

Bound to No Party, Trump Upends 150 Years of Two-Party Rule

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Photo



The high-water mark for independent presidential candidates since Theodore Roosevelt came in 1992, when Ross Perot won 19 percent of the popular vote. Credit: Edward Keating/The New York Times

WASHINGTON — When [Donald J. Trump](#) set his sights on the presidency in the 2000 election, he pursued the nomination of the Reform Party, a home for disenchanted independents. “The Republican Party has just moved too far to the extreme right,” he explained. “The Democrats are too far to the left.”

In the end, he dropped the campaign and the Reform Party, the leftover construct from [Ross Perot](#)’s two independent presidential candidacies during the 1990s. It was one of at least [five times](#) that Mr. Trump would switch party affiliations over the years. “I’m the Lone Ranger,” he once said in another context.

Now in the White House, President Trump demonstrated this past week that he still imagines himself a solitary cowboy as he abandoned Republican congressional leaders to forge a [short-term fiscal deal](#) with Democrats. Although elected as a Republican last year, Mr. Trump has shown in the nearly eight months in office that he is, in many ways, the first independent to hold the presidency since the advent of the current two-party system around the time of the Civil War.

In recent weeks, he has quarreled more with fellow Republicans than with the opposition, blasting congressional leaders on Twitter, ousting former party officials in his White House, embracing primary challenges to incumbent lawmakers who defied him and blaming Republican figures for not advancing his policy agenda. On Friday, he [addressed discontent](#) about his approach with a Twitter post that started, “Republicans, sorry,” as if he were not one of them, and said party leaders had a “death wish.”

While some conservatives complained about the apostasy of cutting deals with Senator [Chuck Schumer](#) of New York and Representative [Nancy Pelosi](#) of California, others applauded his assault on establishment Republican leaders like Speaker [Paul D. Ryan](#) of Wisconsin and Senator [Mitch McConnell](#) of Kentucky. By the week’s end, pundits speculated about whether Mr. Trump might seek re-election in 2020 as an independent.

“The truth is that he is a political independent, and he obviously won the nomination and the presidency by disrupting a lot of norms that Republicans had assumed about their own party and their own voters,” said Ben Domenech, publisher of The Federalist, a conservative website. “This week was the first time he struck out and did something completely at odds with what the Republican leadership and establishment would want him to do in this position.”

None of which means that Mr. Trump has suddenly transformed himself into a center-hugging moderate. More situational than ideological — critics would say opportunist — Mr. Trump adjusts to the moment, and his temporary alignment with Democrats could easily unravel tomorrow. The deal he cut, after all, merely postponed a fight over spending and debt for three months. It did not resolve any substantive disagreements.

But it showed that Mr. Trump does not feel beholden to his party. “I never viewed Trump as a strict adherent to Republicanism,” said Ned Ryun, a Trump supporter and founder of American Majority, which trains political activists. “He gave Paul Ryan and Mitch McConnell almost nine months to get something accomplished, and all they accomplished was to really remove all doubts about their legislative incompetence.”

Until now, the American two-party system has resisted assaults from the outside for more than a century and a half. No new party has captured the presidency since Abraham Lincoln’s Republicans in 1860.

Even formidable figures like Theodore Roosevelt failed to break up the duopoly. Unhappy with his Republican successor, William Howard Taft, Roosevelt formed his own Progressive Party, also known as the Bull Moose Party, to mount a comeback in 1912, [winning 27 percent](#) of the popular vote and 88 electoral votes, but losing to the Democrat, Woodrow Wilson.

Strom Thurmond in 1948 and George Wallace in 1968 staged independent candidacies founded on overtly racial appeals. John B. Anderson, a moderate Republican congressman, ran as an independent in 1980. The high-water mark since Roosevelt came in 1992, when Mr. Perot won 19 percent of the popular vote as an independent; he ran again in 1996 and drew less than half of that.

Photo



George Wallace, the former Alabama governor, ran for president as an independent in 1968 on an overtly racial appeal. Credit: Associated Press

By running within the [Republican Party](#), Mr. Trump last year managed what they never did, while making clear that he was not really a party man. The feeling was mutual. The Republican establishment resisted even after he had won enough primaries to secure the nomination, and he repeatedly threatened to run as an independent if he felt mistreated.

As someone who spent [George W. Bush's](#) presidency as a registered Democrat, Mr. Trump had the potential to cross lines, but once inaugurated, he chose a hard-right path of banning visitors from certain Muslim-majority countries, pulling out of a climate change accord and seeking to overturn Mr. Obama's health care program. He seemed uninterested in working with Democrats, and they seemed uninterested in working with him.

“There could have been some ways early on in his presidency to use his unique standing of a somewhat-independent who did not have the normal party strictures, and to date he has not been able to capitalize on that,” said Thomas F. McLarty III, who was [Bill Clinton's](#) first White House chief of staff.

Yet even as he ignored Democrats, Mr. Trump was not governing as a traditional Republican, particularly on issues like free trade or national security alliances. Republican leaders distanced themselves when he made racially inflammatory comments after a white nationalist rally erupted into violence in Charlottesville, Va.

Other presidents have tacked against their own parties at times. Franklin D. Roosevelt sought to oust conservative Democrats who bucked him during party primaries in

1938. [Ronald Reagan](#) worked with Democrats, who controlled the House, to pass his agenda. Mr. Clinton introduced the term “triangulation” to the political vocabulary as he negotiated budget and welfare deals with Speaker Newt Gingrich.

But none seemed as distant from his own party as Mr. Trump. Breitbart News, the archconservative website run by his former adviser Stephen K. Bannon, delights in attacking establishment Republicans like Mr. Ryan. At a conference in Washington this past week featuring prominent political veterans from both parties, Republicans often expressed harsher assessments of Mr. Trump than Democrats did.

