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Always Silent? Exploring Contextual Conditions for Non-responses to Vote Intention Questions at the 2020 US Presidential Elections

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Abstract

Non-responses to vote choice questions notoriously impact the quality of electoral predictions. This issue has gained visibility in the US due to the aftermath of the 2020 Presidential Elections. Indeed, the failure of many major pollsters in predicting election results in several key states stimulated a renewed attention for the so-called "Shy Trump Supporter" hypothesis, according to which Trump supporters would be more likely to hide their vote preference in electoral surveys due to social desirability bias. Interestingly, although empirical research on this topic is methodologically diverse, it tends to focus mainly on individual-level data and overlooks the role that the socio-political environments of the respondents could play in the decision to disclose (or not) one's own political preferences. This research note aims at exploring the role of social desirability bias in hiding one's own vote recall in a survey context. Hypotheses are tested by means of logistic regressions on data from the 2020 Cooperative Election Study, matched with prior Presidential results at the county level (MIT Electoral Lab).

Keywords

Survey non-response; vote intentions; election forecasting; spiral of silence; US Presidential Elections; Donald Trump

1. Introduction

As it is well-known, survey data tend to incorporate a certain amount of error, especially when it comes to the measurement of opinions on sensitive topics such as voting. Existing studies have demonstrated that social desirability bias not only makes abstainers reluctant to admit their abstention (Bernstein, Chadha, and Montjoy, 2001), but also favours reticence about one's own party and/or candidate preferences or vote intentions. This is an issue of increasing importance in the field of pre-electoral studies, along with the issues of increasing survey non-response rates and voters delaying their voting decisions until the late stages of political campaigns (Gelman, 2021), which has made electoral predictions more and more difficult in recent years. While both unit non-response and item non-response are problems within survey research (see Little and Rubin, 1987), we use 'non-response' in this study to refer to item non-response: a situation in which a respondent either fails to respond to a question in a survey or chooses a 'don't know' or 'uncertain' option when provided.

Along with the Brexit referendum and Donald Trump's election in 2016, the 2020 Presidential Elections represent a paradigmatic case of this tendency, as poll error turned out to be even more significant than previous occasions (Lyu, 2021). Against such background, pundits and pollsters have been increasingly discussing that one of the factors behind their poor election forecast could be the reticence of some Republican voters to admit their support for a controversial candidate such as Donald Trump, i.e., the so-called *Shy Trump Supporter Hypothesis* (e.g., Coppock, 2017; Enns, Lagodny, and Schuldt, 2017). Curiously, empirical research on this topic has not been particularly extensive so far. Moreover, it has led to rather mixed results, also overlooking the role that factors such as the holding minority (or majority) political views in one's own local context could play in the decision to disclose (or not) one's own political preferences. In fact, Noelle-Neumann's (1993) spiral of silence theory suggests that individuals tend to avoid expressing political opinions or preferences that are not popular in their own social environment. In the light of that, this research note aims at exploring the role of *social desirability bias* in hiding one's own vote intention at the

2020 US Presidential Elections. Our hypothesis is tested by means of logistic regressions on data from the 2020 Cooperative Election Study, matched with prior Presidential results at the county level, which we use as a proxy for the political environment surrounding the respondent (see also Brownback and Novotony, 2018). The estimates obtained show that Republican leaning voters during the 2020 presidential election tend to be significantly more reticent about their voting preference (i.e., they declare more to be uncertain) in those counties where Democratic support was stronger during the 2016 presidential election.

The research note is structured as follows. In the following section, we provide a quick overview of the existing literature on the determinants of non-responses to vote choice questions in electoral surveys and introduce our working hypothesis. In Section 3 we describe our data, the variables we employ and our statistical methods. In Section 4, we describe our results. To conclude, Section 5 ends the research note with some final remarks and a discussion of potential avenues for future research.

