



Former President Donald Trump, the Republican presidential nominee, gestures as he leaves, after casting his ballot for early voting in Florida's primary election, in West Palm Beach, Florida, Aug. 14. (OSV News/Reuters/Marco Bello)



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Two months from tomorrow, voters will go to the polls. What must the Republican Party overcome, and what opportunities can it exploit, if it hopes to secure the White House and make gains in Congress?

The largest hurdle is obvious: Donald Trump. The thing that draws voters, especially those who have been disaffected from politics and disdainful of elites, to Trump has been his apparent straightforwardness. When most people recoil at his penchant for breaking norms, those voters celebrate it. When he speaks inappropriately, he is often giving voice to a sentiment they share. Even if they do disagree with what he says, they believe he is a man who means what he says and says what he means.

Then, as we saw last week, [with his flip-flop on abortion](#), Trump proves to be his own worst enemy. [After first saying](#) he opposed Florida's strict six-week limit "I am going to be voting that we need more than six weeks" he switched within days after receiving pressure from pro-life groups. Now, he promised to vote "no" on the referendum that would have overturned the six-week ban.

Will that kind of flip-flop matter? Politically engaged voters who care deeply about opposing abortion will surely still vote for Trump, given the Democrats' aggressive pro-choice stance. But how many voters who are usually not engaged politically, but for whom the abortion issue matters, will now decide to stay home? That number can't be large, but we can anticipate the election will be decided, as the last two were, by a few thousand votes in seven key swing states.

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The deeper damage is to his reputation for straight talk. The worst thing Trump can do is appear like he is just another politician. A significant number of people who had not voted in years turned out for Trump in 2016 precisely because he was not a typical politician. [A 2017 study by Democracy Fund](#) found that 5% of Trump's supporters fell into the category "the disengaged." One reason the polls were off that year is because the modeling pollsters used did not expect these people to turn up on election day. Enough of them did. When they see Trump perform an Olympic-quality flip-flop, and unless they are true believers, they might revert to staying at home on Nov. 5.

Trump also has done precious little to appeal to a discrete group of Republican voters he needs to win: those who voted for former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley in the primaries. Although Haley has formally endorsed Trump, and spoke at the GOP National Convention in July, a significant slice of her voters were "[double haters](#)," people who did not want to vote for either Trump or incumbent President Joe Biden. Now, with Biden out of the race, will some of their support turn to Vice President Kamala Harris? Haley garnered a quarter of the vote in the April Republican primary in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, the largest county in the all-important suburbs of Philadelphia. She had dropped out of the race in March. Trump's latest, exceedingly vulgar, misogynistic [attack on Harris](#), and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, doesn't endear him to suburban women voters.

The final, related problem Trump faces this year is Trump fatigue. "It seems hard to believe, but there was a time when we Americans could go days, or even weeks, without hearing about Donald Trump," [wrote William Becker in an op-ed](#) at The Hill. He is exhausting and even some of his fans are feeling it. Back in February, Siddhartha Deb [reported in The New Republic](#) that people at a Trump rally in South Carolina headed to the exits before the former president had finished his now familiar, rambling, over-long speech. [Others have reported](#) the same phenomenon at other rallies. The energy of his 2016 campaign, the sense of revolutionary ferment in the air, has disappeared.

The Republican Party has two things in its favor. One is the lingering frustration with, and experience of, inflation. Undecided voters are difficult to figure out: In this highly polarized political environment, who could be undecided? [A report at the New America Foundation](#) noted several characteristics about them, but this one seems especially relevant: "Policy positions have little effect on how undecided voters feel about the parties." That is to say, they are not very politically sophisticated. They

may not understand how little influence a president has over the economy, but they know that it is really hard to get out of the grocery store for under \$100.

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[A report from the Congressional Budget Office](#) gave substance to the impression, noting, "prices of the typical 2019 consumption bundle increased by more for lower-income households than they did for higher-income households. Conversely, incomes available to pay for that consumption bundle increased by more for higher-income households than they did for lower-income households over the same period." So, rich people ended up with more income after paying for their essentials, while poorer folk had less money left over. And, as the New America study of undecided voters concluded, "they are younger, less educated, less wealthy, and less politically aware and engaged than partisans." They are among those struggling.

The other thing the GOP has in its favor is, well, Trump. Yes, his flip-flops make him seem more like a regular pol. Yes, his inability to stay on message or reach out to voters he needs has crippled his campaign's effectiveness. Yes, his schtick is getting tired. But Trump still commands the news cycle. He still projects confidence and strength in a superficial way which might be enough for those low-information voters. If Harris slips on a banana peel, he won't be reluctant to jump on the situation, even if Trump today seems like the one who has been unable to avoid the peels, not least because he is the one putting them there.

If, however, he stops the self-inflicted damage, he is a formidable campaigner and messenger who could, as in 2016, motivate those people who are fed up with government and disdainful of elites to turn out and put him back in the White House.

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. [View the full series.](#)