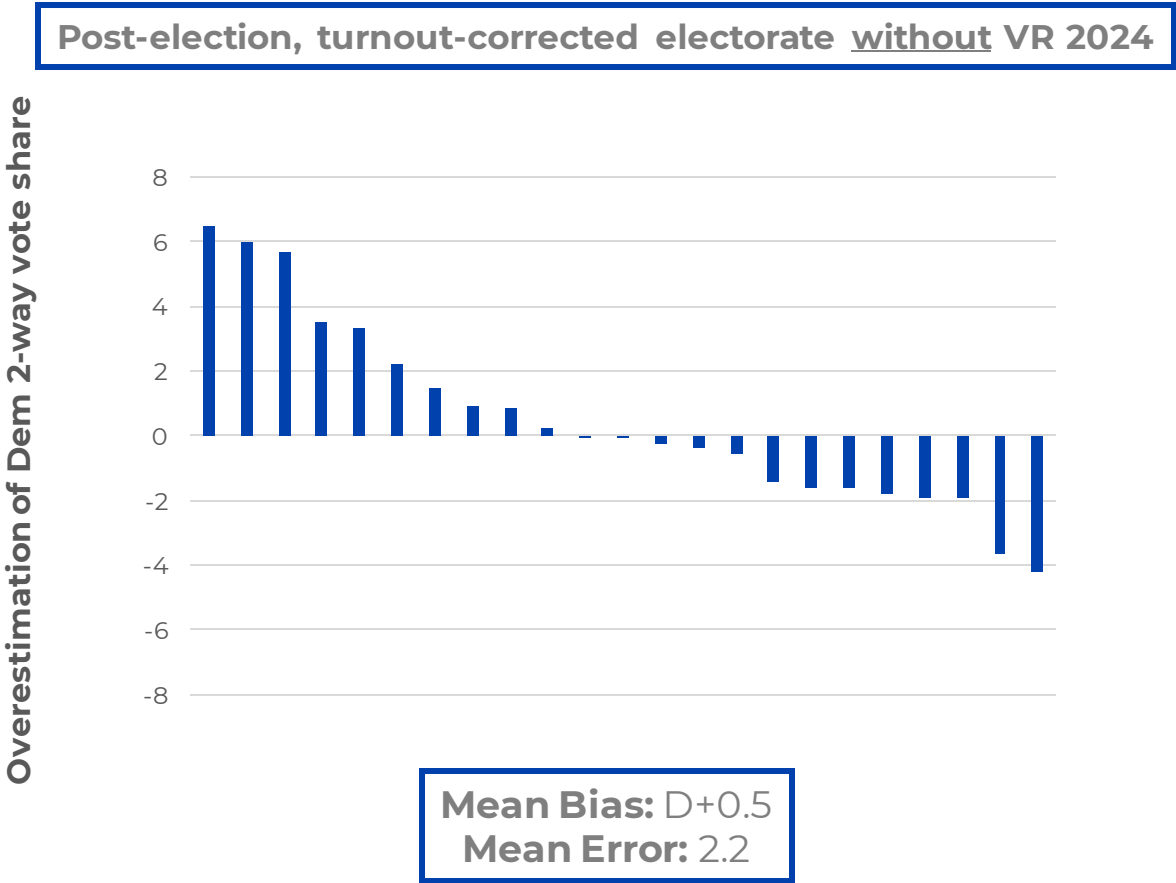**Mean Error:** 1.4 (-0.8)

Impact of known turnout post-election in 2024: Weighting to known turnout demographics and party post-election reduces pro-Dem bias by over half a point, and slightly reduces error

Presidential Vote in Statewide Polling

Base without VR 2024

Mean Bias: D+1.1
Mean Error: 2.3

Post-election, turnout-corrected electorate without VR 2024

Mean Bias: D+0.5 (-0.6)
Mean Error: 2.2 (-0.1)

Y-axis: Overestimation of Dem 2-way vote share

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Impact of VR **and** known turnout post-election: When weighted to the actual electorate post-election, VR reduces both error and bias

Presidential Vote in Statewide Polling

Post-election, turnout-corrected electorate **without** VR 2024

Post-election, turnout-corrected electorate **with** VR 2024

Overestimation of Dem 2-way vote share

Mean Bias: D+0.5
Mean Error: 2.2

Mean Bias: D+0.2 (-0.3)
Mean Error: 1.9 (-0.3)

