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Doomed to fail?

Donald Trump's return to the White House promises a powerful presidency, but can his influence hold as internal divisions grow?

When Donald Trump re-enters the White House on 20 January, he will be in a considerably more powerful position than he was when he first became president. In 2017, as in 2025, Trump's Republican Party enjoyed a 'trifecta' of power — control of the presidency and both houses of Congress. But in 2017, Trump – who lacked a certain degree of legitimacy on account of having lost the popular vote – faced considerable opposition from within his own party, as well as from outraged Democrats who organised the *#Resistance* movement against him. This meant that in Trump's first term, Republicans were unable to achieve much of their legislative agenda even before they lost majority control of the House of Representatives in the 2018 midterm elections.

But this time around, Trump unified the Republican Party around him and won a near-majority of the popular vote, while Democrats, reeling from the unanticipated magnitude of their defeat, are divided and demoralised. Does this mean that Republicans can now pass their most ambitious proposals into law? To what extent can (or should) the Democratic minority in Congress cooperate with them? And, finally, how long will Republican unity last?

Willingness to cooperate on some issues

Early indications suggest that considerable numbers of Democrats are open to the possibility of voting with Republicans, at least on certain issues. For example, on 7 January, the House passed the Laken Riley Act – a bill that would require the detention of any undocumented immigrant charged with theft or burglary – with the support of all voting Republicans and 48 Democrats (while 159 voted against). In the Senate, a number of Democrats (including Pennsylvania's John Fetterman and Arizona's Ruben Gallego) have declared their support for the bill.

Many Democrats believe that their election defeats in November resulted from public backlash against their perceived failings and unpopular positions on issues including immigration, inflation, crime and public disorder, and race and gender radicalism. Voting with Republicans on bills dealing with these issues in a practical way can, they believe, help realign the Democratic brand with mainstream public opinion — and particularly with working-class voters of all races who have become increasingly alienated from left-wing cultural ideology. Representative Jared Moskowitz, a Democrat from Florida, told *Punchbowl News* that the increase in Democratic support for the Laken Riley Act was a response to the election results: 'I don't think the American people want extremism, but they do want changes at the border', he said. 'On some of these issues, we were to the left of the American people.'

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Democratic legislators have also told reporters that they're open to working with Republicans on bread-and-butter issues that include bringing down the cost of living, tax reform and perhaps the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE)'s effort to reduce wasteful government spending. Even some progressives have talked about cooperating with the administration on policies that would benefit working-class Americans, such as Trump's plan to cap credit card interest rates. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, perhaps the best-known progressive legislator in the country, has stated that she believes Democrats sometimes lose elections 'because we're reflexively anti-Republican, and that we don't lean into an ambitious vision for working-class Americans strongly enough.'

But such quotes may overstate the willingness of both parties to work with each other on more than a handful of relatively uncontroversial measures. American politics has become increasingly tribal since Trump's first term, and large numbers of partisans in both parties regard compromise with the opposing side as akin to treason. This is why no one envies Mike Johnson, the Republican from Louisiana who was re-elected as Speaker of the House on 3 January. The Republicans hold only a 219-215 majority in the chamber, the narrowest seat margin in nearly a century — and that majority will become even narrower in the coming weeks when two of their members will leave to take appointments in the new administration. It's worth pointing out that even though Johnson

was re-elected on the first ballot, he had zero votes to spare, making him the first speaker candidate in 112 years to be elected without a single vote beyond the bare minimum.

Republican unity?

Johnson is widely considered to be destined for failure, not only because the close vote indicates the weakness of his support within his caucus, but also because Republicans will have to maintain near-perfect unity in the House if they are to pass bills without Democratic assistance. That would be an extremely difficult feat to achieve on a regular basis even if the Republicans were in perfect ideological alignment, when in fact they are more divided than they have been in decades.

Republican presidents, starting with Ronald Reagan, once benefited from a unified conservative movement that was able to subordinate its disagreements to the larger goal of winning the Cold War. Conservatism today is not a unified movement so much as a riot of competing factions. Populists, libertarians, nationalists, Evangelicals, Silicon Valley tech bros, Wall Street deficit hawks, Catholic integralists, barstool conservatives, isolationists, neo-imperialists, QAnon conspiracists and more — they are united only by shared loyalty to Trump and hatred of the left. A preview of intra-conservative hostilities to come erupted in mid-January when Steve Bannon, Trump's former chief strategist, attacked Elon Musk, the co-leader of Trump's DOGE initiative, largely over disagreements about the role of high-skilled immigration via the H-1B visa program.

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These hostilities within the conservative movement will reveal themselves in fights within the Republicans' congressional caucus on a multitude of issues, few of which have even reached public awareness yet. Just as an example, Republicans once were largely united in opposing Democratic plans to increase the number of electric vehicles (EVs) on American roads — but that was before EV magnate Musk went MAGA and before Biden-era legislation like the Inflation Reduction Act led to the creation of EV factories in strongly Republican states like Kentucky, South Carolina and Tennessee. How will Republican legislators from those states respond to plans to kill what by now have become some of their top job providers?

The problems of presiding over a deeply-divided, narrow-margin majority will bedevil Speaker Johnson at every turn. And what will happen when he doesn't have the votes on must-pass legislation like raising the debt ceiling, funding the government or extending the Trump tax cuts? Perhaps he could cut a deal with Democrats to gain enough votes for passage — but that likely would cost him even more Republican votes and spark a rebellion that could oust him from the speakership.

And even these dire scenarios don't take into account the possibility that Trump may entirely upend American politics as we know it. Some of Trump's proposed early actions – mass deportations, arresting journalists and political opponents, firing thousands of career civil servants, ending birthright citizenship – likely would produce such intense opposition from Democrats (and even some Republicans) as to snuff out any possibility of bipartisan cooperation. And what would happen if the administration then were to move toward genuine authoritarianism — defying court orders, using the Insurrection Act as a pretext to send the military into American cities to suppress protests? The comparative bipartisanship of the present moment may turn out to be very short-lived indeed.

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