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Poll Addict Confesses

By **DAVID BROOKS**

Hello, my name is David, and I'm a pollaholic. For the past several months I have spent inordinate amounts of time poring over election polls. A couple of times a day, I check the Web sites to see what the polling averages are. I check my Twitter feed to see the latest Gallup numbers. I've read countless articles dissecting the flawed methodologies of polls I don't like.

And do you know what I've learned from these hours of attention? That if the election were held today (which it won't be), then President Obama would be a bit more likely to win. At the same time, there seems to be a whiff of momentum toward Mitt Romney. That's it. Hundreds of hours. Two banal observations.

I have wasted a large chunk of my life I will never get back. Why? Because I've got a problem.

Look, I know in the cool light of rationality how I should treat polling data. First, I should treat polls as a fuzzy snapshot of a moment in time. I should not read them, and think I understand the future.

If there's one thing we know, it's that even experts with fancy computer models are terrible at predicting human behavior. Financial firms with zillions of dollars have spent decades trying to create models that will help them pick stocks, and they have gloriously failed.

Scholars at Duke University studied 11,600 forecasts by corporate chief financial officers about how the Standard & Poor's 500-stock index would perform over the next year. The correlation between their estimates and the actual index was less than zero.

And, if it's hard to predict stocks or the economy, politics is a field perfectly designed to foil precise projections.

Politics isn't a game, like poker, with an artificially limited number of possible developments. National elections are rare, so we have ridiculously small sample sizes. Political campaigns don't give pollsters immediate feedback, so they can gradually correct their errors. They have to wait for Election Day for actual results, and only the final poll is verifiable.

Most important, stuff happens. Obama turns in a bad debate performance. Romney makes offensive comments at a fund-raiser. These unquantifiable events change the trajectories of tight campaigns. You can't tell what's about to happen. You certainly can't tell how 100 million people are going to process what's about to happen. You can't calculate odds that capture unknown reactions to unknown events.

The second thing I know is that if you do have to look at polls, you should do it no more than once every few days, to get a general sense of the state of the race. I've seen the studies that show that people who check their stocks once a day get lower returns than people who check them once a quarter because they get distracted by noise and make terrible decisions. I've seen the work on information overload, which makes people depressed, stressed and freezes their brains. I know that checking the polls constantly is a recipe for self-deception and anxiety.

I know all this. But do I obey? Of course not. I check every few hours. I'm motivated by the illusion of immanent knowledge. I imagine that somehow the next batch of polling will contain some magic cross-tab about swing voters in Ohio that will satisfy my voracious curiosity and allay this irritable uncertainty.

I'm also motivated by the thrill of premature celebration. Elections aren't just about policy choices. They're status competitions. When the polls swing your way, you feel a surge of righteous affirmation. Your views are obviously correct! Your team's virtues are widely recognized! You get to see the humiliation and pain afflicting your foes.

When the polls swing the other way, well, who believes the polls anyway? Those idiots are obviously skewing the results. This has been a golden age for confirmation bias.

Finally, I'm motivated by the power of cognitive laziness. It's hard to figure out how each candidate will handle the so-called budgetary fiscal cliff or the uncertainties involved with Iran. But the polling numbers are like candy. So clear and digestible! Just as the teenage mind naturally migrates from homework to Facebook, just as the normal reader's mind naturally wanders from Toynbee to Twitter, so the political junkie's brain has a tendency to slide downhill from policy to polling.

Look, I went into a profession — journalism — committed to the mission of describing the present. Imagine how many corrections we'd have to publish if we tried to predict the future. Yet, despite all that, every few hours, I'm on my laptop, tablet or smartphone — sipping Gallup, chugging Rasmussen, gulping Pew, trying to figure out how it will all go down.

Come on, David, think through the poll. This is the first day of the rest of your life.

Wait a second! The 7-Eleven Coffee Cup Poll is out! Just one more look. Obama is up big!