



The American Panel Survey

Late Deciders in the 2016 Presidential Election: Choosing Between Unliked Candidates

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The characteristics of late deciders is given only a little attention in the political science literature. The most comprehensive study examined voters interviewed for the American National Election Study during the 1972-1988 period who reported deciding in the last two weeks of a presidential campaign.¹ The study reported that late deciders are less involved politically but otherwise were less predictable in their vote choice, at least when judged by a reasonably standard set of predictors—party identification, issue attitudes, and evaluations of candidates' personal qualities. In fact, the study characterized the late deciders' behavior as essentially random. These findings suggest that presidential campaigns seldom involve late-breaking events that create a bias favoring one candidate or the other among late deciders.

The 2016 presidential campaign brought late deciders back into focus for two reasons. First, the extraordinary large number of late deciders distinguished 2016 from other recent election cycles. Most pollsters showed about twice as many undecided voters through the summer and fall of 2016 as were found in the previous two presidential campaigns. Second, there was a late breaking event, the letter from FBI Director James Comey to Congress about Clinton emails, that might have altered undecided voters' views about the two candidates. The combination of a large pool of undecided voters and a significant late event would seem to be a recipe for something systematic happening among these voters.

Studying late deciders is difficult. Surveys with national samples, like *The American Panel Survey* (TAPS), will generally identify a roughly proportionate number of late

deciders but their numbers will be small, hampering statistical analysis of their characteristics. Even so, we find the possibility that late deciders were decisive enough in the 2016 presidential context to justify a close look at the data available in TAPS.

We consider three types of correlates of vote choice. The first is party identification and a set of demographic features that are related to vote choice in nearly all recent presidential elections. The second is the response to a question asked in October about whether the candidate is qualified to be president. The third compares the respondent's ideological placement on a five-point scale to his or her placement of the two candidates and determines which candidate is perceived to be closer to the respondent.

In Table 1, we report estimates from TAPS of the relationships between vote choice and age, ethnicity, education, gender, income, union membership, and marital status. The

Table 1. Correlates of Trump-Clinton Vote, All Voters and Late Deciders, November 2016			
	All Voters (Two-Party Vote)	Late Deciders Only (Two-Party vote)	Late Deciders Only (Two-Party vote)
Party	0.22*** (3.36)	0.20 (1.55)	0.05 (0.40)
Education	0.02 (0.79)	.13 (0.85)	0.13 (0.85)
Gender	-0.07*** (-3.45)	-0.13 (1.07)	0.06 (0.52)
Union Membership	-0.09** (-2.71)	-0.17 (1.02)	-0.07 (0.58)
Married	0.03 (1.39)	-0.08 (-0.59)	-0.21 (-1.65)
Income	0.08** (3.26)	0.19 (1.57)	0.12 (0.92)
Age	0.01 (0.01)	-0.54 (0.72)	0.04 (0.52)
Clinton Qualified	-0.20*** (-16.57)		-0.30*** (-5.06)
Trump Qualified	0.18*** (14.75)		0.14* (2.61)
Trump Closer	0.03*** (4.24)		0.09 (1.80)
AIC	1212.2	105.64	28.31
Logit estimates with Trump/Not Trump as dependent variable; t-values in parentheses; intercept not shown; weighted by CPS benchmarks; *** p < .001; ** p < .01; * p < .05.			

left column reports estimates for all respondents who voted in the November election. The middle and right columns report estimates for respondents who reported that they were undecided in October but voted in November.

There are dramatic differences between late deciders and all voters. Most of the demographic variables, along with party identification, is correlated with vote choice for all voters. Republicans, men, non-union families, and higher income voters were more likely to support Trump than Democrats, women, union families, and lower income voters. For all voters, views about whether Clinton and Trump are qualified to be president also affected vote choice, as did the identity of the candidate who was deemed closer to one's own policy views.

In contrast, none of the demographic variables were related to vote choice for late deciders. Even party identification was not related to vote choice in this group, largely because few late deciders have strong identification with a party. This gives the impression, consistent with previous research, that late deciders' decisions are random, at relative to their demographic characteristics.²

Nevertheless, later deciders' choices still reflected their evaluations of the candidates. Late deciders appear to be influenced by their attitudes about the personal qualifications of the candidates, but not strongly by the relative policy locations of the two candidates. Clinton's qualification is more strongly related to vote choice than Trump's qualification.

The relative strength of the Clinton and Trump qualification variables may seem surprising. We pursue this further—but with trepidation because of the small number of cases of late deciders in our sample who did not have missing data. A cross-tabulation of vote choice and the qualification variables for the two candidates for late deciders is shown in Table 2.

The table shows that only about 20 percent of the late deciders thought Trump was qualified to be president. This undercuts the possibility, frequently mentioned in popular commentary, that late deciders were shy Trump supporters. In fact, most late deciders disliked him. About 45 percent thought Clinton was qualified. The greater variance in the Clinton measure accounts for the larger statistical effect on the multivariate estimates reported in Table 1.

The table also shows an asymmetrical pattern for the two candidates on the relationship between qualification and vote choice that greatly advantaged Trump. A large majority of late deciders who thought that Trump was qualified to be president voted for him, whatever they thought of Clinton. In fact, none of the late deciders who thought that Trump was qualified to be president voted for Clinton. In contrast, a majority of the late deciders who thought the Clinton was qualified and Trump was not qualified went from

Table 2. Late Deciders' Views of Whether Trump and Clinton Are Qualified to be President and Vote Choice (in Percent).

	Trump Qualified		Trump Not Qualified		Not Sure if Trump Qualified		
	Clinton Qualified	Clinton Not Qualified	Clinton Qualified	Clinton Not Qualified	Clinton Qualified	Clinton Not Qualified	
Clinton	0 0	0 0	73.3 44.0	20.0 7.9	6.7 25.0	0 0	100.0 16.3
Trump	19.6 84.6	10.7 100.0	12.5 28.0	44.6 65.8	3.6 50.0	8.9 83.3	100.0 60.9
Other	9.5 15.4	0 0	33.3 28.0	47.6 26.3	4.8 25.0	4.8 16.7	100.0 22.8
	14.1 100.0	6.5 100.0	27.2 100.0	41.3 100.0	4.3 100.0	6.5 100.0	100.0 100.1

Blue = row percent; red = column percent. N = 92.

a minor party candidate or Trump. Finally, the most frequent combination—the over 40 percent of late deciders who thought both candidates were not qualified (shown in yellow)—yielded a heavy pro-Trump advantage.

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About *The American Panel Survey*

The American Panel Survey (TAPS) is a monthly online panel survey of over 2,200 people. Panelists were recruited as a national probability sample with an addressed-based

sampling frame. The survey is conducted by GfK Knowledge Networks for the Weidenbaum Center at Washington University. Individuals without Internet access were provided a laptop and internet service at the expense of the Weidenbaum Center. In a typical month, about 1,800 of the panelists complete the online survey. Analyses in this report use weights based on CPS benchmarks. Technical information about TAPS is available at taps.wustl.edu.

Notes

1. J. David Gopoian and Sissie Hadjiharalambous, "Late-Deciding Voters in Presidential Elections," *Political Behavior* 16:1 (March, 1994), pp. 55-78.
2. The lack of statistically significant relationships for demographic variables in the estimates for late deciders is affected by the sample size. In most cases, the logit estimates are not too different than the estimates for all voters but the standard errors (not shown) are much larger and the t-values (shown) are much smaller for the late deciders.