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Politics

# How Trumpism has come to define the Republican Party

By [Ashley Parker](#) March 24 at 7:09 PM

Over just a few days last week, the essence of Trumpism was on global display: The president [ignored his advisers](#) by congratulating Vladimir Putin, took the first steps toward [imposing tariffs](#) on billions of dollars in Chinese goods and [signed](#) a huge \$1.3 trillion spending bill that will balloon the federal deficit.

In each case, President Trump cast aside years of Republican orthodoxy — and most of the party followed right along. The raw, undefined brand of populism that Trump rode into office is now hardening into a clearer set of policies in his second year, remaking the Republican Party and the country on issues ranging from trade and immigration to spending and entitlement programs.

Even amid persistent unpopularity and the chaotic din of his White House, Trump has used a mix of legislation and unilateral actions to successfully push ahead with key parts of his vision — tariffs that have rocked global markets; harsh crackdowns on illegal immigrants; a nationalistic foreign policy that spurns allies while embracing foes and costly policies with little concern for the growing national debt.

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The spending legislation — which puts the deficit on track to pass \$1 trillion in 2019 — faced little meaningful opposition from Republican lawmakers despite years of GOP complaints that federal expenditures were out of control. Trump called the bill “ridiculous,” but focused on issues other than the amount of spending.

It was another example of how Trump seems to have overtaken his party’s previously understood values, from a willingness to flout free-trade principles and fiscal austerity to a seeming abdication of America’s role as a global voice for democratic values.

“While the president’s vision of pro-American immigration, trade and national security policies may not have had widespread support in Washington, they are widely supported by the American people,” said Raj Shah, a White House spokesman. “This is President Trump’s Republican Party.”

A tweet Friday, in which Trump threatened to veto the spending bill, also underscored another tenet of Trumpism — a state of continuous uncertainty about where he will land on key policies. In the tweet, Trump said he was frustrated with the legislation both because it “totally abandoned” young undocumented immigrants known as “dreamers” (long a Democratic priority) and because it failed to “fully” fund his controversial border wall (now a Republican priority).

“There has certainly been a wholesale repudiation of many core principles that have guided the Republican Party’s thinking over the years,” said Eswar Prasad, a professor of trade policy at Cornell University. “Their willingness to accept certain victories on their agenda in return for the acceptance of Trumpism more broadly — that seems to be the guiding principle of Republican Party leaders.”

Trump allies and advisers say that while he has in some ways reshaped the Republican Party, he rose to power by understanding where the party's base already was and channeling those existing worries and desires.

"I would argue that Trump is more a reflection of where the voters are today," said Barry Bennett, a former Trump campaign adviser. "I don't think he persuaded them into these stances. That's where they were. He's merely being a mirror to them. . . . He heard what the voters were talking about, what they feared, the pain that they had, and he immediately championed it."

White House officials also stressed that Trump's professed "America First" theme serves as a kind of connective ideology, whether in prioritizing American workers over foreign workers on immigration or calling for NATO members to spend more on a shared defense. They said that on many regulatory and economic issues, such as last year's tax cuts, the president and Republican lawmakers remain naturally aligned.

For many pro-Trump voters, one senior White House official said, the actual policies are less important than the principle — and the principal, Trump himself, promising to stand up and fight for them.

Sen. Bob Corker (R-Tenn.), who decided to retire this year after periodically sparring with Trump, described Trump's support in stark terms: "It's more than strong, it's tribal in nature," Corker said.

"People who tell me, who are out on the trail, say, 'Look, people don't ask about issues anymore. They don't care about issues. They want to know if you're with Trump or not,'" he said.

An NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll last week illustrated the point, finding that 59 percent of registered Republican voters said they consider themselves more a supporter of Trump than the Republican Party.

The question is whether Republican lawmakers and party leadership are compromising long-held values — or simply racing to catch up to a president and a party that has shifted underneath them.

