

IDEAS

Republicans Back Trump Because of the Insurrection, Not Despite It

The former president's ruthlessness remains central to his appeal.

By David A. Graham



Brendan Smialowski / AFP / Getty

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America as a whole has had enough of Donald Trump. Voters hold him responsible for the January 6 insurrection, they believe the Senate should have convicted him for his role, and they want him to leave national politics. But the Republican Party is another country, and they do things differently there. Its rank-and-file members didn't support impeachment, don't want Trump punished, and prefer him over any other potential candidate for president in 2024.

How can it be that Democrats and Republicans see the former president in such divergent ways? One common answer is that, thanks to information bubbles, they're looking at different sets of facts; conservative outlets buried the impeachment hearings compared with other outlets' coverage. Democrats and independents are still outraged, while Republicans have forgiven and forgotten.

But maybe that's wrong, and Republicans are backing Trump not in spite of the insurrection but because of it. Many Republican voters supported Trump in 2016 and 2020 not out of particular policy affinities but because they saw him as someone who would actually fight for their vision of American culture, doing whatever it took to win. Trump's frantic attempt to overturn the election didn't work, but it was just the sort of furious effort his supporters wanted. Why would they object now?

Recent opinion polls have shown overall support for convicting Trump in the upper 50s—in other words, almost exactly mirroring the 57 out of 100 senators who voted to convict him. (Conviction would have required 67 votes.) Yet Republicans disagree. In a Quinnipiac poll released Monday, 89 percent of GOP respondents opposed conviction. Three-quarters said they want to see Trump play a major role in the party going forward.

David A. Graham: Trump's coup attempt didn't start on January 6

Morning Consult, in a poll released Tuesday, found that just 59 percent of Republicans want him to play a major role in the party, but 54 percent back him as the party's candidate for president in 2024—up from 42 percent in the days just after the insurrection, and even with where he stood in late November in the same poll. (Among other potential candidates, only former Vice President Mike Pence, at 12 percent, reaches double digits.) That's more support than Trump drew in the 2016 Republican primary, before four disastrous years that culminated in the attempted coup.

While the former president's protracted attempt to overturn the election confirmed for the majority of Americans that Trump was unfit for office, it proved to the majority of Republicans that he really would take drastic action to stand up for their beliefs.

The events of January 6 were the actions of only a few thousand of the most rabid Trump supporters, and in the days immediately afterward, some observers, including Trump allies, were quick to point out that they did not represent the mass of Trump faithful. But in the weeks since, the two factions have converged. During the Senate hearings, Trump's attorneys argued that his impeachment was somehow a slap in the face of the 74 million Americans who'd voted for him to be reelected. Conflating the two groups might seem like a cynical ploy and unfair to those who merely voted for Trump, if not for the fact that polling shows this larger group has mostly come to accept and even applaud the insurrection.

Lining up behind a man who fomented this assault on the country's government would require a sort of political nihilism—and in fact such a thing is common among Republicans. Two-thirds of Trump voters said that the 2016 election was “the last chance to stop America's decline.” In September, 83 percent of Republicans in a YouGov poll said the American way of life was under threat. Driving through eastern North Carolina this summer, I saw billboards that read SAVE AMERICA. VOTE REPUBLICAN.

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Trump's incessant false claims since November 3 that the election had been stolen only reinforced this apocalyptic thinking, by seeming to confirm that what rightly belonged to Trump and his backers had already been seized from them. A group of voters that believes the fate of the country sits in the balance is a group that will be willing to countenance attacking the bedrock of the nation—democratic elections and peaceful transfers of power—in order to defend it. They will also be more likely to subscribe to far-flung conspiracy theories like QAnon, which offers the illusory hope that there is a shadowy plan afoot that will save the country from whatever they perceive as a threat.

The idea that Republicans are embracing Trump because of the insurrection sits uneasily with the growing popularity of conspiracy theories and denialism about what happened on January 6. But while these are not reconcilable, they don't have to be reconciled. As Thomas Edsall recently wrote, many people who buy into conspiracy theories believe in multiple, mutually incompatible theories. Hence someone could believe that the election was stolen, that the riot was righteous, and also that “antifa” was responsible for fomenting violence.

The notion that antifa was behind the insurrection, with which Trump's lawyers flirted during the Senate hearings, serves another purpose. The invocation of antifa is an effort to convince voters who backed or are sympathetic to Trump that however bad he might be, the other side is more of a threat, from which he's keeping his supporters safe. (The former president's attorneys pointed out that a self-described liberal activist was arrested and charged over the events at the Capitol; that person seems to not be a member of any antifa group, nor does his presence show he organized them.)

Not all Republicans are willing to accept or even defend the insurrection. Seven Republican senators voted to convict Trump. (Many are now facing censure from GOP groups at home.) Others, like Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, tried to have it both ways, by blasting Trump's conduct but voting against conviction on a (rather unconvincing) constitutional technicality.

But politicians' careers depend on being able to see where the party's voters are. The senior senator from South Carolina is a good case. His embrace of Trump occasioned scores of "What happened to Lindsey Graham?" inquiries, but Graham has a good nose for where Republican voters are. When it seemed like GOP voters wanted a stiff-spined statesman, he emulated John McCain. When Trump took over, he became a sycophantic Trump backer.

Trump's loss hasn't broken the bond. Graham helped Trump's election-theft effort, placing a call to the Georgia secretary of state in which Graham allegedly pressured him to help overturn the election. Graham emerged as a defender of the president during last week's impeachment trial, and is now warning that Republicans will impeach Vice President Kamala Harris for supporting Black Lives Matter protests if they take the majority. (Never mind that the BLM/January 6 analogy is nonsense, or his implication that Republicans are powerless to stop themselves from taking actions they think are bad.)

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While this sort of positioning can help Republicans in primary elections, and will not harm them in red states like South Carolina, it is probably bad for the GOP in swing states and in national elections. Being forced to choose between a militant base and a horrified broader populace places politicians in an untenable spot. Trump twice lost the popular vote for the presidency, and under him the GOP lost control of the White House, the House of Representatives, and the Senate. Nonetheless, the imperative to appeal to core Republican voters gives us Representative Jim Jordan insisting that "cancel culture" is the most important issue facing the country, even as barely half the country has heard of the concept.

Even as Republican support for Trump remains strong and even rebounds, the former

president has been unusually quiet since Twitter banned him on January 8. His silence is confounding: While his social-media accounts were a handy shortcut to the public, Trump had no problem getting media attention for decades before he first logged on. Even today, if he wanted to give an interview, practically any journalist would take his call. Instead, Trump has been restrained, even greeting his acquittal with just a written statement. One theory for the reticence is that Trump was concerned that speaking publicly might worsen his prospects in the Senate trial or in later criminal proceedings, but Trump has almost never acted with this kind of prudence about potential legal exposure.

In any case, he has now started venturing out. Tuesday evening, he issued a seething statement striking back at McConnell for his criticism. The statement is harsh (and was reportedly harsher in an earlier draft), though it has none of the terse zest of his tweets. Most Americans will not greet a Trump finding his voice once more kindly—but these polls show Republicans will be delighted.

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