Feeling thermometers in online polling

Findings from polls of the 2019 Kentucky gubernatorial election

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Background

- Key questions: Are results from online favorability scales:

    1) comparable to phone results on identical 4-point scales?
    2) an improvement when 100-point sliders are used?

- Feeling thermometers in telephone polls lead to heaping given time constraints and the mental shortcuts respondents employ to answer the questions.

- The online format allows for more complexity and customization of scales and response mechanisms.

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Methods

- Conducted 3 waves of a survey of likely voters in the lead-up to the Kentucky gubernatorial election.

- Each wave had side by side phone and online surveys.

    – Wave 1 (May-Jun 2019)
    – Wave 2 (Aug. 2019)
    – Wave 3 (Oct./Nov. 2019)
    – Election Day: Nov 5, 2019

- All waves weighted on age, gender, education, race, party, and congressional district.

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Quick reminders

Matt Bevin – Republican
KY Governor 2015-19

Andy Beshear – Democrat
KY Governor 2019 –

704,754 votes
48.8%

709,890 votes
49.2%

Also Libertarian John Hicks 28,443 votes, 2%.

Question details

- To test, used favorability ratings for President Trump, Governor Bevin, and Attorney General Beshear

  – Wave 1:
    - Phone: 4-point scale from "very favorable" to "very unfavorable"
    - Online: 4-point scale from "very favorable" to "very unfavorable"
  – Wave 2:
    - Phone: 4-point scale from "very favorable" to "very unfavorable"
    - Online: 4-point scale from "very favorable" to "very unfavorable"
  – Wave 3:
    - Phone: 4-point scale from "very favorable" to "very unfavorable" and a 100-point scale from "very favorable" to "very unfavorable"
    - Online: 100-point sliding scale from "very favorable" to "very unfavorable"

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Comparability – phone & online, 4-pt scales

- The 4-point scale online is largely comparable to the 4-point scale online, across 2 waves and 3 candidates.
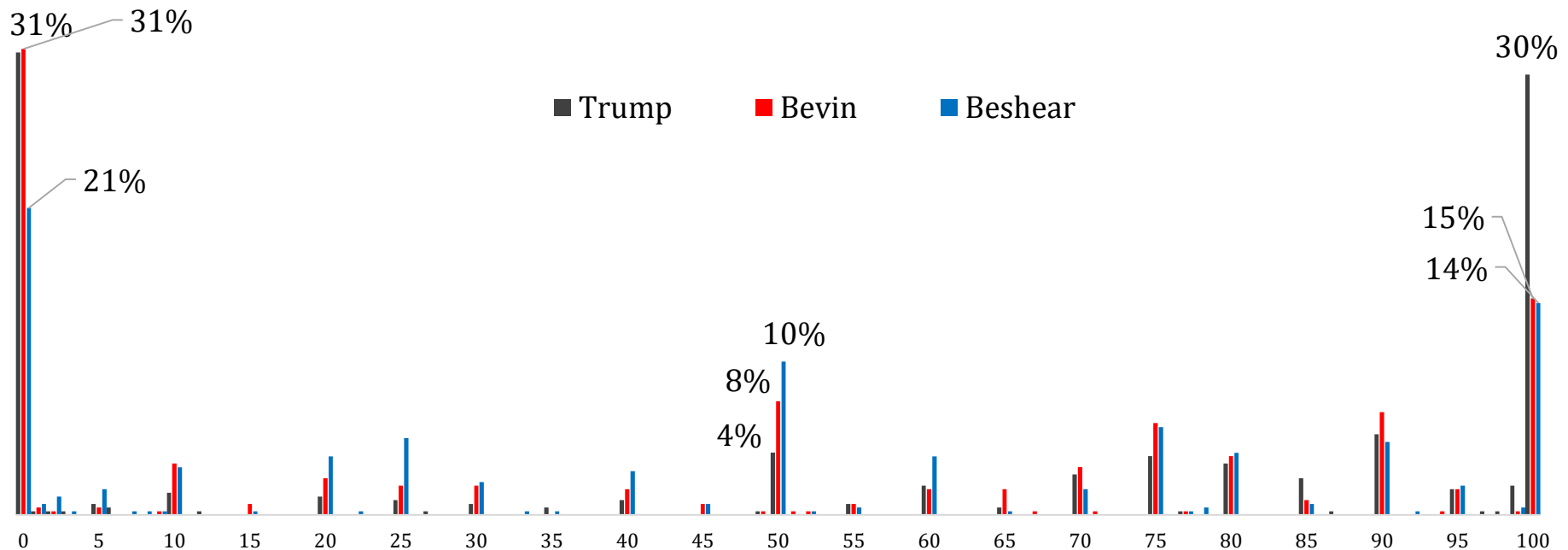
		Wave 1		Wave 2	
		Phone	**Online**	**Phone**	**Online**
Trump	Very favorable	39%	34%	38%	34%
	Somewhat favorable	14%	17%	16%	21%
	Somewhat unfavorable	5%	8%	6%	7%
	Very unfavorable	39%	38%	37%	35%
	Unsure	*3%*	*2%*	*3%*	*2%*
Bevin	Very favorable	18%	12%	18%	18%
	Somewhat favorable	20%	24%	23%	24%
	Somewhat unfavorable	11%	16%	13%	16%
	Very unfavorable	44%	43%	39%	37%
	Unsure	*8%*	*5%*	*8%*	*5%*
Beshear	Very favorable	19%	18%	19%	15%
	Somewhat favorable	27%	29%	29%	30%
	Somewhat unfavorable	13%	19%	15%	20%
	Very unfavorable	22%	21%	21%	22%
	Unsure	*19%*	*13%*	*17%*	*14%*

