



The American Panel Survey

A Note on the Problems with the Presidential Election Polls in 2016

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The Trump electoral college victory over Clinton in the 2016 presidential election surprised nearly all pollsters, poll aggregators, and even the candidates' campaign teams. The problem was not the overall performance of the polls. The poll aggregators *Real Clear Politics*, pollster.com, and *Fivethirtyeight* gave Clinton a 3.2, 5.3, and 3.6 percent edge, respectively, in their final estimates.¹ The national vote count was a 48.2-46.1 Clinton advantage, 2.1 percent margin. That is not bad. In 2012, the final *Real Clear Politics* polling average was a 0.7 percent advantage for Obama over Romney; Obama won the election by 3.9 percent.

The polls in 2016 drew special attention primarily because Trump won the electoral vote. Instantly, observers noted two features of the 2016 polls. First, most quality national polls erred in the same direction—showing Clinton with somewhat more support than her vote total. That is, the misses seemed systematic rather than random. Most pollsters were doing something wrong or events causing voters' preferences to change occurred at a time that could not be reflected in their polls. Second, state-level polling results, particularly in battleground states, showed greater error in Clinton's favor. The error was enough to change the predicted winner in a few key states.² This raises the possibility that the methodological errors or late events had particularly strong effects in states that were receiving the most attention from the candidates.

Pollsters, journalists, and scholars scrambled to account for the small but pro-Clinton bias in late campaign polls. Some of the explanations focused on missing signs of trouble for Clinton and a disbelief that Trump could win. We will set aside the issues of interpretation and commentary by journalists. They may have been unduly influenced by the unbroken lead that Clinton enjoyed in the polls through the summer and fall and

reports that Clinton was doing well in early voting states where polls or vote counts gave some indication of Clinton's advantage.

In the months since the election, survey researchers have speculated about and produced scattered evidence for four explanations for the systematic but small pro-Clinton errors in the polls:

1. shy Trump supporters (social desirability bias and nonresponse bias);
2. late deciders broke for Trump (winner effect, late events effects);
3. likely voter screens were biased against Trump voters; and
4. greater Republican turnout and depressed Democratic turnout in key demographic groups in key states.

Evidence from *The American Panel Survey* (TAPS), a monthly survey of more than 1,500 of the same people, gives clues about the fit of the first three of these explanations. The fourth, turnout in key states, involves localized voting patterns that we cannot evaluate with our national sample, which provides very small samples in those states.

During the 2016 campaign, some observers speculated that at least some Trump supporters were bashful about their intention to vote for him. This may be due to a social desirability bias, which is a tendency to choose responses to survey questions that might be considered unpopular or embarrassing. A nonresponse bias is a tendency to refuse to answer survey questions, or even to participate in a survey, which might be caused by a poor mood or concern about answering questions that cause discomfort. Studies conducted during the campaign showed little bias of this kind, although there may have been a small effect for well-educated people.³ Moreover, there is no evidence that Trump did best in states where Clinton was most popular.⁴

We take a fresh look at the question of shy Trump supporters with the TAPS panel, which allows us to compare vote intentions before the election with the reported vote on election day. Our main finding: The vast majority of the voters who went for Trump but did not report supporting him before the election simply did not like him. As Figure 1 shows, the vast majority of late Trump supporters believed that Trump was not qualified to be president and, as Figure 2 shows, disliked most of Trump's personal qualities.^{5,6} They did not like Clinton either (data not shown) but went for Trump.⁷ Very few truly shy Trump supporters—those who liked him but did not report an intention to vote for him—appeared in the TAPS panel.

The last-minute support from voters who were unhappy with him may have proved crucial to Trump's success. In Table 2, we report how people reported their candidate preferences in September—before the final debates, the Access Hollywood tape disclosure, and the Comey letter—who said they voted in November and how they voted in November. The shaded cells show that undecided voters in the September survey broke about 2-to-1 in favor of Trump over Clinton—again, despite not liking Trump very much.

