

Donald Trump's Continued Presence Unsettles Christian, Establishment Leaders

With Donald Trump's lead in both national and early-state polling growing, both the conservative Christian and establishment factions of the Republican Party appear to be doing everything in their power to avoid a Trump nomination.

The latest "talk" among political activists is of a "brokered convention" in which no candidate has an outright majority of delegates to win the party's nomination. Current GOP rules require delegates awarded as a result of the primary and caucus process be "pledged" to candidates based on their finish in each respective state, but after the first convention vote, they are "released" to vote for whomever they want.

"Whomever" can also mean a candidate who isn't even currently an official candidate in the race.

Evangelicals vs. Trump

It's no secret that while there are many evangelicals who are willing to support Trump's candidacy, there are many more who oppose it on moral grounds. In recent weeks, there has been a big push for evangelicals to unite behind U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas), as evidenced by a number of high-profile endorsements this week.

Thursday, Sarah Pulliam Bailey of *The Washington Post* reported that the search for a means of defeating Trump is becoming frantic for many evangelical leaders. In her report, she noted:

"Evangelical voters, who are an important voting bloc for the

Republican Party and are not easily led by their leaders, are all over the map in polls leading up to the primaries in key states. And many evangelical leaders are struggling to coalesce around one candidate who they believe could beat Trump.”

Currently, they have several choices, besides Cruz, to consider. Dr. Ben Carson, former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee and former U.S. Sen. Rick Santorum (R-Pa.) top the list for many evangelicals who haven’t already backed Cruz.

Trump’s 30-day polling average for the first three early-voting states—Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina—is percent. His 30-day polling average nationally is percent. Cruz sits in second place, based on the early-voting states, at percent, while Carson remains in second in the national average with percent.

Although there are signs his campaign may be in freefall, he currently has no motivation to drop out. Combining the early-state and national averages of Cruz, Huckabee and Santorum, you get and percent, respectively, which is more than 11 points fewer than Trump.

Establishment vs. Trump

It’s no secret, either, that there are many establishment Republicans—particularly those who have benefited from the status quo—who are loathe to see the GOP nominate a candidate who threatens to shake things up.

Thursday, Niall Stanage of *The Hill* reported that Cruz or Trump would be a “nightmare scenario” for the Republican Party establishment. In that report, he noted that the establishment has the same—in not, perhaps, even more daunting—uphill battle to coalesce that Christian conservatives face:

“That leaves the third member of the trio, Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, potentially well-placed to pick up the support of

center-right Republican voters who are looking for someone to stop Trump and Cruz at almost any cost.

“But Rubio is behind both of his top-tier rivals in national polling averages and is even further back in Iowa, home to the first-in-the-nation caucuses, where he holds fourth place, albeit behind the fast-fading Ben Carson.

“An even deeper problem for the Florida senator is that other candidates who are competing for the same voters are unlikely to drop out before the New Hampshire primary. That means votes that might otherwise go to Rubio could instead be won by contenders such as former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie and Ohio Gov. John Kasich.”

In reality, there are seven establishment candidates in the field: Rubio, Bush, Christie, Kasich, Carly Fiorina, U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham and former New York Gov. George Pataki. If you combine all of their 30-day polling averages in the early-voting states, you get percent, which would overcome Trump’s average.

Trump is polling higher—currently at percent—nationally, however, and several of the establishment candidates are polling much lower nationally, as well. Their combined national polling average is just , about three points lower than Trump.

No One’s Dropping Out

Because the field is so wide, and because candidates can hand over their pledged delegates to another candidate after suspending their own campaigns, there isn’t any motivation for the field to winnow down. Campaigns can “sell” their pledged delegates to others in exchange for relief on unpaid debts, or seek prime positions in the eventual nominee’s administration, should the GOP win back the White House next November.

The Republican National Committee’s rules were rewritten

following the 2012 nomination process in what was termed an effort to “streamline” the nomination process. Instead, it may have made the nomination unattainable for any candidate who doesn’t win a plurality of the delegates in the required number of states, currently set at five.

Rules can be changed, but there would be a tremendous backlash. A floor fight at the convention would be even uglier than the current state of the campaign and likely bring mainstream-media-induced embarrassment for the Republican Party.

“Gaming the system”—working within the current rules to manufacture a win—is an option, as well. In 2012, former U.S. Rep. Ron Paul’s campaign attempted just such a move at the national convention, but came up short, creating some minor headaches for party leadership.

