



# HOW DONALD TRUMP WENT FROM A DIMINISHED EX-PRESIDENT TO THE GOP'S DOMINANT FRONT- RUNNER - ASSOCIATED PRESS

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*Photo: Supporters cheer after learning that Republican presidential candidate former President Donald Trump has won the New Hampshire primary, at a primary election night party in Nashua, N.H., Tuesday, Jan. 23, 2024*

When he left the White House, Donald Trump was a pariah.

After years of bending Washington to his will with a single tweet, Trump was, at least for a moment, diminished. He was a one-term Republican president rejected by voters and then shunned by large swaths of his party after his refusal to accept his 2020 election defeat culminated in an insurrection at the U.S. Capitol that sent lawmakers running for their lives.

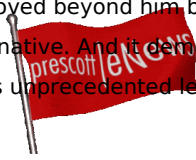
Some members of his Cabinet had discussed invoking the 25th Amendment, seeing him unfit to remain in office. He was banned from social media and became the first president to be impeached twice. And when he departed Washington, the nation's capital was still reeling from his supporters' violence and resembled a security fortress with boarded-up storefronts and military vehicles in the streets.

Three years later, Trump is on the cusp of a stunning turnaround. With commanding victories in the first two 2024 nominating contests and wide polling leads in the states ahead, Trump is fast closing in on the Republican nomination. Already, he is the first nonincumbent Republican to win the party's contests in both Iowa and New Hampshire, and he had the largest victory margin in Iowa caucus history. His standing is expected to improve this coming week with a win in Nevada's Republican caucuses, which his last major GOP rival, Nikki Haley, will skip in favor of a competing primary, which awards no delegates.

Trump did all this while facing 91 felony charges that range from mishandling highly classified documents and conspiring to overturn the results of the 2020 election, which he lost to Democrat Joe Biden, to paying off a porn star during his 2016 campaign. Trump is also facing a civil fraud case in New York that threatens his control of much of his business empire and was recently ordered to pay \$83.3 million for defaming a woman he was previously found liable for sexually abusing.

The story of how Trump became his party's likely nominee for a third straight presidential election is a reminder that there was an

opening — however brief — when the GOP could have moved beyond him but didn't. It shows how little was learned from 2016, as his critics once again failed to coalesce around a single alternative. And it demonstrates — with long-standing implications for American democracy — how Trump and his campaign seized on his unprecedented legal challenges, turning what should have been an insurmountable obstacle into a winning strategy.



"I think everybody got in the race thinking the Trump fever would break," said longtime Republican strategist Chip Saltsman, who chaired the campaign of one of Trump's rivals. "And it didn't break. It got hotter."

#### A DERAILMENT

Trump campaign aides say their first sign of momentum was not a legal victory or a gaffe by a rival, but a trip to East Palestine, Ohio, in February 2023.

Following a lackluster 2024 campaign announcement a few months earlier and slow start, the former president received a rousing welcome from residents demanding answers after a train carrying toxic chemicals derailed, leading to evacuations and fears of air and water contamination. Trump was briefed by local officials, blasted the federal response as a "betrayal" and stopped by a local McDonald's.

"It kind of reminded people what it was they liked about Trump to begin with," said senior campaign adviser Chris LaCivita. Trump, whose surprise 2016 victory had been fueled by angry white working-class voters who felt the government had failed them, was again casting himself as the outsider fighting big business and Washington.

Biden didn't visit at the time, helping Trump draw a contrast. He has accepted an invitation from East Palestine's mayor to finally visit this month.

#### THE CHARGES START ROLLING IN

If the derailment offered Republican voters a reminder of why they liked Trump, a series of criminal charges would reinforce their devotion to him.

Ralph Reed, chair of the influential Faith & Freedom Coalition and a presidential campaign veteran, happened to be at Trump's Mar-a-Lago club in Florida for a charity breakfast the morning Trump became the first former U.S. president to be indicted.

"It was like a bomb going off," he said. "You could feel the ground shift immediately.

But instead of calls for Trump to suspend his campaign, the response from Republicans was one of indignation. Trump portrayed himself as the victim of a politicized criminal justice system bent on damaging his reelection chances. Almost immediately, Republicans sprung to his defense.

