

Veteran Pollster Sees 2016 as a Reckoning for Both Parties

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(CN) - When former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg confirmed earlier this year that he was weighing an independent run for the presidency, he cited the banality of the comments already dominating the political discussion, statements that he called "an insult to the voters."

He was "looking at all the options" he told The Financial Times of London in early February. He then called Douglas Schoen, the veteran Democratic pollster and former advisor to President Bill Clinton, to gauge his prospects.

Those polls, conducted in February and earlier this month, looked at Bloomberg's appeal nationally and also, specifically, in 22 states deemed essential to a successful presidential campaign.

They found voters generally responded favorably to the billionaire founder of the Bloomberg financial news empire, but also that in a three-way race against Republican Donald Trump and either Hillary Clinton or Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont, the best he could hope for was creating a stalemate in the Electoral College.

This would have thrown the selection of the next president to the Republican-controlled House of Representatives, and presumably result in either Trump or Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas, the second-leading vote getter in the Republican primaries and caucus thus far, winding up in the White House.

On March 7, Bloomberg said he decided not to run because that outcome "is not a risk I can take in good conscious."

It has been, for many, an unsettling and yet surprisingly engaging primary season.

Few would have predicted the iconoclasts -- Trump among Republicans, Sanders among Democrats -- would define the national debate, or that an election year many expected would come down to sending either another Bush or Clinton to the White House could lead to a major realignment of both political parties before it's through.

Even those who had an inkling of what was going on, like Douglas Schoen, now admit it has been an electoral cycle that has confounded expectations.

"We have such a profound anger," Schoen told Courthouse News on Monday. "My colleague on [Fox News'] "The Political Insiders," Pat Caddell, has said the legitimacy of our institutions is in question, and I think he's right."

"On the right, the anger with the Republican leadership and with Washington is palpable, hence you have Donald Trump and Ted Cruz. And on the left, you have anger with Washington and also a sense that the game is rigged, and that we need radical redistribution of wealth and power, breaking up the banks, raising taxes on the wealthy," he said.

"That's why Bernie Sanders is doing as well as he is, and why Hillary is moving as far to the left as she in fact is," he added.

Another symptom of that dynamic is that, "the kiss of death in this election is to be perceived as being part of the establishment," Schoen said. "Look at what happened to Jeb Bush. Look what happened to Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker."

Asked why establishment candidates didn't better position themselves to withstand the headwinds of a roiling

electorate, Schoen said the level of anger people are feeling "is well beyond what anybody anticipated."

"I saw a fair amount of anger through our polling, but I don't think anyone believed that we would be in a moment where the legitimacy and indeed, the existence, of both major parties would potentially be called into question," he said.

At the same time, that discontent has not created an opportunity for a viable run by an independent candidate -- even a Michael Bloomberg, who had suggested he'd spend as much as \$36 billion of his own money on his campaign.

The reason, Schoen said, is "the system in America is rigged against independents. It's hard to get on the ballot. It is hard to get political traction, it's hard to raise money, it's hard to get political credibility.

"The put it another way, the two major parties agree on nothing, but what they do agree on is that independents should not run," he said. "I consider it a weakness in our system when close to 60 percent of the electorate says it wants an independent [to run], and 42 percent of the electorate calls themselves an independent."

As far as Tuesday's primaries in Florida, Illinois, Missouri, North Carolina and Ohio are concerned, Schoen predicted that if Kasich doesn't win his home state of Ohio, he'll bow out of the race.

The same goes for Marco Rubio if he loses in Florida.

"Hillary and Bernie, I think are going all the way to the convention," Schoen said. "Bernie has the chance to win somewhere between one and three states tomorrow. I think Donald Trump will certainly win Florida, and potentially as many as four more states.

"If Trump wins Florida and Ohio, I think he will have a giant leg up on winning the nomination, and if he doesn't, we can expect to see a long slog between he and, most likely, Ted Cruz, again going all the way to the convention," he said.

While much attention has been paid to what might happen at the Republican National Convention, in Cleveland, in July, should the GOP establishment try to block Trump's nomination, little has been said of how the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia will play out if Sanders and Clinton are still going toe-to-toe then.

"I foresee it playing out with a lot of intensity on both sides, particularly [among] the Bernie people who will come close but probably lose," Schoen said. "They will say with some degree of justification that the game and the process was rigged against them, and then we will see Hillary going forward trying to do everything she can to keep the party together."

What won't likely be seen is candidates who have spent months trying to appeal to the hardcore of their respective parties, abruptly modifying their message after the conventions to appeal more to voters in the middle than at the extremes, Schoen said.

"I don't think they will be able to move to the middle, for two reasons," he explained. "One, they've staked out such [strong] positions on the left and right, respectively, that it will be very hard, if not impossible, to moderate them.

"But secondly, there are far fewer swing voters than there used to be, hence less reason to move to the center," he said. "The Republican party is an ideological movement of conservatives, and they consider it betrayal to move to the center ... and as for the Democratic party, the Obama coalition [in 2008 and 2012] was comprised of blacks and liberals and young people and Hispanics, and I think that's what Hillary or, in the off chance it's Bernie, Sen. Sanders will do in terms of constructing a coalition."

As for the tattered parties themselves, Schoen said he can see them changing some of their rules in an attempt to regain their footing, "but I don't think it will help assuage a deeply restive and angry electorate."

"I think the Democrats have certainly rigged the game by the number of super delegates that exist, and I think the Republicans may move in that same direction to try to tamp down the possibility of a Donald Trump or a Ted Cruz winning the nomination in the future."

Before the end of the conversation, Schoen was asked about his bread and butter -- the matter of polls -- and to assess their real value.

"Let me answer in three ways: in terms of the voters, the candidates and the media," he said.

"For the media, it's visibility, sometimes credibility. They sometimes don't know the value or utility of the individual polls they cite or report, but for them it's ratings and credibility," Schoen explained.

"For politicians, it's usually something else. It's not only where the candidates stand, horse race polling, but it's also to try to understand how the electorate views the candidates so that they can then develop and make strategy decisions to influence the electorate in their direction.

"As for voters, it used to be that voters were unaware of the polls. But nowadays, with the Internet, I run across many voters -- and I smile as I say this -- that know as much about the polls as I do and there's a lot more tactical voting going on than there ever was before," he said.

As an example, he pointed to this past weekend, when the Rubio campaign reportedly told his supporters in Ohio to vote for Kasich in an effort to stop Trump.

It's a strategy based the question, Schoen said, of "How do you have the greatest degree of influence to achieve your larger purpose?"

That kind of strategic or tactical voting is becoming more and more common, he said.

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