

CURING THE DONALD TRUMP SPELL: THE PROBLEM

126 Republican members of the House of Representatives signed an amicus supporting a frivolous challenge to President Trump's election losses in swing states. Reportedly, 140 members will support Louie Gohmert's even more frivolous challenge to the certification of President-Elect Biden's win. Every single Republican member of the House voted against impeachment of President Trump for withholding funds they themselves had appropriated to go to Ukraine in hopes of obtaining Russian-promoted dirt to use against Joe Biden. And while just a few Senators have overtly backed these frivolous challenges to Biden's win, just Mitt Romney voted to convict the President in his impeachment trial.

A majority of the Republican Party has, thus far at least, made it clear they would abrogate the Constitution to see Donald Trump remain in power, even if it means trading away their own institutional prerogatives and dignity.

It's unclear how much this rejection of democracy stems from recent trends in GOP culture and how much arises simply from a desire or perceived need to back Trump, who openly applauds authoritarians. My guess is that Trump just gave Republican permission to openly defy norms they've been quietly chipping away at for some time.

Still, Trump has made it clear he intends to keep milking the grift delegitimizing his own loss.

Two people familiar with the matter say that in recent days, Trump has told advisers and close associates that he wants to keep fighting in court past Jan. 6 if members of Congress, as expected, end up certifying the

electoral college results.

“The way he sees it is: Why should I ever let this go?... How would that benefit me?” said one of the sources, who’s spoken to Trump at length about the post-election activities to nullify his Democratic opponent’s decisive victory.

That may exert political pressure on Republican elected officials. It will surely foster [more] violence among Trump’s followers.

That leaves the United States with a twofold task if it will be successful at stepping back from the brink of authoritarianism it faced on November 3: first, in the middle of a pandemic and a time of escalating inequality, to prove that democracy can still provide tangible benefits to Americans. That will require that President Biden not only choose to pursue policies to address the malaise that made Trump possible, but that he’ll succeed in implementing such policies. With limited exceptions, that will first require convincing a sufficient number of Republicans to act to benefit the US rather than just the party, or at the very least, to understand benefit to the GOP to be something other than lockstep loyalty to Trump. It requires doing so at a time when much of the GOP believes (Trump’s underperformance compared to down ballot races notwithstanding) that they need Trump’s support to get reelected in 2022, one stated reason why some Republican Senators may join Josh Hawley’s cynical support for Trump’s challenge on Wednesday.

But the vote on Jan. 6 to certify Biden’s win is viewed within the GOP as a painful litmus test. Republicans either risk blowback or a primary challenge by approving Biden’s win amid Trump’s baseless claims of widespread fraud, or they can align themselves with Trump’s attempt to subvert the election results.

Trump has already shown little regard for those who are criticizing the efforts in the House and Senate to block Biden's win. The president attacked Senate Majority Whip John Thune (R-S.D.) for the second time this week after Thune said Trump's efforts to overturn Biden's win will go down like a "shot dog" in the upper chamber.

The president urged Gov. Kristi Noem (R-S.D.) to run against Thune, though Noem has already said she will not run against Thune. Trump in a tweet called Thune a "RINO" on Friday – a Republican In Name Only.

In short, something will need to break – or at least chip away at – the spell of authoritarian sycophancy that Trump has over the GOP.

Some of this may come of its own accord. For example, if Democrats manage to win the Georgia run-offs, Trump may try to claim that Republicans lost only because he had no reason to boost turnout. Still, if the GOP does lose the Senate after Trump spent months denigrating elections in Georgia, ultimately Senators will put some blame on Trump.

Trump's luster may fade of his own doing. After all, a key part of his mystique comes from a belief that he has had any more success as a businessman than any other rich heir would be with the same money. Trump Organization is badly underwater, even absent the legal troubles facing the company in New York State. The pandemic will continue to suppress business travel at least for another four months. The private bankers at Deutsche Bank who've kept Trump afloat in recent years resigned some weeks ago. While Trump, personally, is entertaining offers for some media venture, it's not clear any of them will provide a way to bail out his family company.

And increasingly, Trump will be deplatformed.

While a significant swath of political journalists will continue air his grievances (it's more fun than covering the kind of substantive policy debates that will return to DC), starting in three weeks Twitter no longer has a commitment to label, rather than delete, his tweets that violate Twitter policy. Rupert Murdoch has (at least temporarily) lost patience with Trump. Trump appears to be banking on sustainably being more important to the MAGA base than Fox News; he believes he can take his followers with him to OANN or a Newsmax channel. And he'll succeed, at least at first, to a point. But deplatforming of other right wing icons has shown that a significant portion of followers won't make the effort to move off mainstream platforms (say, from Twitter to Parler). Without the same ability to juice the central conflicts of the day, Trump won't have the same ability to remain one pole in a deliberately stoked polarization.

These are all things that may happen of their own accord. In a follow-up, I'll look at ways that may bring Trump some accountability going forward.