Peter Lewis, Executive Director, Essential Media:

Do you think the polls were accurate in predicting the US election result? What do you think contributed to the improvement (compared to 2016) or the inaccuracies?

The aggregation of polls giving Biden a 90 per cent change of victory were born out There were some state polls that were outside the margin of error (notably Wisconsin).

The big short since 2016 was the inclusion of education in sampling by many pollsters to better represent non-college educated voters who had been unrepresented in 2016 and leaned heavily to Trump.

There are suggestions that people not answering mobile phones is to blame for the increased margin of error. Do you think that poses a significant challenge for pollsters? How can pollsters address this issue?

I'm not sure if there was a 'increased margin of error'.

That said there are real challenges in reaching votes, including mobile phones - apart from landlines much harder to link to electorates.

We operate on an aggregation of online panels which improves weighting but carriers it on challenges re 'observer effect'

Robopolls where phone are automatically called are highly problematic

Ad an aside, reject the 'shy trump' theory - reality is these voters are harder to reach and online polls are anonymous anyway.

Should the media rely on the polls? How should the media cover the polls?

Polls should be part of the intelligence infrastructure that informs political reporting, but should never be reported as a horse race/predictor of future events.

The problem with reporting polls is that margin of error movements (for an n=1000 +/- 3 per cent) should not be newsworthy, but tend to attract surplus meaning

We have made the decision not to release out fortnightly poll since the 2019 election, preferring instead to release a three month series which allows for reflection but breaks the 'horse race cycle'.

As a pollster I think the right questions can deliver rich insights, but 'who is going to win?' is not one of them.

Can I just clarify what you mean by this:

"The problem with reporting polls is that margin of error movements (for an n=1000 +/- 3 per cent) should not be newsworthy, but tend to attract surplus meaning"

What I mean is that there are way too many news reports attempt to explain one or two per cent movements which are better explained by being within the margin of statistical error … ie Labor/Liberal up two points after a torrid week in Parliament … its errant nonsense,

Examples of useful questions:

- What's important to you?
- Where do you get your information?
- What news are you aware of?
- How much trust do you have in government?
- Are you optimistic about the future?

These allow you to build a richer picture of the public sentiment and provides context to a campaign rather than just 'who is winning'

For eg the last poll we ran before 2019 election we asked 'are you happy?' - made me question whether there would be a change of government despite the horse race - https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/commentisfree/2019/may/16/its-the-unknown-unknowns-that-will-decide-who-wins-the-election