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The Times They Are A-Changin': A Longitudinal Review of Public Opinion Methodology, 2011-2023

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The Times They Are A-Changin': A Longitudinal Review of Public Opinion Methodology, 2011-2023

Paige Thissen, St. Cloud State University; James Cottrill, St. Cloud State University; Ann Finan, St. Cloud State University; Amanda Hemmesch, St. Cloud State University; Sandrine Zerbib, St. Cloud State University;

SCSU Survey Research Center



Founded in 1980 to provide experiential learning for students in research methods courses.



The Survey Center engages between 150-300 students in research every year as part of coursework across multiple fields of social science.



Over the last 40 years, our work has grown to include externally funded research projects for non-profits and governmental organizations.



Rapid changes in survey practices and respondent behavior poses significant challenges to our work. We review these challenges, and their implications, [here](#).

The Changing Environment for Public Opinion Research

Technological Changes:

- Declining Land Line Usage
- Call screening and Voice Mail
- Limitations of Online Surveying

Cultural and Behavioral Changes

- Increased Mistrust of Institutions
- Increased Partisan Polarization

Technological Changes:

Decline of Land Line Usage

From 2011-2022 the percentage of completes from land lines dropped from 75.73% to 8.94%.

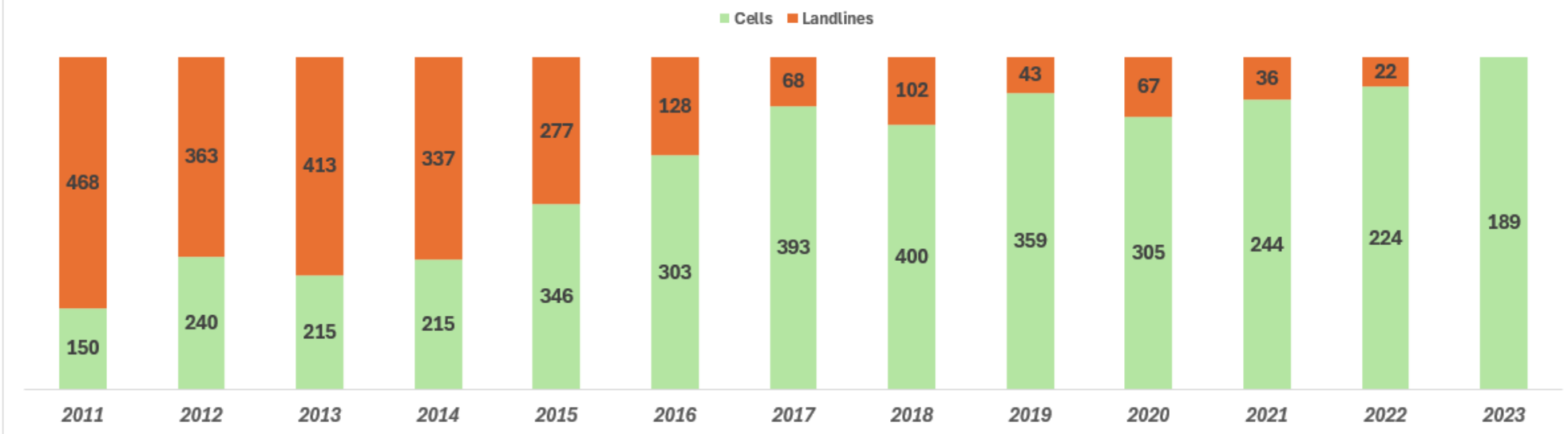
This shift has alleviated some methodological issues while creating several new challenges.

Systematic bias in response rates by gender has reversed as cell phone usage has increased.

Cell phone usage requires new procedures for ethical data collection.

