

# [***What's in a name? A Trump embraces ex-president's approach in helping lead Republican Party***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6C33-24C1-JC5B-G2YR-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

WASHINGTON — The direction of the Republican National Committee is clear from the last name of its new second-in-command: Trump.

“My No. 1 goal is making sure that Donald Trump is the 47th president,” said [*RNC co-chair Lara Trump*](https://apnews.com/article/republican-national-committee-trump-whatley-legal-fees-53402f8e8ac845db3cf4ab82c882ea74) in an interview with The Associated Press.

It’s one more step in solidifying Trump's hold over the Republican Party. The daughter-in-law of the former president has wasted no time in rebranding the typically staid committee in Trump’s image, embracing her own version of his pugilistic ***politics*** and brash management style in ways that affirm his sway over the Republican establishment.

The RNC has [*fired dozens of longtime staffers*](https://apnews.com/article/republican-national-committee-trump-staffing-cuts-46bc8afcc152aecfd471161a59b74005) and sought alliances with election deniers, conspiracy theorists and alt-right advocates the party had previously kept at arm’s length. Lara Trump, who is married to Trump's third child, Eric, has been an outspoken defender of the former president and has not hesitated to blast his foes, promising four years of “scorched earth” political retribution if he wins the election. And she's led a steep increase in fundraising, a particularly acute need for Trump's election bid because his political fundraising operations have spent tens of millions of dollars in legal fees to defend him in criminal and civil cases.

Trump supporters say Lara Trump is breathing new life into the party, and say her charisma and dogged work ethic make her an ideal choice to serve as its champion.

But her installation has raised concerns among some Republicans who say the RNC is being run in ways that could harm its mandate to help all its candidates up and down the ballot. By prioritizing the presidential campaign, they said, the RNC might not be able to dedicate the necessary resources to assist other office seekers.

“It kind of suggests an expectation of complete, unabashed and, perhaps, a blind loyalty to the candidate,” said Marc Racicot, a former RNC chair who served as Montana's governor for eight years.

Conceding that she is confronting a “big, big learning curve,” Lara Trump told the AP she has the background to succeed, having worked on both of Trump's previous presidential campaigns.

“You’d be hard pressed to find someone who has had as much political experience as I have in any campaign right now, and that’s kind of unique to be able to say," she said.

She is also aware that, as a Trump, she makes a particularly tempting political target.

“Certainly," she said, “I am in the crosshairs for a lot of people given this position.”

**THE NEW RNC**

Lara Trump became co-chair in March, culminating efforts by Trump and his allies to shake up the RNC, the party’s governing body.

Trump and other members of his “Make America Great Again” movement had grown disenchanted with the RNC’s leadership, blaming the organization for the party’s lackluster performances in 2018, 2020 and 2022. They were also concerned about the RNC’s financial position.

They succeeded in replacing its chair of eight years, Ronna McDaniel, with Michael Whatley, a fervent Trump supporter and leader of North Carolina’s GOP. Lara Trump, a fellow North Carolinian, was tapped to be Whatley’s No. 2. The chair runs the party’s day-to-day operations. The co-chair, meanwhile, generally focuses on raising money and boosting morale.

As they took the reins, Lara Trump and Whatley promised to enact sweeping changes. And they did: They merged the GOP and the Trump campaign into a single operation.

Brian Hughes, a spokesman for the Trump campaign, told the AP the strategy was essential to ensuring Republican victories in November.

“By joining the two organizations together, we are all rolling in the same direction to get President Trump elected, as well as to increase the majority of the House and the Senate," he said.

Lara Trump said party and campaign staff are “all part of organizing the ground game, working on day-to-day operations.”

She appears to have already helped turn around the committee’s anemic fundraising operation. Republicans say she is a sought-after speaker on the fundraising circuit and has helped excite donors.

Whatley, the RNC’s chair, told the AP that Lara Trump was among the party’s “most important assets.”

