

"Lesser of Two Evils" Takes On New Meaning in 2016

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By **Tony Fabrizio**
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There is no precedent in modern political history for the position the two presumptive nominees currently find themselves in starting off the general election. Certainly not in the past 20 years and as far back as I can recall, the presumptive GOP and Democrat nominees have never been in such bad shape image-wise with the voters as Trump and Clinton find themselves.

Looking back at March of the election year, whether it is 1996 (when I was Sen. Bob Dole's pollster), 2000, 2004, 2008 or 2012, the presumptive nominees of both parties enjoyed mostly positive image ratings from the voters--the only exception would be Romney in 2012. In most cases, both candidates had fairly healthy positive images. In 2008 for example, McCain's positive image averaged around 53% and his negatives were 32%. Obama at the same time was roughly 61% positive and 31% negative.

Conversely, Clinton and Trump today are in the worst shape image-wise that presumptive nominees have ever been. In our latest national survey of 1,500 registered voters conducted in conjunction with NewsMax, we found Trump's image at 39% positive and 58% negative. Clinton's, while slightly better, was also underwater by double digits at 43% positive and 54% negative.

Take a second and compare that to 2008 with McCain and Obama--the last time we had an open-seat Presidential election. The image ratings for both presumptive nominees in 2016 are the mirror opposite and not in a good way.

As all of the races I mention above progressed, no doubt each of the candidate's images became less positive due to the spotlight of the campaign. But for both presumptive nominees to start off significantly "underwater" in their images is something that NO modern Presidential campaign has ever faced. And the challenges for the campaigns are staggering.

Assuming a candidate has a positive image rating over 50%, most campaigns in that position just try to convert enough of their "positives" into voters. However, in 2016 with both candidates' favorables well below 50%, that is NOT an option.

If things continue as they are, one of the most important sub-groups of voters for both the Trump and Clinton campaigns this election will be voters who have an unfavorable or negative opinion of both candidates. Usually in http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2016/03/27/lesser_of_two_evils_takes_on_new_meaning_in_2016_130104.html

Campaigns this election will be voters who have an unfavorable or negative opinion of both candidates. Usually in highly polarized elections, the number of voters that fall into that category is small.

Only when you have two candidates like Clinton and Trump who are shunned by portions of their own partisans and/or larger than usual portions of unaffiliated voters, do you have a sizeable sub-group of voters who are unfavorable or negative to both candidates.

In our March national survey, we found that 24%--nearly 1 in 4 voters--had a negative or unfavorable opinion of BOTH Trump and Clinton. These voters are critical to Trump no matter the poll trails Clinton by various margins, BUT they are also crucial to Clinton if she wants to block any chance of Trump overtaking her.

I faced a similar situation in 2010 in Gov. Rick Scott's surprise victory in Florida. After tens of millions of dollars attacking Scott for his record as a Health Care executive and our attacks on his Democrat opponent Alex Sink, we found both candidates' image "underwater" and a sizeable sub-group of voters who were unfavorable or negative to both. Understanding those voters and what would motivate them to first still go out and vote and then secondly to vote for a candidate they didn't like was quite a challenge. It took a lot of research and testing, but we finally got it right and Gov. Scott went on to win.

In our survey, we found that among the 24% of voters who are unfavorable to both, the presidential ballot was roughly a three-way split with Trump at 33%, Clinton at 32% and 35% undecided. Right now, this benefits Clinton because this group of voters happens to be very GOP in their vote behavior. This group votes 48% GOP and 28% Democrat in the generic ballot for President. They vote 49% GOP and 26% Democrat in the generic ballot for Congress. With Trump underperforming the generic ballots among this group and Hillary over performing, it gives Clinton an early overall ballot edge.

But despite this early edge, Clinton can't rest on her laurels. Among this group two-thirds have a VERY unfavorable opinion of her--the same number as Trump. So no advantage there. When asked their hesitations in voting for Trump, 26% called him "arrogant" or a "bully", 24% said he wasn't presidential material/lacked experience and 20% said they just disliked him or his ideas. Conversely, when asked their hesitations of voting for Clinton overwhelmingly 56% said she was "untrustworthy" or called her a "liar." Trump's problems with these voters appear to be personality or behavior based, while Clinton's problems appear to be more fundamental and problematic--they are character based.

To underscore how important this group of voters is to both candidates, the undecideds among the voters who have a negative opinion of both Trump and Clinton (35%) represent 72% of the all the undecideds in our survey. With 12% undecided overall, that group can have a significant impact on the outcome of the race.

Again, while Clinton is benefitting right now among this group, there are dark clouds on the horizon. This group seriously dislikes Obama, giving him a 33% approve vs. 67% disapprove job rating. By a 77% to 23% margin they believe that the federal government is too big and tries to do too many things versus it isn't too big and needs to do more to help people in need. And by a 65% to 35% margin they say that we need to make America great again versus America never stopped being great.

These three data points, coupled with the strong GOP proclivity on the generic ballots, offers glimmers of hope to Trump and potential problems for Clinton.

But again, the question comes down to who will figure out how best to deal with and motivate this group who really doesn't want to vote for either of the candidates. Who will win the race to get to these voters first remains to be seen. But clearly, in the minds of these voters never has the saying "the lesser of two evils" been a more apt description of their sentiments towards trying to choose between these two candidates.

Tony Fabrizio is a partner in Fabrizio, Lee & associates a nationally recognized and widely respected GOP polling firm. Fabrizio is a senior level veteran of 5 Presidential campaigns including Sen. Bob Dole in 1996 and most recently Sen. Rand Paul this year.



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