

# [***Senate GOP offers cautious embrace of Trump amid fears over his electability***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B5T-D6C1-JBSS-S033-00000-00&context=1516831)

CNN Wire

January 24, 2024 Wednesday 9:52 PM GMT

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**Length:** 1307 words

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**Dateline:** (CNN)

**Body**

Sen. John Cornyn has long been skeptical about Donald Trump's 2024 chances, telling reporters last June that the former president's "basic problem" is that he "hasn't yet figured out how to expand his appeal beyond his base" - something he said is a recipe for a general election loss.

On Tuesday night, the Texas Republican endorsed Trump and called for GOP unity [*after the New Hampshire primary*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/23/politics/takeaways-new-hampshire-primary/index.html). But on Wednesday morning, Cornyn's concern about Trump's electability remained unchanged.

"After a primary there needs to be a broader appeal than just to primary voters," Cornyn told CNN. "You can't win with just your own base."

As Republicans steadily fall in line behind Trump as their party's likely standard bearer, there are deep-seated reservations about his polarizing candidacy - particularly within the Senate GOP. Many still have fresh memories of the 2021 Capitol attack and had hoped he wouldn't return to the national scene. Others blame him for their 2022 failure to take back the majority in the midterms and had stayed quiet as the 2024 presidential primary unfolded.

Yet now Trump is on a glide path to the nomination and remains the most dominant force in GOP ***politics*** - something they're trying to reconcile as they fear that his penchant for controversy [*and four criminal indictments*](https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2023/07/politics/trump-indictments-criminal-cases/#:~:text=Appeals-,Summary,Nauta%20have%20pleaded%20not%20guilty.) will sink their chances at keeping the House and taking back the Senate.

"For him to win the general election, he's got to start running a general election campaign, which will mean his message is going to have to appeal to those independent voters and moderate Republicans," said Senate GOP Whip John Thune, the No. 2 Republican who has yet to endorse Trump but said he would back the eventual nominee.

[*CNN's exit poll of New Hampshire's GOP primary*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/23/politics/exit-poll-new-hampshire-primary/index.html) underscores much of that concern. While Trump dominated with GOP voters, winning about three-quarters of them, he struggled with independents and more moderate Granite Staters who voted in the primary - with 64% of undeclared voters backing former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, compared to just 35% for Trump. Nearly 9 in 10 Haley voters in the state said they would not be satisfied if Trump were the nominee.

Trump's performance with that swing voting bloc was a far cry from 2016 when he first burst into presidential ***politics*** - something not lost on many in his party.

Republicans now fear that Trump would put off those types of independent voters who will be essential to winning battleground House and Senate seats - and that could cost them control of Congress.

"Yes," one swing-district House Republican said, when asked if he believes Trump will cost their party the House.

"Twenty percent of GOP voters will not vote for him," the Republican member said. "Independent voters think Biden is weak, but they hate Trump. And Dems - he motivates them to vote."

The concerns come as numerous Republican holdouts have jumped on board with Trump's candidacy following his back-to-back victories in Iowa and New Hampshire, with more expected to soon follow suit. On Tuesday night, Trump picked up endorsements from GOP Sen. Deb Fischer of Nebraska and Rep. Brandon Williams of New York, who represents a swing district carried by President Joe Biden.

Despite Trump's lackluster showing with more moderate voters, a number of Republicans believe that will change in the general election - especially given Biden's poor approval ratings and dissatisfaction with his presidency.

"If you look at the battleground states, people would have to be incompetent not to go after and try and go after the right of center, in our state unaffiliated voters, that's obviously where you would go for it. And that's exactly what Trump's going to do," Sen. Thom Tillis, a North Carolina Republican, told CNN. "The races are not won by the parties. They're won in the middle and I think both campaigns are going to target that."

Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, a staunch Trump supporter, added: "I think when you look at the structural problems of President Biden with the electorate versus that of Trump, I think Trump has a better hand. But there's a long way to go."

Sen. Mike Rounds, a South Dakota Republican who has yet to endorse Trump, said that "other candidates have shown in polls that they would have had a higher percentage of support than the former president. It doesn't mean that he can't win in the next election."

And Fischer, who endorsed Trump on Tuesday night, said: "I think people will pay attention to President Trump and the policies he's going to offer, and they're going to support him for those polices."

Asked if he should moderate, the Nebraska Republican said: "President Trump needs to be who he is."

Yet there are some key Republicans who are keenly aware of who Trump is. That includes Senate GOP Leader Mitch McConnell, whose relationship with Trump soured after he blamed the former president for being responsible for the January 6, 2021, attack.

Asked Tuesday if he will need to endorse Trump if he continues to do well in primaries, McConnell once again refused to take a stand.

"I don't have any announcement to make on the presidential election," McConnell said. "In fact, you all may recall, I've stayed essentially out of it. And when I change my mind about that, I'll let you know."

Sen. Susan Collins of Maine, who was one of the seven Senate Republicans who voted to convict Trump in his impeachment trial on a charge of inciting the January 6 insurrection, went even further, saying she doesn't see herself endorsing Trump - even if he becomes the eventual Republican nominee.

"I do not at this point, no," Collins said Wednesday when asked if she'd eventually offer her endorsement.

Collins also said she supports Haley staying in the race, a position that puts her at odds with Trump allies.

"I'm glad to hear last night that Nikki Haley is determined to stay in. And I think the more people see her for her, particularly since she appears to be the only alternative to Donald Trump right now, the more impressed that they will be," Collins said.

Yet Sen. J.D. Vance of Ohio, a top Trump ally, said that Haley's continued candidacy will only hurt Trump's chances - and the party at large.

"What's going to happen here is that we're going to spend another 30, 50, maybe 100 million dollars attacking Donald Trump, who will be our nominee, weakening him in the process," Vance told CNN. "I think it's a huge mistake, and it will siphon money away from needed things on a failing presidential campaign."

But even those who have been most resistant to Trump are coming to grips with the fact that the movement inside the GOP to stop the former president might be over.

"I think my wing has been wounded for a long time, and I don't know that it's going to be coming back anytime soon," said retiring Sen. Mitt Romney of Utah, who voted to convict Trump in both of his impeachment trials.

Many senators are still grappling with Trump's resurgence within the party after he left Washington in disgrace in 2021. Asked to explain Trump's comeback within the GOP, multiple Republicans pointed to the weakness of Biden and the belief among the GOP base that he is a needed force to "disrupt" Washington.

"You think the grass is greener on the other side, and all of the sudden you get over there, you realize that pasture isn't better, you want to go back to the pasture you were in," said Sen. Markwayne Mullin of Oklahoma.

For Cornyn, he said that he "underestimated the anger voters have in both parties" towards Washington.

"And I think President Trump, in many people's minds, is the answer to that status quo," he said.

CNN's Ted Barrett, Sam Fossum, Kristin Wilson, Haley Talbot and Lauren Fox contributed to this report.

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**Load-Date:** January 24, 2024

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