2. Why do people hide their voting behavior? Theoretical insights and hypothesis between individuals and contexts

Social desirability bias (SDB) is a frequent concern in survey research due to its ability to skew results. SDB is the systematic misreporting of socially sensitive behavior or attitudes (Zaller and Feldman 1992). For this misreporting to occur, respondents must become aware of the possibility of violating social norms and consciously avoid norm-violating responses (Krumpal 2013). It is such that questions on sensitive issues may trigger responses that are biased towards "socially acceptable" responses. However, this is not simply limited to surveys as the literature has assumed SDB is a general human trait that impacts everyone equally (see Blais 2000; Brady, Verba, and Schlozman, 1995). In studies of turnout, however, this assumption has led researchers to infer that validated turnout produces essentially the same results as those relying on reported turnout (Sigelman, 1982; Swaddle and Heath, 1989; Traugott and Traugott, 1979). The reality is more

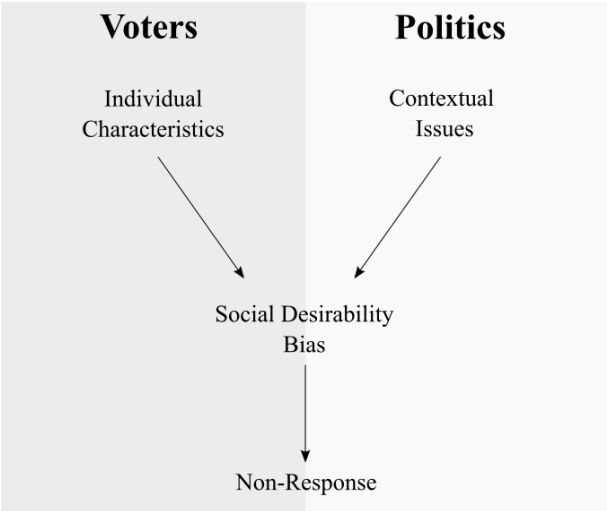
mixed, however. Focusing on studies involving the 2016 American presidential election, Brownback and Novotny (2018) and Coppock (2017) both suggest that the effect of SDB is limited. While we may wonder if there are issues with the number of respondents to a survey, which may in turn lead to higher response error, several studies have demonstrated lower response rates do not necessarily lead to higher survey errors (Curtin, Presser, and Singer, 2000, 2005; Keeter, Kennedy, Dimock, Best, and Craighill, 2006; Keeter, Miller, Kohut, Groves, and Presser, 2000). As such, the question of what factors impacted polling errors in the 2016—and subsequently 2020—presidential elections are still a topic of interest. Instead of focusing only on SDB, we opt to focus on what leads to SDB to understand why some individuals do not disclose their vote intentions in electoral surveys.

There are a variety of variables that may explain why some individuals do not disclose their vote intentions in electoral surveys. The research typically takes one of two routes, as demonstrated in Figure 1. There are two paths within the general research on non-responses: there are individual level characteristics, and contextual factors. At the individual level, reticence about electoral preferences has often been associated to low levels of education and low interest in politics, as well as feelings of alienation/isolation from the broader society/polity (Grooves and Couper, 1998). Not by chance *non-respondents* have been traditionally portrayed as less politicized and *marginal* voters (Milbrath 1965), i.e., people *who care little and know less* (Chaffee, and Rimal, 1996: 269). When it comes to demographics, instead, women and older voters are those usually more prone to pick the *'Don't know/No answer'* option (Barisione, 2001). In this way, education and age are important individual-level characteristics on the respondent side that necessitate consideration.

Extant studies have emphasized that the sensitivity of survey questions has to do with social desirability dynamics such as those described in Noelle-Neumann's (1993) spiral of silence. According to this contribution, individuals tend to keep their opinions to themselves when they perceive that these are not the prevailing ones in society. In other words, people tend to refuse to express or even discuss their point of view on an issue when they think they are a minority and fear

this will lead to social isolation. The result is that respondents may hide their feelings when asked about certain types of candidates, especially if those candidates have non-traditional demographics or do not share the same demographics as respondents. This suggests race and sex are two important factors behind respondents masking their true preferences.

