

Cozen Currents: Trump Enters Uncharted Political Territory (Again)

The Cozen Lens

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Despite the legal jeopardy arising from former President Trump's historic indictment, it looks like it could be a political boon for him, at least in the near term. But the longer-term implications on his 2024 campaign and the GOP more broadly are murkier.

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Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell's (R-KY) recent concussion and prolonged recovery is a reminder that the longest-serving Senate leader ever will eventually relinquish his top spot, with three "Johns" waiting in the wings.

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The Farm Bill is up for reauthorization this year, and food stamp benefits and climate change are likely to be partisan flashpoints. Farm Bill watchers should look to the 2014 legislation as a case study for this year's version.

The 800-lb Gorilla Sitting on the Elephant

The Indictment Impact on Trump. The New York indictment with other criminal investigations swirling leave former President Trump endangered legally but emboldened politically, at least at the present time among Republican voters.

- Trump is deploying the long-time Trump playbook with the indictment. He's indignant (calling the indictment a "political persecution and election interference at the highest level in history"), defiant (Trump said he "wouldn't even think of leaving" the presidential race due to indictment), threatening (warning of "potential death and destruction"), and loud.
- This helps Trump in the near term with the GOP base. His [presidential polling](#) improved post-indictment, which embodies the MAGA distrust of institutions. "If they can come for him, they can come for anyone," said Trump supporter Rep. Andy Biggs (R-AZ).
- The long-term outlook for Trump is more challenging. Beyond the legal threats, the general electorate is more weary and put-off by Trump's theatrics than the GOP base.

The Indictment Impact on the Republican Party. The GOP's relationship with Trump remains tangled, with most lawmakers hoping for a change but unwilling and/or unable to find a way to do so.

- The GOP establishment is too weak to confront Trump. In 1974, it was the GOP establishment that was able to push President Nixon to resign. Today, most Republican lawmakers want Trump to go, but the establishment fears Trump more than he fears the establishment.
- Republican voters [care more](#) about backing a candidate that best represents them than one who can best win the election. Most GOP voters believe Trump has had a [positive impact](#) on the party and is still the one who best channels the grievances and culture wars predominant on the right.
- GOP alternatives to Trump are in a holding pattern to take on Trump. Governor Ron DeSantis (R-FL), the top-polling alternative, moved to attack the indictment after first being



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more circumspect. DeSantis won't defeat Trump by attacking his moral character. A primary victory would come rather from showing he's more competent and effective in implementing a conservative agenda while at the same time being more electable.

The Indictment Impact on the Democratic Party. Being "not Trump" is the biggest asset for Democrats like President Biden. That means not getting in the way of the Trump news cycle and ongoing investigations.

- Democratic leaders are following the political Hippocratic Oath of doing no harm. They are keeping their distance from commenting on the indictment in order to avoid accusations of influencing criminal investigations and cases.
- President Biden is deploying his 2020 playbook for a 2024 rematch against Trump and/or "ultra-MAGA." That means an implicit contrast of the theatrics from Trump with the governing achievements and low drama of Biden.
- Biden's formal re-election announcement will likely wait until there's a lull in the Trump indictment developments. The wheels were in motion for an April announcement, but key personnel and organizational decisions still remain to be done and the president doesn't want Trump to overshadow his announcement.

Which John is the Future of the Senate GOP?

Is the McConnell Era Nearing Its End? The 81-year-old Senate minority leader is recovering from a fall that has left him out of work for weeks. This prolonged absence has brought renewed questions of Senator Mitch McConnell's (R-KY) reign as GOP leader.

- McConnell's longevity from being the longest-serving Senate leader ever comes from his ability to wield power. In a party now defined by anti-institutionalism, McConnell embraced being a conservative institutionalist. More often than not, McConnell delivers the votes and he gets things done, even if it's unpopular with more activist elements of the party.
- Life has gotten harder for McConnell though. While the Senate is a different beast than the "people's House," the makeup of Republican senators is changing. Some of McConnell's top allies have retired over the last six years. The institutionalists who have embodied the more collegial and collaborative years of the Senate are being replaced with more combative and partisan colleagues.
- Whether or not McConnell remains leader through 2026, seeks re-election or steps down early will depend on his health as well as the outcome of the 2024 elections.

A John-Centric Future. The Senate often doesn't have messy leadership fights, with parties seeking unity behind closed doors. Right now, the most likely successor to McConnell is someone named "John."