Q (phone): I'm going to read you the names of several people who are active in public affairs. After I read each one please tell me if you have a generally favorable or generally unfavorable view of the person or group.
Q (online): Do you have a generally favorable or generally unfavorable view of each person listed below?

Heaping of telephone responses

- On the phone, there is clear evidence of heaping. Respondents mostly chose multiples of 5 between 0 and 100.

Mental shortcuts produce less variability in telephone responses
% rating each figure at each point from 0-100

Legend: ■ Trump ■ Bevin ■ Beshear

Annotations: 31%, 31%, 21%, 4%, 8%, 10%, 30%, 15%, 14%

X-axis: 0, 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, 35, 40, 45, 50, 55, 60, 65, 70, 75, 80, 85, 90, 95, 100

Q (phone): On a scale of 0 to 100, please tell me if you have a generally favorable or generally unfavorable view of the person where 0 is very unfavorable and 100 is very favorable.
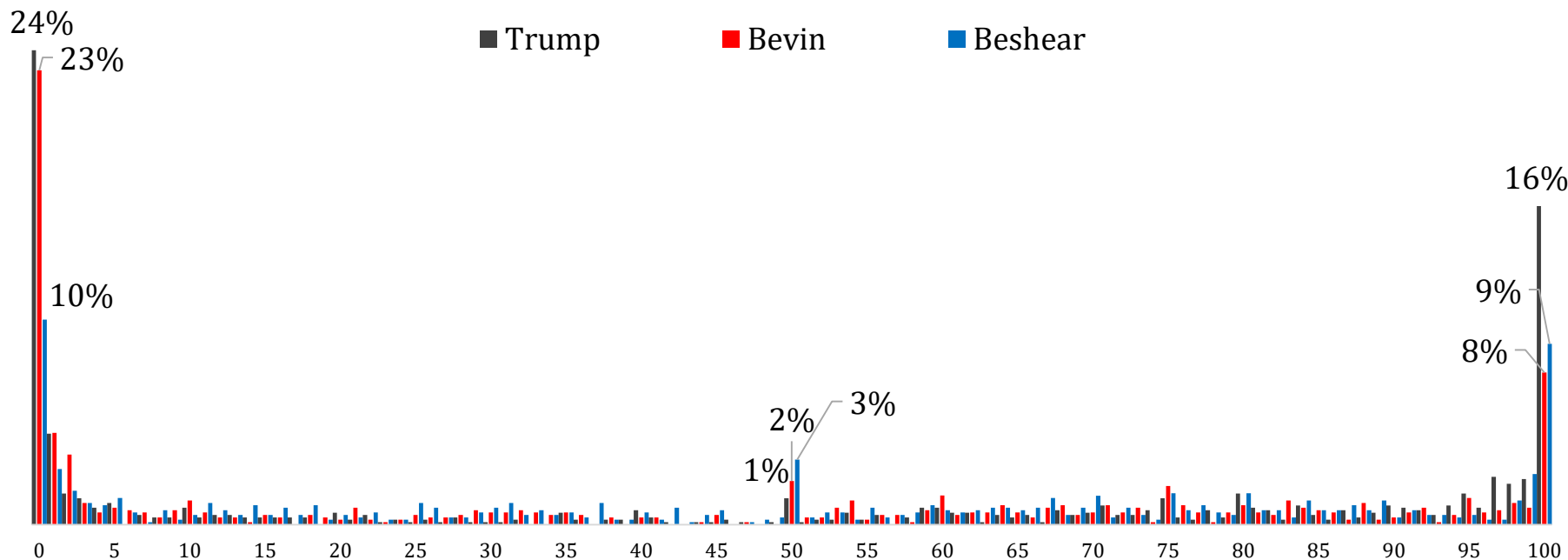
More even distribution online

- While still plenty of responses at 0 and 100, respondents online utilized many more points on the scale.

