

Why Trump Isn't Worried He's Losing Momentum in the Polls

Happiness in politics is a divided opposition. That's why Donald Trump doesn't seem to be alarmed by his sudden drop in a Reuters poll of Republicans nationwide. He's still getting more than twice as many votes as any of his rivals.

Right now, there is no mainstream anti-Trump. Ben Carson is still running second (15 percent to Trump's 31 percent), although Carson's numbers, too, are in decline. No other Republican contender is in double digits.

The Paris attacks appear to have solidified Trump's base. Trump is the candidate of anger – he says he would “quickly and decisively bomb the hell out of ISIS.” A lot of Republican voters are angry right now – not just at the terrorists but also at their own party leaders who seem incapable of thwarting President Barack Obama.

And at the influx of immigrants into the United States, which has always been Trump's issue. Opposition to immigrants is not a uniquely American phenomenon. The flood of Middle Eastern refugees is generating a political backlash all over Europe.

The Dutch prime minister has warned that if the European Union does not regain control of its borders, it risks the same fate as the Roman Empire. “As we all know from the Roman Empire, big empires go down if the borders are not well-protected,” Mark Rutte said last week. Trump couldn't have said it better.

And in a Trump-like assault on multiculturalism, former French President Nicolas Sarkozy is maneuvering to regain office in 2017 under the banner of “France de toujours” (“eternal France”). “There is no French identity, no happy identity, in a multicultural society,” Sarkozy said.

So why the Trump decline? Most likely because he is losing supporters beyond his hard-core base. Many voters were very

likely appalled by Trump's mockery of a disabled reporter. It was not the image of a prospective president. Moreover, at a time when Americans feel threatened, they may be looking for an experienced leader with a sure and steady hand. That is not Donald Trump.

Who else could it be? Hillary Clinton may qualify, though to do so she may have to distance herself even more from Obama. If voters accept the Republican argument that a vote for Clinton is a vote for a third term for Obama, she may be doomed. Right now, the big issue for 2016 looks to be terrorism. Obama's ratings on terrorism are not good.

Nevertheless, the issue may ensure Clinton the Democratic nomination. Poor Bernie Sanders has lost his issue. He's running on inequality. Every time terrorism comes up, Sanders tries to change the subject as quickly as possible to inequality, as he did in the last Democratic debate. In politics, as in comedy, timing is everything.

Right now, the only Republican candidate who is moving up in the polls is Ted Cruz. Cruz is a slightly more respectable Donald Trump. He maintains a respectful relationship with Trump and hopes to inherit Trump's support. But Cruz, who embraces government shutdowns as a negotiating tactic, is anything but a sure and steady hand.

Cruz is likely to win the Iowa caucuses on Feb. 1. He is a hero to the kinds of Republicans who dominate the Iowa contest: hard-line conservatives and the religious right.

The big test will come on Feb. 9 in New Hampshire. Four candidates will be competing for the mainstream Republican title: Marco Rubio, Jeb Bush, John Kasich and Chris Christie. Whichever of them comes out ahead of the others in New Hampshire will claim to be the candidate who can stop Trump, even if – or especially if – Trump wins New Hampshire.

The [New Hampshire] *Union-Leader* newspaper has real influence among New Hampshire Republicans. Its decision to endorse Christie may give the New Jersey governor real momentum in the

Granite State. Terrorism is Christie's issue. Won't it be wonderful to see Christie and Trump get into a shoving match?

Republicans could end up with a three-way contest: Trump the angry populist, Cruz the hard-line conservative and a mainstream Republican. A three-way contest is inherently unstable. Any of them could become the frontrunner with a divided opposition.

Moreover, Republican rules allow states to hold winner-take-all primaries beginning March 15. The idea was to shut the contest down quickly. It may end up shutting it down too quickly for the Republican establishment to prevail.

As a last resort, party leaders may try to stop Trump or Cruz at the convention. That may have worked 50 years ago, but it won't work today. If party insiders try to reverse the vote of the people, there will be hell to pay. That's the only thing predictable in this wildly unpredictable campaign. {eo}

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