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## Shy voters could be the Trump card again in 2020

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On the eve of Election Day, the mere phantasm of a second Donald Trump presidency is grotesque and vile for the Democrats and Americans who have lost their kin due to his reckless and cavalier attitude towards Covid-19, ominous for US allies and its tattered superpower image and also threatens to egg on a militarily and economically resurgent China to further extend its footprint across the globe.

Despite Trump's Democratic rival Joe Biden leading in national opinion polls by around 10 percentage points, 'Battle of Trafalgar' 2.0 could play out in 2020. Reminiscent of the famous naval battle, in which the British Navy defeated the combined fleets of France and Spain in 1805, it was only the Atlanta-based opinion polling and survey company Trafalgar Group, pitched against an array of differing opinion polls in 2016, which had correctly predicted the Trump victory—especially in the battleground states of Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, Florida and North Carolina.

The polling company's website claims to have been "named the best polling firm of 2016 presidential race". "And this year, Real Clear Politics called us the most accurate pollster of the cycle among those firms that polled multiple Senate and governor races," it says.

Biden's lead over Trump is almost double that of Hillary in some polls. According to the CNN Poll of Polls, which tracks the average poll results, Biden had a lead of 54% as against Trump's 42% as of October 30: Fox News 52% and 44%, October 27-29; Ipsos/Reuters 52% and 42%, October 23-27; Quinnipiac University 51% and 41%, October 16-19; *The New York Times*-Siena College 50% and 41%, October 15-18 and several other polls that give around 10-point lead to the former vice-president.

However, Trafalgar founder and senior strategist Robert Cahaly doesn't rule out a repetition of the 2016 Trump thunderclap in 2020 with president's 'shy voters' (soldiers) coming out guns blazing on the D-Day of November 3. "Will Biden win the popular vote? Probably. I'm not even debating that. But I think Trump is likely to have an Electoral College victory," Cahaly tells the *Politico*. "People are going to be shocked [this election]."

A shy voter never expresses his/her candidate preference during opinion polls, especially if the candidate is as controversial as Trump, for the fear of triggering opprobrium. For example, a 'shy' Trump supporter when asked by a pollster over the phone about his choice of candidate could either choose Biden or say "likely to vote for him" and might even say "not decided"

considering the president's recklessness about the pandemic, his support for white supremacists and his racist ideology, which has polarised America.

According to leading platform for online research and surveys CloudResearch, which recently surveyed 1,000 respondents, shy voters mentioned six reasons for being reluctant in expressing their choice over a phone call: "a lack of trust in phone polls as truly being anonymous; an apprehension to associate their phone numbers with recorded responses; fear that their responses will become public in some manner; fear of reprisal and related detrimental impact to their financial, social, and family lives should their political opinions become publicly known; a general dislike of phone polls and malicious intent to mislead polls due to general distrust of media and political pundits".

A survey conducted by public policy research think tank Cato Institute way back in July found that 62% of Americans are reluctant in expressing themselves openly due to the highly charged political climate in the US compared to 58% in 2017 with Republicans at 77% and Democrats at 52%. Conservatives lead self-censorship with 77%.

Reluctance to express political views is also prevalent among demographic groups: Latinos 65%, Whites 64% and African-Americans 49%. Besides, fear of losing employment opportunities or concerns about career progression dissuade respondents from expressing themselves openly. According to the Cato survey, 32% of employed Americans worry about losing their jobs or careers getting stalled with 31% of liberals, 30% of moderates and 34% of conservatives fearing getting sacked. "These concerns are also cross-partisan although more Republicans are worried: 28% of Democrats, 31% of independents and 38% of Republicans are worried about how their political opinions could impact their career trajectories."

Such voters are not only hesitant to reveal their choice of candidate but could also lie over the phone during the survey. According to Cahaly, if Americans can lie to their accountant, doctor or priest, they won't be truthful in opinion polls either.

"A lot of people aren't going to tell a stranger on the phone who they're going to vote for especially if they're afraid that information might wind up on a website or a Facebook page for everybody to see," Cahaly tells *The Wall Street Journal*.

The 'social desirability bias' plays a significant role in respondents lying when pollsters rely on live calls. Such voters give answers viewed favourably by others or are politically correct, which, in turn, skew opinion polls. The Bradley effect is the best example of the 'social desirability bias'. Named after Los Angeles' late African-American Democratic mayor Tom Bradley, the theory states that white voters would conceal to pollsters about their racial voting preferences when the other candidate is an African-American. Bradley, who was ahead of his Republican rival George Deukmejian in the opinion polls for the 1982 California governor's race, subsequently lost.

Cahaly finds the live caller method of long questionnaires erroneous and unreliable because of the 'social desirability bias'. Though Trafalgar includes the live caller as one of its methods to

conduct opinion polls, it also relies on integrated voice response, text messages, emails, which are considered more reliable, authentic and easy by Cahaly.

Trafalgar claims to have “pioneered methods to deal with” the ‘social desirability bias’ that “get at what a poll participant’s true feelings are in situations where they believe some individuals in a poll are not likely to reveal their actual preferences”. For example, the firm asks nine questions or less to respondents “based on their perceptions about attenuated attention spans and the need to accommodate modern busy lifestyles”.

Another method Trafalgar uses to rule out the error caused by the ‘social desirability bias’ is the ‘neighbour formula’: shy voters who are hesitant to express their choice or lie are asked what do their neighbours think of the candidates or for whom they will vote. This methodology, Trafalgar claims, rules out errors since the respondent won’t lie about neighbours. The company cites the success of its methods in predicting the 2016 presidential election and the 2018 Florida gubernatorial polls accurately.

There is a high probability that Trump’s shy voters lied this year as well considering that the race for the Oval Office is the most defining and polarising election so far in the history of US politics for the high stakes involved—a debilitating pandemic that has infected 9,140,734 Americans and killed 230,626 as of November 1; an America cleaved racially by police killings of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and Jacob Blake; the president’s xenophobic and racial rhetoric and the resurgence of white supremacist groups like Proud Boys.

Trump has been ripped to shreds for his xenophobia, racial bias, self-aggrandisement, nepotism, corruption, manic decisions to pull out of international accords and alienate allies and propensity to lie by the mainstream American media—CNN, *The Washington Post*, *NYT*, *WSJ* and others. In such a scenario, a Trump voter would have avoided getting into a politically awkward situation during a live call with a pollster.

So, how often do US voters lie in opinion polls? CloudResearch asked the respondents in live calls whether they were comfortable in truthfully disclosing their preference for either Trump or Biden. The survey found that 11.7% of Republicans as against 5.4% of Democrats—almost half—won’t reveal their choice of candidate on telephone. And, “10.5% of Independents fell into the shy voter category”.

Subsequently, CloudResearch asked the respondents about their preferred candidates. Shockingly, 10.1% of Trump supporters said that “they were likely to be untruthful on phone surveys” as against 5.1% of Biden supporters.

An August 29-31 survey by news website The Hill and market research firm HarrisX found that 66% of respondents felt that a very large chunk of people lie in opinion polls. Seventy per cent of Republican voters as against 60% of Democratic said that people lie in such polls.

Though pollsters and experts claim to have improved their polling techniques and corrected mistakes committed in 2016—for example, not taking into account voters without a college degree—the shy voter could again turn out to be the president’s Trump card in 2020.