Donald Trump and the Future of the GOP

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Abstract: The conclusion of the 2020 US presidential election left open questions about the future of the Republican Party, with or without former president Donald Trump. His presence at the top of many 2024 GOP polls lends the impression of a man hard to separate from his party. I examine this linkage through the 2020 American National Election Study, looking specifically at feelings toward the GOP and GOP figures Donald Trump and Mike Pence and measures of trust and authoritarianism among Trump supporters, as well as open-ended responses on political parties. I find that Trump was a driving force in the 2020 election in a way that Joe Biden was not, and is difficult to disassociate from the Republican Party. The strongest Republican Party identifiers seem to like Trump more than the party itself. His supporters demonstrate distrust of both the news media and experts while believing that corruption declined under Trump. When asked in open-ended questions to talk about political parties, survey respondents were far more likely to mention Donald Trump when discussing party negatives than any other candidate in recent years. In sum, these analyses point to a future in which Trump will very much be a defining figure in the Republican Party.

Keywords: Public Opinion, Political Parties, Authoritarianism, Donald Trump

1. Introduction

Following the 2020 US Presidential Election, prominent media outlets have asked about the future of the Republican Party and what place Donald Trump holds in that future [1]. It seems many in the party have not begun to contemplate a GOP without a prominent role for the 45th president, as 2024 Republican presidential primary polls show Trump approaching 50% of the vote [2]. Through an analysis of the 2020 American National Election Study (ANES), a picture emerges of a party difficult to separate from Donald Trump.

Donald Trump has been described as a figure of "unparalleled dominance" within the Republican Party [3]. Even after his "Big Lie" and the events of January 6th, Trump maintained the support of nearly three-fourths of rank-and-file Republicans [4]. Scholars have pointed to Trump's position in the GOP as exacerbating gaps between the major parties on demographics such as gender, age, and race [5]. Trump's rise was attributed in some academic circles to authoritarian voters [6]. Research on authoritarianism often places a premium on legitimacy of leadership and authority [7]. Thus, it is natural to ask, given the results of the 2020 election, how the party views Donald Trump, how closely the party is tied to Trump, and who might be next in line to fill that leadership role.

How strong are the ties between Trump and his party? Given that American politics are more candidate-driven than in parliamentary systems, perhaps American voters are able to leave issues with specific candidates and not apply affect toward parties in general. Cox and McCubbins, in fact, make explicit the dichotomy between personal and party reputations, saying that "politicians need to evaluate the trade-off between the value of personal and party reputations" [8] (p. 419). We do, however, have some anecdotal evidence that personal traits may transfer from candidate to candidate. For example, Al Gore's problems with personal integrity were to some degree an extension of Bill Clinton's issues in the same area. With Clinton's name not on the ballot, those who viewed Clinton's integrity as a problem had an outlet on the ballot in Al Gore [9]. Predictors of feelings towards Trump such as xenophobia were found to also be strong predictors of GOP support across Trump's campaign and time in office [10]. Anecdotal evidence further suggests that politicians themselves recognize an issue with keeping party members who are personally odious in the fold. With regard to Anthony Weiner's run for New York City mayor, former New York State Democratic Party leader Judith Hope

suggested Weiner's remaining in the race following a series of scandals would be "bad for the party" [11].

In the analyses that follow, I examine the relationship between Trump and the Republican Party, focusing specifically on what space, if any, exists between the two and the views of his supporters that may influence party leadership moving forward.

2. Methodology

Data is drawn from the 2020 ANES. Feeling thermometers run from 0 to 100, with higher numbers indicating greater favorability. Age is in years. I code all other variables to run 0-1. Ideology is from a 7-point self-placement measure, as is party identification. Education is from a five-category summary from less than high school through graduate degree. Attention is from a five-category measure asking how often the respondent pays attention to politics and elections. I also use a measure of authoritarianism and various measures of trust that are addressed later in the analyses that follow.

