Do October surprises move the polls?

Timeline of October surprises 1

Oct. 31, 1968 O President Lyndon Johnson announces end to bombing and peace talks in Vietnam

Vice President Humphrey struggled to unify the Democratic base due to the increasingly polarizing Vietnam War. The polls moved three points towards Humphrey after the announcement, but it was not enough to secure his win.

Polling averages:
Before: Nixon +3
After: Nixon +1

Result: Nixon +1

Oct. 26, 1972 Henry Kissinger announces peace in Vietnam is fast approaching

Kissinger, Nixon's national security adviser, announced progress in talks with North Vietnam, distracting from the emerging Watergate scandal. Nixon defeated McGovern by wide margins, but the talks fell apart in December.

Polling averages:

Before: Nixon +23 After: Nixon +24 **Result:** Nixon +24

Nov. 4, 1992 O Former Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger is indicted in relation to Iran-Contra

His arrest reignited the Reagan administration's Iran-Contra scandal. The polls swung in Clinton's favor, but in the end the results were only a point off from pre-indictment polling averages. Bush lost to Clinton in a three way race with Perot and pardoned Weinberger before he left office.

Polling averages:

Before: Clinton +7
After: Clinton +12 **Result:** Clinton +6

Nov. 2, 2000 News of George W. Bush's drunk driving arrest in 1976 leaks

Bush was running as a compassionate, religious conservative, so many thought this news would erode his base. The polls did not swing significantly towards Gore after the story came out. Ultimately, Bush lost the popular vote but won the Electoral College.

Polling averages:

Before: Bush +4 After: Bush +3

Result: Gore +1 (Bush wins EC)

Oct. 29, 2004 O Osama Bin Laden releases video ridiculing Bush

It was widely debated as to which candidate the tape would hurt most. Bush was running as the national-security candidate, but Kerry could remind people that Bin Laden was still at large. The polls did not move significantly after this October surprise.

Polling averages: Before: Bush +3

After: Bush +2 **Result:** Bush +2

Harry Enten, "How much do 'October surprises' move the polls?" October 30, 2016, FiveThirtyEight; Taylor Gee, "15 October surprises that wreaked havoc on Politics," Politico, October 4, 2016.

November 1, 2016 | Libbie Wilcox 1

October surprises might move the polls, but they rarely affect the election outcome

Timeline of October surprises 2

Oct. 6, 2008 O The stock market plummets in October

In September 2008, Lehman Brothers collapsed and by early October the financial system had received a \$700 billion bailout. The state of the economy hurt McCain's chances of winning, but the huge October stock market losses did not significantly affect the polls or the outcome.



Polling averages:

Before: Obama +6 After: Obama +8 **Result:** Obama +7

Oct. 29, 2012 💍

Hurricane Sandy devastates the East Coast

When Romney did not win the 2012 election, many pundits blamed Sandy. Obama was able to demonstrate his strong leadership before, during and after the storm. While the polls did not move after Sandy, Obama did win by a larger margin than polls indicated.



Polling averages:

Before: Obama +1 After: Obama +1 **Result:** Obama +4

Oct. 28, 2016

FBI Director James Comey announces the reopening of Clinton email server investigation Potentially violating the Hatch Act, Comey releases a letter to Congress informing them of new emails found on computer of Clinton aide Huma Abedine's husband in the course of another investigation. Polling is most accurate a week after an event occurs, so the effect of this announcement will not be known until shortly before election day.



Polling averages:

Before: Clinton +5.4

After: TBD **Result:** TBD

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