“There’s still a big question about whether he has a political strategy that matches his willingness to bash his own party,” said William J. Antholis, director of the University of Virginia’s Miller Center, which sponsored the conference. “There’s clearly a genius about Donald Trump. The question is whether it translates into political wins. If he continues to do this, would he get the Republican nomination? Would he run as an independent?”

The more immediate question is whether he will continue to seek agreements with Democrats. “President Trump campaigned as a conservative with an independent streak,” said Greg Mueller, a conservative consultant. “This disposition helped him build a winning coalition, but I think it’s too early to make a determination that he will now adhere to a strongly independent path and steer from his more conservative base.”

The Democrats’ liberal base finds Mr. Trump so anathema that party leaders will be pressured not to make concessions in the interest of finding consensus.

“The profound problem for him is this would have been a smart way to do things eight months ago, but post-Charlottesville, it’s really hard,” said Neera Tanden, president of the Center for American Progress, a left-leaning research organization. “He can do deals where Democrats win, but it’s really hard to get progressives to stretch for Trump.”

As for Republicans, Mr. Domenech said they should not think of Mr. Trump as their party leader. “They need to approach him the way they would have approached a Ross Perot presidency,” he said. “They’re dealing with a guy who technically has an R next to his name, but only technically. We have to convince him that our way is better, not just assume he’ll think so.”

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Fear and Loyalty: How Donald Trump Took Over the Republican Party

The president demands complete fealty, and as the impeachment hearings showed, he has largely attained it. To cross him is to risk losing a future in the Republican Party.



Jonathan Martin and Maggie Haberman, *The New York Times* Online edition. Published December 21, 2019, and updated December 22, 2019

BIRMINGHAM, Mich. — By the summer of 2017, Dave Trott, a two-term Republican congressman, was worried enough about President Trump’s erratic behavior and his flailing attempts to repeal the Affordable Care Act that he criticized the president in a closed-door meeting with fellow G.O.P. lawmakers.

The response was instantaneous — but had nothing to do with the substance of Mr. Trott’s concerns. “Dave, you need to know somebody has already told the White House what you said,” he recalled a colleague telling him. “Be ready for a barrage of tweets.”

Mr. Trott got the message: To defy Mr. Trump is to invite the president’s wrath, ostracism within the party and a premature end to a career in Republican politics. Mr. Trott decided not to seek re-election in his suburban Detroit district, concluding that running as a Trump skeptic was untenable, and joining a wave of Republican departures from Congress that has left those who remain more devoted to the president than ever.

“If I was still there and speaking out against the president, what would happen to me?” Mr. Trott said before answering his own question: Mr. Trump would have lashed out and pressured House G.O.P. leaders to punish him.

Just under four years after he began his takeover of a party to which he had little connection, Mr. Trump enters 2020 burdened with the ignominy of being the first sitting president to seek re-election after being impeached.

But he does so wearing a political coat of armor built on total loyalty from G.O.P. activists and their representatives in Congress. If he does not enjoy the broad admiration Republicans afforded Ronald Reagan, he is more feared by his party’s lawmakers than any occupant of the Oval Office since at least Lyndon Johnson.

His iron grip was never firmer than over the last two months, during the House inquiry that concluded Wednesday with Mr. Trump’s impeachment on charges of abuse of power and obstructing Congress. No House Republican supported either article, or even authorized the investigation in September, and in hearing after hearing into the president’s dealings with Ukraine, they defended him as a victim of partisan fervor. One Republican even said that Jesus had received fairer treatment before his crucifixion than Mr. Trump did during his impeachment.

Perhaps more revealing, some G.O.P. lawmakers who initially said Mr. Trump’s phone call with the president of Ukraine was inappropriate later dropped their criticism. People close to Mr. Trump attributed the shift both to his public defense of the call as “perfect” and to private discussions he and his allies had with concerned lawmakers.

This fealty hardly guarantees Mr. Trump re-election: He has never garnered a 50 percent approval rating as president and over half of voters tell pollsters they will oppose him no matter who the Democrats nominate.

But the shoulder-to-shoulder unity stands in contrast to Democrats at the moment, with their contentious moderate-versus-liberal primary that was on full display in Thursday night’s debate. And it is all the more striking given Mr. Trump’s deviations from longstanding party orthodoxy on issues like foreign policy and tariffs.

“He has a complete connection with the average Republican voter and that’s given him political power here,” said Representative Patrick McHenry, Republican of North Carolina, adding: “Trump has touched the nerve of my conservative base like no person in my lifetime.”

Interviews with current and former Republican lawmakers as well as party strategists, many of whom requested anonymity so as not to publicly cross the president, suggest that many elected officials are effectively faced with two choices. They can vote with their feet by retiring — and a remarkable 40 percent of Republican members of Congress have done so or have been defeated at the ballot box since Mr. Trump took office.



Representative Dave Trott of Michigan decided not to seek re-election in 2018 after determining it was untenable to run as an anti-Trump Republican. Credit: Bill Clark/CQ Roll Call, via Associated Press

Or they can mute their criticism of him. All the incentives that shape political behavior — with voters, donors and the news media — compel Republicans to bow to Mr. Trump if they want to survive.

Sitting in a garland-bedecked hotel restaurant in his former district, Mr. Trott said that he did not want to seek re-election “as a Trumper” — and that he knew he had little future in the party as an opponent of the president.

There is no market, he said, for independence. Divergence from Trumpism will never be good enough for Democrats; Mr. Trump will target you among Republicans, Mr. Trott added, and the vanishing voters from the political middle will never have a chance to reward you because you would not make it through a primary. That will be ensured in part by the megaphone the president wields with the conservative news media.

“Trump is emotionally, intellectually and psychologically unfit for office, and I’m sure a lot of Republicans feel the same way,” Mr. Trott said. “But if they say that, the social media barrage will be overwhelming.” He added that he would be open to the presidential candidacy of former Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg of New York.

