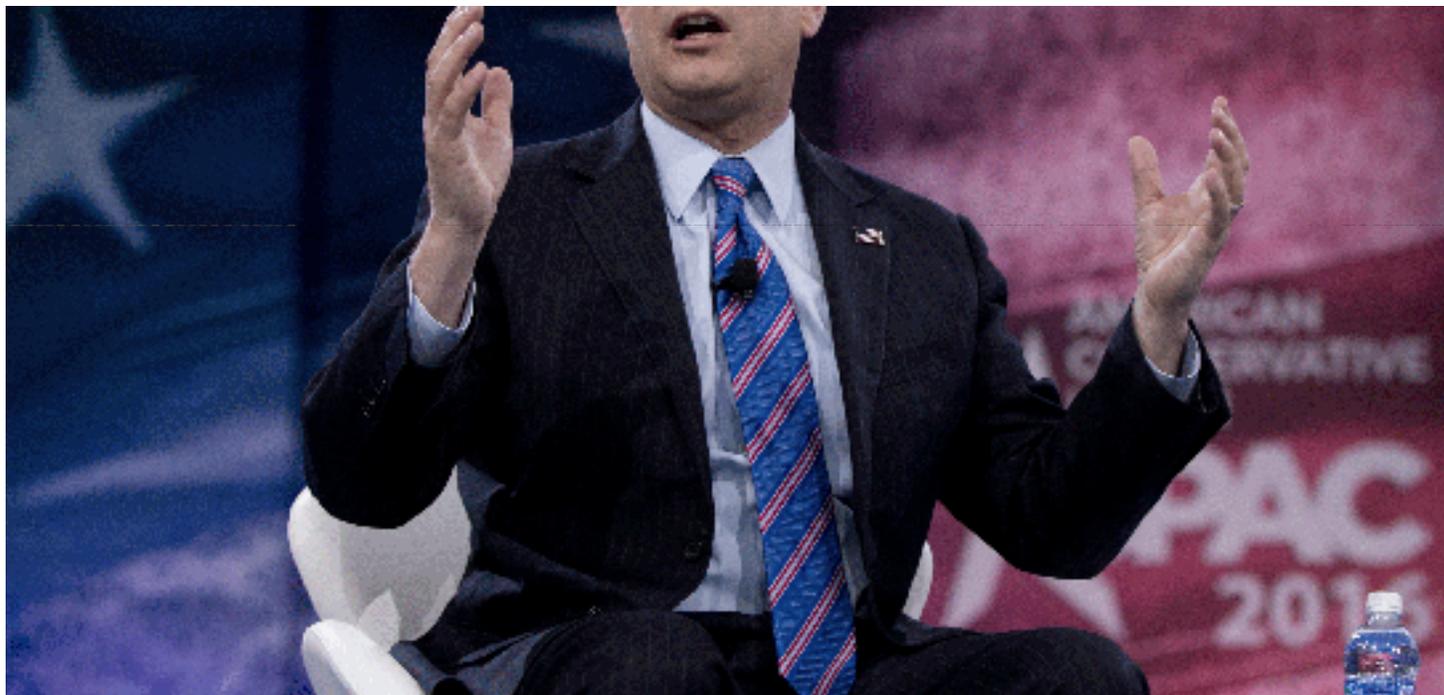


For Trump and the RNC, a Struggle for Control

The GOP works to maintain its identity even as it backs the rogue candidate.



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If Donald Trump's squabble with House Speaker Paul Ryan proves anything, it's this: The big-talking New Yorker may have won the Republican presidential nomination, but he has not won over the Republican Party.

The two men are scheduled to meet Thursday following Ryan's refusal to immediately endorse Trump—yet the standoff already highlights the peculiar dynamic between party and candidate that's likely to remain for months.

Trump desperately needs the party's organization and fundraising infrastructure to have a realistic chance of winning on Nov. 8, while the Republican National Committee faces an even bigger challenge: making sure it still exists as a viable national political party the morning of Nov.

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Never in its century-and-a-half existence has the party faced as serious a threat to its very identity as it does now. Its own rules require that it nominate the candidate who has won a majority of its convention delegates—which means that it’s almost certain that the party of Lincoln, Eisenhower, Goldwater, and Reagan will be represented by a reality TV star with a long history of crude insults on Howard Stern’s radio show.

And so it is that even as party leaders grit their teeth and make sure the GOP does what is required to support Trump this autumn, they are simultaneously working to maintain its independence and keep it from falling under Trump’s control, so that it can regroup afterward for elections to come. RNC Chairman Reince Priebus has been assuring members privately that Trump cannot take over the 168-member group—and he essentially said the same thing publicly last week.

“It’s the party’s party. The party is, was, will remain the Republican Party,” Priebus said at a question-and-answer session sponsored by *Politico*. He then went on to reject the idea that staffers who cannot wholeheartedly support Trump would be asked to resign. “That’s not the test. The test is are you doing a good job, and are you great at what you’re doing. And if you’re great at what you’re doing, there’s no problem.”

That the head of the party felt compelled to state this illustrated the uniqueness of Trump’s nomination. Typically the RNC meshes its operation with the campaign of its nominee without fuss or fanfare. In 2012, it hired Mitt Romney’s campaign staff for some positions at its Capitol Hill headquarters, while some RNC staff moved to Boston to work with the nominee’s much bigger fundraising operation. There was a similar merger with the 2008 John McCain campaign. In 2000, George W. Bush’s campaign essentially took over the RNC, but many of his staff had previously worked at the national party during his father’s presidency.

In each instance, though, there was never a question of divergent goals or philosophies. The candidates had been lifelong Republicans and were readily accepted as de facto leaders of the party, and the staff mergers were done voluntarily.

The situation with Trump could not be more different. The developer-turned-entertainer has a history of donating to both parties. His policy pronouncements frequently land well outside of party orthodoxy. And his volatile temperament and frequently shifting stances have fostered a deep distrust from party regulars.

Despite Trump’s weekend threat to remove Ryan from his role as chairman of the summer convention, party rules don’t give him that author-

ity. (Ryan has since said that he would give up that convention role if that's what Trump prefers.) To force Ryan out, Trump would have to stack the convention's obscure Committee on Permanent Organization, which recommends a chair for the convention, as well as win over a majority of the floor delegates themselves.

"He knows, and everybody knows, that not all of those are Trump loyalists," an RNC official said privately. "In fact, a substantial number are not."

And if even Ryan is relatively safe from Trump's reach, Priebus is downright untouchable. Priebus was elected unanimously to a two-year term in January 2015. Removing him requires a two-thirds vote of the RNC's 168 members. And while as many as one half of those will be replaced by new members in the coming weeks, Trump is unlikely to muster enough support from the newly constituted group to dump Priebus, even if he wanted do.

Of course, much of the thinking regarding the party's independence from Trump and long-term survival is based on the assumption that he will lose in November. The situation becomes radically different should he win, at which point both custom and fundraising capability would swing control of the party away from the RNC and toward Trump.

"If he's the guy on the Capitol steps on Jan. 20, he'll tell the RNC who he wants as chairman and the RNC will go along with it," the RNC official said—but then, after a pause, added: "Probably."

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