Figure 1 – Non-Response Model



Starting with race, we often see respondents mask their intentions in the case of African American politicians (Redlawsk, Tolbert, and Franko, 2010). The overstated support for African American politicians among white respondents out of reluctance to admit voting for a different candidate, known as the "Wilder effect" or "Bradley effect," appears to have been dominant from the 1980s to 1990s (Keeter and Samaranayake, 2007; Reeves, 1997) although Hopkins (2015) claims it has since disappeared. In addition to racial considerations, respondents also consider whether a politician is female. While support for female candidates—especially for the presidency—has increased overall since suffrage, Lawless (2004) suggests that support towards a woman handling defence issues in the aftermath of the 9-11 attacks has decreased, which may indicate decreased confidence towards female presidential candidates' ability to handle national defines issues. In surveys, this has led to the suggestion that respondents hide their real preferences towards female candidates (Streb, Burrell, Frederick, and Genovese, 2008). In an instance of

support for descriptively representative and substantively representative candidates (see Pitkin, 1967), votes who share race or sex with a candidate have been found to be more likely to support candidates with shared identities, although the effects can vary (Bejarano, Brown, Gershon, and Montoya, 2021). If race and sex can influence vote decision, survey respondent's race and sex are also significant considerations; they are likely drivers of non-support masked by respondents due to social pressures. Given the lack of descriptive representation among presidential candidates, however, we focus on race and sex as individual-level factors among voters rather than candidates.

Moving on to the contextual dimension, it is not only demographics that can impact respondents, but it may also be that the political climate as a whole is simply not ripe for some respondents to express their points of view. For example, previous research on Spain has shown that the '*Don't know/No answer*' option was used by many right-wing voters during the initial years after democratization to hide their true preferences (Urquizu Sancho, 2006) out of fear that many leaders of the Popular Party were still linked with the Francoist dictatorship. More recent research has also suggested that voters' propensity to disclose vote intentions in public is lower in those contexts where the public image of their preferred party (or candidate) is poorer (see also Martinez and Orriols, 2014). In this way, the socio-political context also matters and influence respondent decisions to make positions known.

We assume a similar mechanism was at work in the 2020 US Presidential Election: voters' decision to disclose their vote intentions for one of the two main candidates in 2020 (i.e., Joe Biden and Donald Trump) was influenced by the general state of political opinions in society. Given Trump served as the incumbent president during the 2020 election, the general state of politics was influenced by his popularity, while his actions and policy decisions impacted his approval ratings. Although Trump's approval ratings started positively at 45.5 percent approval in January 2017, this decreased such that 57.4 percent disapproved by August 2017 (Bycoffe, Mehta, and Silver, 2021). Disapproval of Trump's performance only increased once the COVID-19 pandemic took its toll ranging from 38 percent disapproval from first death to about 57 percent disapproval nearing

election day 2020 (Bycoffe, Mehta, and Silver, 2021). We hypothesize conservative respondents are less likely to disclose their vote intentions (i.e., they are 'more shy') in those contexts where Trump's popularity appears relatively poor (**H1: *Social Desirability Bias Hypothesis***). Just as voters choose to vote retrospectively (Fiorina 1978, 1981; Lewis-Beck 1988), so too should respondents consider the retrospective track records of the Trump administration when responding to surveys. When the administration's popularity is poor, respondents should be less likely to express their true preferences.

