

Is a Pennsylvania groundhog's prediction accurate in your neck of the woods?

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Credit: Aaron J Hill from Pexels

Persuaded by pomp and pageantry, people across the nation are more likely to put faith in a Pennsylvania groundhog's weather predictions than those made by local woodchucks, according to a national survey

query made on behalf of a University of Virginia researcher.

Thomas Guterbock, UVA sociology professor emeritus and former director of the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service's Center for Survey Research, said responses show 53.4% of Americans chose Pennsylvania's renowned Punxsutawney Phil as their primary marmot prognosticator, while 46.6% would choose a local groundhog.

The survey was conducted by Verasight, a reputable survey firm that offered survey researchers a chance to add one question to a nationwide survey at no cost.

"This result confirmed that a majority of people across the entire country have succumbed to the relentless persuasion of the national media and failed to recognize the autonomy and distinctiveness of their own community's climate," Guterbock said, his tongue planted firmly in cheek. "They place their trust in the media groundhog, even if they live thousands of miles away from Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania."

Groundhog Day is a tradition observed in the U.S. and Canada on Feb. 2 that was brought to America by German immigrants. Similar traditions exist across Europe and the British Isles, with animals from bears and badgers to hedgehogs and snakes serving as mock meteorologists.

According to lore, if a groundhog pops out of its burrow on that day, sees its shadow and retreats, six more weeks of winter will follow. No shadow, however, means an early spring.

As an exercise for courses on [research methods](#) that he taught for several decades at UVA, Guterbock often sent undergraduate sociology students out to survey people they knew regarding Groundhog Day and Punxsutawney Phil. Students surveyed adults they knew, using demographic quotas to ensure the respondents were diverse in age,

gender and ethnicity.

In addition to their knowledge of the tradition, or "groundhog awareness," the surveys measured "groundhog priority," which probes the relative authority of Punxsutawney Phil versus local marmots.

Student-conducted class surveys consistently found the Pennsylvania critter was the preferred authority. In a 2019 student-run survey, 61.2% chose the TV groundhog with only 38.8% believing the forecasting abilities of their local woodchucks.

It is understandable. The people of Punxsutawney have worked hard for more than a century to create a spectacle of themselves and their groundhog worthy of national media attention. This year's festival, the 138th, includes a Groundhog Eve talent show, Groundhog Club Members-Only Reception and the annual Groundhog Banquet.

Held at Gobbler's Knob, a natural amphitheater outside of town, the official showgrounds open at 3 a.m. on Groundhog Day. Tickets may be purchased for access to a heated pavilion featuring food, coffee, a live feed of the proceedings, private portable restrooms, an official souvenir and the chance to have a photo taken with the rodent of the hour.

Phil is then presented to the audience—an estimated 40,000 people have been known to gather in some years—makes his prediction and is returned to his residence. This year, he will also make guest appearances at a weekend luncheon and Groundhog Ball with [live music](#), dancing and libations.

"You've got to hand it to the folks in Punxsutawney. They recognized that today all media must have a visual with every story," Guterbock said. "They offer a colorful image of men in top hats pulling a wakeful groundhog out of a box—perfect for TV, Instagram or TikTok.

"Unfortunately, the wild groundhogs in your neighborhood don't make themselves visible to photographers in February. Out of sight, out of mind."

Still, Phil's hegemony makes little sense to Guterbock.

"Suppose that on Feb. 2 it is clear and bright in Punxsutawney, but cloudy in your hometown," Guterbock said. "Punxsutawney Phil sees his shadow, but the local groundhogs do not. If you believed in the Groundhog Day story and you wanted to know when spring would be coming to your hometown, which groundhog ought you rely upon?"

When Guterbock learned a few months ago that Verasight was offering the chance to add a question to a nationwide survey, he asked for inclusion of a question about groundhog priority.

Verasight has created a high-quality, nationally representative survey panel recruited primarily through scientific sampling, rather than volunteers.

The survey, with a margin of error of plus or minus 3.3%, showed Punxsutawney Phil was the top meteorologic marmot in both metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. In fact, Phil was the top dog across census regions, age groups, gender categories, racial and ethnic categories, and income and education categories.

"Apparently, groundhog priority is the one thing that people on the left and right agree on in this country, as there was no significant difference in the preference for Phil between Republicans and Democrats or even 2020 Trump voters versus 2020 Biden voters," Guterbock said.

Local groundhogs earned significantly greater respect in snowy states that see 30 inches or more of snow per year. In those localities, 60.3%

chose their regional groundhogs.

"That phenomenon fits with the anthropological understanding of augury rituals as serving the important function of alleviating anxiety about potential future dangers or adverse events," Guterbock said. "If you live in a place where winter is a big deal, you have more reason to be really concerned about when spring will come, and thus you will be more discerning about which groundhog merits credibility."

Guterbock said the solution to declining loyalty to neighborhood woodchucks may be to provide more media-friendly and photogenic local animals.

"Many today are concerned that we are losing good sources of local news," he said. "Well, we don't just need more local news. We need more local groundhog news."

Provided by University of Virginia

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