Changing Phone Usage 2011-2023

What # of "Completed Interviews" came from *CellPhones? Landlines?*



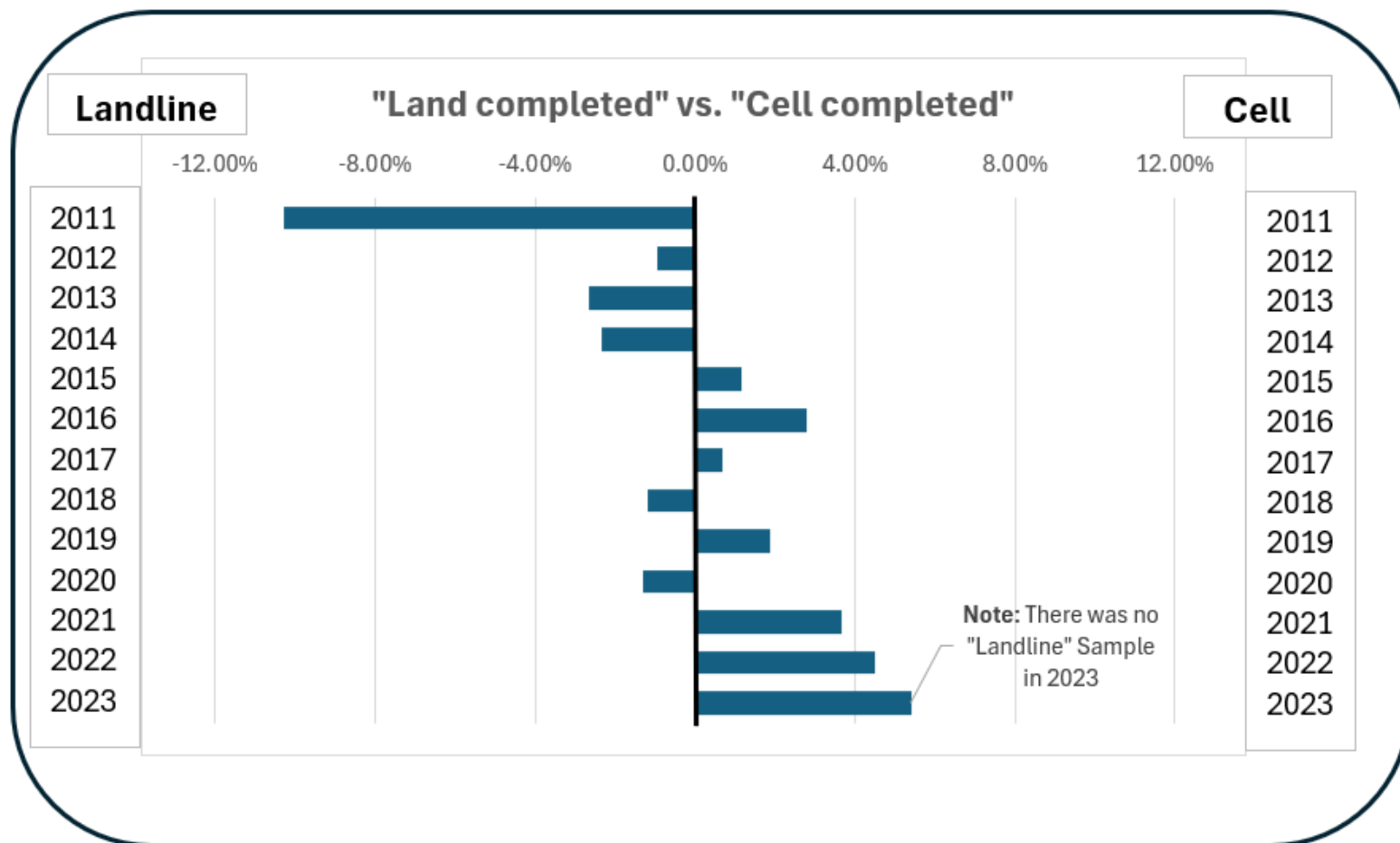
What # of "Completed Interviews" came from Cells? Landlines?

Landline completes have been on a steady decline for the past 13 years.

2015 was the first year "Cells" outnumbered our "Landline" completes.

Notes: In 2023 there was *no landline sample* ordered.