Additional accuracy analyses we conducted show reductions in error and bias across various types of races

o In statewide Presidential level polling, **we saw a significant reduction in pro-Dem bias from 2020** (~1.3 points less bias and ~0.5 less error)

o In Congressional district polling:

   o There **was less error on the Presidential vote than on the House vote** (~0.8 less bias and ~0.4 less error)

   o However, **House races may simply be prone to more error and late movement.** We saw a **very significant reduction in both error and bias in comparing 2020 House races to 2024 House races** (~3.7 less bias and ~2.0 less error)

o In a ticket-splitting analysis, we saw that our polling, on average, **captured the difference between the Presidential vote and Congressional/Senate vote in 2024**

	Down Ballot Dem - Harris		
	Poll	*Actual*	*Diff*
Average – States	+1.1	+1.8	**-0.7**
Average – Districts	+2.0	+2.4	**-0.4**

Vote Recall Weighting

There was a vigorous debate about vote recall weighting in 2024

- GSG and other firms identified **weighting to recalled vote** as a key way to control for partisan nonresponse that had plagued polls in '16 & '20.

- Vote recall weighting became a **flashpoint** in the accuracy debate, receiving criticism such as:
  - **Being unable to capture changes in the electorate**
  - **Being overly deterministic and a form of herding**
  - **Being subject to winner's bias**
  - **Not being a true weighting variable, unlike demographics or "on-file" party variables**

- **BUT, post-2024...**GSG and other firms found **vote recall as a helpful tool in making our polling more accurate.**

- **There is still a right and a wrong way to weight to vote recall:** GSG has worked hard to identify the best approach.

Many vote recall criticisms are understandable, but our view is that they are issues to be managed via data analysis, not inherent flaws

Criticism	GSG's Point of View
Vote recall is unable to capture changes in the electorate since you're just weighting to the last election.	**We do not simply weight to the last election. We weight to a modeled estimate that can capture changes in the electorate.**
Vote recall weighting is overly deterministic and susceptible to herding.	**Vote recall is an effective control for partisan non-response bias that allows for deviation from past results if people who say they voted one way in 2020 are now voting differently in 2024.**
Vote recall weighting will get screwed up as people change their views (winner's bias, regret, etc.).	**We can monitor this and adjust for that, as needed.**
Vote recall is not a true weighting variable like other demographics or variables on file (party registration, score, etc.).	**We see vote recall as an attitudinal measure of partisanship which, across several cycles, has been a more effective control of partisan non-response than just on-file variables.**

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Our Approach to Vote Recall

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How GSG thinks about vote recall weighting

GSG's POV: It's an attitudinal measure of underlying partisanship
- Used to get the correct attitudinal partisan mix in the sample
- We care less about whether someone literally voted or changed their mind

Alternate Viewpoint #1: It's a "demographic" measure of vote choice
- Trying to get the right number of actual Biden/Trump voters in the sample
- Should not be applied to people who did not vote

Alternate Viewpoint #2: Do not weight on recalled vote
- It's highly correlated with vote choice and effectively determines that metric
- It's measured with too much error

GSG's view on key vote recall decisions

o **What target do we weight to?**
  - o **GSG's POV: Turnout-adjusted modeled estimate**
  - o Alternate viewpoint: The actual results from the prior election

o **Who do we weight?**
  - o **GSG's POV: 2020 voters – self-report**
  - o Alternate viewpoint: 2020 voters – file-based
  - o Alternate viewpoint: Everybody

o **How to handle self-reported refusals and third-party voters?**
  - o **GSG's POV: Allocate based on party ID**
  - o Alternative viewpoint: Leave unweighted

Using a model-based approach captures electoral shifts that static past vote numbers do not

o **Electorates change**
  - o Who is registered and available to vote changes
  - o Who is likely to turn out from those available changes
  - o **Therefore, the vote recall weighting target should also change to account for this**

o **We use predictive models at the individual level to capture change**
  - o Turnout propensity score: modeled likelihood of voting
  - o 2020 predicted candidate support: modeled likelihood of supporting Biden or Trump
  - o The summed product of these scores is a predicted 2020 two-way vote for likely voters

