

# [***Super Tuesday may underline Trump's transformation of the GOP***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BGF-DNH1-DY7V-G1R5-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Heading into Super Tuesday, [*former President Donald Trump*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/president-donald-trump-45) remains on track to potentially win more primaries and caucuses than any previous Republican presidential candidate other than an incumbent.

His performance so far reflects his success at transforming the Republican Party in his image. He's reshaped the GOP into a more blue-collar, populist and pugnacious party, focused more on his volatile blend of resentments against elites and cultural and racial change than the Ronald Reagan-era priorities of smaller government and active global leadership that [*former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/04/politics/nikki-haley-delegates-super-tuesday-dg/index.html) has stressed. The refusal of almost any GOP elected officials to endorse his last remaining rival - despite the qualms some of them hold about the direction Trump is imposing on the party -testifies to their recognition that the former president now commands nearly unquestioned loyalty from a majority of the GOP coalition.

But while the primaries have underscored Trump's grip on the GOP, they have also demonstrated continued vulnerability for him in the areas where he has labored since he first announced his candidacy in 2015 - particularly among the white-collar suburban voters who mostly leaned toward the GOP before his emergence. The early 2024 nominating contests have shown that a substantial minority of Republican-leaning voters remain resistant to Trump's vision. Even while posting such convincing victories, he has struggled with college-educated voters and moderates. Trump has carried only about 40% of independent voters who participated in the three contests where exit or entrance polls of voters have been conducted.

Capturing both strength and weakness, the presidential primaries, as always, have offered important clues about the direction of the party holding them. As Trump nears what could be a crushing performance Tuesday, here's a look at some of the key lessons about the GOP suggested by the results, and patterns of support, from this year's primaries.

The most important message from the primaries is the most straightforward: Trump's coalition is the dominant faction in the GOP. Haley's victory in [*Sunday's low-turnout Washington, DC, primary*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/03/politics/nikki-haley-dc-primary/index.html) will prevent Trump from winning every primary and caucus (as the past four incumbent GOP presidents have done.) But Trump is still faring better than any other Republican who was not an incumbent. (Reagan in 1980, Bob Dole in 1996, George W. Bush in 2000 and Mitt Romney in 2012 all won about 45 contests.)

Veteran GOP pollster Whit Ayres said the primaries have shown that Republican voters are viewing Trump, in effect, as an incumbent president to a greater extent than the other candidates expected. Trump is trying to become the first defeated incumbent to win a rematch four years later against the man who ousted him from the White House since Democrat Grover Cleveland beat Republican Benjamin Harrison in 1892. Trump "is running as a quasi-incumbent," Ayres said. To understand his dominance, Ayres continued, "What we really need are entrance polls and exit polls from the 1892 Democratic coalition for Grover Cleveland. That's the analogy: a former president running again to defeat the guy who beat him."

Chris Wilson, who polled for the super PAC supporting Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis during the primary, likewise said, "Trump's lead in the GOP race at this point" is rooted in "the perception among a large number of GOP primary voters that Trump is effectively our incumbent candidate." None of the other candidates, he said, "found the message that makes them think they should dump their de facto incumbent."

Yet in important ways, Trump is a different candidate than he was in 2016. This time he's much stronger among - and more reliant on - the party's most conservative elements. In his first run, Trump attracted almost exactly the same level of support among voters who described themselves as very conservative, somewhat conservative and moderate, according to a cumulative analysis by Gary Langer of ABC News of all the exit polls conducted that year. This time - in Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina, the three states where exit or entrance polls have been conducted - voters who describe themselves as very conservative have given him a much higher share of their votes than the other two groups; he's lost moderates badly in all three states, never exceeding 28% of the vote among them.

Likewise, Trump is posting huge advantages this year among Republican voters who identify as White evangelical Christians, while facing a much closer split among voters who don't. The gap in his support between evangelicals and everyone else is much wider than it was in 2016.

Education was already the most important dividing line in the 2016 race, with Trump running 12 percentage points better among voters without a degree than those with at least a four-year college education, in the cumulative analysis. That gap, too, is much wider this time: Trump has run at least 25 points better among voters without a degree than those with one in each of the three states that have been polled on Election Day. (There's some preliminary evidence as well that those non-college voters are comprising a larger share of the total vote than they did in 2016.)

"Trump's strength has kind of changed," said Kyle Kondik, managing editor of the political newsletter Sabato's Crystal Ball, which is published by the University of Virginia's Center for ***Politics***. "It's made him a more durable Republican candidate. But it remains to be seen what that means for the general election."