Changing Phone Usage 2011-2023



Cell % Completed "minus" Land % Completed

Landline tended to have more completed per call prior to 2015.

Bounced back & forth from **2015 - 2020**.

Cell has pulled ahead since 2020.

Note: No "Landline" sample was ordered in 2023 so the bar on that line represents the % of calls turned "completed" for Cells.

Technological Changes:

Call Screening and Voice Mail



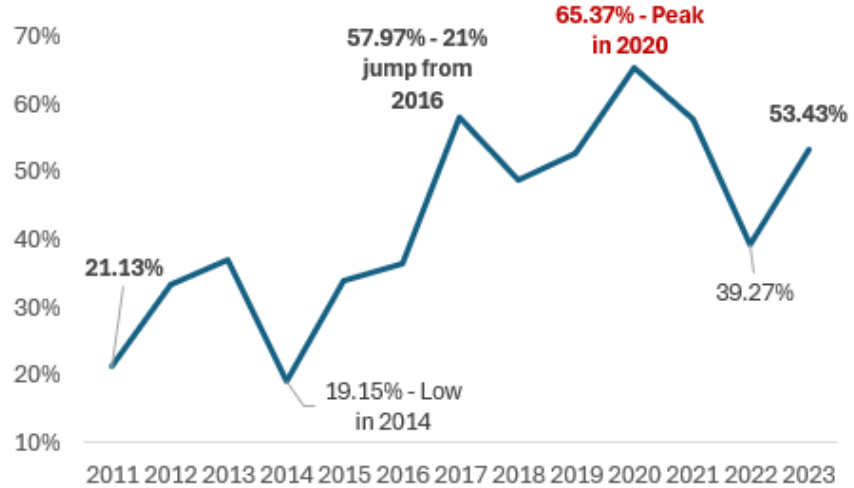
As the percentage of cell numbers in our sample has grown, the number of Voice Mail dispositions has exploded.



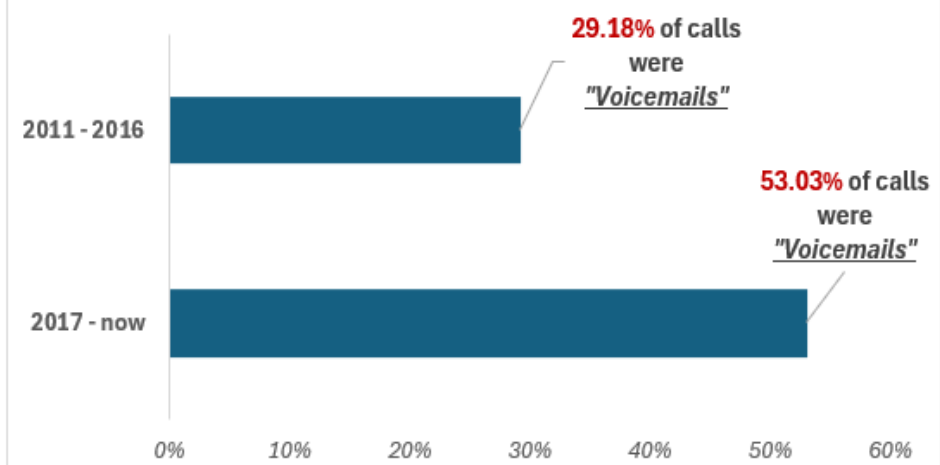
Response rates have declined as call screening behavior has increased and more attempts are needed to achieve the same number of completed interviews.

Increase in Voice Mail

What "%" of ALL Calls are voicemails? Is it going up?



Are more of our calls going to "Voicemail" post-2016.



What % of ALL Calls are voicemails?

Heavy increase after 2016.