His campaign was flooded with small-dollar donations and raised \$15.4 million in just two weeks. (When Trump was later booked on racketeering charges in Georgia and became the first former president to have his mug shot taken, the campaign brought in a record \$4.18 million that day.) Trump's allied super political action committee, which had struggled to raise money, saw a similar surge in contributions as Trump's poll numbers began to rise.

For Republican voters, the mounting charges confirmed Trump's loudly stated grievances that the system was rigged against him, driving many who had been considering other candidates to rally around him.

It was "a reminder that, at the end of the day, they wear a red jersey, and Joe Biden and his henchmen wear a blue jersey," said Trump senior campaign adviser Jason Miller.

Michael Telesca, a former schoolteacher from Hickory, North Carolina, who left his job to hike the Appalachian Trail, said last fall that the indictments and other attacks against Trump had transformed him from an ordinary Trump voter into an "ardent" supporter.

While he liked Trump's policies, "I am more fighting against the system that is attacking him relentlessly. ... There's a good portion of Republicans who say it's time for someone else. Here's the problem: If that happens, you've allowed the system to win."

The impact was immediately felt across rival campaigns, whose candidates were put in the awkward position of having to defend their chief opponent in order to avoid siding with Democratic prosecutors or Biden's Justice Department. As the indictments continued to roll in, Trump further dominated the media coverage, denying his competitors much-needed attention.

"It made him a victim, and nobody's better at playing the victim than Donald Trump," Reed said.

Trump turned his subsequent bookings and court appearances into spectacles that became fundamental to his campaign message. Indeed, some weeks, he voluntarily spent more time in the courtroom than in early voting states. Trump's team credits his decision to confront the charges head-on with helping ease voters' concerns about his electability.

"It was from that point on that it essentially had become impossible to beat Donald Trump in the Republican Party primary," LaCivita said.

#### DESANTIS-IN-WAITING ... AND WAITING

For months, Trump's stiffest competition for the GOP nomination appeared to be the governor of Florida.

Fresh off a landslide reelection victory in November 2022, Ron DeSantis was a rising conservative star and one of his party's only bright spots in a bruising midterm election cycle. Some polls showed voters preferred him to Trump, who was being blamed for backing extreme candidates who cost Republicans winnable seats.

But DeSantis chose to wait until May 2023 to launch his campaign, giving the former president and his allies a six-month head start.

Trump's senior advisers urged him not to attack DeSantis until later in the race. But Trump, rebuffing their guidance, came out with his derisive "DeSanctimonious" before the midterm vote. The super PAC ads began last March.

"We made a big bet," said MAGA Inc. CEO Taylor Budowich. "We decided to go after him early and define him before he could define himself." That included pouring millions into ads hitting DeSantis for previously backing Social Security cuts.

For some top Trump aides, beating DeSantis was personal. A handful had worked for the governor previously, and some were burned by his actions. Even those who left on good terms were intimately familiar with his strengths and weaknesses and what would make him tick.

To contrast DeSantis' awkward interactions with voters, Trump's campaign began planning photo ops at pizza joints and diners that showcased the former president interacting with his fans.

Ridicule was also part of the strategy, including a memorable "pudding fingers" MAGA Inc. ad that highlighted unsavory reporting on DeSantis' eating habits, and accusations DeSantis wore lifts in his boots.

To blunt the governor's momentum, the super PAC also aired attack ads on networks such as CNN, trying to target more moderate voters considering the governor.

"MAGA Inc's national buys were targeted at national polls because that was the barometer of strength at that time — we were able to simultaneously drive down his standing in primary and general election polling," Budowich said.

Interviews with voters suggested those who had been open to a Trump alternative ultimately realized they preferred the original better.

"DeSantis, he can talk from here all day long," said Gary Leffler, a general contractor from West Des Moines, Iowa, as he pointed to his head. "Fact-wise, policy-wise, all this other stuff, he's pretty solid." But Trump, Leffler added as he moved his fist to his heart, "talks from here. And that's a gear that DeSantis doesn't have."