On the other hand, Mr. Trump dangles rewards to those who show loyalty — a favorable tweet, or a presidential visit to their state — and his heavy hand has assured victory for a number of Republican candidates in their primaries. That includes Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida, who [did as many Fox News appearances](#) as possible to draw the president’s attention.

“The greatest fear any member of Congress has these days is losing a primary,” said former Representative Carlos Curbelo, Republican of Florida, who lost his general election last year in a heavily Hispanic Miami-area district. “That’s the foremost motivator.”

The larger challenge with Mr. Trump is that all politics is personal with him, and he carefully tracks who on television is praising him or denouncing his latest rhetorical excess. “He is the White House political director,” Scott Reed, a longtime Republican consultant, said.

More conventional presidents may be more understanding of lawmakers who are pulled in a different direction by the political demands of their districts — but Mr. Trump has shown little tolerance for such dissent. Mr. Curbelo, for instance, occasionally spoke out against Mr. Trump, particularly over immigration policy, and the president took notice.

Riding with Mr. Trump in his limousine on Key West last year, Mr. Curbelo recalled in an interview that the president had noted that people were lining the streets to show their support for him, and asked Mr. Curbelo if they were in his district.

He said they were, prompting the president to turn to others in the car and say: “Maybe Carlos will stop saying such nasty things about me,” Mr. Curbelo recalled.

He said they all laughed but the “passive aggressive” comment, as he put it, was not lost on him.

Increasingly, though, Mr. Trump does not even have to make implied threats within his party — Republicans can ascertain the benefit of sticking with him.



Representative Carlos Curbelo occasionally spoke out against Mr. Trump over immigration policy. He lost re-election in 2018. Credit...Pedro Portal/Miami Herald, via Associated Press

Representative Elise Stefanik hails from an upstate New York district that the president carried by 14 points yet she had not previously hesitated to go her own way.

“I have one of the most independent records in the House,” Ms. Stefanik said. “And I have critiqued the president, have voted differently than the president.”

Yet after she vehemently criticized the impeachment hearings and found herself under attack by George Conway, the anti-Trump husband of the White House adviser Kellyanne Conway, she welcomed the embrace of the president, his family and news media allies such as the Fox News host Sean Hannity — and the campaign donations that poured in.

Ms. Stefanik said she opposed impeachment because Democrats failed to make a convincing case. But she said that she would not have even voted to censure the president, and that she was chiefly driven by wanting to “stand up for my district.”

And, Ms. Stefanik noted, since her “no” vote she had received “the most positive calls since I was sworn into office.”

The incentive to show fealty to Mr. Trump has become evident to the Club for Growth, a fiscal conservative group that was made famous for its willingness to fund primaries against Republican leaders and was hostile to Mr. Trump in 2016.

The group’s president, David McIntosh, said conservative voters had lost interest in punishing ideological heresies and were motivated by one overarching factor unrelated to policy.

“Poll after poll showed us that Republican primary voters wanted their nominees to support President Trump,” he said, “so in order to make sure they were viable and would get re-elected, they ended up being supporters of his.”

Mr. McIntosh and Republican lawmakers said Mr. Trump’s largely conservative record had made it easier to remain loyal, noting his tax cuts, deregulation and judicial appointments.

Lawmakers not seeking re-election are often the most candid about the slavish devotion Mr. Trump engenders with voters — and the pressure it puts on them.

“Public officials need to be held accountable, and I don’t think any governmental system works well with blind loyalty without reason,” said Representative Francis Rooney of Florida, who announced his intention to retire earlier this year after criticizing Mr. Trump for his conduct with Ukraine and suffering an immediate backlash.

Mr. Rooney ultimately voted against impeachment, but told colleagues he felt uneasy about it. Recalling an appearance on a Florida television station afterward, Mr. Rooney said: “They interviewed me after the vote and then they interviewed one of these Cape Coral Republican ladies and she said, ‘Well, it’s about time they came around to realize it’s a big media hoax.’ How do you argue with that? How do you reason with that?”

Many of the Republicans who may have considered impeaching Mr. Trump are gone. They were part of a 40-seat loss the party had in the House last year, which deprived the

caucus of many of its most independent figures and left it more supportive of the president than ever.

So why was there no introspection within the party after the midterms about the damage Mr. Trump did to Republican candidates, particularly in the suburbs?

“If you go to any Republican event, you’re going to find more people at that event than ever before,” Mr. Trott said, “and every single one of them to a person will be all in for President Trump. They’ll all have ‘Make America Great Again’ hats on and they’ll be saying what a tremendous president he is.”



Representative Elise Stefanik, Republican of New York, was a vocal defender of Mr. Trump during impeachment hearings. Credit...Erin Schaff/The New York Times

Mr. Trott recounted one of his most vivid memories of his time serving with Mr. Trump. It was the day in 2017 when House Republicans voted to repeal the A.C.A. and celebrated afterward at the White House.

Mr. Trott was one of the first lawmakers to enter the Oval Office after the Rose Garden celebration and he stood behind the president’s desk when Mr. Trump pulled out a sheet of paper.

“He already had a list of 20 people who had voted against him two hours earlier,” he recalled.

Nicholas Fandos contributed reporting from Washington, and Kitty Bennett contributed research.

How the Trump Campaign Took Control of the G.O.P.: Seizing Voter Data and Fund-Raising Arms to Amass Power and Turn a Profit

Danny Hakim and Glenn Thrush, *The New York Times* National Edition, March 9, 2020, pp. A1, A14.

WASHINGTON — President Trump’s campaign manager and a circle of allies have seized control of the Republican Party’s voter data and fund-raising apparatus, using a network of private businesses whose operations and ownership are cloaked in secrecy, largely exempt from federal disclosure.

Working under the aegis of Jared Kushner, the president’s son-in-law, with the cooperation of Trump appointees at the Republican National Committee, the operatives have consolidated power — and made money — in a way not possible in an earlier, more transparent analog era. Since 2017, businesses associated with the group have billed roughly \$75 million to the Trump campaign, the Republican National Committee and a range of other Republican clients.