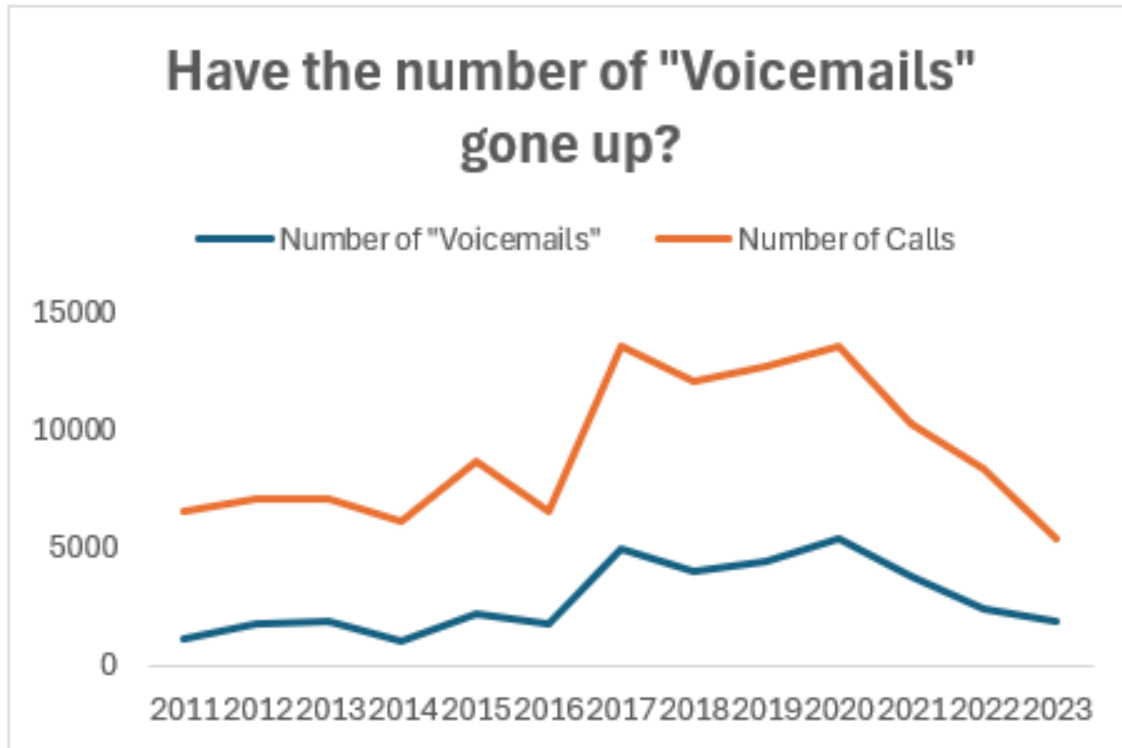
Consistently more than **50%** of our calls go to Voicemail post-2016

Highest was **36%** in the years prior - that number came in 2016.

