**Trumpism on the GOP ballot**

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In addition to the predictable battles that will take place between the Republican and Democratic parties, this year’s US primary election contests are featuring significant struggles being waged within both parties. On the Republican side, the internal conflicts are not ideological. With few exceptions, most Republicans are running on the same platform that brought Donald Trump to power in 2016. It’s an agenda focused on a range of “cultural” issues: fear of excessive immigration from non-European countries; restrictions on abortion; rejection of efforts to educate young people on matters of racial justice and gender equity; rejection of efforts to introduce reforms to police behaviour; and rejection of any gun control.
These cultural issues have been framed by Republicans as matters of personal freedom or the protection of traditional values. As such, they have succeeded in tapping into the discontent and sense of loss experienced by a broad swath of middle class, middle aged, non-college educated, mainly white Christian voters who have deep insecurities brought on by dramatic transformations in the economy, culture, and demographics of the US. By embracing them, Republicans have refashioned themselves as the party of the forgotten middle class promising in Trump’s words to “make America great again”—which his supporters have understood to mean taking us back to an imagined past glory.
While this approach has won the support of many in the struggling white middle class, the actual Republican agenda has been one that has given free rein to policies that lower taxes on the wealthy, end government regulations that protect health, safety, and environment, cut back on needed social services, and appointed ideological officials and judges that support these policies. Gone are the days of the moderate Republican. Former presidents George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush both rejected Trump’s crass appeal. Even Senator Mitt Romney, the 2012 Republican presidential nominee, no longer feels at home in the party he once led. With Trumpism defining today’s GOP, the only question that remains is whether the former president still leads the movement he helped to take to victory in 2016. There are pretenders to the throne, among them: Trump’s former vice president Mike Pence, his Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, his UN Ambassador Nikki Haley, and Florida Governor Ron DeSantis. On most issues, all are playing to the Trump base, except one. While Trump himself has continued to insist that he won the 2020 election only to have his victory stolen by Democrats and faithless Republicans, not all of his erstwhile competitors are as obsessed with this issue—especially Pence, who the Trump faithful still hold responsible for certifying the electors who gave the White House to Joseph Biden.
It has been fascinating to watch the hoops that Republican candidates in this year’s midterm elections have jumped through to secure Trump’s endorsement—the most important of which has been to agree with him that his 2020 “victory” was stolen by Democrats. And so, the primaries to date have not been about differing policies, since they all largely agree. Rather it’s been about who can court Trump sufficiently enough to secure his endorsement and pledge to support the kind of electoral “reform” policies that will give Republican governors and legislatures the power to undo the voters’ will in future elections. To date, Trump-endorsed candidates have fared well. His chosen candidates have won important contests in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina. They’ve averaged around a third of the vote in competitive multi-candidate races, demonstrating that Trump still has substantial political clout. All this has left more moderate, traditional Republicans in a quandary. Some left the party in 2020. Others are struggling to find a new home. With Senate and House Republicans and most of this year’s nominees now in lock step behind Trumpism, what remains to be seen is whether it’s a winning formula for Republicans in November and whether the former president’s power at the polls can propel him to win the Republican nomination should he run again in 2024.
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