3. Results

3.1. Trump and the Republican Party

Feeling thermometers for Donald Trump and the GOP in the 2020 ANES show Trump generating a mean score of 40.44 to the GOP's 43.78, a significant difference (paired t-test, p<.001). A closer look, however, indicates that the higher score for the GOP is driven almost entirely by self-identified Democrats and independents. Self-identified strong Republicans feel slightly warmer towards Donald Trump than the party as a whole, a difference that is, once again, statistically significant (paired t-test, p<.001). There is seemingly a group of Democrats who believe in a GOP without Trump (or at least feel slightly better about the GOP, and Mike Pence, than Trump), but to those most firmly identified with the GOP, warmth toward Trump abounds. Also of note, there is no significant difference between feelings towards the GOP and feelings towards Mike Pence among all respondents, indicating that he is viewed as relatively indistinguishable from the party in a way that Donald Trump is not.

Table 1. Feeling Thermometers for GOP and GOP Figures, by Group.

	Trump Therm.	Pence Therm.	GOP Therm.
Overall	40.44	44.20	43.77
Strong Dem.	5.26	14.36	14.97
Weak Dem.	16.32	25.89	27.68
Dem. Leaner	8.62	17.17	21.69
Independent	35.71	38.84	39.65
GOP Leaner	67.77	66.93	60.74
Weak GOP	62.36	61.18	63.26
Strong GOP	88.67	85.30	81.64
Romney Voters (2012)	75.85	77.34	69.96
Obama Voters (2012)	17.15	24.55	26.55
No Democrats	57.21	58.06	57.02
N	8048	8045	8141

Of course, partisan identity is not created in a vacuum, so it is possible that those who love Donald Trump could also be more likely to voice a strong attachment to the party he heads rather than the other way around. Similarly, those who dislike Trump may be less likely to voice their support for or affiliation with the Republican Party. While imperfect, we can look at how Trump and the GOP as a whole fare among those who voted for Mitt Romney in 2012. Here, again, we see a similar pattern – Trump is held in higher regard by Romney voters than the GOP as a party (paired t-test, p<.001), although in this case Mike Pence is viewed more highly than Trump (paired t-test, p<.001).

3.2. Authoritarianism

Another point of importance regarding the future of the GOP is the authoritarian support of Donald Trump that has been demonstrated by other scholars [5, 12]. I use child-rearing measures of authoritarianism [13], rescaled 0 to 1, with higher values measuring greater levels of authoritarianism.

Table 2. Authoritarianism and Feelings Towards Biden and Trump.

	Biden Thermometer	Trump Thermometer
Authoritarianism	10.65 (1.79)*	4.75 (1.70)*
Party ID (GOP)	-49.15 (2.36)*	56.89 (2.46)*
Authoritarianism*Party ID	-16.63 (3.07)*	16.13 (2.85)*
Ideology (Cons.)	-24.92 (2.22)*	34.02 (2.31)*
Age	.237 (.027)*	.040 (.023)
Education	4.01 (1.44)*	-7.49 (1.59)*
Attention	3.07 (1.68)	4.55 (1.47)*
Constant	68.82 (1.81)*	-12.54 (1.62)*
N	6785	6777
R^2	.59	.67

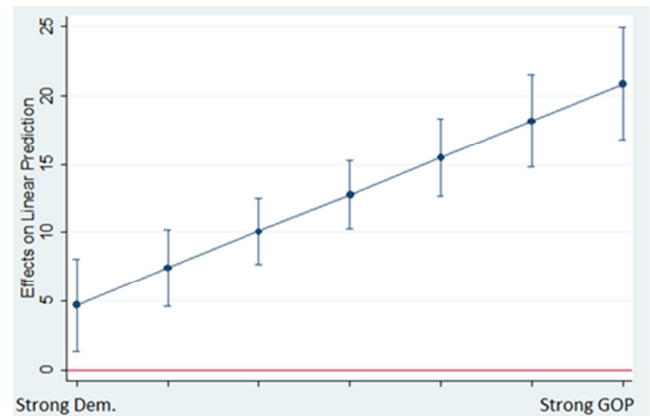*=sig.<.05, two-tailed test, weighted regression using ANES survey weights

Figure 1. Average Marginal Effects of Authoritarianism on Feelings Towards Trump.

