
The Daily 202

The Daily 202: Trump's pollster says he ran a 'post-ideological' campaign

By [James Hohmann](#) December 5, 2016

THE BIG IDEA:

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — Donald Trump won more because of strength than ideology.

The shouting match between top advisers to the president-elect and Hillary Clinton's senior staff overshadowed several other compelling conversations during last week's post-election conference at Harvard's Kennedy School.

One revealing exchange came during a panel of the campaign managers for the Republican primary candidates. As they mulled over Trump's surprising appeal to evangelicals, Trump's pollster jumped into the conversation with an important window into the winner's thinking.

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"Everybody in this room needs to pull their head out of their aes," said Tony Fabrizio.** "We really live in a world where everybody thinks that ideology is linear, and that, 'if you answer these 10 questions correctly, that makes you a conservative.' But not every conservative is pro-life. Not every conservative is anti-gay marriage. Not every conservative puts 100 percent emphasis on this or that."

"One of the problems is many people tried to look at the Donald Trump phenomenon through the ideological lenses which had defined previous Republicans presidential nominating contests," Fabrizio added. "**Donald Trump is post-ideological. His movement transcends ideology**.... Through his own antennae — and, trust me, many times I had this conversation with him — Donald Trump understood the fold in American politics. It's the reason so many Trump supporters and so many [Bernie] Sanders supporters agreed on so many things."

Trump insisted early in his campaign that he did not need a pollster because they are a waste of money. But he signed Fabrizio in the days after securing the Republican nomination in May. The veteran operative polled for Rand Paul in the primaries, but he has worked for clients from across the GOP coalition (from the U.S. Chamber and Bob Dole to Rick Scott and Matt Bevin).

"Every time he said something ... and doubled down, that was proof to voters he'd speak his mind and not lie to them. It's what they wanted," Fabrizio said of Trump. "His best group of voters were those who said they were 'angry.' And let me tell you, in the Republican primary, a third of voters would tell you they were outright angry. With another 60 percent telling you they were dissatisfied. So he had a rich pool to tap into."

-- **Policy didn't matter.** "**What we missed was that nobody cared about solutions,**" said Sarah Huckabee Sanders, who managed Mike Huckabee's campaign until he dropped out, then joined Trump's operation as a consultant soon after. "**They just wanted to burn it all down. They didn't care about building it back up.** They wanted to burn it to the ground and then figure out what to do with the ashes afterwards. There was no understanding of this electorate and the anger on the front end in terms of just how pissed off they were. **You may have the best policy in the world to get every single American the best job they've ever had. Nobody cared.**"

-- **Experience didn't matter.** From Marco Rubio campaign manager Terry Sullivan: "We got hit with commercial after commercial about how little experience [Marco had] and how many missed votes in the Senate. It didn't matter. People don't care. **The Senate sucks. Why would we want to be there?** We're not voting. Who cares? **And voters bought into that.** Experience was a liability. It was not an asset. We figured that out early, but Trump took it to the next level."

-- **Ben Carson's campaign manager, Barry Bennett, argued that Trump's success was always more about strength than ideology.** "We went to Iowa for three or four days before we started and did a bunch of focus groups to try to figure out what people wanted," he recalled. "**I thought Ben's lack of government experience was going to be a negative. Well, it wasn't. But what they wanted more than anything else was strength.** And Trump was the one that they thought had that."

Bennett fondly recalled the stretch when his client was riding at the top of the polls. In addition to self-inflicted wounds from a power struggle inside the campaign, he believes that **the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris made it impossible for someone with the retired neurosurgeon's personality to secure the nomination.** "We couldn't really believe it, to tell you the truth," Bennett told the group. "The first six weeks of the fourth quarter we raised \$22 million. We were going gangbusters, and then we ran into Paris, Armstrong Williams and a couple other issues. In the next six weeks of the fourth quarter, we raised \$1.5 million. ... There was an opportunity for a nice outsider to win until Paris came, and then all of a sudden [voters] needed 'strength' again."