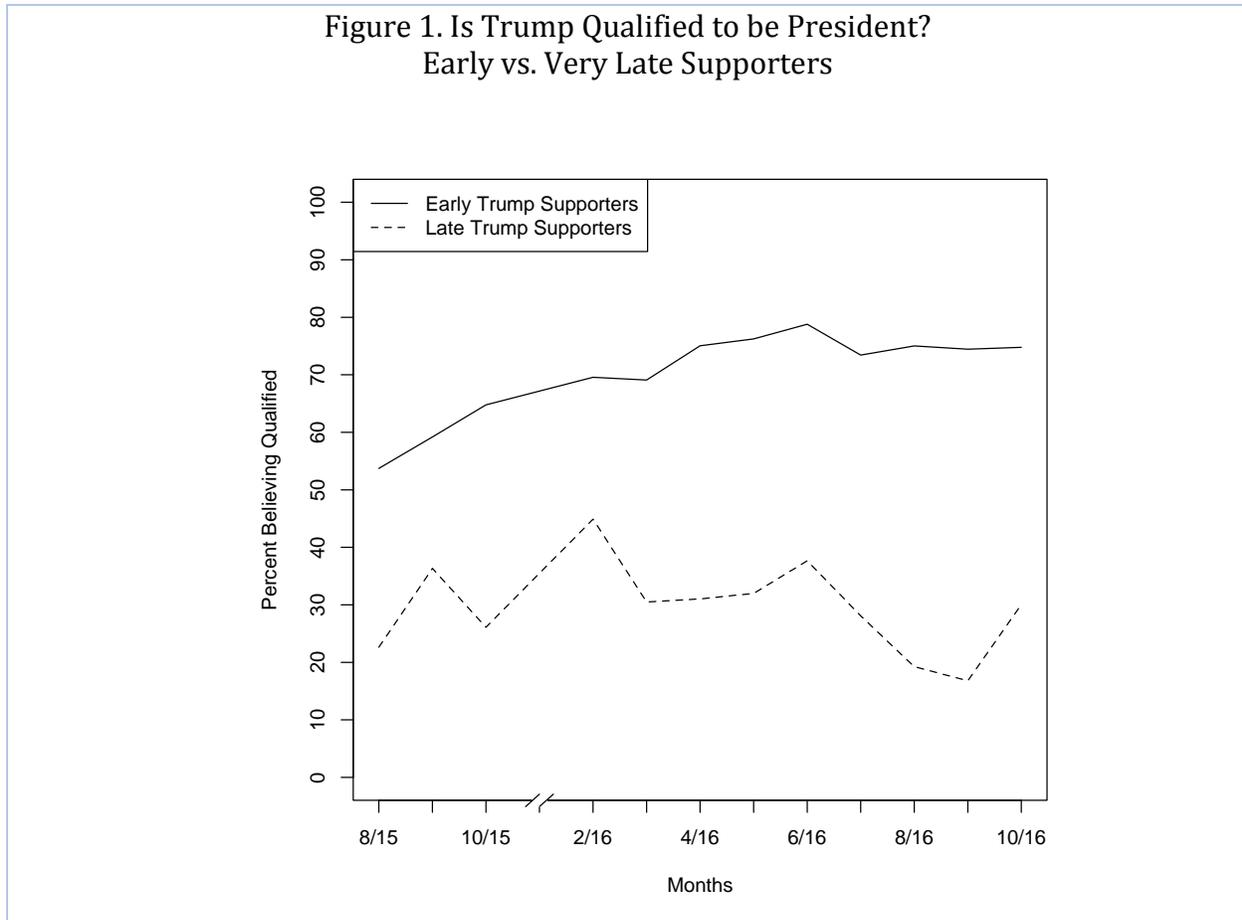
