

A Post-Mortem on Ted Cruz's Campaign

With Ted Cruz having dropped out of the 2016 presidential race, there will be a string of eulogies seeking to autopsy his campaign. At least some of those critiques may hit the mark. In particular, Cruz's campaign strategy went awry in three ways.

First, Cruz consciously copied Obama's micro-targeted campaign of voters. He has been repeatedly praised for a campaign that focused on tiny groups of voters in states like Iowa to learn exactly how to win their vote. But while that works in Iowa where there is time to prepare, it does not work once the primary calendar heats up. This focus on targeting winnable voters also led Cruz to worry too much about focusing on states he thought he could win. He had success, in the sense that he won most of the states he heavily focused on, but by "giving up" in other states he let Trump get too far ahead. The most recent example—giving up on the northeast state primaries to focus on Indiana—probably doomed his campaign. Cruz was ahead in Indiana, but after Trump's victories in the northeast the polls in Indiana changed drastically.

Second, Cruz copied the strategy of every other political candidate in history but Trump: give a speech in front of microphones, leave before taking questions and avoid gaffes. Partly as a result, the media didn't heavily cover most of his events and rarely showed his speeches live, in stark contrast to the coverage Trump garnered.

Third, Cruz focused too much on winning the most conservative voter. It is not a terrible idea to start there, especially in a crowded primary. But Cruz campaigned as though being the most conservative candidate was a virtue, rather than campaigning on ideas that matter and arguing why his

conservative solutions are the best answers.

These are three legitimate complaints about Cruz's campaign. But the bigger story is that Trump is basically a black swan, an unforeseeable event with extreme consequences, like the Arab Spring or Leicester winning the English Premier League this year. Even still, without a public immensely dissatisfied with its elected leadership, a post-Constitutional President Obama that has made some Republicans want their own version, and a lapdog media focus, Trump would never have succeeded as he has.

That at least is the version of Trump's success that is most friendly to the conservative movement. In other words, Trump's success is not the fault of the conservative movement, but an isolated issue related to Trump's particular candidacy.

There's another story, however. Lost in the string of Cruz eulogies sure to come is the bigger point—that every critique of Cruz's campaign will apply as much or more to the rest of the Republican field. Remember, a year ago Republican operators were bragging about the deepest field of candidates in history, including as many as 17 candidates. More importantly for the conservative movement, many of them were serious political conservatives that had been successful governors, senators, and business leaders. But that deep field turned out to be fool's gold. Governors who spent a combined \$260 million campaigning for a tiny number of votes. Senators who fantasized about someone killing Cruz on the Senate floor.

The pressing question is why? Why have 40 percent of theoretically conservative Republican primary voters rejected these candidates in favor of a charlatan, con-man and liar who spends much of his campaign peddling conspiracy theories from the *National Enquirer*?

The unavoidable conclusion is that they are simply not buying what Republicans are selling.

And this is not really that surprising. Conservatives have been selling essentially the same policy promises since Reagan, even though economic and political conditions in America have drastically changed in the last 30 years. And the Republican leadership, while not particularly conservative, has happily taken the votes of conservatives and promised to act on X, Y and Z, with precious little intention, or evidence, of actually following up.

So in response, their voters have turned to a candidate with no center, who blows wherever the wind goes but promises to do so with conviction. Failing to find conviction in Republican leaders, Republican voters have fallen for Trump's false promises.

The long-term problem for conservatives—who are, after all, distinct from the Republican Party—is that regardless of the outcome of the 2016 election, regardless even of the continued existence of the Republican Party, they do not know how to convince voters of their ideas—or even what ideas are most important. Until they fix that, no candidate or campaign magic can fix their problems. Which is to say, Trump is not the problem. His successful candidacy is the evidence of a much deeper problem in the American Republic.

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