-- All three people who ran the Trump campaign noted, to varying degrees, the billionaire's lack of a fixed ideology. While his rivals for the nomination were playing multi-dimensional chess, Trump kept winning by playing checkers. In retrospect, there is something so skillfully simple about a message that defied easy categorization. He could never be placed in one of the "lanes" operatives talk so much about: tea party, establishment, social conservative, libertarian or hawk.

Corey Lewandowski: "We didn't have a traditional campaign of coalitions. It was the same message for everybody: ... 'I'm going to make America great again.' ... **With all due respect to Jeb (Bush), he had three of four different launches. There was Jeb 2.0, Jeb 2.5 (and) Jeb 3.0. We just stuck on the same message the entire time. It was so simplistic, and it didn't target any specific demographic.** ... We didn't have this notion where, 'We have to go win evangelicals in South Carolina to be successful.'"

Paul Manafort: "**They always tried to pigeonhole him.** They'd say, 'He's talking to white working men' or 'He's talking to uneducated older people.' ... **He had a sense of the country that no other candidate had, and he knew what was bothering the country.** So everybody would fixate on the (John) McCain comment, but he was talking about the veterans and how they're not treated right. ... He was talking about terrorists coming into the country and not being vetted, with people being afraid to walk down the streets. The media heard 'Muslims.' You can go through almost any one of the 'faux pas,' so to speak, and you'll see the underlying message he was talking about was resonating."

Kellyanne Conway: "**This is the first time that Republicans have resisted the fiction of 'electability' from early in the primary.**"

-- Could Trump ever have been stopped? "**At a certain point, probably August (2015), Trump was Godzilla walking into the power plant,**" answered David Kochel, Bush's chief strategist. "Everybody thought he'd blow up, and he just got stronger every time. He touched the third rail. He touched the fourth rail. He touched the fifth rail. He kept growing. He kept getting bigger. The feedback loop was kind of unstoppable by then. You would have had to define him out of the race real early. Jeb's 'chaos candidate' frame was a late shot that didn't do that. If you could have hung that big concept around him in July, maybe it would have been different."

Trump's GOP rivals now all acknowledge the collective action problem that led them to ignore the first-time candidate – hoping someone else would knock him off – until it was too late. "I thought it was a reality TV gimmick," said Sullivan, Rubio's manager. "I didn't think he'd even necessarily stick in the race. In a lot of previous election cycles, no one maintains a lead as the frontrunner that long. So I assumed, somewhat wrongly, that gravity would take course. Why would I engage in a fight with a skilled knife-fighter? Let someone else go and attack him."

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With contributions from Elise Viebeck ([@eliseviebeck](#)).

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WHILE YOU WERE SLEEPING:

Trump's Transition: Ben Carson for housing and urban development

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President-elect Donald Trump named Ben Carson as his nominee for housing and urban development secretary. Here's what you need to know about the former GOP presidential candidate. (Sarah Parnass, Osman Malik/The Washington Post)

-- Trump announced this morning that he will nominate Ben Carson to lead the Department of Housing and Urban Development. "Carson...is the president-elect's highest profile African American supporter and confidant. A conservative political celebrity, **the 65-year-old Carson recently cast doubt on his suitability for a Cabinet role, saying he would be 'like a fish out of water' as a federal bureaucrat,**" write Elise Viebeck and Karoun Demirjian. "A review of some of Carson's political commentary on housing policy reveals his views to be at odds with some of the anti-segregation policies championed by minority groups, including the NAACP. On at least one occasion, he criticized efforts by the Obama administration to use its regulatory powers to improve racial integration in housing."