The takeover of the Republican Party’s under-the-hood political machinery parallels the president’s domination of a party that once shunned him, reflected in his speedy impeachment trial and summary acquittal. Elected Republicans have learned the political peril of insufficient fealty. Now, by commanding the party’s repository of voter data and creating a powerful pipeline for small donations, the Trump campaign and key party officials have made it increasingly difficult for Republicans to mount modern, digital campaigns without the president’s support.

The process has not been exactly frictionless, shot through with accusations of empire-building and profiteering by the campaign manager, Brad Parscale, and his allies. Mr. Parscale’s flagship firm, Parscale Strategy, has billed nearly \$35 million to the Trump campaign, the R.N.C. and related entities since 2017 — the vast bulk of it, he says, passed along to advertising and digital firms.

What’s more, the move to consolidate voter data came at the expense of a competing data vehicle developed by the conservative activist Koch brothers, provoking resentment from Koch allies, especially in the Senate. And a fierce pressure campaign to centralize fund-raising on the new platform, a for-profit company that Mr. Trump [branded](#) WinRed, brought dissent from candidates initially reluctant to sign on, as well as competitors who believed they were being pushed aside without a fair hearing.

For all that, WinRed, created last summer, has given the party an overdue counterweight to ActBlue, the Democrats’ small-donor fund-raising juggernaut. With WinRed, donors could contribute with a few clicks, and candidates could reap windfalls through joint appeals with the president. In its first six months, capitalizing on the Republican base’s outrage over impeachment, WinRed raised \$100 million, a fast start, though still well behind the roughly \$1 billion raised last year by ActBlue.



While Jared Kushner's responsibilities in the White House have varied since his father-in-law took office, his most consistent role has been informal campaign chairman. Credit...Anna Moneymaker/The New York Times

“It is completely, thoroughly ironic that Trump, who ran against anything to do with the R.N.C. and the establishment, is the guy who is breathing new life into the party,” said WinRed’s chairman, Henry Barbour. Perhaps no one better represents the new outside-in reality than Mr. Barbour — nephew of the former Republican Party chairman Haley Barbour — who once said it would be “[very hard](#)” to vote for Mr. Trump.

The younger Mr. Barbour is also chairman of the other central pillar of the Republican machine, Data Trust, a storehouse of personal, commercial and demographic voter data collected from state parties and voter files or bought from data brokers (or from WinRed, itself a vital source of donor information). Data Trust, a private company controlled by a board of Republican grandees, provided much of the raw material behind the Republicans’ digital-messaging advantage in 2016 — a deficit that the Democrats, after leading on tech during the Obama years, are now struggling to close amid the divisive funk of this primary season.

The Parscale-led group — including Katie Walsh Shields and her husband, Mike Shields, both former R.N.C. chiefs of staff; and the party’s former digital director, Gerrit Lansing — has also presided over the creation of a number of other political tools, from the president’s affiliated super PACs to a forthcoming party-controlled news app intended to produce cheerleading content.

Mr. Parscale declined to comment in detail for this article. But he and his associates have said that private companies give them greater operational flexibility, given the constraints of campaign-finance laws. (ActBlue, by contrast, is a nonprofit. Both entities, though, are required to [disclose individual donors](#).) Still, the millions moving through opaque private businesses have left even the president perpetually concerned

that Mr. Parscale and his team are making too much money, according to campaign and White House staff members.

The Trump family looms over the whole operation, starting with Mr. Kushner. While his [White House](#) portfolio has variously encompassed everything from immigration to the Middle East, his most consistent assignment has been informal campaign chairman, overseeing the most vital arm of the new family business: politics.

According to two people with knowledge of the matter, Parscale Strategy has also been used to make payments out of public view to Lara Trump, the wife of the president's son Eric, and Kimberly Guilfoyle, the girlfriend of Donald Trump Jr., who have been [surrogates on the stump](#) and also taken on [broader advisory roles](#). Their presence makes for an odd dynamic between a campaign manager and a candidate's family.

[During a campaign appearance last summer in Orlando](#), Ms. Guilfoyle confronted Mr. Parscale: Why were her checks always late? Two people who witnessed the encounter said a contrite Mr. Parscale promised that the problem would be sorted out promptly by his wife, Candice Parscale, who handles the books on many of his ventures.



ActBlue, the Democrats' small-donor fund-raising platform, is a nonprofit. WinRed, which the Republicans developed in response, is a private company. Credit...Jessica Rinaldi/The Boston Globe, via Getty Images

A Data Arms Race

In the aftermath of Mitt Romney's failed 2012 presidential run, the Republican Party released a [100-page report](#) that many considered an autopsy. Reince Priebus, then the R.N.C. chairman, offered [this blunt assessment](#): "Our message was weak. Our ground game was insufficient. We weren't inclusive. We were behind in both data and digital."

While Mr. Trump's team shredded its core recommendation — a tolerant immigration policy and outreach to women and minorities — it embraced the call for technological change.

Previously, parties had spent heavily on television advertising, but now the R.N.C. moved to rebuild around Data Trust, which it had recently [helped establish](#). The idea was compelling: If state and national party committees and campaigns fed information into one place, it could create a deeper understanding of voters. If that place were outside the party, fund-raising limits would not apply. Contractors were fired, and much of the R.N.C.'s data staff was moved into Data Trust, which effectively became an off-campus arm of the party.

“Naturally we faced opposition from a lot of the entrenched interests who had business models that benefited from the old way of doing things,” said Mr. Shields, the R.N.C. chief of staff in 2013 and 2014.

That included the Koch brothers and their data vehicle, i360, which built personality profiles of millions of voters and was used by a number of campaigns. They weren't the only skeptics who worried that the committee was steering business to its pet company. Aides to the Senate majority leader, Mitch McConnell, believed that Data Trust was inferior to its competitor, and Mr. McConnell gave senators the option of using either.

