Jim Messina, center, and Karl Rove, right, at the EY Strategic Growth Forum.
Mark Jeffries, left, served as moderator. Photo via EY Strategic Growth Forum

Political masterminds Karl Rove and Jim Messina: How data is changing politics, why polling sucks, and which social network matters now

BY **JOHN COOK** on November 14, 2015 (GeekWire)

PALM DESERT, Calif. — Two political foes faced off Friday here at the EY Strategic Growth Forum, but the dialogue was civil, enlightening and, at times, downright funny.

Republican political strategist Karl Rove and Democratic political adviser Jim Messina— who orchestrated President Barack Obama's successful 2012 re-election campaign — discussed a wide range of hot-button issues, from Donald Trump's rise to the partisan gridlock paralyzing Washington D.C.

But a significant chunk of the nearly hour-long conversation centered around the changing political landscape, particularly driven by big data.

While the Democrats have held a lead in utilizing technology to win elections — largely under the direction of Messina — Rove said that the Republicans are catching up and have learned some of their opponents' secret sauce.

Rove noted that during the 2012 campaign, Mitt Romney actually contacted more Americans: 31 percent contacted by Romney versus 30 percent by Obama.

The big difference, according Rove, was that the "quality" of contact was far superior from the Obama campaign, meaning that they were able to establish deeper relationships with would-be voters.

Messina talked a bit about how they did that, sharing some insights about the 2012 Obama campaign, explaining that he largely ignored polls and instead relied on detailed analytical simulations of the race.

"Every night for 18 months, we did 66,000 computer simulations of the election, and that's how we based our tactics. That's how we based his travel, that is how we based Michelle (Obama's) travel, to Karl's point, we based it all on big data."

What about traditional polls? Messina says he ignores them, and that the polling system is broken, citing the recent prime minister election in Canada as an example of where polls were wrong.

"I have a rule in my organization: If you send me a public poll, I will fire you," Messina said. "Because I think polls are ridiculous … and absolutely useless."

The problem, he said, is that polls are "snapshots" and not "extrapolations." Earlier, Rove agreed, saying that "increasingly we are going to rely on big data in lieu of polls" as people become unglued from landline telephones.

Even so, Rove noted that you can only take data so far, and at times political strategists must use instincts to make key decisions, as he did when President George W. Bush made a strong bid for West Virginia in the 2000 campaign.

"Strategy at times cannot simply be based on data," said Rove, noting that data likely would have suggested that West Virginia was not in play to a Republican. Bush carried the state by six points.

"Millennials may be attracted to these things, and we may be able to use these tools to convey to them, but if you look at all of the age cohorts in 2012, the group that moved most from Obama in '08 to Romney in 2012, was what? The millennials," said Rove. "This is part of a broader fabric. It is an important tool, but there are a lot more things that go into a successful campaign."

Messina, on the other hand, is a full-on believer in using the power of data to make decisions. And as part of that, the University of Montana journalism and political science grad said he's always trying to connect with younger voters, finding out the tools they are using to communicate and share opinions, and mining that for insights that may not otherwise be discovered.

In the past, that was Facebook and Twitter. But Messina — who is advising Hillary Clinton in the 2016 campaign — said there's a new top dog in social media when it comes to younger voters. Here's more of what he said about the role of technology in politics.

"Technology is going to change, and the platforms will change. In 2008, we sent out one Tweet because we thought it was a stupid technology that would never go anywhere. In 2012, it was dominant and we used it. I now think the most important technology for millennial voters is Snapchat. And it didn't exist three years ago…. Now it is dominant with those people.

But the one thing is not going to change is data, and data is incredibly important, and you can't just catch up. It took us a long time to catch up to where they were in '04. In 2012, we had about 670 pieces of data on every single voter in the battleground states, and the most predictive behavior in the future is what you did in the past, and that ability is really important. And Karl is right: We didn't want to talk to every American. I wanted to talk to the 7 percent, over and over and over."

That 7 percent is a reference to the divide in American politics, with Messina noting that the U.S. is now the most partisan country on the planet. Just 7 percent of Americans were ever undecided between Obama and Romney, compared to 32 percent who were undecided in the Jimmy Carter-Ronald Reagan race in 1980.

"If you have the ability to find out who that 7 percent are and where to talk to them, and, more importantly, how to talk to them, you could have a unique conversation in a way that can be very helpful in a close election," he said.

Before taking over the campaign in 2012, Messina made a plea to Obama.

"I looked at him and said: You need to promise me that you are not going to run the same campaign you did last time. And he looked at me weirdly and said: 'What do you mean?' And I said, well in the ensuing four years technology and data have changed everything. So I went on a grand tour around the world and interviewed everyone I respected — Steve Jobs, before he died, Eric Schmidt, Bill Gates — and a whole bunch of people about this: And the Obama campaign in 2012 really bet on big data and technology in a way that was unprecedented.

We spent two years and about $400 million trying to build up a capacity to predict people's behaviors and match that with social media. The final 96 hours of the 2012 race, a majority of Americans, for the first time since 1972, went to the incumbent. And when you ask them why: 76 percent of those said because their friend or family member talked to them on social media and told them why they had to support Barack Obama."

The end result, of course, was a second term — a victory for the Obama campaign, and for the use of big data in politics.

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