Celebrations at Standing Rock after pipeline victory

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Protesters celebrate after an announcement Sunday that the Army would not grant an easement for the Dakota Access Pipeline to be built under Lake Oahe in North Dakota. (Zoeann Murphy/The Washington Post)

-- **The Army announced that it will not approve an easement necessary to permit the controversial Dakota Access Pipeline to cross under Lake Oahe in North Dakota, marking a monumental victory for the Native American tribes and thousands of others who have flocked in recent months to protest the oil pipeline.** From Brady Dennis and Steven Mufson: “Officials in November had delayed the key decision, saying more discussion was necessary about the proposed crossing, given that it would pass very near the reservation of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, whose leaders have repeatedly expressed fears that a spill could threaten the water supplies of its people. ... The decision averts a possible showdown on Monday, the date the Army Corps, which owns land on either side of the lake, had set for cutting off access to the protesters’ camp. Attorney General Loretta E. Lynch, worried about violence, had sent mediators to the area over the weekend.”

But the victory for the Standing Rock Sioux and its allies could be short-lived: “Trump has vowed to support pipelines such as this one. And Kelye Warren, the chief executive of the pipeline company Energy Transfer Partners, has been a major contributor to the Republican Party and Trump’s campaign. ... Trump, who once owned a stake worth between \$500,000 and \$1 million in Energy Transfer Partners, has sold the shares, his spokeswoman Hope Hicks said.”

-- **INSTABILITY IN EUROPE: Italy’s prime minister resigned, the latest victim of 2016’s populist tidal wave that already gave the west Brexit and Trump.** From Michael Birnbaum and Anthony Faiola: “Europe’s embattled political establishment lost another round Sunday in its effort to thwart the anti-elite movement, as Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi resigned after voters rejected his constitutional reforms. The thorough rejection of Renzi’s referendum to streamline lawmaking was a significant boost for the country’s surging populist forces ... Renzi’s loss also risks unleashing financial upheaval in Europe’s third-largest economy as Italy’s weak banks struggle to contain the fallout.”

What’s next? “A populist takeover of Italy is still an uncertain prospect, since Renzi’s center-left Democratic Party remains in control of Parliament and national elections do not have to be called until 2018. But much will depend on the makeup of the next government and how anti-immigrant, Euroskeptic parties capitalize on their success,” Michael and Anthony note. “Italy, which has had 63 governments in the past 70 years, is no stranger to political chaos. What comes next will depend partially on Italian President Sergio Mattarella, who is charged with picking a new person to try to form a government, as well as with deciding whether to hold early elections. ... **In the wake of Renzi’s resignation, Italy’s mainstream political parties are likely to change voting laws to make it more difficult to rule without a wide coalition, diluting the possibility that an insurgent force could seize power in the next elections.”**

The Trump fan you should keep an eye on now, via Rick Noack: “When Beppe Grillo started to make headlines as the leader of Italy’s biggest protest party six years ago, it was hard to avoid the puns. A comedian turned politician, Grillo was laughed at and branded a ‘clown.’ But by 2013, the laughing subsided, and German magazine Der Spiegel already had called him ‘the most dangerous man in Europe.’ Three years later, he may finally be living up to that description ... **Renzi's resignation could ultimately sweep Grillo's left-leaning and anti-establishment Five Star Movement party into power** ... Grillo has for years advocated a referendum on Italy’s eurozone membership status.” **Grillo and Trump are frequently being compared in Europe.** The Italian comedian himself made such remarks during an interview following Trump’s victory: “Our movement has some similarities,” he said. “We became the first political movement in Italy, and the media didn’t even realize it.”

-- **But, but, but: A center-left presidential candidate in Austria handily defeated his far-right challenger yesterday.** The victory in Austria of an elder statesman formerly of the Green Party suggested the limits to the anti-elite anger. Many thought the far-right nationalist would win, and the result might be the biggest boost the E.U. has received in a while because polls show the electorate is more Eurosceptic than most of its neighbors.

-- **A remarkable visualization of just how fast the populist movement has swept the west:**



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