And in 2008, one could argue “delegate math” is what ultimately gave Barack Obama the Democratic Party’s nomination over Hillary Clinton. As Patrick O’Connor of *The Wall Street Journal* noted in July: “Don’t be surprised if the savviest Republican campaigns start sending allies to Guam, Puerto Rico or the other territories that award delegates.”

Closed-Door Meetings

Thursday, Robert Costa and Tom Hamburger of *The Washington Post* reported that there was a meeting Monday in Washington, D.C., involving GOP National Chairman Reince Priebus and more than 20 of the party’s leadership and establishment powerbrokers. During that meeting, the conversation reportedly covered the possibility of a brokered convention.

“Weighing in on that scenario as Priebus and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) listened, several longtime Republican power brokers argued that if the controversial billionaire storms through the primaries, the party’s establishment must lay the groundwork for a floor fight in

which the GOP's mainstream wing could coalesce around an alternative, the people said," according to that report. "The development represents a major shift for veteran Republican strategists, who until this month had spoken of a brokered convention only in the most hypothetical terms—and had tried to encourage a drama-free nomination by limiting debates and setting an earlier convention date. Now, those same leaders see a floor fight as a real possibility. And so does Trump, who said in an interview last week that he, too, is preparing."

Apparently, Carson didn't get the memo, though. Based on a report Friday morning by Politico's Nolan McCaskill and Kyle Cheney, the retired neurosurgeon blasted the RNC over the WaPo report, saying, "I will not sit by and watch a theft."

His campaign released the following statement:

"If the leaders of the Republican Party want to destroy the party, they should continue to hold meetings like the one described in the *Washington Post* this morning.

"If this was the beginning of a plan to subvert the will of the voters and replace it with the will of the political elite, I assure you Donald Trump will not be the only one leaving the party.

"I pray that the report in the *Post* this morning was incorrect. If it is correct, every voter who is standing for change must know they are being betrayed. I won't stand for it.

"This process is the one played out by our party. If the powerful try to manipulate it, the Republican National Convention in Cleveland next summer may be the last convention. I am prepared to lose fair and square, as I am sure is Donald. But I will not sit by and watch a theft. I intend on being the nominee. If I am not, the winner will have my support. If the winner isn't our nominee, then we have a

massive problem. My campaign is about 'We the People' not 'They the Powerful.'"

Third-Party Run?

ABC News asked Carson about the *WaPo* report and his statement, and he said he would not attempt to mount a third-party campaign if he leaves the party. Last week, he told *CNN* a third-party run shouldn't be necessary, since Trump and the Republican Party had a signed agreement.

But if the GOP is reneging on its end of the bargain, Trump would have an opening to run an independent campaign. And recently, he renewed the threat to jump ship and run his own campaign.

As *CNN Politics* reporter M.J. Lee points out in a report published on Thursday:

"Successfully launching a third-party bid is complicated and tedious, but it's definitely doable—especially if you have money.

"Trump would need to dig into his wallet to build signature-gathering operations and get on the ballots in all of the states—a process that would likely cost tens of millions of dollars.

"But it's not clear if the billionaire real estate mogul is really willing to shell out."

It is unlikely an existing third party that already offers immediate ballot access would have interest in Trump as their own nominee. As *CNN's* Tal Kopan reported in August—the last time Trump toyed with leaving the GOP:

"Trump will have to keep an eye on the calendar and make some strategic decisions on where he chooses to run if he wants to mount a third-party bid, said minor party activist and ballot access expert Richard Winger.

“Winger, a Libertarian, has spent 40 years advocating for minor party candidates and maintains a website about ballot access.

“To appear on ballots in all 50 states and the District of Columbia would require collecting about 570,000 signatures, he said.

“According to a chart published in the July issue of his newsletter, the earliest deadline Trump would have to meet would be May 9 to get on the ballot in Texas. But Winger said a candidate could feasibly mount a legal challenge to that date, because Texas doesn’t require independents for other offices besides president to file until June.”

But ballot access isn’t the only obstacle he would face in an independent run. Most states have “sore loser” laws that prevent a primary contestant who loses from switching party affiliations and running in the General Election.

Maybe.

As Kopan’s report notes: “When you add them all up, practically every state is on record saying our sore loser law doesn’t apply to presidential primaries,” Winger said.