Mental shortcuts produce more variability in online responses
% rating each figure at each point from 0-100

Legend: ■ Trump ■ Bevin ■ Beshear

Q (online): Do you have a generally favorable or generally unfavorable view of each person listed below? Use the slider to indicate how favorable or unfavorable you feel.

Few phone respondents use whole scale

- On the phone, between 90% and 95% of responses were 0, 100, or another 5-point value.

- Online, between 43% and 54% of responses were a value other than 0, 100, or another 5-point value.

Comparing responses by mode shows major differences in distributions
% rating each candidate at each point from 0-100

	Phone			Online		
	Trump	**Bevin**	**Beshear**	**Trump**	**Bevin**	**Beshear**
0 value	31%	31%	21%	24%	23%	10%
100 value	30%	15%	14%	16%	8%	9%
Other 5-point value	34%	48%	55%	14%	16%	19%
Other value	5%	3%	5%	43%	49%	54%
Don't Know / Unsure	1%	3%	5%	2%	4%	7%

Q (phone): On a scale of 0 to 100, please tell me if you have a generally favorable or generally unfavorable view of the person where 0 is very unfavorable and 100 is very favorable.
Q (online): Do you have a generally favorable or generally unfavorable view of each person listed below? Use the slider to indicate how favorable or unfavorable you feel.

Are online ratings meaningful?

- The results confirmed that a 100-point scale on the phone is less meaningful as heaping essentially turns the 100-point scale into a 10-point or 20-point scale.

- Online, there is more even distribution.

- Is there meaning behind the increased distribution of values online? Does the added precision of a 100-point scale online translate into new insights and actionable data?

- We can examine this question through the horse race results and candidate messaging results.

Horse race results show favorability is continuous

- Support for each candidate climbs in a more or less continuous fashion as favorability increases from 0-100.

- Added precision offered by this scale allows better targeting and analysis of persuadable voters than a 4-point scale would.

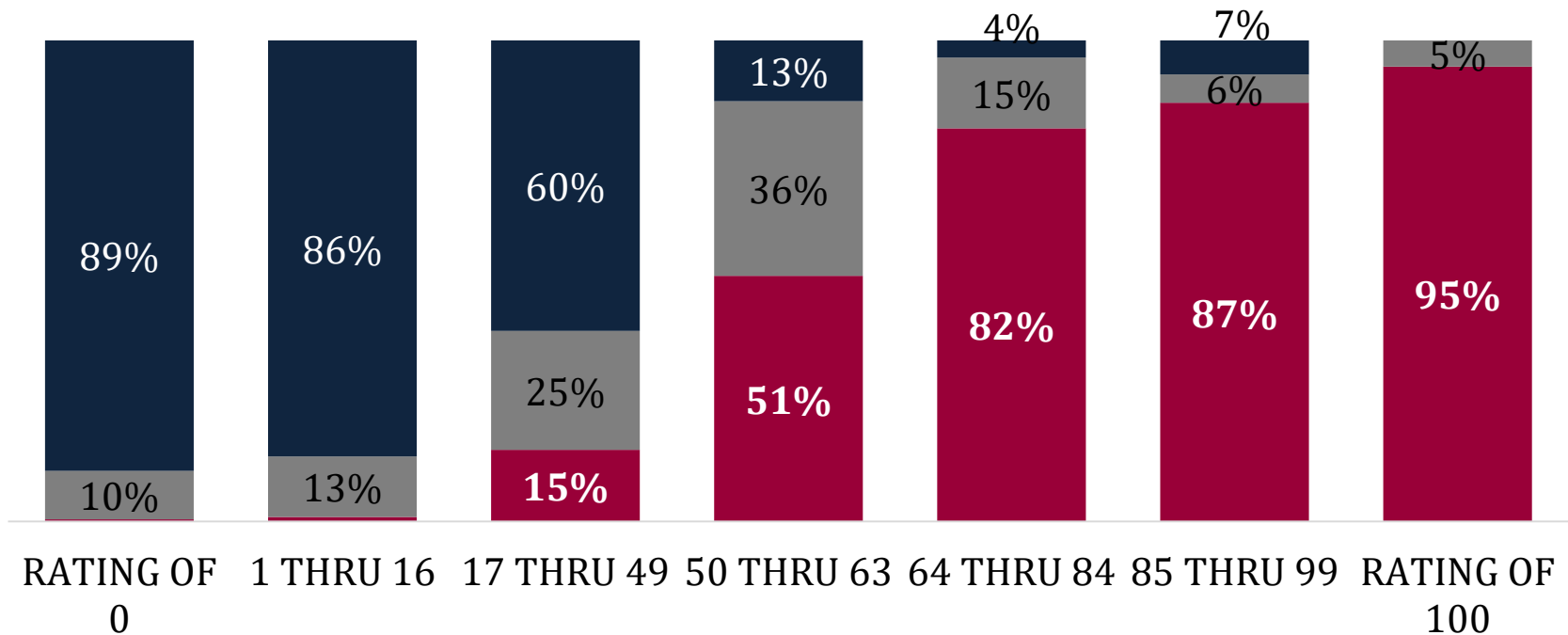- Segment precision limited by sample size in this survey.