Avg. 2011 - 2016: **29.18 %**

Avg. 2017 - now: **53.03 %**

Voicemails and Number of Attempts



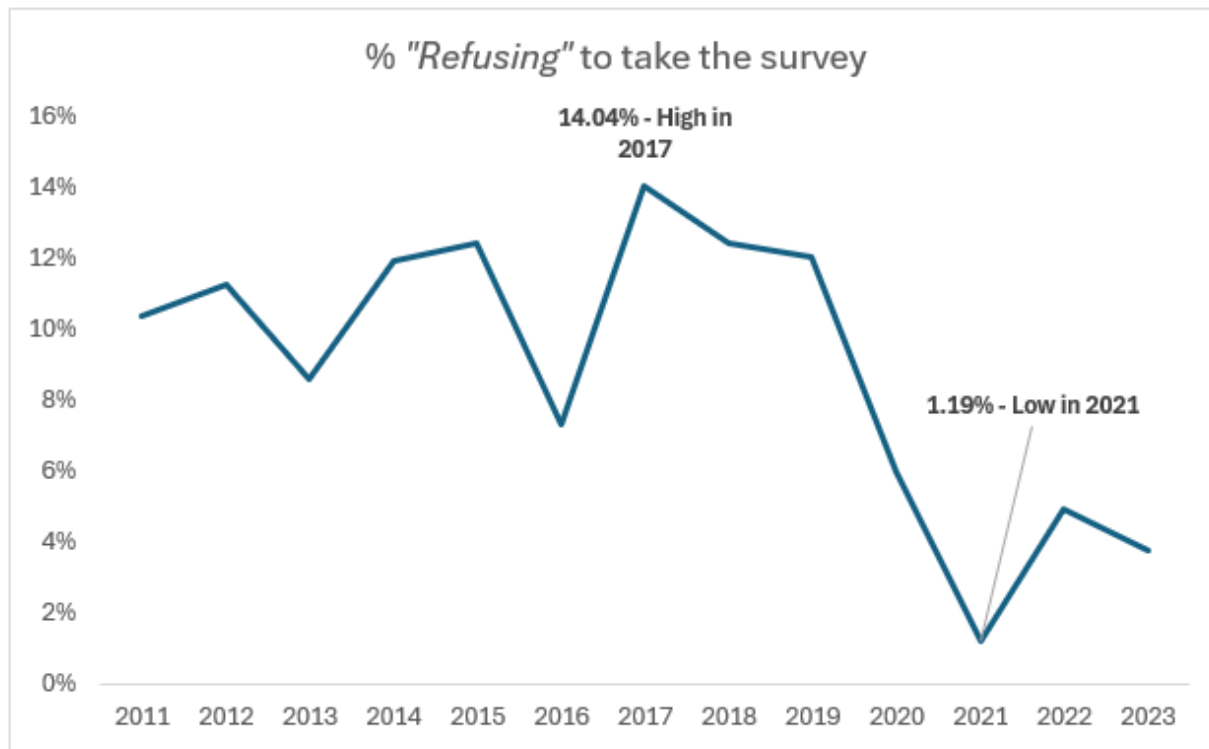
Have the number of "Voicemails" gone up?

Following a *similar* pattern to the number of call attempts we make.

Voicemail number begin picking up around *2015*. *Heavily post-2016*.

As Voicemail increased, refusals decreased (as seen in the next figure).

“Voice Mail is the New Refusal”



% Refusing to take the survey - both "Hard" & "Soft" Refusals:

Refusals stayed in a fairly consistent range between 2011 - 2019 prior to Covid.

Peak came in 2017 at *14.04%* - the year after Donald Trump's Election. *Doubled* from the year before.

Low is in 2021 at *1.19%*.

Technological Changes:

Limitations of Online Surveys



Online surveys offer the potential to offset lower response rates on cell phones by introducing multi-mode approaches



However, email contact requires respondents to have opted-in already which prevents the drawing of a random sample

Cultural and Behavioral Changes:

Declining Trust

Trust in institutions, processes, and other people have declined in the last decade making it difficult to enlist cooperation

Callers have encountered more instances of open hostility from respondents

Declining Trust by Party 2016 and 2020

Election Confidence by Trump Approval 2020					
	Excellent	Very Good	Only Fair	Poor	Very Poor
Confident	42%	57%	73%	86%	89%
Neutral	1%				
Not Confident	58%	43%	27%	14%	11%

Election Trust by Party 2020			
	Democrat	Republican	All
Confident	90	52	71
Neutral	0	2	1
Not Confident	10	46	28

