

OPINION
THE EDITORIAL BOARD

Trump's Conquest of the Republican Party



Credit... Haiyun Jiang for The New York Times

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This article has been updated to reflect news developments.

With Donald Trump's victories on Tuesday, he has moved to the cusp of securing the 1,215 delegates necessary to win the Republican Party's presidential nomination. The rest is a formality. The party has become a vessel for the fulfillment of Mr. Trump's ambitions, and he will almost certainly be its standard-bearer for a third time.

This is a tragedy for the Republican Party and for the country it purports to serve.

In a healthy democracy, political parties are organizations devoted to electing politicians who share a set of values and policy goals. They operate part of the machinery of politics, working with elected officials and civil servants to make elections happen.

Members air their differences within the party to strengthen and sharpen its positions. In America's two-party democracy, Republicans and Democrats have regularly traded places in the White House and shared power in Congress in a system that has been stable for more than a century.

The Republican Party is forsaking all of those responsibilities and instead has become an organization whose goal is the election of one person at the expense of anything else, including integrity, principle, policy and patriotism. As an individual, Mr. Trump has demonstrated a contempt for the Constitution and the rule of law that makes him [unfit to hold office](#). But when an entire political party, particularly one of the two main parties in a country as powerful as the United States, turns into an instrument of that person and his most dangerous ideas, the damage affects everyone.

Mr. Trump's ability to solidify control of the Republican Party and to quickly defeat his challengers for the nomination owes partly to the fervor of a bedrock of supporters who have delivered substantial victories for him in nearly every primary contest so far. Perhaps his most important advantage, however, is that there are few remaining leaders in the Republican Party who seem willing to stand up for an alternative vision of the party's future. Those who continue to openly oppose him are, overwhelmingly, those who have left office. [Some have said](#) they feared speaking out because they faced [threats of violence](#) and retribution.

In a traditional presidential primary contest, victory signals a democratic mandate, in which the winner enjoys popular legitimacy, conferred by the party's voters, but also accepts that defeated rivals and their competing views have a place within the party. Mr. Trump no longer does, having used the primary contest as a tool for purging the party of dissent. The Republican candidates who have dropped out of the race have had to either demonstrate their devotion to him or risk being shunned. His last rival, Nikki Haley, is a Republican leader with a conservative track record going back decades who served in Mr. Trump's cabinet in his first term. He has now cast her out. "She's essentially a Democrat," the former president said the day before her loss in South Carolina. "I think she should probably switch parties."

Without a sufficient number of Republicans holding positions of power who have shown that they will serve the Constitution and the American people before the president, the country takes an enormous risk. Some of the Republicans who are no longer welcome — such as [Adam Kinzinger](#), [Liz Cheney](#) and [Mitt Romney](#) — tried to hold their party's leader accountable to his basic duty to uphold the law. Without such leaders, the Republican Party also loses the capacity to avoid decisions that can hurt its supporters. John McCain, for example, [voted to save Obamacare](#) because his party had not come up with an alternative and millions of people otherwise would have lost their health coverage.

A party without dissent or internal debate, one that exists only to serve the will of one man, is also one that is unable to govern.

Republicans in Congress have already shown their willingness to set aside their own priorities as lawmakers at Mr. Trump's direction. The country witnessed a stark display of this devotion recently [during the clashes over negotiations](#) for a spending bill. Republicans have long pushed for tougher border security measures, and Mr. Trump

put this at the top of the party's agenda. With a narrow majority in the House and bipartisan agreement on a compromise in the Senate, Republicans could have achieved this goal. But once Mr. Trump insisted that he needed immigration as a campaign issue, his loyalists in the House ensured that the party would lose a chance to give their voters what they had promised. Even the Senate minority leader, Mitch McConnell, who pushed for the bill for months, ultimately [abandoned it and voted against it](#). He has now [endorsed Mr. Trump](#), a man whom he [has not spoken to](#) in over three years, according to reporting by Jonathan Swan, Maggie Haberman and Shane Goldmacher of The Times. And last week, Mr. McConnell announced that he would [step down](#) from his leadership post.

