

Pollster: Trump's grip on lead weakens as GOP field consolidates



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(Photo: Rudolph Bell)

Donald Trump will begin to lose his grip on frontrunner status the more the Republican presidential field consolidates, according to a leading pollster who spoke at Furman University Wednesday night.

Peter Hart, founder of Hart Research, is pollster for NBC News and the Wall Street Journal.

He said Trump's share of the Republican primary vote – about 30 percent – looks very impressive with so many candidates in the race.

But if the GOP field narrows to two or three candidates from the current seven, "I think that 30 percent will grow, but very slowly, and I think the other candidates then start to pick up a large share of everybody else's

vote," Hart told *The Greenville News*.

He also said the Democrats would probably lose the presidential race if their nominee was Hillary Clinton and former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg runs as a third-party candidate as he has talked about doing. That's because Bloomberg would take moderate-to-liberal Democrats and independents away from Clinton, Hart said.

If Trump runs as a third-party candidate, however, as he has threatened to do if he's not treated by the Republican establishment in a way he deems fair, the Republicans would probably lose because Trump would take the lower-income white vote known as Reagan Democrats away from the GOP, Hart said.

Hart, who has advised more than 500 campaigns, was guest of Furman's Riley Institute, whose namesake, former South Carolina Gov. Richard Riley of Greenville, was in the audience.

In introducing Hart, Riley said he didn't think he would have ever made it to the Governor's Mansion if he hadn't hired Hart in 1978 and taken his advice to run directly at one of his rivals for the Democratic nomination at the time, former Lt. Gov. Harvey Brantley of Beaufort.

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