

Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton and the Opinion Polls

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Global Research, May 26, 2016

Region: [USA](#)

In-depth Report: [U.S. Elections](#)

There should be no sharp intake of breath on this. Reactionary politics and a certain voodoo mastery of reality was already perfected by Ronald Reagan when he secured the White House and ensured the irrevocable decline of an ailing empire. Making America great has remained the caption of failed politics, but it seems entirely at home in the Trump argot.

Which brings us back to that most inexact of sciences, if one can even call it that. Reading polls is much like reading tea leaves: such matter is often inscrutable, though people still make much of it. The United States first witnessed that now insatiable obsession in 1824, when the pundits suggested that Andrew Jackson was in the lead over John Quincy Adams. On that occasion, the figures were accurate enough.

Behind such readings come the usual deceptions, hesitations and assumptions in population sampling. One does not want to come across as a barking racist, so it is best to keep silent. Again, US politics familiarised itself with this phenomenon in what remains known more generally as the Bradley Effect.

In 1982, Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley, an African-American candidate, threw his hat in the ring in contesting the California governor race. All seemed to be going swimmingly in the polls till “social desirability bias” struck him down.

Pundits have attempted to find some means of relating the lessons of Bradley to the Trump phenomenon, though many of these are stretched. The point on Trump, it has been contended, is that he has more appeal that is being measured or calculated, a reverse Bradley phenomenon. Effectively, “social desirability bias” favours, rather than undermines him, with voters reluctant to concede they might back such a candidate.[1]

In December last year, polling and data firm Morning Consult studied the figures on Trump’s faring across telephone and online polling using a sampling of 2,500 Republican voters. The study found that Trump performed “about six percentage points better online than via live telephone interviewing and that his advantage online is driven by adults with higher levels of education.”[2]

Such findings have convinced political scientists such as Ken Goldstein that Trump’s support is “understated when you go into the sanctity of the secret ballot.” Like all polling figures, the last minute rush, the desperate re-think, and the appraisal as the candidate is selected at the ballot box, tend to elude such calculations.

Similarly to tea varietals, polls vary. RealClearPolitics impressed media outlets such as the BBC, which insisted with a grave air that Clinton’s “double-digit lead, which she has held over the past several months, has vanished – and with it, apparently, Democrats’ dream of a transformational 2016 victory that would leave Republicans wandering in the wilderness for

a generation.”[3]

Other polls, such as the Washington Post/ABC News poll released on Sunday, speak of 44 percent of the electorate wishing for a third candidate option. But this is merely a sign that the current poll figures suggest a good degree of fear and loathing.

As Dan Balz and Scott Clement have put it, “Among those registered who say they favour Clinton, 48 percent say their vote is in support of the candidate while an identical percentage say their vote is mainly to oppose Trump.” This point is mirrored on Trump’s side with 44 percent of backers claiming they are voting for the presumptive Republican nominee while 53 percent “say their motivation is to oppose to Clinton” (*Washington Post*, May 22).

Nothing could ever have been transformational about Clinton, a veteran political apparatchik who has a record sufficiently tarnished to warrant barring. Her husband, on the other hand, managed to shape the United States in a manner few Republicans could have, giving it a true Tory savaging if ever there was one. Conversely, the suggestion that Trump could be devastatingly different is to ignore the various devastating administrations that have come before. Such regimes wax and wane in their appalling effects, with some aspects contained by Congressional limits - when those on the Hill decide to wake up from their business slumber.

There is little doubt that the great problem for Trump - resistance from within the GOP movement - is faltering. The figures, to end, show that. The #NeverTrump movement has folded, and is now passing into enforced and collaborative amnesia. Opponents have decided that Trump, bogus of intention or otherwise, is their figure of choice, the favoured bull in a doomed china shop. Having made the political flip flop artful and, importantly, without lasting consequence, Trump has managed to stay essentially unburnt.

The dangers surrounding Clinton, however, are far more pronounced. The fires are leaping, and there are Democrats who remain seduced by Bernie Sanders who, if he is worth his salt, should take the plunge as a true independent. As for Clinton, there is no hint of Teflon coating on that side of the race.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2015-12-22/a-reverse-bradley-effect-polls-may-under-estimate-trump-s-support>

[2] <http://morningconsult.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Morning-Consult-Donald-Trump-online-vs-rsus-live-polling-methods-study1.pdf>

[3] <http://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2016-36372929>

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