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If Trump loses

What do Trumpists do after Trump? They won't engage in traditional political action — we should be prepared for the worst

President Trump may continue to dominate the news, but he's having an awfully hard time persuading the public of anything. He rails at governors who imposed strict lockdown orders to deal with the coronavirus pandemic, yet those governors have become far more popular than he is. He urges us all to resume normal economic and social activity, yet pollsshow most Americans still wary and in no hurry to rush out to share each other's droplets. He cries that voting by mail is fraudulent, yet state after state — including many run by Republicans — is expanding access to mail voting.

You know what's coming next: But his base! Those loyal Trump fans, the ones who watch Fox News religiously, proudly don their MAGA gear, go to his rallies and believe everything he says. Nothing will diminish the fervency of their support for him, right?

That is undoubtedly true. And it raises this question: What will those people do if Trump loses in November? What happens to a cult of personality when the personality is forced by the electorate to leave?

We have no recent precedent that could help us predict. Presidents who obtain anything like the kind of worship Trump enjoys from within their own party tend to win two terms, then depart in the glow of strong approval ratings. Those who lose a bid for re-election (a group that in the last hundred years includes only George H.W. Bush, Jimmy Carter, and Gerald Ford) have had no cultists to mourn their defeat.

Imagining 4 November 2020

The typical path for any defeated candidate's supporters — moving from denial to anger to acceptance — may not work the same way for Trumpists, because of the instruction he has given them in understanding the world in which we all live. It's a picture of

institutional corruption, the necessary rejection of norms, rules and laws; and the fundamental idea that any outcome you don't like is illegitimate by definition.

Trump's new obsession with mail voting is a good illustration. In truth, all the evidence suggests that absentee ballot fraud is exceedingly rare and in general mail balloting advantages neither Democrats nor Republicans. But in an election in which there will be more ballots cast by mail than ever before, Trump continues to insist that if there are significant numbers of mail ballots then the election is fraudulent, already predicting that this 'will be the greatest Rigged Election in history.'

So if you're a Trumpist but Trump has permanently retreated to Mar-a-Lago, what would be the point of engaging in traditional political action?

Now let's imagine it's Wednesday, 4 November. Joe Biden has won the election and declared victory. The most die-hard Trumpists — let's call it 10 or 20 per cent of the public — are gripped not just by disappointment but by rage. Because Biden won, they know the election was stolen. Not only will they see it as history's greatest moment of injustice but as a direct threat to themselves, since they know that when Democrats take over they're going to become a target for all manner of oppression.

For most Trump voters, who were Republicans before he came along and will be afterward, the immediate anger will fade. Many of their leaders will begin saying they never liked Trump anyway, as they try to distance themselves from his failure, determine the course of the Republican Party's future, and fashion a place for themselves in it.

What would Trumpists do after Trump?

But the Trumpists will see little role for themselves in that process. They never had a policy agenda to unite around, one that could be easily championed by another politician. Sure, there were some things they wanted (mostly on immigration), but they aren't going to wait on line for hours to rally for upper-income tax cuts and environmental deregulation. It was Trump they loved, in all his crude, hateful glory. No future campaign, no policy fight will make them feel the way Trump did. They could pour their energies into the anti-Biden movement, the next iteration of the Tea Party. But having tasted the ecstatic glory of Trumpism, will that really have much appeal?

They've been convinced that the system is inherently corrupt, yet there is no programme they advocate to reform it. There isn't a hypothetical set

of rules you could institute that would make the system what they want it to be. It's corrupt and always will be, they're convinced, so the only acceptable state of affairs is for someone with Trump's majestic power to take temporary control of all its corrupt means and force it to serve his own ends. When he's gone, it goes right back to what it was before.

So if you're a Trumpist but Trump has permanently retreated to Mar-a-Lago, what would be the point of engaging in traditional political action? Are you going to knock doors for some pale imitation of Trump, let alone the Marco Rubio or Nikki Haley types who will be running for president in 2024? What's even the point of voting?

Because Trump is so unique, he is likely to leave his fans uniquely bereft.

That may be the most serious danger the Republican Party faces post-Trump. They could decide to put this horrifying period behind them, raise up more mainstream leaders and construct an appeal that reaches beyond their shrinking base. But as they do so, a significant chunk of their voters may just drop out, seeing nothing in Republicans worth supporting.

The Republicans' future

We should also be prepared for the possibility of a spasm of violence after the election. If you've spent years nodding your head as Trump and others tell you that the white man is being targeted by sinister forces that are literally out to destroy everything you believe in, and then Trump is defeated, you may conclude that politics is no longer a viable path to save the country and violent revolution is the only alternative. As private citizen Trump tweets out all his bitterness and Democrats triumphantly take the reins of power, we could see more mass shootings and attempts to trigger a civil war.

Perhaps we'll be lucky enough to avoid that kind of reaction. And it's possible that Trump has so altered the Republican Party that it will continue on in his image; when a QAnon conspiracy loon wins the party's nomination for a US Senate seat in Oregon, it's tempting to conclude that the GOP has become so deranged that even Trump's defeat will not be enough to shock it back to sanity.

But especially if this November's election gives Democrats not only the White House but control of the Senate and wins at the state level, the GOP establishment will be highly motivated to reject Trumpism and head toward a future where they can assemble a majority in a changing America. For the Trump cultists, that will be proof that there's no point

in participating.

Because Trump is so unique, he is likely to leave his fans uniquely bereft. Devotees of Ronald Reagan or Barack Obama might not find another figure as charismatic as the president they revered, but each had a vision of progress they left behind, one that could be carried by others. Trumpism is just about Trump, and without him, nothing will remain. We can't know for sure what his superfans will do in that post-Trump world, but his party should be very worried.

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