With this hypothesis we are implying that social groups and environments that are closer to respondents matter for their understanding of both the political opinion climate and the popularity of the Presidential candidate they prefer (see also Marsh, 2002). For this reason, and considering the available data, we focus on a contextual level that is close to citizens' daily interactions and experiences: the county where they live. Given the unique, polarizing nature of the Trump administration, it is important to consider the Republican and Democratic leanings within each county. Specifically, counties that leaned Republican during the 2016 election may be more likely to support Trump in the 2020 election. This is in line with a study by Bartels (2018) suggesting little partisan change occurred between 2015 and 2017 among Democrats and Republicans, although there were some party switchers during that period. However, this should be predicated on ideology given Trump's polarizing nature. In other words, it may be the case that political divisions in counties are not clear cut, and some liberals and conservatives may not vote for Democrats and Republicans respectively. This is in line with work by Evers, Fisher, and Schaaf (2019) on foreign policy, suggesting that party loyalty does not overwhelm concerns with the substantive content of a president's policy behavior in spite of a hyperpolarized political environment. In other words, there may be an interactive effect here between ideology and partisan leaning.

3. *Data and methodology*

Our analyses rely on data from the 2020 Cooperative Election Study (Schaffner, Ansolabehere, and Luks, 2020). This dataset consists in a sample of overall 61,000 interviews collected across two

online waves: the first taking place before the Presidential Election (from September 29 to November 2), and the second being in field after the election (between November 8 and December 14). The sampling method is based on YouGov's matched random sample methodology.[i] In addition to standard individual-level variables, we incorporated the political outlook of respondents' counties.

For our dependent variable, we coded a *vote non-response* variable for our dependent variable: declaring uncertainty about vote choice was coded 1 (*non-respondents*), while all other options (1=Donald Trump; 2=Joe Biden; 3=Other; 4=I won't vote in this election) were coded as 0 (see Martinez and Orriols, 2014).

Moving on to the predictors, we used a continuous variable for *political interest* (4 categories from low to high). We also measured respondents' *ideology* based on self-placement on a 7-point continuum (1=very liberal; 10=very conservative). More precisely, we split respondents in three different groups, the first including those positioning themselves on the 'Liberal' end of the continuum (i.e., scoring from 1 to 3), the second including those who are 'Moderate' (score=4), and the third one with those identifying as somewhat to very 'Conservative' (scores from 5 to 7). We use 'Liberal' as a reference and include dummy variables for 'Moderate and 'Conservative.'

We also include control variables in our model to account for the potential influence of some individual characteristics: *presidential job approval* (1=Strongly disapprove to 4=Strongly approve), a series of dummy variables accounting for *race* (White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, Middle Eastern, Two or more races, Other), a dummy variable for *gender*, a continuous variable for *age*, and a continuous variable for *education* levels (No HS, High School Graduate, Some college, 2-year Graduate Degree, 4-year Graduate Degree; Post-graduate).

Finally, in our second model we include a variable for *Partisan Electoral Performance by County in 2016*, measured as the extent to which respondents live in counties that are Democratic-leaning or Republican-leaning based on 2016 Presidential election results (source: MIT Election Lab). To be more specific, we first calculated the difference in votes between Clinton and Trump

for each county during the 2016 presidential election and then computed a ratio with the total votes received by the two candidates. The result is an index ranging from -.91 to +.93, where -.91 corresponds to the county with the highest electoral advantage for Clinton as opposed to Trump (Democratic-leaning) and ranging up to +.93 which identifies counties where Trump performed better compared to Clinton (Republican-leaning).

4. *Results*

To test our hypothesis, we estimated two logistic regression models with clustered standard errors at the county level to account for respondents nesting into geographical areas with different political backgrounds. The first model was aimed at only testing the effect of individual-level predictors on non-response to the vote intention question, while the second model includes a two-term interaction between the ideological background of respondents (i.e., liberal vs. conservative) and partisanship-leaning at the county level based on 2016 Presidential candidate performance.

