The Trump Party: Republican in Name Only

Donald Trump lost last year's presidential election, but the former President retains his grip on his party and it retains its populist, nativist image, argues John E. Owens.

On 6 January 2021, an angry crowd stormed the United States Capitol. The insurrection was prompted by Donald Trump's refusal to accept his November election loss. The President claimed victory had been stolen through fraud, sought to persuade state election officials to falsify results, contemplated martial law, and partly financed and organised the mob that descended on Washington. Behind all this, Trump's 'Big Lie' has torn a fissure through the Republican Party.

While the immediate cause of the fissure was Trump's post-election behaviour, it's the result of a decades-long process by which the Grand Old Party (GOP) unshackled itself from its core conservative principles, as it harnessed itself to opposition and identity politics, exploited white low-income voters' fears of cultural change and economic displacement, and embraced anti-democratic action. Building on groundwork laid by House Speaker Newt Gingrich's ruthless partisanship and a scorched earth style of politics in the 1990s, as well as the steady migration of non-college white male voters to the Republican Party,

Trump's nativist, populist appeal and brazen personal style further reinforced this shift.

Becoming the Trump Party

Unlike the 16 other candidates seeking the Republican presidential nomination in 2016, Trump grasped the simple notion that the political demands made by most Republican activists – mostly conservative primary voters – did not sit well with all aspects of the party's traditional conservatism, as articulated by its congressional leaders and think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute. 'I'm a conservative,' Trump declared, 'but don't forget, this is called the Republican Party. It's not called the Conservative Party.'

After de facto hijacking the Republican presidential nomination, then running a successful insurgent campaign purportedly to 'make America great again', which substantively and stylistically rejected his party's traditional brand, the political organisation formally known as the Republican Party became the Trump Party, a party that has more in common with Marine Le Pen's National Rally than Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats. Inasmuch as Trump had a policy platform and a brand in 2016 or 2020, it was him, based essentially on his myriad attention-seeking tweets, statements, outpourings, and comments of the moment.

While four of the party's five previous presidential nominees and many prominent conservative intellectuals publicly opposed Trump, by the end of the first year of his presidency, most Republican activists, corporate donors and identifiers had come to embrace 'America First'. Aided by conservative news media, such as *Fox News* and right-wing 'super spreader' misinformation, Trump pathologically opened up the US's fragile divisions regarding economic disruption, race, identity and culture, by brazenly using raw emotional appeals to exploit the deep-seated grievances of particular identity groups – especially older, blue-collar/non-college, and evangelical Christian whites living mostly outside urban areas. These groups in particular have felt dispossessed, left behind, and most uneasy about important demographic and cultural developments in US society – immigration, racial policies, feminism, and political correctness – that have changed their country since the 1960s, eroding their traditional values and diminishing their status.

Over recent decades, Republican identifiers have consistently expressed the most racial resentment among US voters. Over the course of his election campaigns and his tumultuous presidency, Trump's frequent expressions of open and deep ethno-cultural resentment, racist and ethnically exclusive views became increasingly normalised within his party. After a peaceful protester was killed by a self-identified white supremacist at a white nationalist Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in August 2017, a poll reported that 69 per cent of Republicans agreed with Trump's comment that there were 'very fine people on both sides', and 44 per cent said that 'America must preserve its White European heritage'. By the 2020 election, 60 per cent of white working class/non-college men and 54 per cent of similarly educated women voted for Trump. Another poll found that most Republicans had escalated their (white) ethnic identity assertions to embracing antidemocratic violence; most said that 'the traditional American way of life is disappearing so fast that we may have to use force to save it', while more than 40 per cent went further, agreeing that 'a time will come when patriotic Americans have to take the law into their own hands'. The strongest predictor of these extremist views was antagonism towards immigrants, African-Americans, and Latinos – epitomised by their agreement that 'discrimination against whites is as big a problem today as discrimination against blacks and other minorities'.