For all Trump's strength, he has faced stubborn resistance from a significant minority of primary voters. Despite his sweep of the early nominating contests, his share of the vote hasn't quite reached the heights of some other primary candidates in both parties. Counting Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina and Michigan, Trump has won a little over three-fifths of the total combined vote so far. That slightly exceeds the share that Reagan won in 1980 and equals the percentage George W. Bush won in 2000, according to results compiled by Northeastern University political scientist William Mayer. But Trump still lags behind the last two candidates who most closely matched his advantages as a quasi-incumbent: vice-presidents George H.W. Bush in 1988 (who hit 68%) and Democrat Al Gore in 2000 (who reached 75%), according to Mayer's tabulation.

Trump's total vote share may approach those heights after Super Tuesday, when six deeply conservative Southern states are among the 15 contests. But the size and consistency of the hold-out coalition behind Haley has surprised many in the GOP. Even with all his advantages, Trump in Iowa only won a little over one-third of voters with at least a four-year college degree. Haley beat him soundly among that group in New Hampshire and South Carolina. No exit poll was conducted in Michigan, but Trump's totals lagged his statewide percentage there too in white-collar places like Oakland, Washtenaw and Kent counties. These trends are likely to continue on Super Tuesday.

Haley's consistent advantage among independents participating in the GOP primaries partly explains that trend, but even a substantial share of college-educated Republicans voted against Trump in the three states where voters were polled on Election Day. Moderates have flocked to Haley in large numbers in the early contests as well.

Yet the clear message of the primaries is that those traditional center-right, often suburban, Republicans now constitute the subordinate minority in a party dominated by Trump's more populist and volatile coalition. This power shift has changed both the party's agenda and its priorities.

The most significant shift is evident on foreign policy. [*When internationalist Dwight Eisenhower beat isolationist Sen. Robert Taft for the 1952 GOP presidential nomination*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/28/politics/gop-foreign-policy-debate-2024/index.html), it marked a lasting turning point in the GOP's internal balance of power. In every Republican presidency over the next six decades, the internationalist forces that supported a robust American role in the world set the course. Trump rejected that consensus when he was elected in 2016, but even during his tenure, Republican internationalists in Congress and his own administration resisted many of his efforts to downplay or abandon traditional alliances.

Now that resistance is crumbling, both in the party's elite and grassroots. A majority of House Republicans last fall voted against providing further aid to Ukraine; so did a majority of Senate Republicans this year. [*The Chicago Council on Global Affairs found last year*](https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/majority-trump-republicans-prefer-united-states-stay-out-world?utm_source=media&utm_campaign=ccs&utm_medium=atlantic) that, for the first time in a half century of polling on American attitudes about foreign policy, a majority of Republicans now say the US would be better off to mostly stay out of global affairs; that view was strongest among the Republicans most sympathetic to Trump.

More than any other prominent Republican, Senate GOP leader Mitch McConnell, who was first elected the year Reagan won his 49-state landslide reelection in 1984, has defended the Reaganite vision of America as the stalwart leader of the free world - the "shining city on a hill." McConnell's announcement last week that he would step aside as Republican leader in November marked an implicit acknowledgement that in Trump's GOP, that Reaganite torch is flickering.

Like McConnell's announcement, the choices by GOP elected officials in the primary contest signal their acknowledgement of the party's direction. The share of GOP elected officials who have endorsed Haley isn't anywhere near as large as her share of the total vote. (Her list of prominent endorsers doesn't extend much beyond New Hampshire Gov. Chris Sununu and two moderate senators who backed her in the past few days, Susan Collins and Lisa Murkowski.) Meanwhile, Republicans are scrambling over each other to bend their knee to Trump.

The long line of GOP elected officials endorsing Trump reflects many factors. He's demolished the standing of his critics - from former Rep. Liz Cheney to DeSantis - among Republican voters, and most in the GOP have grown deeply reluctant to challenge him. Trump's early primary victories, and huge lead in the national primary polls, convinced other Republican officials that opposing him was a suicide mission.

But a deeper factor also explains the imbalance in support among GOP elected officials. Trump has changed the electoral incentives for virtually everyone in the GOP. In the Trump era, hardly anyone in the party running in a competitive state can now rely on as much support from the college-educated voters who once anchored their coalition. That means virtually all Republicans need big turnout and margins among the same blue-collar, non-urban and culturally conservative voters most passionate about Trump. That gives other Republicans a powerful electoral incentive to move in Trump's direction, in tone and substance. "There is no doubt the composition of our base is changing," said Wilson.