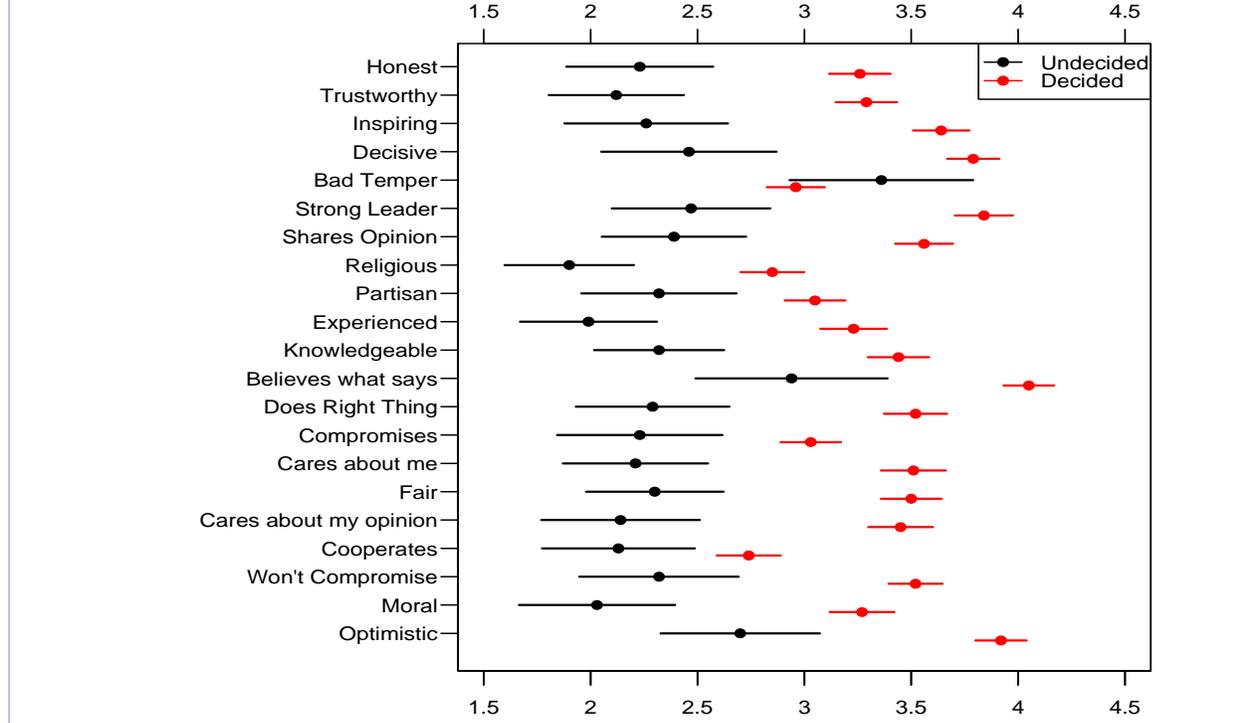