The battle came to a head in mid-2016, when Mr. Priebus and Ms. Walsh-Shields, who had become R.N.C. chief of staff the previous year, visited the National Republican Senatorial Committee. She accused the committee of working against the interests of the party and its presumptive presidential nominee, Mr. Trump. From there, the meeting devolved into shouting, several Republicans with direct knowledge of the clash said.

While Ms. Walsh-Shields said in a statement that she did not recall the specific meeting, she added: “I have found that quite often when a woman in a position of power disagrees with a man, it is later referred to as a bad meeting.” She said the Senate committee's staff was “bizarrely very beholden to using i360 and the Koch brothers' system,” while Mr. Priebus's general position was that the party would help pay campaigns' staff expenses only if those aides were “going to be using — and gathering — data that would help elect the president.”

In the end, some Senate Republicans continued to use the Koch data.

Money was another point of contention. Some Senate committee staff members chafed at a consulting contract given to Mr. Shields by Data Trust, given Ms. Walsh-Shields's influence, though she had briefly left the R.N.C. in 2017 during the period when it was awarded. (Mr. Barbour said Mr. Shields “provided tremendous value.”) Data Trust also chronically needed to purchase new state voter files and pay its staff and vendors like Mr. Shields. The party has pumped nearly \$15 million into the company since 2016, filings show.

Building relations with Senate Republicans became secondary after Mr. Trump secured the nomination. Ms. Walsh-Shields struck an unlikely alliance with Mr. Parscale, then the Trump campaign digital director, when the two began sharing a Trump Tower office.



Katie Walsh Shields, a Parscale associate whose consulting firm is on retainer with the R.N.C. and gets a cut of every dollar raised for the party's 2020 convention. Credit...Cliff Owen/Associated Press

Mr. Parscale, now 44, was a small-time San Antonio web entrepreneur with a gift for salesmanship. Ms. Walsh-Shields, 35, had worked her way up [through the political ranks](#) on the strength of her fund-raising abilities and knowledge of the party's internal workings. With Mr. Kushner's blessing and Data Trust's information — and some help from the now-defunct, controversial data firm Cambridge Analytica — Mr. Parscale focused on targeting Facebook ads at voters.

Karl Rove, campaign manager and confidant to President George W. Bush, was [an early backer](#) of Data Trust and has been informally advising Mr. Parscale. He wrote in a [recent Wall Street Journal op-ed](#) that technology had played a critical role in battleground states, adding, "Data Trust was a big reason why Donald Trump won the 2016 election."

Building a Cash Machine

Just before the Republicans lost the House in 2018, Mr. Kushner convened a cadre of operatives at the Trump family's Washington hotel to confront a rising threat to the president.

Republicans had watched with alarm as ActBlue helped Beto O'Rourke, a previously obscure Texas congressman, pull in [more than \\$50 million](#) for his improbably serious challenge to Senator Ted Cruz. Megadonors warned Mr. Kushner that, come 2020, they would not make up for the party's small-donor deficit.

Republicans had fund-raising tools, but by coalescing around a single vendor like ActBlue, candidates could raise money jointly and more easily share data on contributors. There were several contenders. But to Mr. Kushner and Mr. Parscale, who

by then was the 2020 campaign manager, only one vendor was acceptable, according to several people with knowledge of the deliberations: a company called Revv which had already been processing payments for the campaign.



Mr. Parscale, second from left, with Mr. Kushner. Both embraced Revv, a fund-raising tool co-founded by the Republican Party's former digital director. WinRed was later built atop Revv. Credit...Jonathan Ernst/Reuters

Revv had been co-founded by Mr. Lansing, who was well regarded as a tech-savvy operator and for raising alarms about ActBlue for years. But in 2017, Politico reported that, [after taking over as the R.N.C.'s digital director the year before](#), he had encouraged Republican campaigns to use Revv, earning a \$909,000 payout from the company. Some party veterans viewed this as self-dealing.

By the summer of 2019, WinRed was created atop Revv's platform, but only after negotiations that ended with the Senate campaign committee, and R.N.C. representatives, imposing restrictions that blocked Mr. Lansing from selling WinRed in the future and tightening control of firms he could hire.

Mr. Lansing, in a statement, called WinRed "the work of seven months of lawyering to ensure every major stakeholder would be happy with all data, financial and ownership arrangements."

The new company was a joint venture between Revv and Data Trust, with 60 percent of profits going to Revv. (WinRed charges campaigns 3.8 percent, plus 30 cents per credit card transaction.) Officials involved would not detail Mr. Lansing's remuneration. Mr. Parscale, Ms. Walsh-Shields and Mr. Shields do not own stakes, according to financial records reviewed by The New York Times.

WinRed became ascendant, and this time the Trump team and Senate Republicans joined in a pressure campaign to convert holdouts. Mr. McConnell told colleagues at a lunch in mid-2019 that his personal goal was to “shut down all the competitors,” according to one senator who was surprised at the majority leader’s directness. The party even sent a cease-and-desist letter to one of the losing contenders, Anedot, instructing it to remove G.O.P. logos from solicitations.

With or without a stake in WinRed, key aides have positioned themselves at the center of a formidable political machine. Ms. Walsh-Shields’s consulting firm receives a \$25,000-a-month R.N.C. retainer and 1 to 5 percent of money it raises for the party’s 2020 convention. Mr. Shields’s firm, Convergence Media, represents clients ranging from the National Republican Congressional Committee to Representative Devin Nunes of California, one of the president’s staunchest defenders against impeachment.

