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Trump's contradictory coalition roils elections in Virginia, Georgia

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It has been two years and two days since President Trump announced his candidacy for the top office — and the Republican Party hasn't been the same since. Trump upended the traditional GOP politics, and his presidency offers near-daily evidence of strains within the party that aren't going away anytime soon.

Anyone looking for real-time evidence could see it in the results of last week's Republican gubernatorial primary in Virginia. Many analysts believed Ed Gillespie, the former Republican National Committee chairman and adviser to President George W. Bush, would cruise to victory in the primary. Instead, he barely defeated Corey Stewart, a Trumpian candidate who campaigned against immigration and for the preservation of the state's Confederate monuments.

More evidence of the Trump effect on politics exists in Georgia ahead of Tuesday's special congressional election in the 6th District, which covers suburban Atlanta. Pre-Trump, Republican Karen Handel probably would have held a comfortable lead. In the age of Trump, she is at risk of losing to Democrat Jon Ossoff. Days before the vote, neither side is confident of the outcome in a district that former GOP presidential candidate Mitt Romney won by 24 points in 2012 but Trump won by just two points in November.

The Virginia and Georgia elections offer two angles from which to examine the impact of Trump's presidency on the politics of both parties. In Virginia, it is the story of a GOP coalition at odds with itself. In Georgia, it is Trump's capacity to unite otherwise fractious Democrats as he unnerves many of the well-educated Republican voters.

As these contests unfold, Emily Ekins of the Cato Institute has provided a timely typology of Trump voters and, by implication, the Republican Party of 2017. Her work is one of several reports produced by the [Democracy Fund Voter Study Group](#), which has brought together analysts from across the political spectrum to design and analyze survey research conducted by the online polling firm YouGov.

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Trump's shadow and stalled GOP agenda loom over close Georgia race

National politics are impacting the special election in Georgia's 6th Congressional District. (The Washington Post)

Ekins puts Trump voters into five groups: American Preservationists, Staunch Conservatives, Free Marketeers, Anti-Elites and the Disengaged (a relatively small group). Her takeaways are instructive and, for Republican leaders, challenging. She says there is “no such thing as one kind of Trump voter who voted for him for one single reason.” Trump voters hold “very different views on a wide variety of issues,” from immigration to national identity and race to trade and economics.

There are many traditional Republicans in the Trump coalition. He wouldn’t have won without them. But it was other voters who were attracted to his messages on race, religion, immigration and national identity that have left the Republicans in the state they are in. A look at just two of the five groups — the American Preservationists and the Staunch Conservatives — helps explain why navigating can be difficult for any Republican aspirant or elected official.

Ekins describes both as core Trump constituencies. The American Preservationists “lean economically progressive and embrace a nativist conception of American identity, take nativist stances on immigration and believe the system is biased against them.” Staunch Conservatives are “conventionally conservative” and distinct from Trump in that way. “They prefer less government intervention in the economy, support moral traditionalism and do not fear a rigged system,” Ekins said.

During the primaries, she writes, more than 8 in 10 American Preservationists voted for Trump, the highest of any of the five groups in her typology. “They helped catapult him to the nomination,” she says. Meanwhile, Trump was also the first choice of about 6 in 10 Staunch Conservatives in the primaries, which also played a key role in his success in winning the nomination.

At the same time, not quite 6 in 10 of these American Preservationists voted for Romney in 2012, while about one in six backed President Barack Obama. Among Staunch Conservatives, however, 9 in 10 backed Romney in 2012. Still, both groups overwhelmingly cast positive votes for Trump in November. Far higher percentages of Trump voters among the Free Marketeers and Anti-Elites considered their decision a negative vote against Hillary Clinton.

There are a variety of similarities between these two groups that make up core Trump constituencies, but on issues, they part company. About 3 in 4 American Preservationists favor raising taxes on the wealthy, while a similar percentage of the Staunch Conservatives oppose that idea. Nearly 3 in 4 Preservationists say Medicare is an important issue, significantly higher than among the Staunch Conservatives. Voters in both groups overwhelmingly favor Trump’s travel ban, but the Preservationists are far more likely to say that legal immigration should be made more difficult for foreigners.

Virginia's Lt. Gov. Ralph Northam won the Democratic nomination for governor by a large margin against former congressman Tom Perriello on June 13. The race was tighter on the Republican side with Ed Gillespie narrowly beating Trump state campaign chairman Corey A. Stewart for that party’s nomination. (Amber Ferguson, Jorge Ribas, Dalton Bennett/The Washington Post)

Trump assembled and held this coalition together in the presidential election, but as the Virginia gubernatorial primary showed, the conflict between the ardent Trump supporters and other Republicans continues. Lee Drutman of the think tank New America writes of the tension in another of the reports from the Democracy Fund study group: “The nativist populism on which Donald Trump campaigned is at odds with much of what Republicans have traditionally embodied.”

Meanwhile, Trump is affecting Democrats, as well. The battle for the soul of the Democratic Party is a common theme these days, and there is something to the friction between the progressive wing of the party, led by Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), and the more moderate wing. But Democrats appear less divided on issues than Republicans, and some of those differences are overshadowed by the unity that Trump’s presidency provides to the opposition party.

In Virginia’s Democratic gubernatorial primary, Lt. Gov. Ralph Northam easily defeated former House member Tom Perriello. Northam had the support of the Democratic establishment, while Perriello had the support of Sanders and Warren. It seemed a proxy war for the overall battle for the direction of the party.

Yet both candidates were broadly liked by Democratic voters, with high favorable and minuscule unfavorable ratings. Both candidates adopted generally progressive positions and especially shared harsh rhetoric aimed at Trump. A race that many believed would be close turned out to be the opposite, and the Trump presidency probably will hasten a coming-together ahead of the fall election.

Drutman argues that the divisions within the Democratic Party are more about disposition than about issues. “The main divide within the Democratic Party electorate is about attitudes toward the establishment and the existing order than it is about specific issue positions (with the exception of trade policy),” he writes. “Democrats are also quite unified on social/identity issues.”

The Democrats aren’t without problems. The party could be pushed farther left on social and identity issues, given the attitudes of their young voters and wealthy contributors, both of whom are more liberal on these matters than other Democrats are. That represents a challenge as Democrats weigh how they can appeal to white, working-class voters who defected to Trump and the Republicans.

Tuesday’s results in Georgia will provide more clues to the state of the two parties, although given the huge amounts of money spent on behalf of both candidates, it is an unusual laboratory. But already, it’s clear the degree to which the president looms over both parties and especially the challenges he continues to present to the party he adopted to win the White House.