While the effects of authoritarianism are dwarfed by the main effects of party identification and ideology (Table 2), we do see strong main positive effects of authoritarian child-rearing values on feelings towards both Biden and Trump. However, we also see significant interaction terms for party identification and authoritarianism, negative in the case of Biden and positive for Trump. What this interaction demonstrates, as seen in Figures 1 and 2, is that

authoritarianism predicts warm feelings for Trump across partisan groups (although increasing with GOP partisanship), but yields diminishing feelings for Biden moving from strong Democrats to strong Republicans. This finding is reminiscent of work by Wronski et al. [14] showing that, while seen more frequently in the GOP, authoritarianism does have predictive value within the Democratic party, as well.
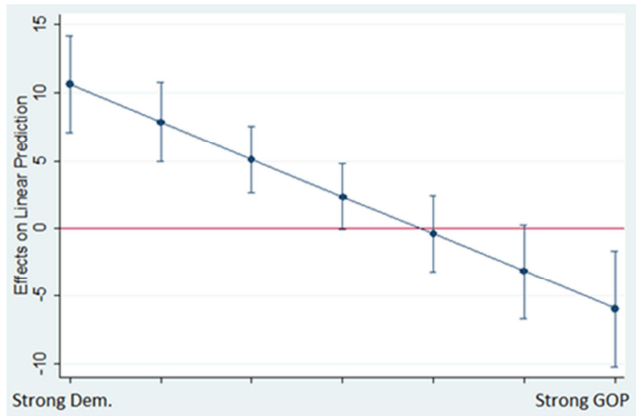

Figure 2. *Average Marginal Effects of Authoritarianism on Feelings Towards Biden.*

3.3. Trust

Perhaps further tightening Trump's grip on his supporters is that ANES data demonstrates that they lack trust in other political actors and institutions. This finding is expected, given research suggesting Trump is an authoritarian figure who uses us-versus-them rhetoric to appeal to voters [3, 9]. I look at trust using six different dependent variables, coded 0 to 1, using questions asking respondents if they trust the news media, local election officials, experts over ordinary people, and the government in Washington to do what is right, as well as how many government officials they believe are corrupt and if they think corruption has increased or decreased under Donald Trump. In Table 3, we see warm feelings towards Trump are associated with a distrust of news media as well as a trust of ordinary people over experts, and similar effects for conservative ideology and GOP party identification. While we do not see an effect for the Trump feeling thermometer on trust of election officials, we do see a relationship between authoritarianism and a distrust of election officials, as well as a relationship between warmth towards Biden and increased trust in election officials.

Table 3. *Trump and Biden Supporters' Beliefs on Trust and Corruption.*

	Trust Election Officials	Trust News Media	Trust Experts
Biden Therm.	.002 (.000)*	.003 (.000)*	.001 (.000)*
Trump Therm.	.000 (.000)	-.001 (.000)*	-.001 (.000)*
Authoritarianism	-.101 (.016)*	.036 (.013)*	-.099 (.017)*
Party ID (GOP)	.064 (.023)*	-.085 (.021)*	.065 (.020)*
Ideology (Cons.)	-.006 (.030)	-.114 (.027)*	-.125 (.029)*
Age	.004 (.000)*	.002 (.000)*	-.001 (.000)*
Education	.102 (.018)*	-.016 (.018)	.125 (.016)*
Attention to Pol.	.057 (.020)*	.061 (.016)*	.053 (.020)*
Constant	.222 (.028)*	.220 (.027)*	.569 (.026)*
N	6686	6690	6668
R^2	.14	.40	.20

	Trust Gov't Officials	How Many in Gov't are Corrupt	Corruption Under Trump
Biden Therm.	.002 (.000)*	-.002 (.000)*	.001 (.000)*
Trump Therm.	.002 (.000)*	-.002 (.000)*	-.004 (.000)*
Authoritarianism	.034 (.014)*	.026 (.013)*	-.047 (.014)*
Party ID (GOP)	.048 (.020)*	-.034 (.018)	-.068 (.025)*
Ideology (Cons.)	-.006 (.024)	-.032 (.021)	-.079 (.025)*
Age	.000 (.000)	-.001 (.000)*	.002 (.000)*
Education	.003 (.014)	-.066 (.015)*	.019 (.016)
Attention to Pol.	.016 (.015)	.008 (.016)	.067 (.018)*
Constant	.124 (.023)*	.817 (.024)*	.817 (.029)*
R^2	.08	.08	.47
N	6686	6667	6658