Head to head matchups show steady movement with 0-100 favorability scale
% supporting each candidate, broken down by fav categories

	R - Matt Bevin	D - Andy Beshear	Other / undecided
Beshear favorability categories			
0 (unfav)	85%	3%	12%
1 thru 16	93%	1%	6%
17 thru 33	69%	14%	17%
34 thru 50	44%	36%	20%
51 thru 70	15%	80%	5%
71 thru 84	1%	95%	4%
85 thru 99	8%	90%	2%
100 (fav)	4%	95%	1%
DK/Ref	*33%*	*30%*	*37%*
Bevin favorability categories			
0 (unfav)	0%	90%	10%
1 thru 16	1%	89%	10%
17 thru 49	18%	65%	17%
50 thru 63	64%	19%	17%
64 thru 84	85%	12%	3%
85 thru 99	91%	7%	2%
100 (fav)	99%	1%	0%
DK/Ref	*26%*	*32%*	*43%*

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Finding swing voters – Bevin favs

- Breaking down favorables more finely shows where swing voters appear, allowing more precise targeting.

Bevin's favorables on a 100-point scale show where swing voters appear
% in each group, broken down by 100-point favorables for Matt Bevin

Legend: ■ Bevin base ■ Swing ■ Beshear base

	RATING OF 0	1 THRU 16	17 THRU 49	50 THRU 63	64 THRU 84	85 THRU 99	RATING OF 100
Beshear base	89%	86%	60%	13%	4%	7%	
Swing	10%	13%	25%	36%	15%	6%	5%
Bevin base			15%	51%	82%	87%	95%

Negative messaging tracks with continuous scale

- Results of the negative Bevin messages show the continuous nature of the favorability 100-pt scale.

- Those "unfavorable" to Beshear may have been persuadable – roughly 1/4 to 1/3 of those who rated Beshear 34-50 say negative messages about Bevin concern them "a great deal".

Messaging persuasiveness follows the 0-100 favorability scale
% who rated each message "a great deal," broken down by 0-100 favorability categories

	Beshear favorabilty								Bevin favorability						
	0	1-16	17-33	34-50	51-70	71-84	85-99	100	0	1-16	17-49	50-63	64-84	85-99	100
Supports charters	15%	10%	18%	33%	53%	68%	77%	91%	83%	72%	38%	18%	13%	15%	14%
Chicken pox	10%	5%	12%	23%	45%	59%	68%	74%	64%	61%	31%	23%	9%	13%	10%
Cut public servant pay	19%	5%	16%	29%	58%	79%	86%	90%	84%	79%	47%	17%	12%	13%	10%
Temperament	14%	4%	16%	30%	63%	78%	81%	89%	83%	83%	48%	13%	10%	14%	7%

Positive messaging reinforces scale, opportunity

- Results of the positive Beshear messages also show the continuous nature of the favorability 100-pt scale.

- Messaging on supporting public schools and rape kits convincing to notable segment of those who rate Beshear 17-50, reinforces persuasion opportunity.

Messaging persuasiveness follows the 0-100 favorability scale

% who rated each message "a great deal," broken down by 0-100 favorability categories

	Beshear favorability								Bevin favorability						
	0	1-16	17-33	34-50	51-70	71-84	85-99	100	0	1-16	17-49	50-63	64-84	85-99	100
Supports public schools	19%	4%	21%	34%	60%	76%	88%	98%	82%	77%	47%	31%	19%	17%	14%
Pharma / Opioids	9%	3%	10%	15%	46%	39%	77%	89%	65%	49%	39%	21%	11%	15%	6%
Testing rape kits	17%	8%	25%	28%	55%	60%	78%	95%	76%	60%	39%	31%	20%	20%	19%
Transparency in gov.	7%	3%	8%	16%	43%	58%	77%	89%	70%	56%	32%	15%	8%	13%	10%

Conclusions

- As expected, the 100-point scale leads to heaping on the phone, gives the illusion of precision.

- Online, the values that respondents choose are much more evenly distributed between 0 and 100.

- The additional precision of the 100-point scale online is meaningful.
  - The scale appears continuous when used to assess horse race results and messaging results. Research with a larger sample would be helpful to confirm this.
  - Further, the segmentation possible with the 100-point scale online reveals swing groups with more precision. Further testing with larger samples sizes would be useful to confirm this observation.

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