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The Three R's Enabling Trump



I admit it. I was wrong about Trump's staying power as a candidate. Not only is he winning primaries, but he has a real path to winning the nomination. Why has he succeeded when I thought he would fail? Trump himself deserves some of the credit. He's read the mood of the electorate and understands the 21st century media better than any other candidate on the GOP side. He is the living, breathing embodiment of the divided and diffused modern GOP: an angry outsider who's also well-connected and influential; a wealthy crony capitalist who embraces a populist, anti-establishment message; an uncompromising figure who boasts of making great deals.

But, Trump didn't get into first place on his skills alone. In fact, what shocks me as much – or more - than Trump's durability has been the persistent passivity of his rivals - an issue **I raised** back in October. If you want to understand Trump's dominance you can look to his three most important enablers: reluctance, rationalization and resignation.

Reluctance

I've been covering campaigns for 15 years. And, while a lot has changed over the years – payphones have been replaced by smart phones, note cards have been replaced by data mining, the fundraising consigliore has been replaced by the SuperPAC – the basics of campaigning haven't really changed that much. Campaigns aren't magic. At their core they require an understanding that you must define your candidate and your opponent before he or she does it for you. However, there has been a serious reluctance by Trump's opponents and outside groups who oppose him to do this very function. Donald Trump started out this race very well-defined – and not in a good way. The earliest polling showed him both well-known and majorly disliked among the GOP electorate. As such, his opponents (and I too) didn't take him seriously. Yet, over the course of the next few months, Trump was able to turn those numbers around. But as his ratings started to rise, his opponents did nothing to cap their climb. Many candidates had already plotted their strategy - namely to win their so-called "lane" of the GOP primary, and they didn't factor Trump into that approach. And, to be fair, none of the campaigns had the money to fight a two-front war, especially when one of their opponents is a billionaire. So, while Trump's the most polarizing figure on the GOP side, he also has higher positives than a candidate this controversial deserves to have.

This brings me to another reason for my early dismissal of Trump: the tremendous baggage – personal, ideological, and temperamental – that he carries. I assumed his opponents would dump this information out and force him to respond to it. I was wrong. Sure, Jeb Bush lobbed some attack ads as has Club for Growth and now Ted Cruz. But, it's been piecemeal and half-hearted. "There is no effort to blanket the airwaves," one veteran GOP operative tells me. "Further, there's been no effort to screw with his head and knock him off balance in ways that he has extremely effectively done to others. It's honestly like people have forgotten how this game works."

Voters don't "magically" or "organically" get information about a candidate. A campaign has to drive that message – aggressively and consistently to make it stick. Trump has been able to do this to his opponents. No one has done this to him. And, the more Trump wins, the harder it is going to be for his opponents to make the case that he's not the winner he says he is.

Rationalization:

In private conversations with deep-pocketed donors over the last few weeks, I've heard an amazing amount of rationalizing about Trump. If presented with the possibility of a generic GOP candidate who wants to put a 45% tax on Chinese goods, penalize companies for making cars in Mexico and refuses to drastically reform entitlements, these donors would have happily have opened their wallets to fund a campaign to defeat him. Yet, when that candidate happens to be Trump, those same positions are suddenly, well, less troubling. I've heard things like "everyone knows a good deal maker starts off with an outrageous price and then bargains down to something more reasonable" and "do we think he really believes this stuff? I'm not sure he'll actually follow through with it" and "well, he's better than Hillary." My sense is that they believe he'll have loyalty to their concerns once he's off the campaign trail and in the White House, despite the fact that the one consistency about Trump has been his inconsistency and his loyalty to himself above all else.

I've also written before about the false sense of security around the Trump "turn-out" surge. Yes, more Republicans are turning out than Democrats. Yes, Trump is responsible for getting new and or lapsed voters to the polls. But, many conflate that surge with general election electability. As I've written before, every action has an equal and opposite reaction.

Getting more white and angry voters to the polls with nativist language also helps to turn out passive Democratic voters who might have stayed home but for the threat of Trump's candidacy. A new *Washington Post* poll, for example, found Trump with an 80 percent unfavorable rating among Latino voters!

This tool created by my colleague David Wasserman and the folks at fivethirtyeight.com allows you to model different assumptions about the demographic make-up of 2016. If African-American turn-out drops significantly from 2012, for example, Republicans should be expected to win Florida. Give Democrats a slightly bigger percentage of white, college educated voters than Obama got in 2012, and North Carolina moves into the Democratic column. One thing that does stand out on the chart is the very low participation rate of non-college white voters - 57 percent turned out in 2012 compared to 77 percent of white college educated voters. Push their participation up and give Republicans a bit more of their votes - i.e. the Trump 'surge' voters - and Ohio, Florida, New Hampshire and Virginia move into the GOP column, giving the GOP an electoral college win. But, now push Latino participation up to an equal level and give Democrats a slightly bigger percent of the vote and that lead vanishes.

Moreover, a Trump candidacy would most certainly turn-off many of the college-educated white voters that supported Romney in 2012. The latest NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll bears this out. Against a "generic" Republican candidate, Hillary Clinton loses white college voters by five points. But, up against Trump, she carries them by 11

points. An increase of support for a Democrat of just 4 points among that demographic group puts the Democratic nominee at 275 electoral votes.

Resignation:

Fundamentally, the folks who think most about these electoral college scenarios also feel the most helpless to do anything about it. Post their 2012 loss, the RNC pleaded with their party to do what they could to attract a younger more diverse electorate. Their candidates are doing just about everything they can to do the exact opposite. With that feeling of helplessness, the party and its leaders have decided to try to make the best of a bad situation, trying to take attention away from their party's shortcoming and putting the focus instead on Hillary Clinton's many problems. "Our guys are bad," goes the thinking, "but at least they're not under FBI investigation." That's true but, if you were looking for the best candidate to face a weakened Democrat, you would not put up someone like Trump who matches or exceeds Clinton's negative ratings. The latest NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll shows Hillary's fav/unfav at 37/50. That's pretty bad, but guess who the only candidate in worse shape is? Donald J. Trump who has a 28 percent favorable to 59 percent unfavorable showing.

At the end of the day, all of this hand-wringing may be looked upon as another example of how the pundit class failed to read this election cycle. This may indeed be the kind of long slog of a race that is not decided by March or April. The more realistic a Trump nomination looks, the greater the possibility that the 60 to 65 percent of GOP voters who aren't Trump supporters, decide to rally around an alternative. Marco Rubio doesn't need to look like a Trump slayer as much as a reasonable contrast to his bullying ways.

But, delegate math and a divided field makes this strategy risky and difficult. Yet, given how many crazy twists and turns this 2016 race has already taken, I guess I should stop being surprised by anything.