But it is Mr. Parscale who has most often been the focus of Mr. Trump’s complaints that those around him are making too much money from his name and brand. Mr. Parscale has not always discouraged suspicions. A few weeks before the 2016 election, the campaign staff gathered at the Whiskey Trader, a watering hole near Trump Tower, to play beer pong and brace for near-certain defeat. In walked Mr. Parscale, returning from dinner with a new campaign hire.

“I’m making so much money!” Mr. Parscale declared, inserting an expletive, according to two people who were present.

Mr. Parscale, in a statement, called their account “untrue and ridiculous,” but since his appointment as campaign manager, he has bought a \$2.4 million canalside home in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.; two condos, owned with his family, together worth \$2 million; and a Ferrari. A campaign official attributed the spending to Mr. Parscale’s relocation and divestment from businesses in Texas.

But after a rival aide left an underlined copy of a [Daily Mail](#) story detailing his spending on the president’s desk, Mr. Trump summoned Mr. Parscale for a pointed lecture, according to a senior White House official.

Others in his circle have made purchases of their own. Mr. Lansing bought a \$1.7 million home in Washington last year, while Ms. Walsh-Shields and Mr. Shields bought a \$2 million beach house in the Florida panhandle. Asked about the house, Ms. Walsh-Shields referred a reporter to her mother, who said the down payment and mortgage payments had come mostly from her. Mr. Shields had also recently sold the house he owned before their marriage.

That Ms. Walsh-Shields has endured is noteworthy. While Vice President Mike Pence said, in a statement, that “we are grateful for her hard work, loyalty and professionalism,” Mr. Trump has privately referred to her as a ‘leaker,’ blaming her for unflattering media coverage during her brief tenure as White House deputy chief of staff in 2017. He has pressed Ronna McDaniel, the party chairwoman, about Ms. Walsh-Shields’s role in recent days. And during a meeting last summer, after prodding by his longtime security consultant, Keith Schiller, the president asked if Ms. McDaniel trusted her, according to people with knowledge of the exchanges. “I do,” Ms. McDaniel replied. “She works for me.”

‘We Have the Upper Hand’

Start-ups have proliferated around the Trump campaign.



The president with Ronna McDaniel, the R.N.C. chairwoman, who has defended Ms. Walsh-Shields. Credit...Zach Gibson for The New York Times

A company called Excelsior Strategies, run by employees at Mr. Shields’s firm, Convergence, was contracted to rent [Mr. Trump’s](#) crown jewel, his list of some 20 million donors; Mr. Shields said that only the campaign profited from the arrangement. And Opn Sesame, a start-up run by Gary Coby, a Parscale protégé, is being paid \$200,000 to \$300,000 a month through the R.N.C., according to campaign filings.

When the Trump campaign’s digital operation recently moved to its own floor at the campaign’s Northern Virginia headquarters, much of it was being run by Mr. Coby, who recently merged his operations with the R.N.C.’s data team. Opn Sesame’s specialty is texting voters, a burgeoning and lightly regulated field that is expected to be a factor in the 2020 campaign.

To allay Mr. Trump’s concerns, tens of millions of dollars worth of campaign advertising that once ran through Parscale Strategy has been redirected to a new company, American Made Media, which is run by a Parscale lieutenant. There are no public records detailing the company’s financial structure; Mr. Parscale and other advisers said they did not profit from it. Mr. Parscale has declined to provide detailed accounting of his [network of interlocking businesses](#), and has told associates he follows Mr. Trump’s directive, relayed through Ms. McDaniel, that he make no more than \$700,000 or \$800,000 for his campaign work.

Even to insiders, the campaign's activities can seem opaque.

Last fall, Mr. Pence's office scheduled his first visit to the headquarters, to get a firsthand look. But when the day came, Mr. Parscale canceled, even though the visit was already on the vice president's official schedule. Mr. Parscale, who spends much of his time working from his Florida home — though he recently said he would [relocate to Washington](#) — told Mr. Pence's office that the campaign's landlord had vetoed the idea, fearing a vice-presidential visit would disrupt other tenants. Mr. Pence was puzzled not to learn sooner, and the visit has not been rescheduled, two officials with knowledge of the episode said.

For the moment, such concerns are muted as the Trump campaign, the R.N.C. and other affiliated committees raised \$155 million in the final three months of 2019, a 23 percent increase over the previous quarter that was buoyed by the impeachment proceedings. The digital operation overseen by Mr. Coby and Mr. Parscale has been developing a series of new products, including a news app for volunteers to dole out Trump-friendly content, republish Trump-world tweets and raffle MAGA hats. An arm of the campaign has also hired a company called Phunware, which specializes in [tracking cellphone locations](#); a senior campaign official said the company was hired to develop an app, not track people.

The Democrats are trying to regroup, but their efforts have been scattershot. A year ago, the party [installed its former chairman, Howard Dean](#), to create a Data Trust for the left, but the momentum around the venture has lagged.

“We're very far behind right now,” said Mikey Dickerson, a former Obama administration official who is chief technology officer at Alloy, a nonprofit tech venture on the left. “They got motivated by the stories from the 2008 and 2012 campaigns saying that the Democrats had an insurmountable advantage,” he said, adding that it “caused our side to be complacent.”

Most Republican officeholders have succumbed to the WinRed pressure campaign. One late convert was Senator Thom Tillis of North Carolina, who learned the power of being linked to Mr. Trump's money machine when WinRed unexpectedly sent out a joint fund-raising appeal that brought in a “six-figure sum in a single day, which is huge in a down-ballot race,” said Tim Cameron, a Tillis adviser and former digital director at the Republican senatorial committee.

Without Mr. Trump's victory, “there'd be nothing at the scale of WinRed,” he said. “All of a sudden, it's one election, and we have the upper hand.”

Correction: March 9, 2020

An earlier version of this article mistakenly listed the Republican National Committee as among the clients of Convergence Media. The firm works for the National Republican Congressional Committee, not the Republican National Committee.

Kitty Bennett contributed research. Kenneth Vogel contributed reporting.