Example 2024 State

	Actual 2020 Results	Modeled Support for 2020 Voters	Modeled Support for 2022 Voters	Modeled Support x GE 2024 Turnout Score	Modeled Support for 2024 Voters
Biden VR Share	48.3%	48.3%	44.7%	47.3%	46.4%

Weighting to modeled vote recall targets reduced bias compared to weighting to exactly what happened in 2020, especially in midterms

o In 2024 and 2022, **weighting to 2020 actual results produced less accurate results than a modeled, in-cycle adjusted approach**

o Using targets that account for electorate changes **reduced Dem bias**

o The reduction in bias was **larger in midterms**, where turnout is more variable

	Weighting to 2020 Results				Weighting to In-cycle Adjusted Targets			
		Dem Share				Dem Share		
	Target	**Poll**	**Actual**	**Bias**	**Target**	**Poll**	**Actual**	**Bias**
2024	51.2%	51.4%	50.9%	0.6%	50.7%	51.1%	50.9%	0.2%
2022	51.2%	52.5%	50.4%	2.1%	49.8%	51.4%	50.4%	1.0%

Dem 2-Way Vote Share; 4,020 2022 BG Statewide Interviews weighted to 2022 electorate; 9,775 2024 BG Statewide Interviews weighted to 2024 electorate

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We weight on self-reported vote recall, instead of on-file, because it helps to reduce the size of the unallocated group

o Vote recall weights **help across a variety of approaches**; the accuracy difference is small between self-reported and file-based vote recall

o **We do not find evidence that weighting on self-report adds bias**

o Weighting by **self-report results in a much lower share of unallocated respondents**
   o The size of the unallocated group will vary by dataset, but decreases with a more aggressive allocation

o A larger unallocated group results in **more variation poll to poll**

	Self Report		On-file	
	Unallocated	Error	Unallocated	Error
Base weights w/o VR		1.3%		1.3%
VR – Allocate none	15.7%	0.4%	32.2%	0.4%
VR – Allocate refusals	15.5%	0.5%	32.0%	0.4%
VR – Allocate 3rd party/refusals	13.2%	0.1%	30.3%	0.6%
VR – Allocate 3rd party, refusals, and did not vote	6.7%	0.2%	28.0%	0.5%

