

How Candidates Learned to Stop Worrying and Embrace Trump

Trump looms large over the battle for the Senate again.



Former Rep. Mike Rogers, R-Mich., speaks at the Vision '24 conference' on March 18, 2023, in North Charleston, S.C. Rogers on Wednesday, Sept. 6, 2023 announced that he will run for Michigan's open U.S. Senate seat. (AP Photo/Meg Kinnard, File)

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Former President Trump helped Republican Senate candidates make it out of competitive primaries in 2022, but when it came to the general elections, most lost to Democrats.

Parties of first-term presidents normally lose seats in their first midterms, but Senate Democrats expanded their razor-thin majority thanks in part to a roster of Republicans who a general electorate couldn't stomach. Part of the blame was also heaped on former NRSC Chair Rick Scott, who took a hands-off approach to primaries and ceded much of the control to Trump.

In the immediate aftermath, Republicans **grumbled** that Trump was to blame for elevating these “exotic and problematic” nominees, as the *Cook Political Report with Amy Walters'* Charlie Cook **called** them. Some party members had questioned whether the party should **distance itself** from the former president ahead of 2024.

But nearly two years after the party's deafening defeat, Trump is marching toward the GOP presidential nomination playing kingmaker once again.

This cycle, NRSC Chair Steve Daines has gotten behind candidates early in the hopes of sealing off primary fields. The NRSC is also working with Trump to stay aligned on the candidates Daines believes could win a primary and a general election.

Swing state Republican candidates are also rushing to embrace Trump despite his lackluster electoral record and mounting legal issues. Three of the five swing states with competitive Senate races this cycle have had their leading candidates in the Republican primary endorse Trump. The holdouts have been in Wisconsin and Pennsylvania.

It's still a risky strategy that some party members are still sweating.

“Trump remains a double-edged sword for Republicans. His endorsement carries a lot of weight in the primary, but can be the kiss of death in a general election, particularly in a swing state or district,” former Rep. Charlie Dent (R-PA), a frequent Trump critic, said.

One of the biggest differences between past recent election cycles and now, is that Trump is slated to be the GOP nominee and lead the ballot, former NRSC communications director Chris Hartline said.

“We saw in 2018, we saw in 2022, the challenges of living in the Trump era, without having Trump on the ballot,” Hartline said. Democrats flipped the House in 2018 and narrowly lost it in 2022 despite predictions of a red wave. “I think this will be a different dynamic in a presidential cycle year with Trump on the ballot and a lot of strong candidates across the map.”

The inevitability of Trump also makes it more difficult for more moderate members to carve a lane separate from him, fearing being labeled anti-Trump—a kiss of death in GOP primaries.

Former Rep. Mike Rogers (R-MI), once a Trump critic before he launched his campaign to replace retiring Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-MI), **endorsed** Trump earlier this month.

“You're kind of damned if you do, damned if you don't,” one former GOP Senate campaign manager told *Hotline*.

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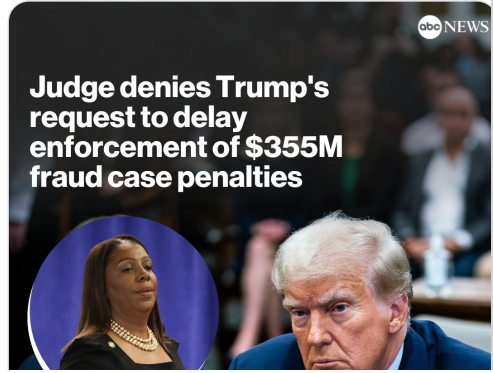
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