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Inside the Biggest 2020 Advertising War Against Trump

Michael Bloomberg's presidential campaign wants to flood voters with attacks on Mr. Trump before it is too late, a lesson Republican candidates learned in 2016 when they initially ignored him.



Jeremy W. Peters, *The New York Times* Online edition, December 29, 2019.

WASHINGTON — Hillary Clinton tried. So did 16 rival Republicans. And after hundreds of millions of dollars were spent on ads attacking Donald Trump in 2016, the results were the same: They never did much damage.

Now Michael R. Bloomberg is trying — his way — spending millions each week in an online advertising onslaught that is guided by polling and data that he and his advisers believe provide unique insight into the president's vulnerabilities.

The effort, which is targeting seven battleground states where polls show Mr. Trump is likely to be competitive in November, is just one piece of an advertising campaign that is unrivaled in scope and scale. On Facebook and Google alone, where Mr. Bloomberg is most focused on attacking the president, he has spent \$18 million on ads over the last month, according to Acronym, a digital messaging firm that works with Democrats.

That is on top of the \$128 million the Bloomberg campaign has spent on television ads, according to Advertising Analytics, an independent firm, which projects that Mr.

Bloomberg is likely to spend a combined \$300 million to \$400 million on advertising across all media before the Super Tuesday primaries in early March.

Those amounts dwarf the ad budgets of his rivals, and he is spending at a faster clip than past presidential campaigns as well. Mr. Bloomberg is also already spending more than the Trump campaign each week to reach voters online. And if the \$400 million estimate holds, that would be about the same as what President Barack Obama's campaign spent on advertising over the course of the entire general election in 2012.

Who Is Michael Bloomberg? | 2020 Presidential Candidate

The billionaire businessman and former mayor of New York is hoping he can forge a path to the Democratic nomination by positioning himself as a centrist who can take on President Trump.

A billionaire businessman, philanthropist and former mayor of New York City. "Oh, you're welcome." Michael Bloomberg is making a late entry ... "This is the road that I'm taking." ... into the Democratic presidential race. So who is he? Bloomberg grew up outside of Boston. After college and Harvard Business School, he got into investment banking. In the 1980s, he created the Bloomberg Terminal, a financial tool for investors that would make him a billionaire. And in 2001, Bloomberg ran for mayor of New York City as a Republican. "That should make a great politician." Then in the middle of his campaign, New York City changed forever on Sept. 11. As New York's outgoing mayor took the national stage, he gave Bloomberg the thumbs up. "Well, I'm urging people to vote for Mike Bloomberg." "I, Michael R. Bloomberg —" Bloomberg won. One of his priorities as mayor was tackling public health. "Sixty-four ounce. Just think about that." "Don't go near these things." He also pushed for controversial stop-and-frisk policies that disproportionately affected minority communities. "Everything the New York City Police Department has done is absolutely —is legal." But just days before entering the presidential race this year, he apologized. "I just want you to know that I realize back then, I was wrong." In 2007, he left the G.O.P. And in 2008, during the financial crisis, he asked the City Council to extend term limits in order to let him run for a controversial third term. "Yes." "No." "No." "Aye." "Aye." The vote passed, and he won re-election. "We're going to make the next four years the best yet." So what about the issues? After he left office in 2013, Bloomberg went back to running his company, which includes a news division. But he's also focused on supporting candidates ... "Let's elect a sane, competent person." ... and causes he cares about, many of which are now key parts of his platform. Bloomberg is a vocal supporter of gun reform. "We cannot have a society where you go out in the street, and you can get blown away. We just have to say enough is enough." He also has big plans for health care reform and fighting climate change. "Trump has done us a favor. Every time he riles against climate change, the money comes flooding in." Overall,

Bloomberg is positioning himself as a moderate in the Democratic field. “With the right candidate, we can turn areas from red to blue.” So what about his chances? They’re somewhat unknown. As a billionaire and fellow New Yorker, Bloomberg supporters feel he is uniquely positioned to take on President Trump. “I’m a New Yorker, and I know a con when I see one.” “There is nobody I’d rather run against than ‘Little Michael.’ That I can tell you.” But he has challenges ahead. He’s as not well known outside of New York City. Also, Bloomberg probably won’t participate in any of the Democratic debates, and he’s likely to skip the early primaries and caucuses. His hope: to surge on Super Tuesday and chart a path to the nomination. “I am running for president to defeat Donald Trump, and to unite and rebuild America.”

The ads amount to a huge bet by the Bloomberg campaign that there are enough Americans who are not too fixed in their opinions of Mr. Trump and can be swayed by the ads’ indictment of his conduct and character.

None of these assumptions are safe in a political environment that is increasingly bifurcated along partisan lines and where, for many voters, information from “the other side” is instantly suspect. But Mr. Bloomberg’s aides believe it is imperative to flood voters with attacks on the president before it is too late — a lesson Republicans learned in 2016 when they initially spent most of their ad budgets during the primaries tearing into each other while ignoring Mr. Trump.

“All this effort and all this money and none of it goes to help the one election that really matters?” asks a man from Michigan in one new Bloomberg campaign [ad](#), referring to the spending in the Democratic primary. The campaign plans to run the ad online in Super Tuesday primary states.

Another man featured in the ad bemoans the fact that the Trump campaign is so focused on Pennsylvania but that none of the Democrats seem to be. “By the looks of it, he’s trying to win Pennsylvania once again. He’s here all the time,” the man says.

In [swing states](#) like Wisconsin and Pennsylvania that are likely to decide whether Mr. Trump gets re-elected, the president’s campaign and its allies have already been advertising on his behalf for more than a year. Mr. Bloomberg’s campaign is focusing its efforts there, hoping to erode Mr. Trump’s standing.

“I’ve been telling anyone who will listen, Trump is winning,” said Kevin Sheekey, the campaign manager for Mr. Bloomberg.