"Obviously, the president has a bully pulpit and he's got a towering Twitter account," said Rep. Mark Meadows (R-N.C.), one of Trump's closest allies on the Hill. "Both of those allow him to communicate directly with some 49 million people each and every day. And it does affect policy, without a doubt."

Even while flouting GOP tenets on issues such as trade, Trump has embraced conservative positions on many social issues — keeping him in good stead with one of his strongest constituencies, evangelical voters. On Friday, for instance, the White House announced a policy to ban most transgender troops from serving in the

military. Trump also retreated to default conservative positions on gun control after suggesting broader restrictions in the wake of the shooting massacre in Parkland, Fla.

The shift to Trumpism is perhaps most stark on trade. Trump's protectionist moves — including a series of proposed tariffs, withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and threats to rip up the North American Free Trade Agreement — have quickly been embraced by a party that for years extolled the virtues of open markets.

In a [Quinnipiac University poll](#) earlier this month, 58 percent of Republican voters supported imposing tariffs on steel and aluminum imports. During the 2016 election year, [Pew tracked a massive drop](#) in the share of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents saying that free trade agreements had been a “good thing” for the United States, from 56 percent in early 2015 to 29 percent in October 2016.

Stephen Moore, a former Trump campaign adviser and senior fellow at the Heritage Foundation, said some of the realignment is a natural outgrowth of the fact that Trump — an unconventional leader not steeped in decades of GOP orthodoxy — is now the leader of the party.

“That’s just political realism,” Moore said. “A lot of my conservative friends say, ‘Well, I don’t agree with him on trade or immigration or infrastructure spending or whatever it may be,’ and my response is, it’s a package deal here. You can’t just pick out what you like and don’t like.”

Corker, who has seesawed in his support for the president, voted against the spending bill and excoriated it as “grotesque” Thursday in a speech on the Senate floor. “There are a lot of discussions about the fact that maybe the Republican Party has lost its soul,” he said, adding that the specter of a Republican-controlled Congress and a Republican president “getting ready to pass a bill that adds \$2 trillion in deficits over the next 10 years” should serve as “a wake-up call to people as to whether that’s the case.”

Trump has upended his party on other issues as well. On immigration, although many GOP voters already shared Trump's restrictionist impulses, his policies and hard-line rhetoric are at odds with long-standing attempts by Republican leaders to attract more Hispanic voters. After the 2012 presidential election, when Mitt Romney won just 27 percent of the Hispanic vote, a report by the Republican National Committee declared that the party “must embrace and champion comprehensive immigration reform.”

On entitlements, too, a number of rising Republican stars — such as House Speaker Paul D. Ryan (R-Wis.) and Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) — have vowed to overhaul the existing system to save the government money. Yet Trump has made no serious moves to change Medicare or Social Security.

Rep. Mike Simpson (R-Idaho) described the return to deficit spending as “scary” and said the solution was to tackle entitlements. “Ultimately, we’ve got to get entitlements under control,” he said. “That’s what’s driving the debt and deficit more than anything else.”

But the problem, Simpson said, is Trump. “You’ve got a president who said he won’t touch it,” he said. “Makes it kind of difficult, you know.”

Similarly, Sen. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.) said Trump “most definitely has, in part, given cover to congressional Republicans to drive up spending.”

“We had the president during the campaign saying he wasn’t going to touch the main drivers of our fiscal problems: Social Security, Medicaid, Medicare,” Flake said. “But this, we can’t blame this on our president. A lot of this is being driven by Congress, and a lot of this went on long before the president got here.”

Asked if there were any other notable areas — aside from spending, immigration and trade — where Trump had significantly remade the party, Flake chuckled.

“On the kind of decency stuff, certainly,” Flake said, before offering the flip side: “And creating a safe space for indecent discourse.”

*Scott Clement, Paul Kane, Seung Min Kim and Erica Werner contributed to this report.*

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