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Donald Trump's Pollster Says the Election Came Down to Five Counties

This wasn't a "landslide," Tony Fabrizio says, it was a squeaker—and James Comey helped pull the Republican across the finish line.



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Donald Trump's former campaign manager, Kellyanne Conway, referred to her candidate's electoral win as a "landslide" earlier this week. But the campaign's top pollster, veteran Tony Fabrizio said just five counties made the difference: four in Florida and one in Michigan.

Speaking to Kristen Soltis Anderson and Margie Omero on "The Pollsters" podcast at a post-mortem election forum at Harvard University, Fabrizio offered a reasoned look at the close contest alongside Hillary Clinton's top pollster Joel Benenson.

Fabrizio said that the campaign modeled a number of ways in which they could lose the popular vote by as much as four percentage points—they are currently down by about 2.5 million votes (nearly 2 percentage points) at this stage—and still win the Electoral College. Trump won the Electoral College with a 10,000-vote margin in Michigan, a 22,000-vote margin in Wisconsin and a 46,000-vote margin in Pennsylvania.

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“What was happening in this election that nobody was taking into account was Donald Trump was going to underperform in states like Texas, Arizona, Georgia. States that deliver Republican numbers,” Fabrizio said.

But, as he pointed out, running up the score in these states was completely irrelevant.

What was important was flipping traditionally Democratic-voting states and edging out Clinton in states that were toss-ups up until the final votes were tallied.

“When you really drill down on this election, if you change the vote in five counties, four in Florida, one in Michigan, we’d be having a totally opposite conversation right now,” Fabrizio said of the race. “For all the money that was spent, for the all the effort that was made, literally four counties in Florida, one county in Michigan puts us at 261 [electoral] votes and makes Hillary Clinton the president. So, remember that.”

In Michigan, Fabrizio is likely referring to Macomb County, which neighbors Detroit, where Trump beat Clinton by nearly 50,000 votes. The county voted for President Obama twice and was the birthplace of Reagan Democrats. The vote differential here played a huge role in the small 10,000-vote margin by which Trump won Michigan overall.

In Florida, Trump outperformed previous Republican nominee Mitt Romney in Lee County (Fort Myers), Pasco (Dade City), Polk (Bartow), Pinellas (Clearwater) and Volusia (Daytona Beach). These areas are mostly white and older than the rest of Florida and were key in delivering his 1.2 percent margin of victory.

With such narrow wins in states, particularly in what was erroneously deemed the “Blue Wall” for Clinton’s campaign, much has been made of the Democratic approach to voters as Clinton struggled to appeal to many Midwesterners and made too few real efforts to do so.

Benenson was asked whether this stark wake-up call would lead the party to simply wait for demographics to help them win the next time around, as the country becomes more racially diverse, or whether the messaging itself should change.

“Demographics are not destiny,” Benenson quickly responded. “They are not unimportant either. Both parties have to reevaluate now. I think it is untenable for the Republican Party to keep losing presidential elections,” he said referring to the fact that the party has lost the popular vote on six of seven of the last elections.

Both men characterized the race as having a measurable degree of movement in the final month and as Benenson put it, Clinton’s campaign was tracking “defectors” from both candidates who had favorability ratings that were underwater.

Fabrizio said that the Trump campaign did not do national polls but rather made aggregates of battleground states.

“One of the things that we saw in the data was that when you looked at the data across all of the states, it was really good for us to get a sense of what was happening writ large,” Fabrizio said. “But there were things that were occurring so frequently in this—we would see our support drop with Republicans ten points in a week after he says something.”

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Thank you for subscribing to the Daily Digest and Cheat Sheet. We will not share your email with In these instances, the voters would move towards Libertarian candidate Gary Johnson or the undecided category. But throughout the process, Fabrizio was certain that those voters would come back because they weren't ever going to Clinton.

In the final week after FBI director James Comey released a vague letter saying that the agency was examining new emails found on Anthony Weiner's computer, the husband of Clinton aide Huma Abedin, Benenson said that Clinton's defectors just didn't come back.

"Ours were coming back after the third debate," Benenson said of the Clinton defectors. "We had actually solidified our lead for a period of days after that debate. Comey happens on that Friday, eleven days out, and that's when we see—our defectors leave, their defectors get loyal and that keeps moving and probably in the end tips the balance."

Fabrizio completely agreed with him and said if one didn't understand the polling fluctuations, "you'd think the bottom fell out."

The groups Fabrizio was tracking, specifically "Trump targets"—a cohort which they consistently tried to sway from supporting Johnson and/or Clinton—drastically decreased in the final week after the Comey letter. They all essentially came home.

But Fabrizio said they "held their breath" because just days later Comey cleared Clinton once again. Benenson said that second announcement did not help them either "because it just put it back into the conversation again."

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