

NATIONAL REVIEW

Trump's Prospects

Michael Tanner

April 20, 2016

Give credit where credit is due. Donald Trump is basking in another big victory today. And there may never have been a campaign that bases so much of its reason for existence on “winning.”

Yet, consider that even as Trump wins a landslide victory among Republican primary voters in New York, his polling numbers for November continue to plummet. According to the RealClearPolitics average of the latest polls, Trump would lose to Hillary Clinton — perhaps the worst Democratic candidate since George McGovern — by more than 9 percentage points. His net favorability rating is now just above 40 percent. That’s not exactly the stuff of “winning.”

To the degree that Trump has a strategy — a debatable point — it appears to be to appeal to disaffected white working-class voters, the oft-discussed “Reagan Democrats.” Trump hopes that by getting these nominally Democratic voters to cross over in November, he can expand the electoral map into the Midwest and other traditionally blue areas. In addition, Trump hopes to attract the 4 to 5 million “missing” conservatives who supposedly abandoned Mitt Romney in 2012.

Unfortunately, as with so much about the Trump campaign, the numbers don’t actually add up.

Start with those missing conservative voters. It has become something of an article of faith on the right that as many as 5 million conservatives, disappointed with the moderate Mitt Romney, stayed home in 2012, costing Republicans the election. And on election night it certainly appeared that way, as Romney’s vote totals ran some 4 million behind those of previous nominees. And to be fair, it’s not only Donald Trump who believes this: Ted Cruz has also based much of his fall election strategy on this theory.

But, as Sean Trende, perhaps the nation’s foremost voter analyst, has pointed out, that first look was misleading, resulting from slow vote counting in a number of traditionally Republican areas. Once all the votes were counted, Romney received 60.9 million votes, compared to 59.9 million for John McCain in 2008, and 60.7 million for George W. Bush in 2004. Moreover, exit polls showed that Romney performed roughly as well as both Bush and McCain among key Republican voter constituencies such as men, whites, evangelicals, and self-identified conservatives.

Moreover, even if a large number of conservatives did stay home in 2012, that tells us little if we don’t know in which states those voters lived. As Al Gore found out, it is electoral votes that matter, not the popular vote. (Note to Trump: It’s sort of like delegates.) If hidden conservatives boosted the size of the Republican victory in, say, Mississippi, it would do nothing to change the overall outcome.

But, if there is no certainty of a hidden pool of conservative voters to draw on, Trump's hopes for victory ride almost exclusively on those elusive Reagan Democrats. In reality, however, Reagan Democrats have become the Republican version of the Loch Ness monster — everyone claims to have seen them, but they may not really exist.

To begin with, actual Reagan Democrats — that is, the blue-collar Democrats who helped provide Reagan with his landslide victories in 1980 and 1984 — are mostly gone. If the average Reagan Democrat was 40 in 1980, the median voting age that year, he would be 76 today. Given the short life expectancies for white non-college-educated working-class men, a lot of those Reagan voters are not with us today.

Second, most so-called Reagan Democrats are actually Republicans today. The polarization of the parties, combined with modern electoral targeting techniques, means that we have seen increased political sorting since 1980. Mitt Romney won 93 percent of Republicans. Barack Obama carried 92 percent of Democrats. Very few voters cross party lines any more, especially in presidential elections. That said, there has been an unusually large number of voters switching parties for the primaries this year, but they appear to be split between Trump voters and those voting against him. There may also have been more than the usual number of mischief-makers trying to influence the Republican nomination process, especially early on, when it looked as if Hillary would be an easy winner on the Democratic side.

Of course, Trump's campaign is probably not literally referring to Democrats who voted for Reagan. Rather, his team is talking about increasing the share of voters who are white and working-class. In particular, Trump hopes to attract large numbers of people who have not voted in recent elections but who fit into that category. But that's a lot easier to say than to do.

In 1980, for example, even with all those Reagan Democrats, Ronald Reagan carried white voters by 10 percentage points. Mitt Romney actually won white voters by double that figure — 20 percentage points — but he still lost. That's because whites' share of the total vote fell from 90 percent in 1980 to around 76 percent in 2012. Even if Trump is able to push the white vote up by 2 or 3 points — something that he has shown that he is able to do in some primaries — he would still fall short in November. We live in a different demographic universe from the one we inhabited in 1980. And, while the absence of Barack Obama from the ticket could hurt minority turnout in some areas, the widespread antipathy for Trump among minorities would likely offset any falloff in the black or Latino vote.

Furthermore, all of this analysis presumes that Trump is able to hold traditional Republican votes, but that looks increasingly unlikely. Polls show that as many as 38 percent of Republican primary voters say they could not see themselves supporting Trump in November. One recent poll showed the Libertarian candidate — former New Mexico governor Gary Johnson — drawing 11 percent of the vote in a hypothetical three-way match-up with Trump and Clinton, even though he is virtually unknown outside his home state. Trump fares especially poorly with Republican women, with polls showing as many as 47 percent saying they cannot see themselves supporting the New York billionaire. Of course, many Republican voters will likely come home as November draws closer and they face the prospect of a President Hillary. But, given the demographic hill that Trump already has to climb, any loss of Republican support will pretty much doom his bid.

Moreover, as his continued problems in the delegate hunt show, The Donald does not have a very effective ground game. His preferred strategy of flying into a state, holding a big rally, and collecting free television time is not likely to be enough to turn out the vote in November.

For a candidate who often sounds like a bizarre parody of Charlie Sheen, Donald Trump does not appear to have an actual plan to, you know, win. Unless something changes, Trump's claims of inevitable victory ring as hollow as the rest of his promises.

Michael Tanner is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and the author of Going for Broke: Deficits, Debt, and the Entitlement Crisis.