“My friend Lara has the ability to raise money, inspire our grassroots and deliver our message extremely effectively,” he said.

The RNC brought in $76 million in April and $65.6 million in March — up from just $10.6 million in February. The increase also reflects changes in donation limits after Trump, in March, became the party’s presumptive nominee. The DNC, by comparison, raised far less in April, [*$51 million,*](https://apnews.com/article/fundraising-april-2024-biden-trump-6cf5f83fd9579829554c33dbb9aeb186) down from $72 million in March.

The RNC’s ability to pump money into the election could prove critical to Trump’s chances because he needs money. The former president is facing dozens of federal and state criminal charges over his alleged efforts to overturn the 2020 election and retention of classified documents. He is currently on trial in New York, accused of making hush money payments to bury allegations of extramarital affairs. His political action committee, Save America, presidential campaign and other fundraising organizations [*have spent at least $76.7 million on legal fees*](https://apnews.com/article/trump-spent-millions-legal-fees-2024-presidential-campaign-3384cbfc2df69d3e97ba9e47c2384312) over the last two years.

The donation button on the RNC webpage automatically redirects to Trump’s campaign site, where 90% of every donation goes to his reelection efforts and the remaining 10% goes to other committee business.

The RNC is “a very big fundraising arm,” said Seth Masket, a political science professor at the University of Denver. “He’s trying to get donors to help cover his legal fees, pay for his lawyers, pay for some of the fines he owes.”

The Trump campaign says money donated to the RNC will not be directed toward Trump’s legal defense.

**CONCERNS ABOUT STRATEGY**

Party insiders and former RNC staffers, including those swept out in recent months, say the committee is lagging in building a county-by-county operation that helps turn out the vote. Former staffers said they worry the RNC is focusing too much on Trump's race, putting down-ballot candidates in a tough spot.

Lara Trump brushed off such critiques, saying the restructuring will ensure the RNC is supporting candidates in state and local races.

“It would be very silly of me to assume that only having the presidency would be able to achieve the goals of the Republican Party,” she said. “Obviously, that requires majorities in Congress, and that’s our goal.”

To help bolster turnout, she is embracing conservative groups that espouse fringe beliefs.

She speaks highly of Scott Presler, an election denier who chaired the group Gays For Trump and who described the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection as “the largest civil rights protest in American history.” Lara Trump calls him a “grassroots hero,” and said in March that she hoped to hire him to help run the RNC’s “legal ballot harvesting” initiative, but later said the RNC would partner with his group, Early Vote Action, instead.

Another organization she said she wants to collaborate with is led by Charlie Kirk, a right-wing student organizer who leads Turning Point USA. Kirk has questioned whether Black pilots are qualified to fly and derided gymnast Simone Biles after she withdrew from the 2020 Olympics. His group has raised roughly a quarter-billion dollars since 2016 — enriching Kirk — but has generally [*struggled to help Republicans win elections*](https://apnews.com/article/election-2024-trump-turning-point-maga-d08a98e439fa4e902cb756d7e35153db).

“No prior political candidate has inspired grassroots supporters to start their own groups and initiatives like Donald J. Trump and it’s why we have seen great expansion in the Republican Party," Lara Trump said, adding the RNC would work with groups run by Presler, Kirk and others “in whatever way we legally can.”

**MAIL-IN BALLOTS**

She is also hoping to encourage Republicans to adopt an election tactic that Trump and many of his allies view with suspicion: [*mail-in voting*](https://apnews.com/article/trump-republicans-rnc-mailed-ballots-voting-759f2277e00532dedaaa93e17f7329a1). The former president has long criticized the voting method as being rife with fraud — an [*unfounded*](https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-election-2020-ap-fact-check-elections-voting-fraud-and-irregularities-8c5db90960815f91f39fe115579570b4) assertion. Sizable contingents of voters rely on this method, and Lara Trump sees value in making it as easy as possible for Trump supporters to cast their ballots.

