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# The king of the Republicans

## Trump has shattered long-held norms by intervening heavily in the Republican midterm primaries, allowing him to tighten his grip on the party

At regular intervals, political pundits predict that Donald Trump's supporters are finally about to turn against him and the Republican Party will return to what it was before Trump. But they are wrong. Nothing has dented the loyalty of Trump's political base — not his defeat in the 2020 presidential election, not his lying about it having been stolen, and not even his incitement of the assault on the US Capitol on 6 January 2021.

Trump is still, by far, the most popular figure in the Republican Party. His endorsement of J. D. Vance in the Ohio Republican senatorial primary elevated the 'Hillbilly Elegy' author from a likely fourth-place finish to victory. As one Ohio voter told a reporter, 'If Trump supports Vance, then we know he will be good.'

Trump's unparalleled dominance over the party, even out of office, has meant that very few Republican politicians dare to challenge him in any way. Other Republican primary elections this spring will confirm his kingmaker status, and the likely Republican triumph in the midterm elections this fall will make it all but inevitable that he will be the party's 2024 presidential nominee.

## An energised Republican base

Midterm elections historically have been bad for the incumbent president's party. Since World War II, the average midterm election has resulted in a loss of 26 House seats for the president's party — and Republicans only need to gain five seats to assume a majority in the 435-seat chamber.

Republicans are energised by this prospect as well as by other factors that bid to make this a difficult cycle for Democrats. These include inflation, rising levels of violent crime, the chaotic situation at the southern border,

and perceived progressive overreach on issues of race and sexuality, all of which have combined to produce President Joe Biden's near-record low approval ratings. Most polls show that Republican voters are more motivated than Democrats as the midterms approach. The vast majority of Republicans agree with Trump's unsubstantiated claims that the 2020 presidential election was fraudulent and see this election as a chance for payback.

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All of these dynamics are playing out as Trump prepares to visit Pennsylvania for a rally before the state's Republican primary elections on 17 May. In this race, as in many others around the country, Trump had the leading Republican senatorial candidates audition for his endorsement. The two front-runners, TV doctor Mehmet Oz and hedge fund executive David McCormick, made supplicatory visits to Trump at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida and proclaimed their undying loyalty to all things Trumpian. In the end, like the all-powerful boss he played on his reality-television show 'The Apprentice,' Trump gave the nod to Oz and told McCormick that he was, in effect, fired.

## A GOP civil war?

People who are not familiar with the American political process may not understand how Trump has shattered long-held norms by inserting himself into races up and down the ballot all around the country. Never before in living memory has any defeated US president demanded that candidates of his party running for election pledge their loyalty to him, nor put his personal seal of approval on candidates in competitive primaries.

Party leaders almost never intervene in such races for fear of creating internal divisions that may damage the winning candidate's chances in the general election. Trump, however, has seized the opportunity to take revenge on officials who thwarted his efforts to overturn the 2020 presidential election, as well as to enforce party allegiance toward himself and his false charges of election fraud. And although his coup attempt failed, it's entirely possible that he may achieve better results next time if Republicans who believe the 'big lie' are in a position to determine the outcome of the 2024 election.

There is much talk among political observers that Trump's dominance of

the party may be threatened if his endorsed candidates fail to win their primaries, with some even going so far as to warn of potential for a civil war within the party. But this is nonsense, since nearly all of the candidates who didn't receive Trump's endorsement are still presenting themselves as Trump loyalists. There is no significant faction of Republican candidates or officeholders who are openly opposed to Trump or his politics, although some express distaste for both behind closed doors.

## The GOP is still Trump's party

In Pennsylvania, for example, Oz and McCormick have essentially the same populist, pro-Trump message and issue platform. Both claim to be 'America First' conservatives. Both make evidence-free claims of 'election irregularities.' Both support completing Trump's border wall to keep out immigrants. Each claims he will follow Trump's model of 'standing up to China.' Each presents himself as a Trump-style fighter, a culture warrior who will shun compromise and defeat 'wokeism.' So no matter who wins the primary — and McCormick currently holds a narrow lead over Oz in the polls despite lacking Trump's endorsement — the outcome will still pay homage to Trump.

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Paradoxically, the only way that Trump's dominance can be shaken is if Republican candidates go too far in seeking his approval. The Trumpian attitude entails a willingness to sow social division and damage American institutions. Vance, for one, has called for Trump to fire every civil servant and 'replace them with our people' if he wins a second term. Such extremism plays well in Republican primaries but may repel enough suburban swing voters to cost the party a Senate majority.

And although Trump is more popular than when he was in office, he still has a net unfavorable rating with the public at large. Some polls show Trump to be tied with Biden in a hypothetical 2024 matchup, but even some of his supporters worry that he is too divisive a figure to win reelection. The Supreme Court's apparent decision to overturn the constitutional right to abortion may also reshape electoral dynamics in unpredictable ways.

But, for now, the GOP is Donald Trump's party. Its brand is still his slogan: Make America Great Again. And Republicans are increasingly confident that the future will be MAGA, in 2022 and 2024 and beyond.



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