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## Inside a divided GOP, ‘real anguish’ over the way forward

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In the wake of Donald Trump’s destabilizing candidacy and Tuesday’s stunning victory, Republicans across the country are struggling with a question: What does it mean to be one of them?

But Trump’s strong performance offered few answers. Instead, it could spell the beginning of a long and divisive GOP war over the way forward.

The party’s old coalition has eroded. The business-friendly conservatism that defined the GOP for a century has been diluted by tariff-happy nationalism. Its core principles are unclear. No one is sure who will decide what’s next, or how.

The first front in the fight over the party’s future will come within days, as House Republicans decide next week on a new speaker: whether to stick with establishment favorite and incumbent Paul D. Ryan (Wis.) or to choose an outsider, if the base agitates for someone new.

A cascade of standoffs will follow over a vacant Supreme Court seat, government funding and the federal budget, appointees for a new administration, and the president-elect’s agenda.

But the party’s future will depend, too, on the states, where the GOP has remained dominant, as much as Washington, where it stands diminished. Trump’s populist and racially charged campaign revealed a fast-growing grievance movement that took Republican leaders by surprise — and exposed their detachment from the simmering frustrations and policy aspirations of their core voters.

The GOP’s usual playbook — lower taxes, fewer regulations, hawkish foreign policy — is ready for reuse, but the question for the party is whether Trump will return to those tenets as he plots his presidency.

Critics such as Sen. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.) argued before Tuesday that the “Trump approach is a demographic cul-de-sac” and that “blaming every closed factory on trade deals” was unrealistic.

But Trump's win gave him immense capital. His allies, such as his campaign's chief executive, Stephen K. Bannon, see a far different landscape. The incendiary website Bannon once led, Breitbart, has rocketed to the fore of the party and is already spoiling to challenge GOP leaders on Capitol Hill, including Ryan, who has long drawn its ire.

Christopher Ruddy, a conservative media executive and friend of Trump, said his appeal is "a function of the economic malaise and the lack of jobs as much as Trump. That anger and bitterness is real."

Trump trampled norms, positions and traditions that were fragile even before he arrived. He alienated (and energized) Latino and Asian voters, but he bolstered the party's support among whites. He sent the GOP's foreign policy establishment running and appeared under banners that evoked the dormant isolationist motto "America First."

Now, Trump "gets to redefine the party," said Ari Fleischer, a former George W. Bush spokesman who did not vote for Trump or Clinton. "It will mostly be a non-ideological populist party joined by a conservative movement on occasion. . . . The party will be led by a personality-type figure, not an ideological one. Which means the success of the party is very much tied to the success of the man."

"I just don't see business as usual," said former Colorado congressman Tom Tancredo, an advocate of hard-line immigration policy who left the GOP because he said it had become the "Party of Democrat Lite." His state, meanwhile, has seen a rise in Latino voting power and was a hotbed of anti-Trump activity.

Today's GOP, Tancredo said, faces a choice between the Trump forces that have energized it to the point of takeover and possible donor-class attempts to smother that energy.

It's hard to see how the latter bloc gains ground in the immediate aftermath of the election. But even if Trump's wing of the party asserts itself, the avalanche of acrimony and internal battles could be politically lethal.

"There's real anguish and a coming apart," said Edward J. Rollins, a former campaign manager for Ronald Reagan. "It's about more than Trump. The party isn't now all traditional Republicans. It's more of the voters we brought in with Reagan: working-class Democrats who left that party and who have grown in our party. They're here, and they don't see the Paul Ryans as one of them."

Outside Washington, most Republicans, if shocked or not totally with Trump, are focused on holding together and keeping Trump voters within the fold.

"You saw this Brexit kind of voter in New York, Pennsylvania and Michigan come out for Trump. It's not a new thing to want to make sure they stay Republican. Every time Republicans win nationally, it's because that voter came with us," said Ed Cox, chairman of the New York GOP.

Cox described his late father-in-law, Richard M. Nixon, as a mainstream Republican who brought together the "silent majority" and the conservative movement during the 1968 election.

He sees Nixon as a model of sorts for how Republicans will need to fuse various blocs in coming years.

Next year should be an indicator, he added, with gubernatorial races in Virginia and New Jersey and a mayoral election in New York City.

As Patricia Poprik worked Tuesday at a bustling GOP headquarters in Bucks County, Pa., a swing suburban area, the county chairwoman was upbeat. “We’re filling spaces where we didn’t have committee people,” she said of Trump supporters. “We’ve got to take that passion and keep everyone involved.”

Poprik said moderates in vote-rich places such as Bucks County won’t abandon the party because of Trump, since most of them still believe that the GOP is “what it’s always been about: smaller government, less intrusion in lives, less regulation, letting people decide for themselves.”

“Those things haven’t changed,” she said. “The rank and file are here. It’s the elites in Washington who should pay attention more to the regular Joes, the moderates and the conservatives, to understand what’s happening.”

