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## Could Social Alienation Among Some Trump Supporters Help Explain Why Polls Underestimated Trump Again?

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Donald Trump was once again underestimated by the polls.

On the one hand, this polling error is fairly normal. We're not talking about huge polling misses, and the polls still "called" the election correctly: Joe Biden won. But that said, it does seem as if polls are still failing to capture some of Trump's support.

There are a number of possible explanations for this, and no definitive answers, but one thing I've come across in my public opinion research is that the share of Americans who are more socially disconnected from society is on the rise. And these voters disproportionately support Trump.

The idea that some of Trump's supporters are more likely to be disconnected from civic life is hardly a new one. During the 2016 Republican primary, Yoni Appelbaum at The Atlantic noted that Trump was drawing support disproportionately from those who said they were civically disengaged. An analysis by Emily Ekins of the conservative-leaning Cato Institute found that despite Trump's continued strong support among white evangelical Protestants, he was actually viewed more positively by supporters who weren't involved in regular religious practice. Finally, research on the 2016 election by David Shor, a Democratic pollster, echoed what we found in our own pre-election 2020 survey: There was a large swing to Trump among white voters who had low levels of social trust — a group that researchers have found is also less likely to participate in telephone surveys.

In our pre-election survey on the strength of Americans' social networks, we found that nearly one in five Americans (17 percent) reported having no one they were close with, marking a 9 percentage point increase from 2013.<sup>1</sup> What's more, we found that these socially disconnected voters were far more likely to view Trump positively and support his reelection than those with more robust personal networks. Biden was heavily favored by registered voters with larger social networks (53 percent to 37 percent), but it was Trump who had the edge among voters without any close social contacts (45 percent to 39 percent).

And this was especially true among white voters even after accounting for differences in income, education level, and racial attitudes. Sixty percent of white voters without anyone in their immediate social network favored Trump, compared to less than half (46 percent) of white voters with more robust social ties.

Of course, the fact that Trump had considerable appeal among those who report feeling socially disconnected is not conclusive proof that these folks were missed in the polls. In fact, it is *really* hard to capture these people in the first place: Many who fall into this group, for instance, wouldn't answer a survey.

However, there is good reason to believe that the polls might be missing some of these people who don't have strong social ties. Social isolation, or the lack of social integration, has long been thought to reduce willingness to participate in surveys. Americans who feel alienated or isolated from society do not feel compelled to participate in surveys out of a sense of civic obligation.

Researchers at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Hiroshima University have shown that Americans with weaker social connections are less inclined to cooperate with survey requests and that some survey estimates may be “systematically biased due to nonparticipation from socially isolated people.” Our survey was not suited to uncover the reasons for why people didn't participate, but we did find that those with smaller social networks are far less politically engaged. For example, Americans with at least four social ties are three times more likely than those with none to have contacted an elected official in the last 12 months.

However, there may not be an easy solution to this problem. Providing financial incentives to bolster cooperation might help, as would increasing the duration of the survey field period. These are standard practices in survey research to increase representation among difficult to reach groups. But it's not clear at this point whether incentivizing respondents or lengthening the interviewing period would increase participation rates among Americans who are socially isolated. A 2000 study found that increasing an interview period from five days to eight weeks made little difference in the final results — although perceptions of the Republican Party were more positive in the survey that included the longer interviewing schedule.

The consequences of this, of course, extend much further than our elections. When Americans are more distanced from society, they become untethered to local and national institutions and are less invested in their continuing function. What's more, they are more inclined to distrust political processes and believe they are serving illegitimate ends. And they may lose faith in the messy and plodding process of democratic change.

A lot of time will be spent over the next few years trying to explain the country's growing social, economic and political problems, but we should not forget that political reforms and economic fixes are not going to address more fundamental problems of loneliness and social isolation in this country. And that may mean we increasingly have less insight into how a growing portion of the country feels.