Not surprisingly, and in line with the previous literature, the results of Model 1 point toward the existence of significant negative effects across some individual variables. The coefficient for political interest suggests higher levels of political interest decreases the likelihood of non-response. Similarly, approval of Trump's presidential record significantly decreased non-response in the model. In the case of ideology, holding a moderate or conservative ideological position favoured reticence compared to those positioning themselves on the liberal side of the continuum. We also see gender effects, with the model suggesting that women are significantly less likely to declare an explicit voting preference compared to men. Interestingly, education levels do not appear to play a relevant role, while age turns out to be negatively related to expressing vote intentions; that is, younger respondents tend to be more reticent than the older ones. Finally, racial and ethnic background has a significant impact on vote intention: Black, Hispanic, Middle Eastern, and multi-ethnic voters disclose their preferences significantly less frequently.

Table 1 – Explaining non-responses regarding vote intentions at the 2020 Presidential Election

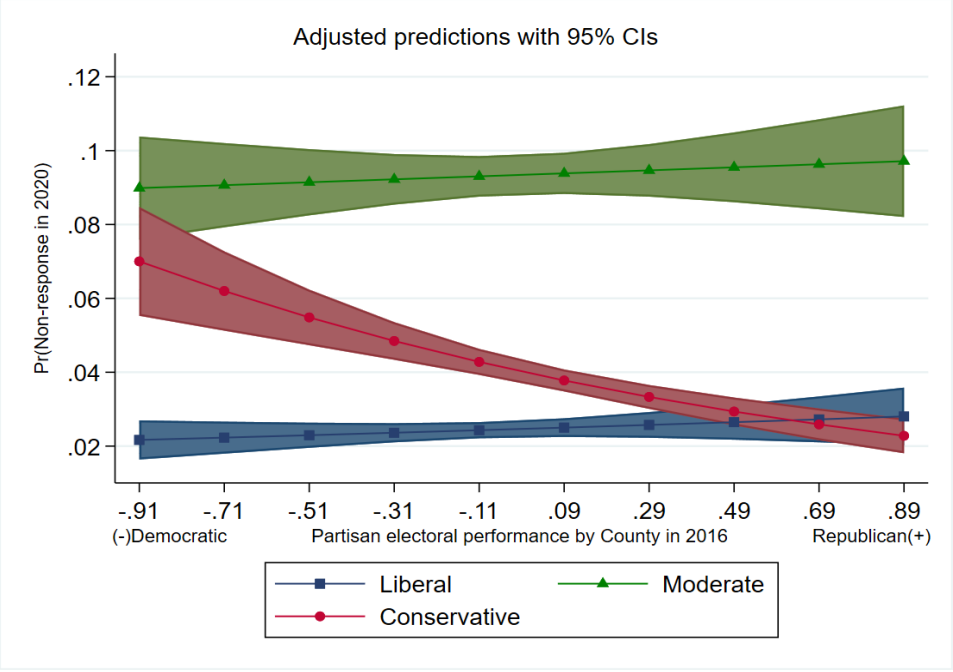
	Model 1	Model 2
Individual-level variables		
Political interest	-0.373***	-0.373***
	(0.0240)	(0.0241)
Ideology *(Reference: Liberal)*		
Moderate	1.389***	1.364***
	(0.0654)	(0.0669)
Conservative	0.958***	0.937***
	(0.0884)	(0.0916)
Trump job approval	-0.155***	-0.143***
	(0.0257)	(0.0260)
Race *(Reference: White)*		
Black	0.180***	0.153**
	(0.0686)	(0.0702)
Hispanic	0.250***	0.213***
	(0.0718)	(0.0716)
Asian	0.192	0.169
	(0.123)	(0.125)
Native American	0.259	0.275
	(0.227)	(0.227)
Middle Eastern	1.280***	1.272***
	(0.411)	(0.410)
Two or more races	0.510***	0.496***
	(0.125)	(0.126)
Other	0.589***	0.576***
	(0.149)	(0.149)
Gender (female)	0.158***	0.163***
	(0.0472)	(0.0476)
Age	-0.0156***	-0.0155***
	(0.00141)	(0.00140)
Education	-0.0151	-0.0177
	(0.0182)	(0.0185)
Context-level variable		
Partisan Electoral Performance by County in 2016		0.147
		(0.143)
Interactive terms		
Moderate* Partisan Electoral Performance by County in 2016		-0.0989
		(0.177)
Conservative* Partisan Electoral Performance by County in 2016		-0.798***
		(0.177)
Constant	-1.778***	-1.772***
	(0.141)	(0.142)
Observations	43,674	43,629