Table 1: November Vote by September Candidate Preferences, 2016

Vote, November 2016	Candidate Preference, September 2016		
	Clinton	Trump	Not Sure
Clinton	96.1	0.6	24.4
Trump	1.9	97.5	51.1
Other	1.8	1.6	18.9
Refused	0.3	0.2	5.6
	100.1	100.0	100.0

Figure 2. Evaluations of Candidate Qualities,
Early vs. Very Late Supporters



We also examined Trump voters' responses to two batteries that captured their location on a populism scale and their place on a liberal-conservative scale.^{8,9} The scatterplot is shown in Figure 3. Trump voters who had not previously indicated that they support Trump were not much different than other Trump voters in their populism, but they were considerably more moderate in their policy views. With the zero point located at the mean of all voters, the figure shows that late deciders for Trump had an average liberal-conservative score considerably closer to the mean than most Trump voters.

To see the larger picture of undecided voters during the 2016, we report support for Clinton and Trump, along with other candidates and undecided voters, in Figure 4 (last page 7). This is a "riverplot" in which the size of the rivers represents the number of respondents and the flow between categories from month to month is readily inspected. The reported vote in November is at the far right; other months represent vote intention about those who voted. The two red arrows point to the voters who were undecided in October and broke heavily for Trump over Clinton. Plainly, timing was everything: The

Figure 3. Ideology and Populism Among Trump Supporters

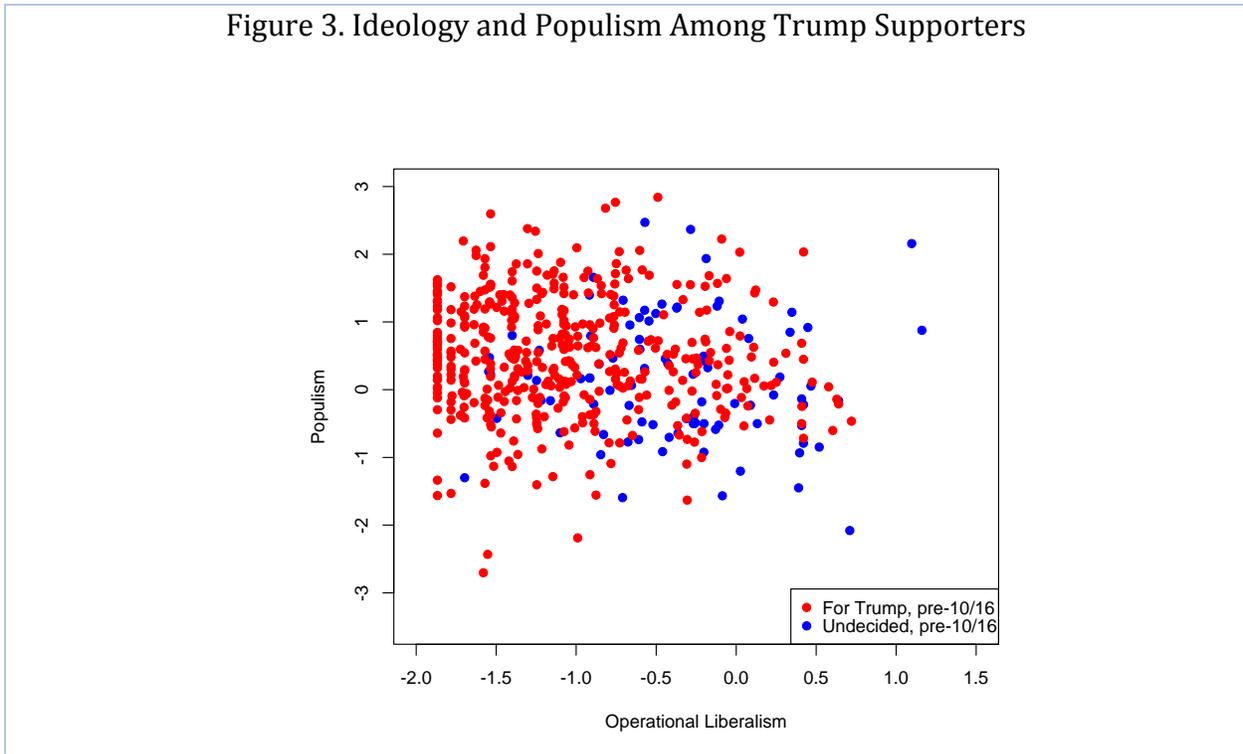
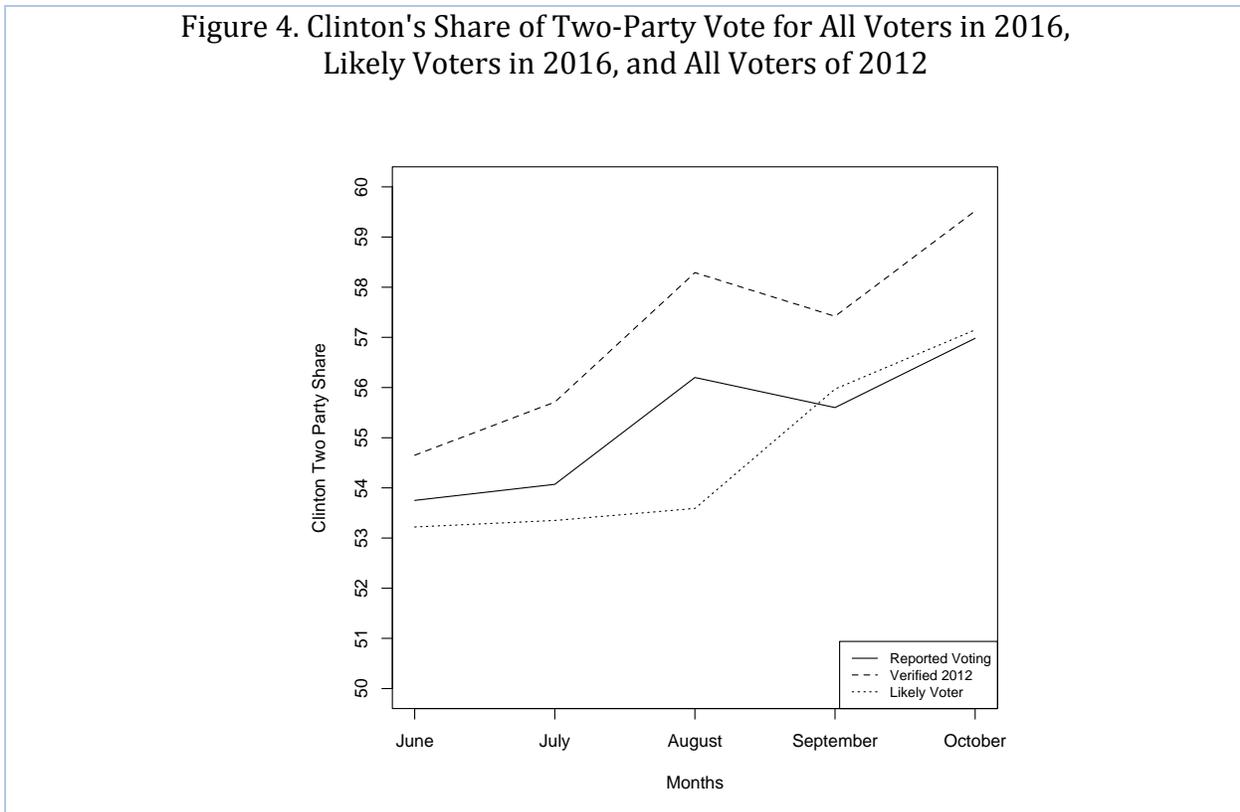