GSG method →

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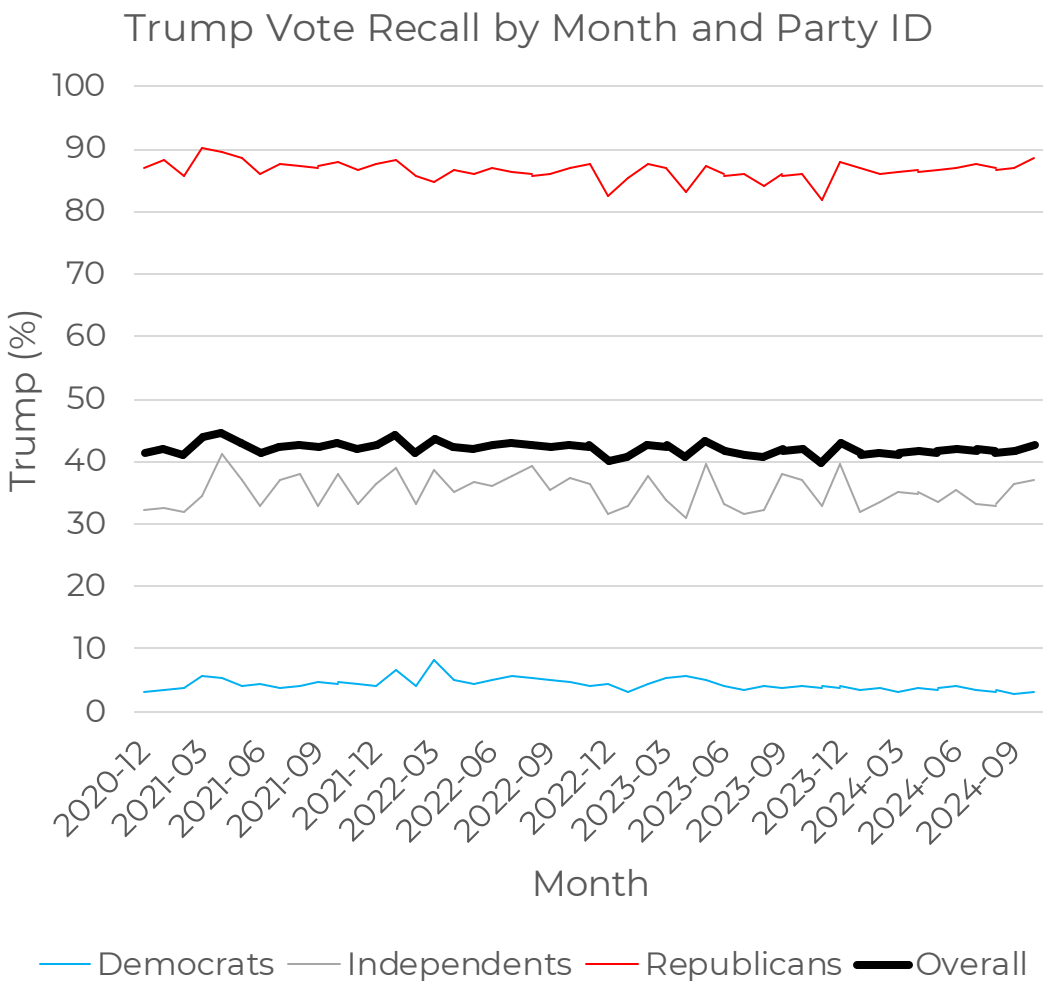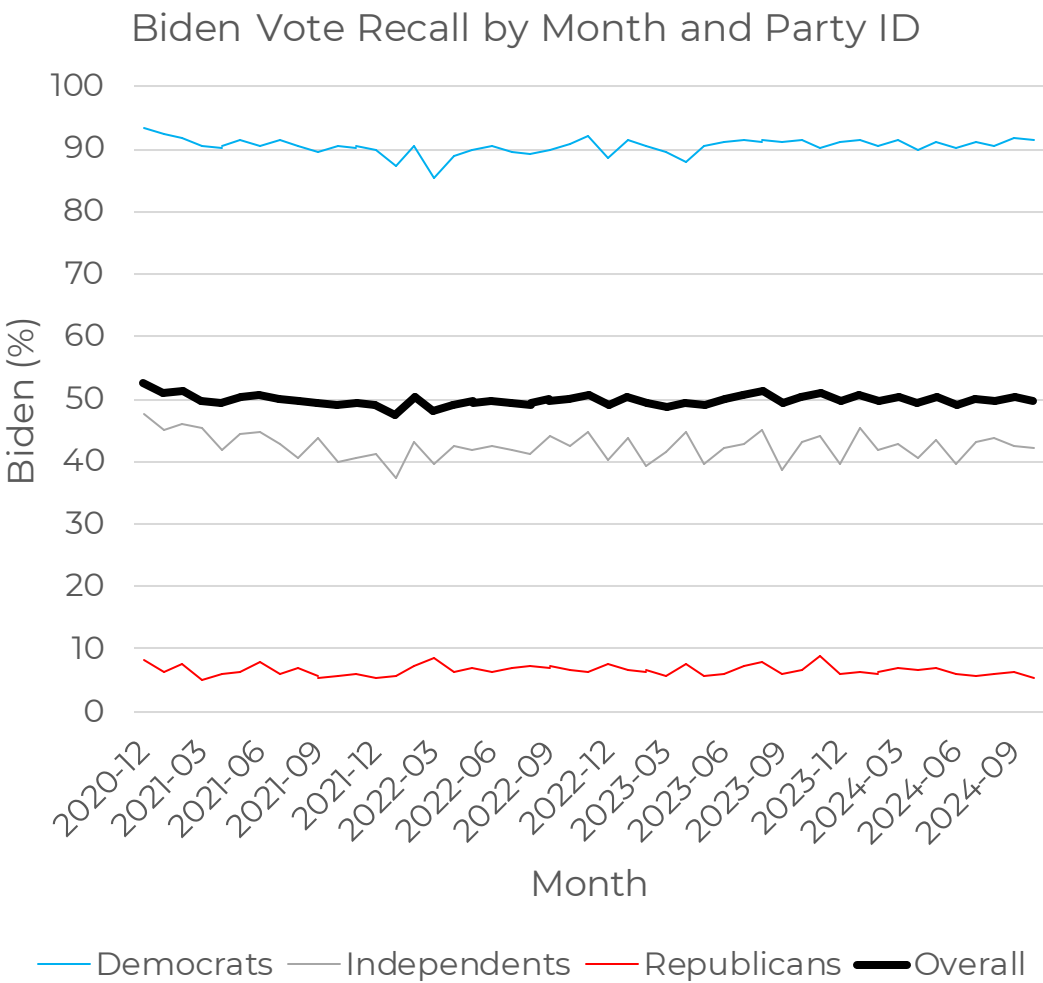# Addressing Additional Vote Recall Concerns