She said she supported a nationwide policy of not counting any ballots after Election Day but declined to go into specifics, adding it wasn’t her area of “expertise.”

That strategy is illegal. States set their own election laws, and most rely on postmarks to determine if a vote was cast in time. That’s because it can take days — even weeks — for ballots cast on or before Election Day to arrive in the mail.

Stephen Richer, a Republican who runs elections in Maricopa County, Arizona, said under state law every legal ballot must be counted. He also said Lara Trump’s policy would have hurt Trump in 2020: He had an edge over Biden in ballots that arrived after Election Day.

“That’s not the law as we understand it and as it has been practiced for many, many, many, many elections in Arizona,” he said.

Lara Trump is no stranger to controversy over counting ballots. In 2020, as the results of the presidential election rolled in, the Trump campaign fired off frantic fundraising missives to supporters, claiming they were the victims of fraud and the election was being stolen.

In one email, Lara Trump told supporters the campaign will just “keep fighting.”

Two months later, Lara Trump was onstage with the then-president and his family at the Jan. 6 rally that preceded the Capitol riot.

Richer said voter fraud and voter suppression are at an all-time low, and questioned the motivations for the Trumps’ insistence that the vote count had been rigged.

“Which is worse, a person who really believes some of these things or the person who knows it’s all nonsensical and goes along with it anyways?" he said. “I’m not sure.”

**ON THE TALK SHOW CIRCUIT**

Lara Trump is not the first presidential relative to be tapped to help lead the RNC. Maureen Reagan, daughter of then-President Ronald Reagan, was named co-chair in 1987 amid nepotism concerns.

But unlike Maureen Reagan, who kept her head down and spent her time attending party meetings and staying out of the headlines, Lara Trump has embraced her more public role. A communications major at North Carolina State University, she had dreamed of becoming a sportscaster, and dabbled in modeling before working as a producer on a TV news show.

She married Eric Trump in 2014 at Mar-a-Lago, the former president’s estate and club in Florida.

Lara Trump has focused on reaching Trump voters through appearances on Fox News, smaller conservative outlets and podcasts, including her own. Such appearances have not always gone smoothly and some of her starkest rhetoric — while appealing to Trump supporters — could alienate moderate Republicans whose votes will count in November.

She was recently lambasted on social media and by a late-night comic for a gaffe during an appearance on Newsmax, a conservative cable channel, in which she asserted the RNC had filed lawsuits in “81 states.”

The RNC co-chair was also roasted after releasing a cover of Tom Petty’s “I Won’t Back Down," and Democrats in March used artificial intelligence to create a parody track after she released an original song, “Anything is Possible.”

“Oh Lara, Lara,” the AI voice croons, “what have you done, the party’s fallin’ down, it’s no longer fun.”

**SCORCHED EARTH**

Lara Trump is painting a startling picture of what a second Trump term might look like.

At a conservative conference last month, she said Trump would punish his political enemies if he retakes the White House. It will be, she said, “four years of scorched earth," referencing the wartime strategy of destroying everything that could help an enemy, including food and water.

Such stark language has been known to backfire, said John J. Pitney, a professor of American ***politics*** at Claremont McKenna College.

“It fires up the Trumpist base, but it doesn’t sound so good to that sliver of moderate voters that Trump is going to need,” he said.

Supporters described Lara Trump as loyal, a staunch conservative committed to her family. A mother of two, a fitness buff and a fierce advocate for rescue dogs.

“I’m a kind-hearted person,” she said. “I continue to maintain values with which I was raised.”

But online, on television and on her podcast she sometimes uses aggressive and incendiary language, including describing political foes as “deranged” and “lunatics.”

When asked about her tone, Lara Trump laughed.

“Obviously some of it is a bit of showmanship for sure,” she said. “I have a fun time.”

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Associated Press writers Dan Merica and Michael Biesecker contributed to this report.

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