Figure 4. Clinton's Share of Two-Party Vote for All Voters in 2016, Likely Voters in 2016, and All Voters of 2012



flow of undecided voters went back and forth without favoring one candidate or the other by much during the June to September period, but the flow to Trump among undecided voters was heavy in the weeks just before the election.

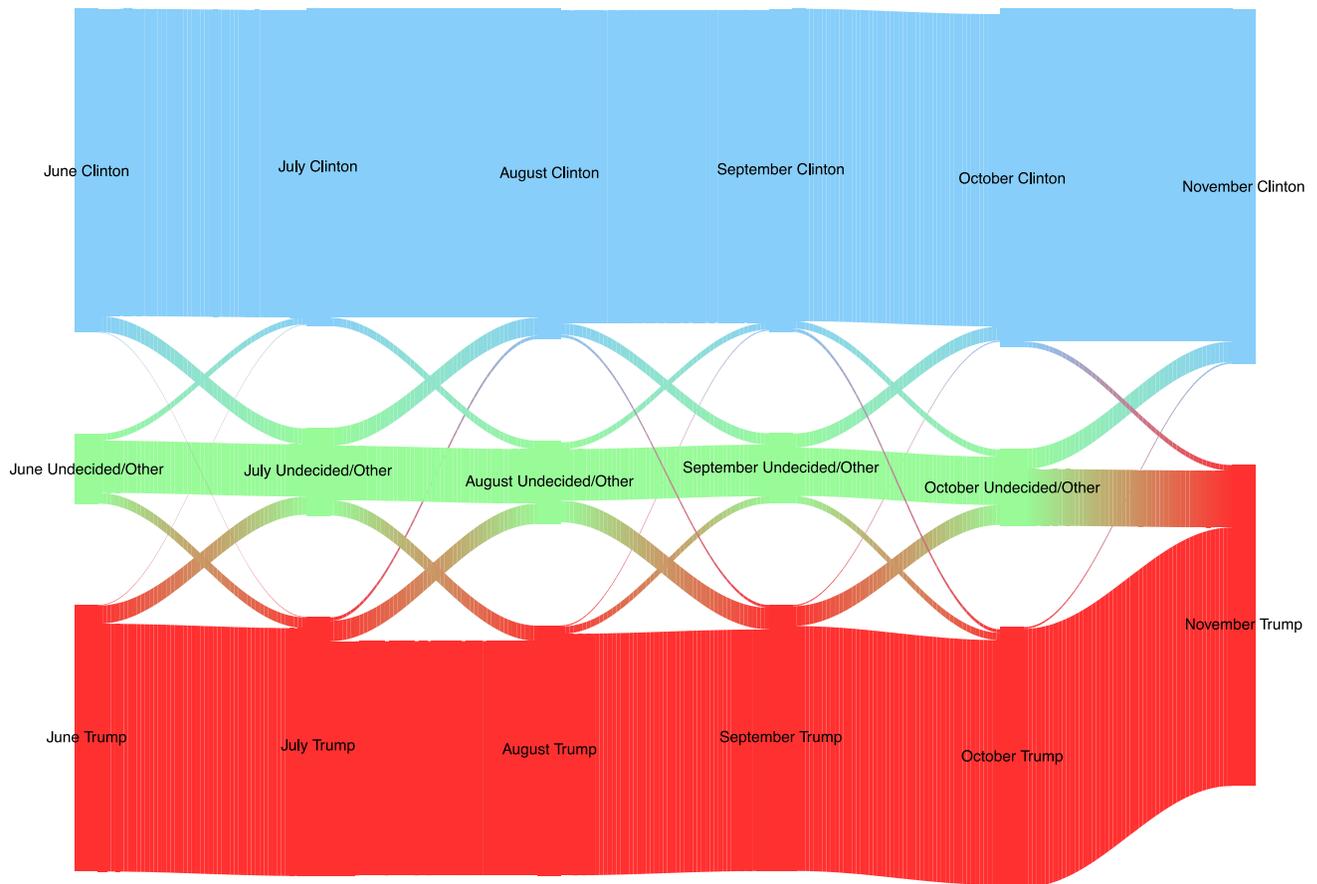
Another potential weakness of polling results rests in likely voter screens. Most major polling organizations report candidate support after applying a screen to determine who is a likely voter and reporting candidate preferences only for likely voters. In most cases, the likely voter screen is based on a battery of questions—sometimes up to six or seven questions—that gauge whether the respondent voted in recent elections, is registered to vote, has an interest in the campaign, knows where to vote, and so on. Likely voter screens tend to pick up a disproportionate number of Republicans as likely voters because of higher rates of voting and registration, along with more stable residency locations, among Republicans than Democrats.¹⁰

A change in patterns of turnout from one election to the next can increase errors in determining likely voters. If the pattern favors one candidate, then the likely voter screens might screen out too many of one type of voter and too few of another. In 2016, there was evidence of a surge in turnout among working class whites in some locations that favored Trump. If so, pollsters' likely voter screens may have led them to exclude some Trump supporters as potential voters.

To check for a bias in likely voter screens, we assigned likely voter status to panelists on the basis of their responses to a battery of questions that is nearly identical to the Gallup screen used in past election cycles. If there was an anti-Trump bias in the voter screen—that is, too few Trump voters or too many Clinton voters—then the candidate preferences based on likely voters should show more support for Clinton than the actual vote in November. As Figure 4 shows, the anti-Trump bias did not materialize. Instead, as usual, the likely voters were slightly less favorable to the Democratic candidate than actual voters.

