Trump, Blue Mirages and False Polls

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The great bard remarks in Henry VI: Part II that all the lawyers ought to be killed. In entertaining this homicidal formula, William Shakespeare had yet to encounter that barnacle breed known as the pollster. There is much to suggest that those practising this dark and futile art ought to be done away with, with their special ability to suggest realities buried in the entrails of malleable opinions. Their failings have been regular and profound: the Brexit referendum in 2016; the US presidential victory that same year for Donald J. Trump.

Cue to 2020. The scene set before the November 3 vote: the wooden, barely breathing Joe Biden, whose only claim to fame in this presidential race has been not being Trump. A vote for Biden; a vote for a return to amnesia, self-denial and the fiction of "decency". Trump, campaigning manically across several swing states in the last days; Biden, doing his little bit in Pennsylvania, strumming his Scranton, working class tune to voters.

Democrats were again counting on the weakness of their opponent, misreading him. Strategists could only see a monster, an apparition that would pass. Left unseen was a campaigner who never left the rally; a person whose four years in office has been one long pitch to retain power. In the meantime, despite the president's predations and the personalisation of high office, Trump's supporters have noted the hum of the economy (prior to the coronavirus), delighted in his hard stance on treaties, his pugilism towards Washington's allies and foes.

The death rate of COVID-19 might have seen him off; indeed, Trump might himself have become a viral casualty were it not for the highly priced medical treatment he received. But even here, this mendacious wonder managed to suggest that he contracted it for the American people, did it for them; the foolish minimiser of disease turned brave warrior, albeit it one with a large medical bill attached.

In this mess were the pollsters – again. Data from Real Clear Politics suggested that Biden would sail into the White House on a sea of blue, ahead with 51 percent compared to Trump's 44 percent in the seven-day rolling average.   The NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll reported a 10 point lead favouring Biden (52 percent to 42 percent).

Emblematic in all of this was the result in Florida.   Victory was secured by Trump by a margin three times that of 2016.   The polling suggested that Biden would be breathing easy with a margin of 2.5 points. Another glaring error for the books.

Looking at Florida, John Podhoretz raged, wondering why "we fell for their crap again." Such polling could only be seen as "a fraud. It claims to measure something that, it is now unmistakably clear, cannot be accurately measured. Polling's seductive promise is that it

will take the guesswork out of understanding a complex and changing set of circumstances and replace that uncertainty with something that looks like science."

Fox News anchor Tucker Carlson was similarly livid. Suggesting that the polling industry was "dead", he advocated mass firings. "I could name some of the people who should be fired immediately."

One figure in the firing line of vituperation was Nate Silver, editor-in-chief of FiveThirtyEight, a data journalism blog described by Aaron Timms in *The New Republic* as having "no politics – or rather, no politics beyond a mute approval of the status quo." Silver has turned into a shape changer over the years, moving beyond the astrology of polling into strident pontifications, some of which are suitably dotty. But elections are meant to be his ham and eggs, and in November 2020, he was nodding the way of a convincing Biden victory.

This prompted Erik Engquist, senior managing editor of *The Real Deal*, to release a volley of indignation. "How many elections can Nate Silver's model do this before people stop taking him seriously? It gave Biden a 95% chance to win MI, 94% chance to WI, 69% to win FL etc." Reuters investigative reporter Joel Schectman suggested that Silver had "a lot of mansplaining to do" though took the barb off his remarks by claiming irony; Ashlee Vance of *Businessweek* wondered how many poles it would take "for Nate Silver to get a forecast right."

Away from the convenient, readymade fictions of the polling industry, the US political ground is looking ugly, fractured and desperate. This has not stopped Democrats remaining wrapped up in an entitlement narrative that continues to repel voters with its own form of snobbery. Biden's promise on Election Day that "there will be no red states or blue states just the United States of America" is supremely fanciful when looking at a country distinctly divided between them. What is abysmal for the Donkey Party this time around is not that Trump just might win (again), but that his record on pandemic mismanagement, politicisation of US institutions and science, to name but a few, did not guarantee a blue stampede. Across the country, the revolted remain in revolt.

Instead, Trump has managed to turn the political fabric of the US inside out, sowing seeds of chaos and now, with a promise of litigation, to reap them in the various courts of the country. His overt turn to hucksterism – the claim that an electoral fraud has been committed – is very fitting. "This is an embarrassment to our country. We were getting ready to win this election. Frankly, we did win this election." The pollsters have now been replaced by the vote counters. The lawyers, far from being done away with, are being hired by the platoon.

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