- Senator John Thune (R-SD) is the current number two as Republican whip. The former chair of the Senate Commerce Committee, Thune's policy positions and demeanor represent the pre-Trump GOP establishment that a number of GOP senators still pine for.
- Senator John Cornyn (R-TX) is a former whip, former leader of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, and close McConnell confidant. The differences between Cornyn and Thune are more stylistic than substantive. He's stuck his neck out on some politically complicated issues, like gun reform and the CHIPS Act, an asset or liability depending on who you ask.
- Senator John Barrasso (R-WY) is the current number three as Senate Republican Conference chairman. He's next in line to become whip when Thune's term expires after 2024. Of the three, Barrasso is the most conservative and vocally pro-Trump and has worked to cultivate relationships with newer Republicans in the Senate.

The Challenges and Opportunities for the Next GOP Senate Leader. The next Senate leader will have to balance the competing factions of the GOP while managing the relationship with the next president.

- McConnell has not feared confrontation with Trump and Trumpism. Right now, the Johns are to varying degrees more sanguine about sticking their necks too far out on the former president. If Trump were elected president again, a new Senate GOP leader may have to

decide how much to let Trump drive the agenda, and will certainly have to play an outsized role in filling in the legislative details.

- Senate GOP leadership may have a more collaborative relationship with someone like a President DeSantis. He is a former congressman and doesn't instill fear in GOP politicians like Trump does.
- A second Biden term will likely be a continuation of McConnell's agenda to stymie Democratic legislative and confirmation priorities and position the GOP for victory at the next ballot box. But like with McConnell, there may be some opportunities for bipartisanship, especially on must-pass items.

Farm Bill Pressure Points

The Future of SNAP. Perhaps the most partisan issue in the Farm Bill is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps.

- House conservatives' desire to fund the government for FY24 at FY22 levels could make SNAP an attractive target for fiscal hawks. According to the Congressional Budget Office, the Nutrition title of the 2018 Farm Bill, which was almost entirely SNAP spending, accounted for 76 percent of the total cost of the package. With cuts to Social Security and Medicare seemingly off the table following apparent agreement on the issue during President Biden's State of the Union address, that doesn't leave many other big pots of money to cut, especially if defense cuts are to be avoided.
- In addition to SNAP cuts, Republicans are also likely to seek greater restrictions on the program, such as work requirements or drug testing, for example. In his letter to Biden last week, House Speaker Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) didn't mention SNAP specifically but called out work requirements for welfare recipients as a proposal for cutting government spending as part of debt ceiling talks.
- SNAP cuts or restrictions are virtually certain to encounter pushback from Democrats, however, particularly at a time of high inflation. Moreover, some of the 18 House Republicans who represent districts won by Biden in 2020 could potentially buck their party on this issue.
- In addition to SNAP spending, lawmakers will also have to make decisions on eligibility for products to be purchased with SNAP benefits and other requirements for retailers.

Climate in the Farm Bill. How the Farm Bill addresses climate change is also likely to provide a dividing line for lawmakers.

- Traditionally, the Farm Bill's conservation programs have been voluntary and have gotten bipartisan support. Progressives are likely to see the Farm Bill as an opportunity to further progress towards climate goals, and they may seek to make some conservation standards mandatory. On the other hand, conservatives are virtually certain to oppose new climate regulations in the sector.
- The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) included \$20 billion for climate-related agriculture programs. Republicans could potentially target IRA agriculture funding as a fiscal offset or seek to redirect it, but this would likely hit a roadblock in the Democratic-controlled Senate.

A Path to Passage. The 2013-14 Farm Bill provides an example of how this legislation can still move forward under divided government.

- The 113th Congress faced similar political dynamics as in the current 118th Congress. In June 2013, the initial Farm Bill was defeated on the GOP-led House floor when 62 Republicans voted against it over fiscal concerns and only 24 Democrats supported it because the legislation included \$20 billion in cuts to SNAP. The Democrat-controlled Senate, on the other hand, passed a more moderate bill. The House later passed a different version and went to conference with the Senate, with a final Farm Bill ultimately passing in January 2014.
- Farm Bill politics don't cut neatly along partisan lines as agriculture isn't a traditional Republicans vs. Democrats issue. Lawmakers can cross the aisle based on particular issues, such as specific subsidies that affect their states or districts. Their stances can also change over time. For example, the House nearly voted to eliminate the sugar subsidy during consideration of the 2013-14 Farm Bill, but voted by a large margin to continue it in the 2018 Farm Bill. This dynamic can make the Farm Bill's path through Congress unpredictable, but it

also makes bipartisanship possible.

- Getting the legislation over the finish line may take longer due to partisan pressure points but that doesn't necessarily mean that the Farm Bill won't pass. The toughest part this time around may be the House amendment process, when lawmakers could offer changes that could endanger the legislation's broader base of support. Once the Farm Bill gets through that gauntlet in the lower chamber though, it's likely to have a clearer path to becoming law.
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