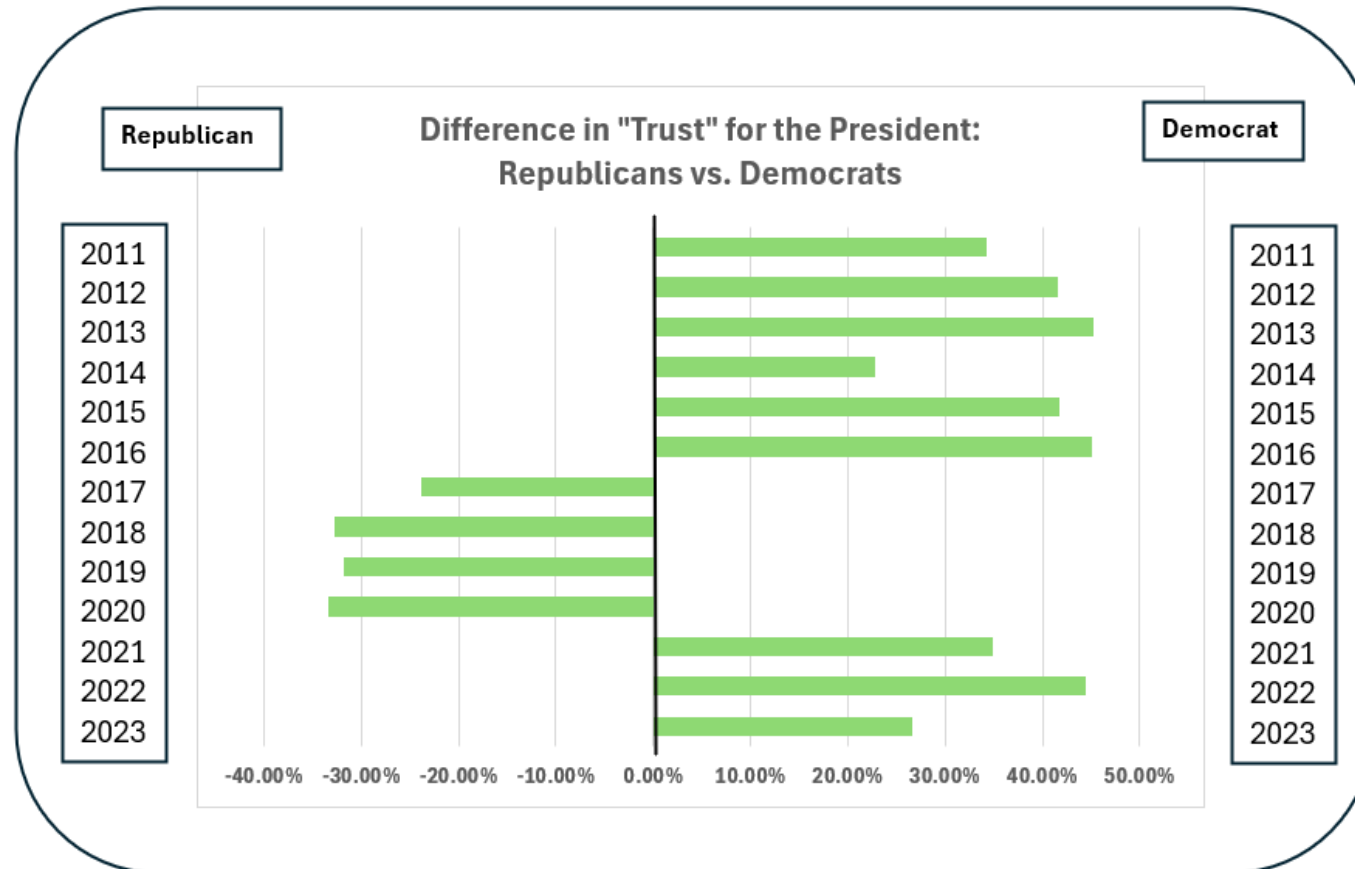
General Trust in People by Party 2016			
	Democrat	Republican	All
A Lot/Some	91	92	91
Only a Little/Not at All	9	8	9

Cultural and Behavioral Changes:

Partisan Polarization

- The growth of sharp partisan polarization has paralleled declining trust and declining response rates
- Asymmetric response rates may be responsible for systematic bias in estimating political opinions (*e.g.*, the underestimation of the Trump vote in 2016).

Party Polarization in Presidential Approval 2011-23



Conclusion

Understanding
Response Rate
is Important:

Lower N decreases confidence in our estimates
Systematic bias in response rates prevents accurate forecasting
Addressing lower response rates increases research costs



*New
Approaches
Are Needed:*

More effective mixed-mode survey approaches may help
Oversampling and improved weighting procedures can offset lower response rates
Other ideas?