Notwithstanding the normalisation of racist and ethnically exclusive views within the party, the embracing of antidemocratic violence, and the repudiation of his presidency by substantial majorities of Americans, in common with most recent Republican presidential nominees, Trump won the votes of 90 per cent or more of his party's identifiers in 2020. Indeed, well before his 2020 election defeat and the violent insurrection at the Capitol, allegiance to Trump had become the sine qua non for the party's identifiers and lawmakers; on its own, being a conservative no longer predicted supporting Trump. Indeed, many of his presidential actions violated traditional party orthodoxy – financial support for the coal industry and farmers, travel restrictions for Muslim and other countries, curtailment of refugees, and tariffs on trade with the European Union and China. Such actions did not, however, prevent the party's lawmakers in Congress, business supporters, farmers, gun rights activists, conservative Christians, white groups nervous of new immigrants and Muslims, and others, from affirming his actions, usually without protest.

From antidemocratic words to violent insurrection and exoneration

Unsurprisingly, then, when Trump invented the 'Big Lie' of a stolen election, almost all Republicans – not only those without college degrees – followed his lead. Indeed, 30 per cent said Trump's refusal to concede the election made them view him more favourably, as did the 26 per cent who approved of his pressure on state officials to overturn certain state results. Meanwhile, Trump's lawmakers in the House and Senate who had sworn to uphold the US Constitution orchestrated a putsch. Led by Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, 60 per cent of Trump's lawmakers in the House formally asked the Supreme Court to prevent four swing states from ratifying their Electoral College votes for Biden. When that move failed, two-thirds of Trump's House members and eight Trump senators voted to invalidate the Electoral College results in at least one state.

Having invented the stolen election myth, Trump and his supporters agitated for the logical next step, directing and financing a violent insurrection at the Capitol, aimed at preventing Congress from ratifying the Electoral College results on 6 January. Many of the insurrections were self-styled militia, right-wing extremists and white nationalists, some armed with deadly weapons. According to *Associated Press* analysis, they were 'overwhelmingly made up of long-time Trump supporters, including Republican Party officials, GOP political donors, far-right militants, white supremacists, off-duty police, members of the military, and adherents of the QAnon myth that the government is secretly controlled by a cabal of Satan-worshipping paedophile cannibals'. Polls showed that almost half of Republican identifiers 'strongly' or 'somewhat supported' the insurrection, just over a quarter saying they 'represented people like me', and many siding with the white nationalists visibly involved in the insurrection. Remarkably, almost one-third of Republicans

did not believe the occupation represented a threat to democracy; 12 per cent said that Trump's actions on the day made them view him more favourably.

Several Republican traditionalists – including McCarthy and Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell – at one time or another condemned the insurrection and Trump's part in it; the House party's third ranking Republican Liz Cheney, went so far as to condemn it as 'an existential threat to who we are' and blamed Trump explicitly, but these statements were rare exceptions. The feedback from party activists and polling evidence, was enough for most Trump lawmakers to conclude that they would suffer electoral retribution if they openly criticised Trump or advocated disciplinary action against the insurrectionists, or the significant one-fifth or so of Republican identifiers who endorsed their views. Even though the lives of Vice President Mike Pence, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, and all House and Senate members and staff had been imperilled, some defended the insurrectionists, endorsing their racist statements, conspiracy theories, and violent threats. The insurrectionists would remain within the party, be allowed to increase their influence, and woe betide any lawmaker who voted to impeach or convict Trump of inciting insurrection.

Where now for the Trump Party?

Trump's 'Big Lie' posed an important question as to how his party would proceed now its principal was no longer President. Would party traditionalists like Cheney and McConnell be able to reassert control, insist Trump should not play a role in the party's future, reject the shameless revisionism of the Capitol attack and restore the party's damaged reputation as a political organisation committed to law and order, the Constitution and free and fair elections? Or would the elephant in the room that is Trump and his supporters remain dominant?

Former presidents usually play some sort of role and exercise a certain amount of influence within their party after leaving office. However, no recent president has wanted to exercise the same kind of personal influence over his party as Trump – in his case, regardless of his public disapproval, and his association with violence, lying, and antidemocratic behaviour. Speculation that he will form a new party is exactly that, as are suggestions that many Republicans will leave the party to join some viable centrist alternative. So long as Trump reasserts his national presence and emblematic significance to the party, and maintains his hold over it, the Republican Party will remain the Trump Party.