This brief review suggests that late deciders, far more than shy Trump supporters or likely voter screen bias, may account for the pro-Clinton “errors” in the polls. In fact, the errors may not have been errors. Instead, the last-minute decisions of many voters may not have been discoverable by polls that were not limited to the last day or two of the campaign. The efforts by the campaigns in targeted locales, the Comey letter, media coverage, and other factors could have moved undecided voters who, in overwhelming numbers, were unhappy with both candidates. Real events and the difficulty of capturing their effects very late in a campaign are more likely to be the source of the pro-Clinton bias than errors survey technology and statistical techniques.

Figure 5. Support for Clinton, Trump, and Undecided/Other for Eventual Clinton and Trump Voters, 2016



About the Authors

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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 1,700 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. http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2016/president/us/general_election_trump_vs_clinton-5491.html; <http://elections.huffingtonpost.com/pollster/2016-general-election-trump-vs-clinton>; https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/2016-election-forecast/?ex_cid=rrpromo.
2. [https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/11/13/upshot/putting-the-polling-miss-of-2016-in-perspective.html? r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/11/13/upshot/putting-the-polling-miss-of-2016-in-perspective.html?r=0).
3. <https://morningconsult.com/2016/11/03/shy-trump-social-desirability-undercover-voter-study/>;
4. <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/shy-voters-probably-arent-why-the-polls-missed-trump/>.
5. Figure 1 tracks the weighted percent of those Trump voters who indicated they planned on supporting the Republican candidate in October, as well as those Trump voters who identified as being “not sure” or supporting someone else in October. Trump voters indicating their support in October identified Trump as qualified for the presidency at consistently higher rates (typically between 70% and 80%) than those who decided to support Trump late in the campaign (among whom a majority never considered the Republican candidate qualified, and in fact demonstrated a negative trend for a good part of the year).
6. In October 2016, panelists evaluated both major party candidates with respect to 21 traits on a five-point scale ranging from “describes not well at all” (1) to “describes very well” (5). Figure 2 displays the mean levels and their respective standard errors for those who voted for Trump in November. Observations are divided between those who indicated in the pre-election survey that they would support Trump and those who had yet to identify their intention to vote for him. Once again, early Trump supporters have significantly higher evaluations of Trump compared to late Trump supporters.
7. When evaluating Clinton on the 21 qualities, the mean value for each item was below the median value of 3 for all but “has a bad temper” for both sets of Trump supporters. The majority of items were below 2. Significant differences in the means between Trump supporters evaluating Clinton only existed for the items “is inspiring,” “has a bad temper,” and “supports compromises on controversial issues.” Still, these differences were quite small substantively (i.e. less than .5).

8. Populism scores were derived from the first dimension of an exploratory factor analysis of a 20-item battery. A shortened 7-item battery provided similar results. First dimension scores ranged from -3.2 to 2.8 and were standardized to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. The mean for Clinton voters was estimated to be -0.46, while that of Trump voters was found to be 0.44.
9. Liberal-Conservative Scales were calculated as the first dimension of a 10-item factor analysis measuring panelists' policy preferences. Items include gun control legislation, same-sex marriage, a woman's right to an abortion, building the Keystone XL oil pipeline, repealing the Affordable Care Act, regulation of greenhouse gases, the use of ground troops in Syria, increasing taxes on wealthy individuals, federal Common Core standards, and allowing undocumented immigrants to become eligible for citizenship. On a standardized dimension with mean 0 and standard deviation of 1, scores ranged from -1.87 to 1.3, with higher values indicating more liberal responses. The mean score for Clinton voters was found to be 0.85, while the same figure for Trump voters was -0.94. For early Trump voters, the mean was -1.05. For late Trump supporters, it was -0.38.
10. For the purpose of this study, we calculate our likely voter screen using the stringent metrics recommended by Gallup. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/111268/how-gallups-likely-voter-models-work.aspx>.