The reluctance of other elected GOP officials to cross Trump in the primaries suggests he would face even less internal resistance in a second term than he did in his first. At times in that first term, GOP congressional leaders resisted him, particularly on foreign policy. That seems much less likely now, with staunch Trump loyalist Mike Johnson installed as House speaker and McConnell stepping aside as Senate GOP leader. "No one could make the argument that McConnell or Kevin McCarthy gave Trump any significant pushback," said Jennifer Horn, a former Republican Party chair in New Hampshire who has become a staunch Trump critic. "And they weren't enough. Neither one of them could be loyal enough for him."

As Trump nears a possible knock-out blow on Tuesday[*, the most important unanswered question is what Haley and her voters do in November.*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/06/politics/haley-voters-trump-gop-biden-analysis/index.html) The primaries have shown her coalition is not nearly big enough to deny Trump the nomination. But it is more than big enough to deny him a general election victory. Through Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina, a consistent four-fifths of Haley voters have said they don't think Trump would be fit to serve as president if he's convicted of a crime, according to the entrance and exit polls. In the AP/NORC VoteCast polls, two-thirds of Haley voters in Iowa, three-fourths in New Hampshire and about three-fifths in South Carolina said they would not vote for Trump in a general election.

In practice, it's unlikely that so many Haley voters would actually reject Trump. In the days before the South Carolina primary, almost everyone I spoke with at Haley events disparaged Trump but said they would still vote for him over Biden, whom they viewed as both a failure and too old for the job. Distaste for Biden's record and capacity may severely limit Democrats' ability to convert Republican voters skeptical of Trump into crossover voters for Biden, predicted William Galston, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, who has sparred with the GOP as an adviser to prominent Democrats since the 1980s. "Yes, there is a division" among Republicans, Galston said. "But is it going to manifest itself where it counts, in votes cast [for Biden]? I don't see a lot of evidence for that so far."

Yet Republicans skeptical of Trump have noted that Trump might not be able to survive if even a meaningful fraction of Haley's voters ultimately reject him. With Biden facing plenty of cracks in his own coalition, the independent, center-right, college-educated Republican-leaning voters who flocked to Haley present probably Democrats' best opportunity to find new voters.

"I expect most of those [Haley] voters to 'come home' by November, but the big caveat is that if Donald Trump keeps picking at the scab rather than letting the party heal, he could absolutely hurt himself," said GOP pollster Kristen Soltis Anderson, a CNN political commentator. "You need your party unified behind you to win a general in an era of deep polarization. You can't afford to lose 10%+ to the other side."

One final point is clear as Trump nears his third consecutive GOP nomination: He isn't relinquishing his grip on the party any time soon. Galston noted that since World War II, the GOP has undergone two previous fundamental shifts - when Eisenhower installed internationalism and greater acceptance of the New Deal as the party consensus in 1952, and when Reagan cemented a more aggressive economic, national security and social conservatism in 1980. "Trump is the third great transformer of the Republican Party since the end of the Second World War," Galston said. "And like the previous two, the consequences will be with us for a long time."

Trump is consolidating his hold on the party infrastructure with the likely installation [*of his loyalists*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/12/politics/trump-endorse-michael-whatley-lara-trump-rnc/index.html) (including his daughter-in-law) in the top positions at the Republican National Committee. Ambitious younger Republicans are mostly defining themselves in his image. After the latest Ukraine vote, first-term Missouri GOP Sen. Eric Schmitt [*noted on social media*](https://x.com/Eric_Schmitt/status/1757368160116670818?s=20) that almost all of the 17 Republican senators elected since 2018 opposed the aid.

Given the level of dominance Trump has displayed in this year's primaries among both voters and elected officials, there's no reason to assume that even if he loses a general election he wouldn't try for the GOP nomination again in 2028, when he'd be about the same age Biden is now. But whether or not Trump regains the White House this year, and whatever he does next if he doesn't, it seems certain that his shadow will envelop the GOP for years.

"I think he will continue to be a significant influence over the party, its elected officials, its platform, its position on all of these important issues, for as long as he's alive frankly," said Horn.

"I said back in 2016 that if the party embraced him and took him on, it would be 25 years before they were able to truly cleanse themselves of him. Now I don't know if I gave it enough time," she added.

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