*=sig.<.05, two-tailed test, weighted regression using ANES survey weights

The measure of trust in government on the ANES is a bit difficult to parse, as it asks how often one can trust the federal government in Washington to do what is right. So, while we see a positive relationship between both the Biden and Trump thermometers and a belief that those in Washington can be trusted, respondents may be thinking about different officials as the ones they can trust, particularly in a divided government. Thus, both Democrats and Republicans are more likely to say they can trust government officials to do what is right "some of the time" while thinking of different actors and situations. Also of note here, Trump supporters, Republicans, and those higher in authoritarianism are more likely to say corruption decreased under Donald Trump. Taken as a whole, we see a picture where Trump supporters trust those authorities they view as legitimate – Trump and his orbit – but not the news media or experts.

3.4. Open-Ended Responses

Open-ended responses give us another area in which to look at how Trump may dominate public perceptions of his party. Here, I code for references to candidates in the open-ended questions asking respondents what they like and dislike about the Republican and Democratic parties. I code for references to either their first or last names, using Barack Obama in 2012, Hillary Clinton in 2016, and Joe Biden in 2020 for the Democrats and Mitt Romney in 2012 and Donald Trump in 2016 and 2020 for the Republicans.

Table 4. *Party Likes and Dislikes Mentioning Parties' Presidential Candidates, Open-Ended ANES.*

	Like About Dems.	Dislike About Dems.	Like About GOP	Dislike About GOP	N
2012	58 (2.8%)	96 (4.7%)	18 (0.9%)	26 (1.3%)	2054
2016	21 (0.5%)	60 (1.4%)	40 (0.9%)	143 (3.3%)	4270
2020	11 (0.1%)	80 (1.0%)	195 (2.4%)	922 (11.1%)	8280

While there is no statistical significance associated with these raw, unweighted tallies (Table 4), it is of note that, for the most part, references to candidates when asked about parties rarely moved above single-digit percentages over the course of 2012 and 2016, and references to Biden when discussing the Democratic party were muted, as well. Part of that, of course, comes with his status as a challenger as opposed to the incumbent. That said, references to Obama in 2012 did not come close to the negative references to Donald Trump when asked about the Republican Party – over 11% of respondents mentioned Trump. Keep in mind, also, that the 11% represents 11% of total survey respondents. The percent of those who chose to answer the open-ended portion of the ANES and mentioned Trump as a negative when associated with the GOP is actually higher – 19.6% percent of those who listed a dislike about the GOP mentioned Donald Trump specifically. In The American Voter Revisited, the authors assert that presidential candidates pass by like "shooting stars" [8] (p. 50). But for the GOP, it seems the "shooting star" that is Donald Trump is still streaking across the sky. The reputation of the party is tied to him, although it remains to be seen how strong this tie will be moving forward.

4. Conclusion

One open question is how Trump's dominance of the GOP compares to the dominance of other presidents as figureheads of their parties. I haven't dug far enough back in the ANES to answer this question. One additional future direction is to use survey experiments to get more precisely at what a GOP looks like without Donald Trump – i.e., how can future GOP actors grab the mantle currently held by President Trump? At the moment survey data seems to indicate a few contenders – Mike Pence, Ron DeSantis, to a lesser extent Ted Cruz – but they are completely washed out when Trump is included in primary polls. When we talk about authoritarian leadership, a necessary component is that the figurehead be viewed as a legitimate authority, and it remains to be seen who will take that title from Trump. It will also be interesting to see how trust, particularly trust in experts, ebbs and flows with, hopefully, the decline of the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, future analysis should seek to better understand the relationship between authoritarian tendencies in the electorate and support for politicians such as Trump, as some work has suggested that voters may appear more authoritarian as they take cues from political leaders [15].

In summary, the ANES paints a portrait of a Republican Party that is firmly entangled with Donald Trump in the minds of voters. The strongest Republican Party identifiers love Trump more than the party itself. And the GOP's detractors frequently cite Trump as the reason, in a way not seen with previous presidents of either party. Combine this with the trust placed in Trump by his supporters in a way they do not place trust in other institutions, and it is not hard to envision a scenario in which Trump plays kingmaker for the GOP in 2024, at the very least.

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