Similarly, the party appears ready to ditch its promises to support Ukraine and its longstanding commitment to the security of our NATO allies in Europe. When Mr. Trump ranted about getting NATO countries to "[pay up](#)" or face his threats to encourage Russia to "do whatever the hell they want" to them, many Republican leaders said nothing.

The Republican Party has long included leaders with widely different visions of America's place in the world, and many Republican voters may agree with Mr. Trump's view that the United States should not be involved in foreign conflicts or even that NATO is unimportant. But once competing views are no longer welcome, the party loses its ability to consider how ideas are put into practice and what the consequences may be.

During Mr. Trump's first term, for example, [Secretary of State Mike Pompeo persuaded him not to abruptly withdraw](#) from NATO. If Mr. Trump were to try in a second term, Congress could, in theory, restrain him; in December lawmakers passed a measure requiring [congressional approval](#) for any president to leave NATO. But as Peter Feaver pointed out recently in [Foreign Affairs](#), such constraints mean little to a party that has submitted to the "ideological mastery" of its leader. Marco Rubio, one of the authors of that legislation, now insists that he has "[zero concern](#)" about Mr. Trump's comments.

It may be tempting for Americans to dismiss these capitulations as politicians doing whatever it takes to get elected or to ignore Mr. Trump's bullying of other Republicans and tune out until Election Day. In one recent poll, [two-thirds of Americans](#) said they were "tired of seeing the same candidates in presidential elections and want someone new."

But tuning out is a luxury that no American, regardless of party, can afford. Mr. Trump in 2024 would be the nominee of a very different Republican Party — one that has lost whatever power it once had to hold him in check.

This subservience was not inevitable. After Mr. Trump incited the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol, some party leaders, especially in Congress, suggested that they were ready to break with him. The Republican Party's disappointing results in the 2022 midterm elections appeared to further undermine Mr. Trump's support, adding doubts about his political potency to the longstanding concerns about his commitment to democracy.

But after Mr. Trump announced his candidacy and it became clear that the multiple indictments against him only [strengthened his support](#), that resistance faded away. He is now using these cases for his own political purposes, campaigning to raise money for his legal defense, and has turned his appearances in court into opportunities to cast doubt on the integrity of the legal system.

U.S. District Judge Tanya Chutkan, who is overseeing the federal Jan. 6 trial, [imposed a gag order](#) on him to prevent him from intimidating witnesses. She noted that Mr. Trump's defense [lawyers did not contradict](#) testimony "that when defendant has publicly attacked individuals, including on matters related to this case, those individuals are consequently threatened and harassed." The leadership of the Republican Party has been silent.

With loyalists now in control of the Republican National Committee and his daughter-in-law, Lara Trump, in line to become its co-chair, the party may soon bend to [Mr. Trump's insistence that the party pay his legal bills](#). His campaign spent roughly [\\$50 million on lawyers](#) last year, and those expenses are mounting as the trial dates approach. One prominent Republican, Henry Barbour, has sponsored resolutions [barring the committee from doing so](#), but he conceded that the effort can do little more than just make a point.

Mr. Trump has also taken over the party's state-level machinery. This has allowed him to rewrite the rules of the Republican primary process and add winner-take-all contests, which work in his favor. That is the kind of advantage that political parties normally give incumbents. But in the process, he has divided some [state parties into factions](#), some of which no longer speak to each other. Democrats may see the dysfunction and bickering among Republicans as an advantage. But it also means that for Democrats, even state and local races turn into ones against Mr. Trump. Rather than competing on the merits of policy or ideology, they find themselves running against candidates without coherent positions other than their loyalty to Trumpism.

Republican voters may soon no longer have a choice about their nominee; their only choice is whether to support someone who would do to the country what he has already done to his party.

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