

# SENATE REPUBLICANS WANT TRUMP BACK IN WHITE HOUSE - ASSOCIATED PRESS

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*Republican presidential candidate former President Donald Trump arrives to speak with reporters at the National Republican Senatorial Committee, Thursday, June 13, 2024, in Washington. After the 2020 election, many Republican senators distanced themselves from Donald Trump. Many were certain his political future was over. But it wasn't. The former president is now the party's presumptive nominee to challenge President Joe Biden. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci)*

Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell declared in a speech that Trump was “practically and morally responsible” for the violent Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol by spreading “wild falsehoods” about election fraud and trying to overturn his reelection defeat.

After the House impeached Trump for his actions, seven Republicans stood with Democrats and declared Trump guilty. He was acquitted, but several GOP senators — even some who still publicly supported him — distanced themselves from the former president. Many were certain his political future was over.

But it wasn't. Trump is now the party's presumptive nominee to challenge President Joe Biden. And on Thursday, he returned to Capitol Hill to meet with Republicans — the first such official meetings since his presidency — to enthusiastic and near-unanimous support from the Senate GOP conference, including many of the same senators who condemned him for his actions as he tried to block President Joe Biden's legitimate victory. McConnell shook his hand, multiple times, and gave him a fist bump.

The hard feelings, and any memories of the violent end to his presidency, seemed to have faded completely.

“I think that’s in the rearview mirror for most people,” South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham said of the 2020 election. “There will always be tension there. But I think most Republicans really see President Trump as the only way to turn this country around. And they’re enthusiastic about the chance.”

Republican senators’ embrace of the former president comes after years of ups and downs. With a few exceptions, senators have never backed him as consistently and as eagerly as their GOP counterparts in the House. But as he runs again, Senate Republicans are backing Trump more enthusiastically than ever.

The zealous Senate support is partly rooted in self-interest.

Republicans have a good shot at winning the Senate majority in November, and they know Trump’s support is key to doing that, especially in solidly Republican states like Ohio and Montana where Democratic incumbents are struggling to hold on.

And they are already starting to talk about what they will do if Trump wins and they gain both chambers of Congress. House Speaker Mike Johnson visited a Senate GOP luncheon Wednesday to discuss the possibility of tax legislation, among other things, if Republicans win full control.

“Our ability to get a majority in the Senate is intrinsically linked to Trump winning,” Republican Sen. Thom Tillis of North Carolina said after the meeting with Johnson. “So we’re like, one team, one vision.”

Texas Sen. John Cornyn, who is running to replace McConnell as GOP leader when he steps down from that post in November, said the party faces a “binary choice” between Trump and Biden.

“There is no Plan B,” said Cornyn, who had called Trump “reckless” after the Capitol attack. “I think people know the strengths and weaknesses of both candidates. And for me, I think President Trump is clearly preferable.”

Also, Cornyn added, “his support is going to be important in a lot of these states where he’s very popular, where we have Senate races.”

It's hardly the first time Republicans have returned to supporting Trump after attempting a clean break.

The arguments, and the whiplash, are a familiar pattern. McConnell, for example, fully backed Trump in the days before he was elected in 2016,

just weeks after the release of a decade-old tape in which Trump was caught on a hot mic bragging to a celebrity news anchor about grabbing women by their genitalia. McConnell had called Trump's comments "repugnant and unacceptable in any circumstance."

Many other Republican senators had been cool to Trump on the campaign trail that year and were outraged by the tape. Utah Sen. Mike Lee, now one of Trump's most loyal backers, recorded a video calling on Trump to step aside, saying he was a "distraction from the very principles that will help us win in November." South Dakota Sen. John Thune, who is also running to replace McConnell, also called on Trump to withdraw from the race. But he later backtracked on those comments.

Once he was elected, Republican senators publicly united behind Trump, aligned with him on policy and were elated by his conservative picks for the Supreme Court. Most of them defended him through the tumultuous investigations of his campaign's ties to Russia and rarely criticized him, lest they might be called out by the president on social media and face conservative voters' ire.

After Trump lost his reelection, though, very few senators backed his false claims of fraud, especially after the courts rejected multiple lawsuits and the Electoral College certified the votes. Thune and Cornyn both criticized his efforts to overturn his defeat in Congress in the days before Jan. 6, with Thune saying he thought the plan would go down "like a shot dog."

Trump later said on Twitter that Thune was a "RINO," or Republican in name only, whose "political career (is) over!!!"

And after the violence of Jan. 6, few had nice words to say.

"Count me out," said Graham in the hours after Trump supporters violently beat police officers and ransacked the Capitol. "Enough is enough."

But in the weeks, months and years afterward, most of them softened — especially as several Trump allies were newly elected to the Senate and Trump faced several indictments that Republicans see as politically motivated. By early this year, most of the Senate GOP conference had endorsed his third run for the White House, including McConnell, Thune and Cornyn.

By the time he was convicted in a hush money trial in New York late last month, he had a sweeping and united backing from the GOP Senate

conference.

“Now more than ever, we need to rally around @realdonaldtrump, take back the White House and Senate, and get this country back on track,” Cornyn said in a statement.



Though he struck a positive note in Thursday’s Senate meeting, even praising McConnell at one point, Trump’s rhetoric hasn’t changed much. He still claims the 2020 election was stolen, calls the rioters who were imprisoned for violence on Jan. 6 “hostages” and says he will pardon them, and has consistently bashed the judges who are overseeing his trials.

A handful of senators remain skeptical. Sens. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and Susan Collins of Maine, both of whom voted to convict Trump after Jan. 6, skipped the meeting with Trump. Louisiana Sen. Bill Cassidy, who also voted to convict, and Indiana Sen. Todd Young, who has declined to endorse the former president, both attended but would not answer questions from reporters afterward.

South Dakota Sen. Mike Rounds, whom Trump once called a “jerk” after he said that the former president didn’t win reelection, also attended the meeting and has endorsed him. He said Republicans had a good working relationship with Trump until the 2020 election, but “many of us that have disagreed with some of the analysis that was done.”

Senators will have to “work our way though that issue,” Rounds said, by concentrating on where they can agree.

“We’re going to focus on what we need to do to fix the economy, bring back a strong defense, try to put out a lot of the fires that are going on around the world, and focus on the policies,” he said.