In interviews, Mr. Bloomberg’s top strategists described how they believe they can undermine Mr. Trump’s standing with voters who are open to reconsidering their support for him. According to the campaign’s data, this is somewhere between 10 percent to 15 percent of the people who voted for him in 2016.

Mr. Bloomberg’s aides say their data generally shows that these people tend to express disappointment about promises Mr. Trump has failed to keep on issues like rebuilding the nation’s infrastructure — an especially potent concern in places like Michigan. In most states, they are upset with the president’s push to repeal the Affordable Care Act

without putting forward a Republican alternative, which voters view as jeopardizing their health coverage. They view his response to several mass shootings during his term as lacking urgency and seriousness, particularly in the suburbs around Detroit and Philadelphia, the Bloomberg data shows.

And many of them report feelings of exasperation and exhaustion after three years of what seems like daily, head-spinning stories about Mr. Trump, his impulsivity, dysfunction inside his administration and partisan squabbling in Washington that has in some cases bled into their lives at home and work.

“With the percentage of the electorate that is open to reconsidering, there is a tax on them that they want to eliminate — and that tax is on their attention,” said Gary Briggs, who last year left Facebook as its chief marketing officer to join Mr. Bloomberg’s company and is now advising his presidential campaign.

The messages that the Bloomberg campaign is using in ads on social media and other websites are tailored to this sense of exhaustion. “Say no to chaos,” says one that appeared on Facebook in North Carolina.

“Another tweet. Another lie. Trump has tweeted thousands of false statements — causing chaos and embarrassing our country,” reads another, depicting a picture of a man covering his face in evident despair as he stands in what appears to be a soybean field. (Soybean farmers have been among the most affected by Mr. Trump’s tariffs on Chinese goods.)

Others are more issue-specific and play to a notion that Bloomberg strategists say has tested well in their research: The president is looking out for the interests of big corporations and the wealthy despite promises to improve the lives of working-class Americans.

The seven states the Bloomberg campaign has chosen are some of the most competitive, like Wisconsin and Florida, and others where Democrats believe they can chip away at Republican dominance, like Texas and Arizona. Rounding out the list are Michigan, Pennsylvania and North Carolina.

The Trump campaign has responded aggressively to Mr. Bloomberg’s entry into the race, going so far as to bar reporters from Bloomberg News from its rallies and events because the outlet has said it would not conduct investigative reporting on Mr. Bloomberg’s rivals for the Democratic nomination. Mr. Trump has belittled the former mayor and dismissed him as a threat saying, “Little Michael will fail.”

Finding the most incisive way to attack a sitting president is extremely difficult for a variety of reasons. Not only does the president enjoy the power and platform of incumbency, but by and large Americans have already formed their views over the course of the first term.



A crowd at a Trump rally in Battle Creek, Mich., the night of the House impeachment vote. Credit...Pete Marovich for The New York Times

Larry McCarthy, a Republican ad maker who wrote many of the super PAC ads that attempted to undercut President Barack Obama's popularity with swing voters in 2012, said he believes his ads were not as effective "because many voters had already made a judgment about Obama."

That judgment, he said, was that "a significant number of voters, in our data, did not like Obama policies but did not think he was a bad guy."

With Mr. Trump, the opposite is true. Polls show that, for instance, most Americans approve of his handling of the economy. But they consistently give him low job approval ratings, saying that they do not think he is honest.

And public [polls](#) further show he stands an even chance of winning many battleground states against a variety of the Democratic candidates, which the Bloomberg campaign said tracks with its internal data.

With the ads, the Bloomberg campaign is also walking a fine line between trying to undercut Mr. Trump and turning off voters who may not like the president but do not want to dwell on him.

"There is a kind of anxiety that he creates," said Howard Wolfson, one of Mr. Bloomberg's longtime top advisers, about Mr. Trump. "This is real for people," he added, acknowledging the contradictory factors. "There's a bit of 'Leave us alone.'"

The campaign said that it had produced 160 versions of its ads on social media alone, reaching 15.5 million people in the first two weeks of December.

“Michael Bloomberg’s fledgling campaign has now spent more on Google and YouTube in the past month than the Trump campaign has spent all year,” Acronym said in a recent analysis of the race.

The ability to pour that much money into ads not only enables Mr. Bloomberg’s campaign to pump out millions of messages a week, it also allows for more precise targeting to individual groups of uncommitted voters — whether that’s women in the suburbs concerned about gun violence or more fiscally conservative people who are alarmed at the nation’s rapidly expanding deficit.

One of the most potentially significant impacts of the Bloomberg strategy, said Ken Goldstein, a professor of politics at the University of San Francisco and an expert in political advertising, could be how he is filling the void in places where pro-Trump ads are dominant.

In a new study Mr. Goldstein conducted with a group of other academics who specialize in political messaging, he said they found that in 2016 the lack of advertising from Mrs. Clinton’s campaign seemed to contribute to lower turnout among voters favorable to her. Democrats with a lower propensity of voting in Michigan and Wisconsin, the study found, were less likely to turn out in areas where Mr. Trump was investing heavily online but where Mrs. Clinton was not advertising.

“The overall impact was modest, to be sure,” Mr. Goldstein said. “But Trump’s margin of victory in Michigan and Wisconsin was also extremely modest.”

In addition to the hard-hitting critiques of Mr. Trump and his leadership, Mr. Bloomberg’s ads are also designed to send a positive message about the former mayor that reaches Democrats in the primary. And it is those voters, no doubt, who need to be convinced first in order for Mr. Bloomberg to politically benefit from his huge investment in anti-Trump advertising.

“Sometimes it’s easiest to define yourself by what you are not,” said Todd Harris, a Republican messaging strategist who has worked on several presidential campaigns, most recently for Senator Marco Rubio of Florida. These ads, he said, are “all about Mike Bloomberg introducing himself to primary voters as someone who dislikes Trump as much as they do.”

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