



## Trump Is Out of Power, But in Control

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His Sunday address to CPAC is expected to make a splash. And that unsettles some in his party who think the GOP will not recover if their losing 2020 nominee is running the show.

**DONALD TRUMP** electrified the crowd at the Conservative Political Action Conference in 2011, turning what initially appeared to be a publicity stunt into the start of a successful political journey. In 2016, then-presidential candidate Trump pulled out of the annual meeting of movement conservatives, annoying organizers.

This year, Trump is out of office and a little down, having lost a Supreme Court case that has put his tax returns into the hands of investigators and facing other legal and financial troubles. But he's still the headliner at the CPAC meeting that started Thursday, and he remains both a galvanizing and divisive figure in a Republican Party out of power in Washington, D.C.

"A lot of our losers, like Bob Dole and Mitt Romney, slink back" after failing in presidential elections, says Matt Braynard, a former Trump campaign operative and current executive director of Look Ahead America, referring to the GOP's 1996 and 2012 presidential nominees. "Typically, the M.O. has been to sort of fade away."

But not Trump, says Braynard, whose group is a participating sponsor of the CPAC meeting this year in Orlando, Florida. "I don't think he's going to fade away. I don't think many of his supporters want him to fade away." Even if Trump doesn't try again in 2024, "I do believe he has tremendous capacity to be a force for good on the right and in American politics, as a candidate, kingmaker or somebody giving guidance on an issue," Braynard says.

Angela Stanton King, a criminal justice activist and prominent Black supporter of Trump, says the former president might not be in office, but he can still energize the base.

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"I think there are 75 million people that support President Trump. He still has that momentum. Those people are still behind him," says King, founder of the American King Foundation, which works to reunite families separated by mass incarceration. "Everybody is excited about a huge comeback in 2024," says King, a panelist at a CPAC session. "Trump is the one to get everybody riled up."

Trump is scheduled to headline the conference on Sunday afternoon. Other notables on the list of speakers and panelists are many Trump loyalists, including freshman Rep. Lauren Boebert of

Colorado, Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas and Sen. Mike Lee of Utah, former White House economic adviser Larry Kudlow and a who's-who of the social conservative movement.

Just as notable is who is not speaking – and that list includes people who have had clashes with Trump. Former Vice President Mike Pence, hustled out of the chamber as pro-Trump rioters called for his hanging, declined an invitation to speak. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, who voted to acquit Trump but immediately afterward said Trump had some responsibility for the Jan. 6 attempted insurrection? Not on the list. Neither is former U.N. ambassador and potential 2024 GOP presidential contender Nikki Haley, who criticized Trump for his involvement in stoking the fires that led to the Jan. 6 violence.

Trump is expected to make a big verbal splash in his Sunday address, as he's finally given a voice that has been muted by his departure from office and his permanent suspension from his favorite social media site, Twitter. And that brings angst to some in his party who think the GOP will not recover and regain power if their losing 2020 nominee is running the show.

"It reinforces the sense that the GOP is a cult, that is so focused on loyalty to one person, and that CPAC has essentially given up on principle, given up on philosophy," says conservative Doug Bandow, a former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan and a senior fellow at the Cato Institute.

"For many years, CPAC was viewed as the place that really serious conservatives would go to, with panels on lots of different issues, policy debate and philosophical discussions. No one would have imagined you had to be loyal to one person" to be part of the CPAC community, which long included major players in the conservative movement, Bandow adds.

The topics of the meeting are also tailor made for Trump's agenda and list of grievances. Six separate sessions are on voter fraud and "protecting elections." Other topics appear aimed at some of Trump's nemeses, with titles such as "Cancel Culture;" "California Socialism: Promising Heaven, Delivering Hell," and "So You've Been De-Platformed – What Now?" – a session relevant to Trump's exclusion from social media sites that helped him build his campaign.

CPAC did not respond to a request for comment about the speakers list.

Republicans are divided over Trump's role in the party after his loss. Asked directly if the former president should be speaking at CPAC, House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy of California said, "Yes, he should." Immediately afterward, Rep. Liz Cheney, chairwoman of the House Republican Conference, offered her differing view.

"That's up to CPAC. ... I don't believe that he should be playing a role in the future of the party or the country," Cheney, Wyoming Republican who voted in favor of Trump's second impeachment, said. McCarthy, who navigated a situation where fellow Republicans were calling for Cheney to be stripped of her leadership post, ended the Wednesday news conference then.

"On that high note, thank you very much," he told reporters on Capitol Hill.