Vote recall does NOT determine where your vote is going to land

- While vote recall is strongly correlated with vote choice, that does not mean it produces identical results to the target you weight to

- This is illustrated in Congressional district polling – **in these districts, we saw Harris's vote share running behind our 2020 target, and the Congressional Dem running ahead, as more Trump voters defected at the House level**

Metric	2-Way Dem %		
	Poll A	Poll B	Poll C
2020 Vote Recall Weight	54%	47%	52%
Harris Vote	51%	44%	51%
House Dem Vote	58%	51%	56%
% of 2020 Trump Voters for Harris	2%	0%	2%
% of 2020 Trump Voters for House Dem	11%	7%	9%

Source: 2-Way Dem Share, GSG Congressional District Polling; Interviews collected in October 2024

Vote recall can be monitored for stability. Using 4 years of aggregated data, we tracked respondents vote recall x party ID and it was quite stable

Biden Vote Recall by Month and Party ID

Trump Vote Recall by Month and Party ID

Democrats — Independents — Republicans — Overall

Other vote recall findings from tens of thousands of GSG interviews across the country...

o **It's ok to ask vote recall without named 3rd party candidates.** We found asking the full ballot with named 3rd party candidates does not have a significant effect on how many people say they voted 3rd party (3% without named third-party candidates on the ballot, 3.8% with full named ballot).

o **We tracked vote recall over time, and we did not find that attitudes changed much or any evidence of a "winner's bias."** But, it's certainly possible this was unique to 2020 vote recall (Biden/Trump), and we plan to continue to monitor it.

   o Just 5% of repeat respondents switched their recalled 2020 vote, most often switching to major candidates.

   o We applied these rates of switching to a dataset and found minimal differences.

Initial x Final Recalled Vote

Final Response	Initial Response		
	Biden	**Trump**	**Oth**
Biden	97%	3%	12%
Trump	2%	96%	10%
Oth	1%	2%	78%

Experiment on 3rd party reporting was conducted on N=4,121 NW RV interviews fielded from 1/30/25-3/17/25. Experiment on repeat respondents used N=18,250 unique interviews collected between 12/1/2020 and 11/30/2024 (each respondent had more than one response for recalled vote across at least two surveys).

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Political Engagement

We are continuing our ongoing work to understand other sources of response bias, especially around political engagement

o **After 2020, we worked with several other Democratic polling firms to explore sources of error that could not be corrected using our conventional methods**

  o We used costly, unconventional methods, including incentives, mail interviews, and in-person interviews to achieve a far higher response rate than a traditional phone survey

  o We asked a range of exploratory questions – demographic and attitudinal – and compared responses using the unconventional, higher response rate survey to those collected using traditional methods

o **We identified a question that had important features – it was associated with partisan political attitudes, but traditional methods appeared to underrepresent certain voters**

> *How important is politics to your personal identity?*
>
> ❑ *Very important*
> ❑ *Somewhat important*
> ❑ *Not too important*
> ❑ *Not at all important*