Robust standard errors clustered by county in parentheses (* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$)

Moving on to Model 2, the negative sign of the interaction between our county-level variable and holding a conservative attitude suggests the relationship we hypothesized between these predictors unfolds as we expected. Where Clinton's advantage over Trump in 2016 was

stronger, conservative voters are significantly more reticent about their vote intention in 2020 compared to counties where Trump was more successful all other things equal. For the sake of clarity, we provide a graphical representation of this pattern in Figure 2, along with the predicted probabilities resulting from estimations including moderate and liberal voters. While conservatives' non-response probability curve decreases at higher levels of Trump's electoral advantage over Clinton in the county, moderates and liberals turn out to be far less sensitive to the electoral context in their non-response behaviour. In fact, moderate voters are the more reticent group, which is probably truly due to indecisiveness between the two 2020 candidates, while liberals exhibit steadily low levels of non-response. This confirms an already observed pattern of lower reticence among left-leaning ideological voters (Martinez and Orriols, 2014).

Figure 2 - The Effect of *Partisan Electoral Performance by County in 2016* on probability of *Non-Response* in 2020, by *Ideology*



Note: predicted probabilities using Model 2 and keeping all other variables at their mean

5. Concluding remarks

This research note has shed light on an often-overlooked phenomenon in the electoral studies literature: the role of social desirability bias, and particularly the role of feeling like a political

minority in one's own social and political environments, in not revealing one's vote intention during a survey. While other studies have often described the so-*called Shy Trump Supporter* as a completely individual-level phenomenon having to do with specific characteristics such as low levels of education, lesser interest in politics and/or social marginality (Fournier, Nadeau, Blais, Gidengil, and Nevitte, 2004; Chaffee, and Rimal, 1996), in this research note we demonstrated that there could actually be more to the story. By using the 2020 Cooperative Election Survey, we demonstrated that the political-electoral context of respondents is likely to trigger a social desirability mechanism leading to reticence about one's own preferred political options.

Our findings suggest that this account especially applies to conservative voters, i.e., those voters that in 2020 were more likely to support Trump as a Presidential candidate, although further data exploration will be needed to develop a comprehensive overview of the different dynamics in place. Moreover, our results are important for survey researchers given prior findings by Brownback and Novotny (2018) and Coppock (2017) on recent American elections found limited support for SDB. Contradicting this research, our findings study suggest that researchers should consider the electoral context and its effect on non-response when making estimates. Future models that include the electoral context within which respondents reside may then be more accurate representations of the real world and account for the context surrounding SDB. In addition, future research on this issue should seek to replicate the analysis we presented here on previous electoral years, to check whether the emerged patterns were specific only to the 2020 elections or can also be applied to previous electoral rounds, especially before the introduction of a 'controversial' and 'polarizing' candidate such as Donald Trump. Similarly, it may be useful to combine both pre-election and post-election surveys in future studies, both in the US and in other established democracies, to place them in a comparative perspective. Finally, future research should assess the role of SDB on actual voting behaviour, as there are at times disconnects between intention to vote and actual voter turnout.

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Footnotes

[1] Although it may be assumed that online surveys induce a stronger sense of anonymity and thus yield lower levels of SDB than offline/paper surveys, recent studies have shown that 'social desirability in offline, online, and paper surveys is practically the same' (Dodou & de Winter, 2014: 494). This makes the Cooperative Election Study a useful source of data for hypothesis testing. Please refer to the following website for further information about the data: *https://cces.gov.harvard.edu*