Loyalty to Trump and party extremism

American political parties are essentially vote-seeking organisations, as well as purveyors of some loose mix of political principles. Notwithstanding the insurrection and Trump's role in it, the two-party system remains firmly in place and remains highly competitive. Even as the GOP failed again to attract majority popular support across the country, the constitutional and political structural advantages that the political system affords Trump's Party, are sufficient to provide individuals bearing the Republican label with half the seats in the Senate, just under half in the House, and 27 of the country's state mansions. Looking ahead to the 2022 midterm and 2024 presidential elections, moreover, there are real possibilities for the Trump Party to regain control of the Congress and the presidency.

The strength of support for Trump within his party is unmistakable. Notwithstanding the wishes of Cheney and probably McConnell, polls taken after the insurrection show 75 per cent of Republicans want Trump to continue to play a major role in the party, and almost 60 per cent say they would be more likely to vote for a candidate in the 2022 midterm elections if endorsed by Trump; indeed, eight in 10 of Trump's 2020 voters said they would be less likely to vote for a candidate who supported his impeachment, half wanted the party to become 'more loyal to Trump' even if it meant losing the support of traditional Republicans, and over three-quarters said that they would support Trump for the 2024 presidential nomination.

On past experience, however, Trump will always be more interested in advancing his own interests, power and personality cult over winning power for the party as a whole. Still, the party needs the energy, momentum, money and votes derived from Trump, and his supporters' exploitation of white blue collar voters' raw emotions and fears of a shifting demographic and cultural landscape. This emphasis on opposition, cultural backlash, and (white) identity politics, also deflects the need for the party to agree new policy alternatives for governing that might better endear the party to the wider public and avoid repeating the party's experience in the two Senate runoff election campaigns in Georgia in early 2021, which the party lost as sufficient younger Republicans, women, business and the suburban supporters, switched to the Democrats.

To date, congressional leaders have sought to manage this dilemma by tolerating criticism of Trump short of disavowing him or his policies. Thus, McCarthy supported Cheney's re-election as Conference Chair but, acutely aware of his party's need for Trump's dollars, he lost no time jetting down to Mar-a-Lago to kiss the ring and opposed the Trump extremist, Marjorie Greene, losing her House committee assignments. Despite being publicly attacked by Trump as a 'hack' unable to lead Republicans to electoral victory, McConnell's fear of losing his leadership position obliged his commitment to support Trump 'absolutely', if nominated in 2024.