What GSG does about engagement

- **Sampling**
  - We stratify by modeled turnout propensity and age
  - We quota on modeled turnout propensity, 2020 vote history, and other variables
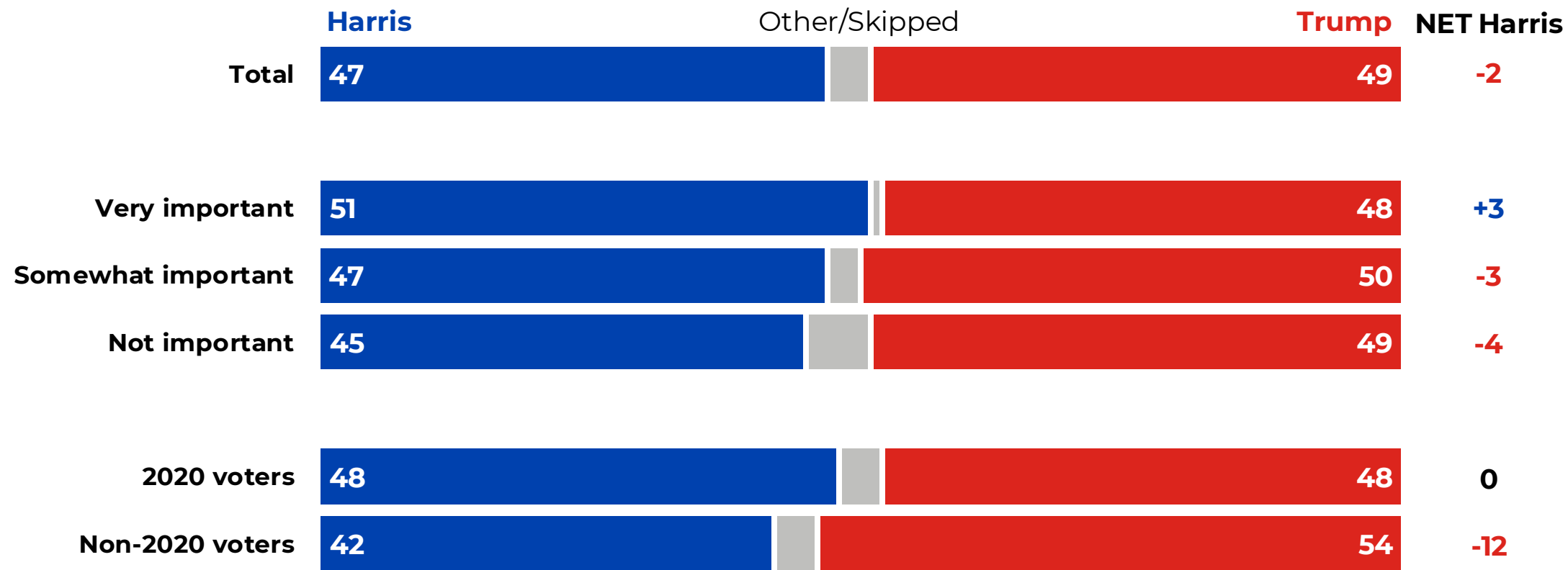- **Weighting**
  - We weight by modeled turnout propensity X on-file partisanship (reg or modeled)
  - We weight by 2020 vote history
  - We weight by our "importance of politics to identity" question
    - We scored the file for that question, allowing us to create targets using scores
    - We used an average of the scored target and how the data comes in to account for increased engagement around elections
- **Analysis & Monitoring**
  - We analyze and monitor data by engagement variables during the cycle with the understanding that it could be a source of additional error

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Less engaged voters favored Trump in 2024. Engagement captures something distinct from on-file history

Presidential Vote by Engagement and Vote History

	Harris	Other/Skipped	Trump	NET Harris
Total	47		49	**-2**
Very important	51		48	**+3**
Somewhat important	47		50	**-3**
Not important	45		49	**-4**
2020 voters	48		48	**0**
Non-2020 voters	42		54	**-12**

5,000 nationwide actual voter interviews conducted October 31st-November 9th, 2024

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Final Thoughts

Final Thoughts

- **We are pleased with progress made in 2024 on accuracy.** But we will continue to monitor for the next problem – the work is never done.

- **We will continue to use vote recall to control for partisan non-response.** But we will also continue do it carefully, in a way that allows for changes in electorates and accounts for any future instability in the metric.

- **Political engagement is an important variable that we need to continue to monitor, understand, and control for.** It is a driver of attitudes that was important in 2024, and we will continue to monitor it.

- **Midterms (and odd-years) present different issues than Presidentials!** Turnout and engagement work differently in non-presidential elections and require tailored approaches, within the framework presented today.

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Thank You

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