#### MCCARTHY'S PILGRIMAGE TO MAR-A-LAGO

Rival campaign aides said Trump's road to the 2024 GOP nomination began just three weeks after the Capitol riot on Jan. 6, 2021. That was when Kevin McCarthy, who was the Republican leader of the U.S. House, traveled to Mar-a-Lago and posed for a widely shared photo next to a grinning Trump at the moment that Trump was at his weakest.

Former U.S. Rep. Liz Cheney, an outspoken GOP critic of Trump, would later write in her book that McCarthy told her he had been summoned because Trump was depressed and not eating. (Trump said he was actually angry and "eating too much.")

But the normalizing episode signaled the party was not ready to give up on Trump.

"I thought it was the kiss of death for McCarthy, for the party and for the country," said Mike DuHaime, a senior adviser to the 2024 presidential campaign of former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, another Trump critic. "It breathed new life into Trump."

#### RISKY BETS THAT PAID OFF

From the start, Trump acted like the front-runner, declining invitations to multicandidate events and refusing to debate.

Trump's absence blunted viewers' interest and left his lower-polling rivals fighting one another instead of him.

"You've got to give credit to the Trump campaign," said Saltsman, who chaired the 2024 campaign of Mike Pence, who was Trump's vice president. "They treated it like they were an incumbent running for reelection."

Miller, the Trump adviser, said steering clear of the debates was part of a broader effort to focus on Biden. Trump went after the Democrat over the economy, the border and wars in Europe and the Middle East.

At the same time, Trump's team worked aggressively behind the scenes to line up endorsements that would signal his continued dominance of the party and the strength of his new campaign. It has been widely praised as far more disciplined and professional than past efforts that were plagued by infighting.

Trump invested "hundreds and hundreds of hours" in relationship development, said Brian Jack, a senior campaign aide who has led the outreach. Trump worked the phones, hosted dinners and invited officials to ride aboard his private plane.

He also astutely weaponized the endorsements. In April, as DeSantis was making a much-publicized trip to Washington before his expected campaign announcement, Trump's team released a set of new endorsements from Florida politicians. Later, Trump taunted Haley, an ex-South Carolina governor and his U.N. ambassador, before the New Hampshire primary by flying in a group of South Carolina officials who were backing his candidacy.

Marc Short, a top adviser to Pence's campaign, also pointed to Trump's more than 200 midterm endorsements. While Trump had mixed success that November, he proved a powerful kingmaker in GOP primary races that often devolved into fealty contests.

"Everyone saw the candidates he endorsed in their primaries won their primaries, signaling to others that, 'I better show my allegiance to Trump or I'm going to be in trouble,'" Short said.

Beyond the endorsements, Trump's team also worked closely with state parties as they set delegate allocation rules, encouraging winner-

take-all contests and other changes that would ultimately benefit a front-runner.

"We were closing doors to our opponents in the Republican nomination seven months ago before they even realized that was happening," LaCivita said.



#### THE LOYALTY FACTOR

As the first nominating contests neared, Trump's team worked to harness the dedication of his loyal supporters. The move paid off particularly well in Iowa, where historically frigid temperatures cut expected caucus attendance in half.

Trump's team rewarded its volunteers with perks such as VIP tickets to his rallies and gold-embroidered hats. Some, like John Goodrich, who lives in suburban Des Moines and knocked on 300 doors, received personal phone calls to thank them for their efforts.

"I was just thrilled," Goodrich said of the caucus day call. Trump "was very thankful for the help" and asked him about his family and his expectations for the night. "It just made me feel good that he would turn to just someone who was more or less a door-to-door salesman for him to get my opinion."

In both Iowa and New Hampshire, Trump's team also marveled at how DeSantis and Haley spent their time and money going after each other, largely sparing him from attacks.

In the end, DeSantis came in a distant second in Iowa, the state on which he had staked his campaign. He dropped out shortly afterward. Haley, who finished second in New Hampshire, has pledged to remain in the race through March, but her path forward remains tenuous.

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Associated Press writer Hannah Fingerhut in Des Moines, Iowa, contributed to this report.