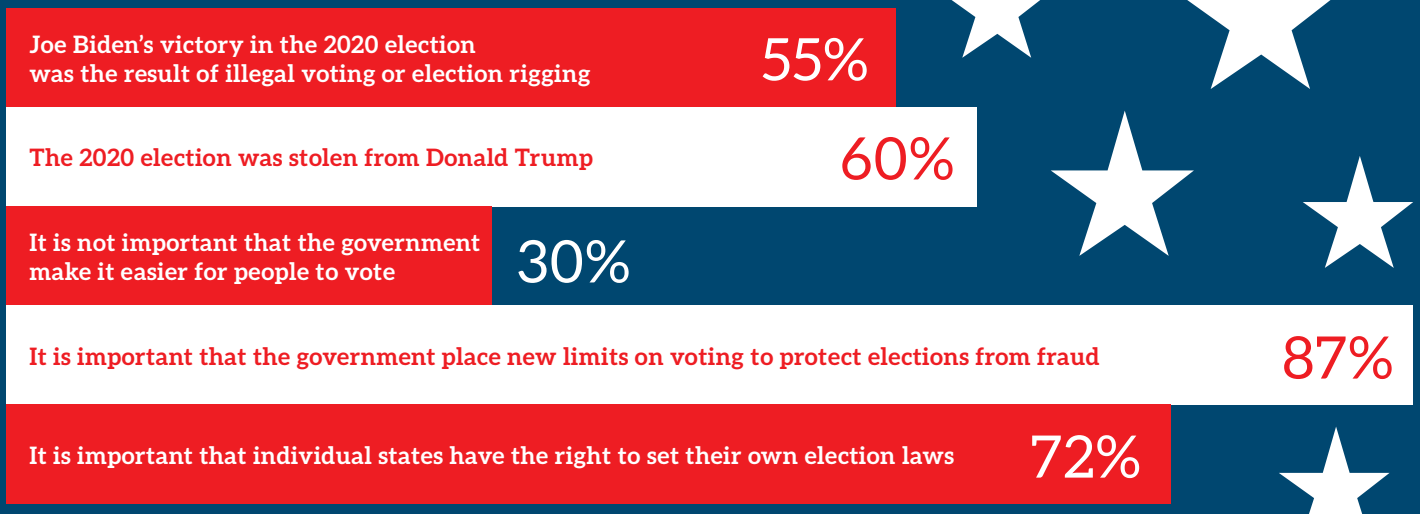
Trump's fealty requirement

Unspoken so far in this management strategy, is how leaders will respond to Trump upping the ante since his acquittal, by requiring retribution and fealty. He has left little doubt that if his party wants to retain his supporters' political loyalty, it will be on his terms – which means validating the 'Big Lie' and the 'injustice' of his election loss, and acknowledging that no blame can be attached to him for any violence on 6 January, which in any event, he and his supporters argue, was incidental and presented 'zero threat' to lawmakers and police officers. Providing heft to these messages, Trump has instructed party activists to 'get rid' of all those House members and senators who voted to impeach or convict him, and at the same time ensure 'no more [campaign] money for RINOS (Republicans in name only)'.

Pro-Trump activists in state parties had already censured two senators and several House members who either voted to impeach or convict Trump. Primary challengers running on the 'Big Lie' have already emerged against all ten House Republicans who voted to impeach, thereby sending out a message

Figure 1: Trump's Republican Party

Percentage of Republicans who agree with following statements:



Source: Reuters/IPSOS poll, April 2021.

to other party lawmakers that they face the choice of openly supporting the party's extremists or keeping quiet, lest they too be challenged in a primary election that they believe they cannot survive. By April 2021, five Republican senators had demurred from that choice and chosen to retire instead, thereby making it likely that their state parties will nominate candidates loyal to Trump and less inclined to support McConnell and other traditionalists in the Senate Republican Conference. These Trump candidates will also likely benefit from the millions of dollars aggressively and dubiously raised online from low-dollar contributions to Trump's 'Save America' Political Action Committee (PAC) rather than to the party. By enacting legislation that gives them greater power to restrict voting opportunities and affect the certification of election results, Republican-controlled legislatures in many states will also effectively legitimise and perpetuate Trump's myth of an election 'stolen' by voter fraud, while suppressing ethnic minority voting.

Trump has also demanded fealty from his party by seeking to wring financial power from national and congressional party leaders in the party's upcoming 2022 campaign. Beyond ensuring that national party funds will not benefit those who voted to impeach or convict him, he has also required the party's national fund-raising committees to obtain his explicit permission before using his name or likeness in their online fundraising efforts. Responding to Trump's instruction, the Republican National Committee moved part of its annual donor retreat to Mar-a-Lago in April 2021.

The party's future?

Fealty to Trump will not be effective in all states and districts. Many if not most congressional incumbents not fervently loyal to Trump, like Senator Lisa Murkowski in Alaska, run in safe seats, having carefully cultivated their own strong base of support over many years, and so likely will be able to withstand Trump's requirement. Where Trump ultras are nominated, moreover, their racially-infused nationalism – presumably supplemented with self-serving interventions from Trump – may repel younger and less extreme Republican and independent voters, who may switch to the Democrats in the general election, as they did in the 2021 Senate runoff elections in Georgia, and may do again in other more competitive, more ethnically diverse, states and districts.

Even so, Trump will surely be nominated for the presidency in 2024, if he runs again. Thereafter, however, and especially if he loses to Biden again, his dominant position will become doubtful. Even before then, deprived of his Twitter and Facebook accounts, the aging Trump may fade out of the party's view. Becoming increasingly dispensable, new presidential contenders will seek his mantle: candidates rhetorically sympathetic to Trump expelling similar appeals to raw white/cultural identity and grievance politics directed at 'ensuring the country's survival as we know it' and cultural backlash, but perhaps with less idiosyncratic, less neurotic, less needy, more disciplined, more agreeable, personalities and messages, that seek to address the economic needs and demands of the country's diminishing number of low-trust, white blue-collar voters, on whom the party has come to rely increasingly for votes, at the same time as they protect their party's corporate allies.

Suggested reading

Bartels, Larry M. 2018. "Partisanship in the Trump Era". Journal of Politics. 80/4: 1483–94.
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