Elsewhere, thousands of state legislators will be working in capitols unified under GOP control. Republican governors such as Maryland’s Larry Hogan and Massachusetts’s Charlie Baker, both of whom [refused to vote for Trump](#), may be positioned to argue that a more moderate party could do a better job of growing the party beyond its base.

“Trump has smoked out the rats in the Republican Party — the globalist rats,” said state Sen. Frank Niceley, a Republican who has served in Nashville since the 1980s and watched his party become dominant. “The Romneys, the Bushes, the [Gov. Bill] Haslams have all been controlled by the David Rockefeller globalist wing of the party. There’s still those of us who believe in limited government and lower taxes, and we’re not going back. When you don’t back the nominee, you’re done for.”

Trump’s rise also empowered people whom the Republican Party had thought vanished or irrelevant. Some of his loudest support came from white nationalists and “alt-right” conservatives. Some quietly volunteered for him, pulling sleeves over their Iron Cross tattoos. More found allies on social media and megaphones in the mainstream media. Richard Spencer, whose white-nationalist think tank has scheduled a post-election conference in Washington, planned to spend election night at Trump’s downtown Washington hotel.

“Anything that can be perceived that way — in some cases, that’s going to be textbook racist comments — the party has a responsibility to reject that,” Flake said.

Back in Washington, Ryan and Senate Republicans could be boxed in. On the horizon in 2018 are a slew of Senate races that look like possible pickups in states where Trump is popular. The temptation and pressure to rouse GOP voters rather than rein in Trump’s policies could be intense and White House-driven, and many Republicans will argue, perhaps rightly, that it is the way to keep activists aligned ahead of 2020.

Rep. Steve King (R-Iowa), a conservative who has clashed with his party's leadership, said the dynamics driving Republicans in Congress are likely to be different than the factors affecting the GOP elsewhere.

“In the House, you have this central group of committed conservatives and a group of 20 to 25 moderates that push and pull and try to decide what's going to happen and who gets leverage,” he said. “Congress will be more about figuring out who's going to decide what, as the populism out there continues.”

Ryan could be a weather vane. An avowed supporter of free markets and sweeping changes to entitlement programs — which Trump opposed — he is a proud descendant of Reaganism and supply-side economics. His willingness or reluctance to modify the party's pitch will say much about how much national Republicans are going to incorporate Trump's politics.

On the other side of the Capitol, young senators who jockeyed to be the face of the GOP's future before Trump beat them in the primaries, such as Marco Rubio (Fla.) and Ted Cruz (Tex.), will battle over that role again — and under Trump's shadow. They'll have support and likely competition from Sens. Ben Sasse (Neb.) and Tom Cotton (Ark.), who have ties to intellectual conservatives and come from the heartland.

In the gubernatorial mansions, Baker and Hogan are not the only influential players. Ohio Gov. John Kasich and Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker ran against Trump and could return to the national stage, with Walker mulling a reelection bid in 2018 and Kasich recently traveling to New Hampshire. Trump's running mate and vice president-elect, Indiana Gov. Mike Pence, could be a bridge between Trump supporters and the Republican leadership.

Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) will be another player, figuring out where his libertarian conservatism fits in light of former New Mexico governor Gary Johnson's campaign as the Libertarian Party nominee, which drew some attention, and his own failed bid for the GOP nomination. Same goes for Sen. Mike Lee (R-Utah), who has been at the forefront of the party's constitutional conservative wing, along with Cruz.

But Paul's early flameout in the primaries surprised even Democrats. Before Trump's campaign, Republicans like Paul talked about building a new majority, with criminal justice reform and economic opportunity winning over nonwhite voters, and a government-shrinking message appealing to millennials. The primary contest revealed how little active support there was for those ideas; the only message Trump adopted was that America needed to avoid foreign wars unless they were quick and in search of natural resources.

“You can complain about the candidates or ‘the system,’ but the bigger problem is there's no mass constituency for radical cuts in government — among GOP primary voters or the electorate at large,” said Gene Healy, a vice president at the libertarian Cato Institute. “Any progress toward shrinking government and expanding liberty is going to be slow and incremental, and it's almost certainly not going to emerge from presidential politics.”

The prospect for immigration reform, too, is all but over. No issue drove Trump more in the primaries. Although Ryan and others in GOP leadership have supported bipartisan efforts in the past, they know any further push could be perilous and opposed by a base that viscerally identified with Trump's proposed wall along the U.S.-Mexico border.

“It’s got to be done in stages and pieces, not some big, massive bill that ends up collapsing under its own weight,” Ryan said at the Economic Club of Washington this fall, talking about the prospect of a pact next year.

The conundrum of how to build the party with Hispanics is hardly new, and it vexed Republicans four years ago, after Romney called for “self-deportation” of undocumented workers. That set off a wave of conferences, speeches and memos about how to rebuild the GOP.

As the party wondered how it had misread the mood of the country and allowed President Obama to win a second term, at least one Republican called in to “Fox and Friends” to explain that the GOP needed to cut smart deals — especially on the issue that had alienated Latinos.

“Frankly, the Republicans should take the lead on immigration,” he said. “Look, they’re never going to win another election unless they do something.”

And then Donald Trump hung up the phone.