



## Never Trump

*Politics and principle alike provide reasons to oppose him*

BY RAMESH PONNURU

**D**ONALD TRUMP's defenders have taken to arguing that his critics are endangering the Republican party. "I'm used to being the moral scold," Bill Bennett told the *Washington Post*, "but Trump is winning fair and square, so why should the nomination be grabbed from him? We've been trying to get white working-class people into the party for a long time. Now they're here in huge numbers because of Trump and we're going to alienate them? I don't get it. Too many people are on their high horse."

Rush Limbaugh, on *Fox News Sunday*, made a similar point:

For the longest time, the Republican party has told us that they can't win with just Republican votes. . . . Donald Trump has put together a coalition. Whether he knows it or not, whether he intended to or not, he's put together a coalition that's exactly what the Republican party says that it needs to win, and yet look [at] what they're

doing. They're trying to get Trump out of the race, because they're not in charge of it.

Bennett's comment blurs the distinction between being on the way to winning the nomination and actually having won it. But the rest of what he's saying, and what Limbaugh is saying, amounts to an argument about electability. The claim is that Trump is bringing many new people into the Republican party, and that rejecting him will drive those people away and thus endanger the Republicans' ability to win the election (and maybe even future elections).

It is a very bold argument, considering that it is made on behalf of the Republican candidate who polls worst against Hillary Clinton. Trump has consistently trailed Clinton in poll averages, while Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio, and John Kasich have all come out ahead of her. About three-fifths of

voters tell pollsters that they have an unfavorable view of Trump: another measure suggesting he is significantly less popular than the other Republicans. If Trump is attracting working-class white voters, in other words, apparently he is also repelling more voters of other kinds.

Record levels of voter participation in the Republican contests appear to have impressed some of Trump's fans as evidence of voter enthusiasm for him. Reviewing primary turnout in recent elections, Sean Trende of *RealClearPolitics* concludes that it tends to correlate with close contests among several candidates. It doesn't correlate with a strong performance in the fall: Sometimes low-turnout primaries yield a winning presidential candidate, and sometimes high-turnout ones yield a losing one. The polling tells us more about Trump's potential strength than turnout does.

And Trump has reached this level of unpopularity while enjoying an advantage that he would lack in the fall as the Republican nominee. Until quite recently, he has not been subjected to many attack ads: The other candidates have mostly gone after one another on the air. In the absence of such ads, most voters have, surveys have also shown, been unaware of such controversies as the accusations of fraud against Trump "University."

If Trump were the nominee, the Democrats would spend tens of millions of dollars making sure that everyone knew about this story, and others. And Trump is, again, already unpopular before such an ad campaign.

Many conservatives who oppose Trump have felt it morally imperative to declare that they will never vote for him, even if he wins the Republican nomination. They will vote instead for Hillary Clinton, or for a third-party candidate, or a write-in candidate, or no one at all. In one respect, those declarations have played into Trump's hands. They put the focus on the anti-Trump Republicans' willingness, under the hypothetical condition of a Trump nomination, to take an action that would help Clinton win the presidency. But it's Trump's supporters who are taking actions, real ones in the here and now, that make Clinton's election more likely.

If Trump wins the nomination, the Democrats will likely start running

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their ads early in an attempt to put the race away months before November. If Clinton has a durable advantage in the polls for much of the year, Republican turnout will be depressed. And it will be depressed even if Mitt Romney or Erick Erickson or any number of other anti-Trump conservatives announce that in the end they have decided to hold their noses and vote for him.

Trump has said that in the general election he would solicit donations, which he would need to counter the Democratic ads. The less competitive he looks, though, the less likely he will be to get those funds. Maybe it won't be a Goldwater- or McGovern-style wipeout: America may be too polarized for that.

they can to keep him from winning a plurality of delegates, especially by persuading some of his supporters to leave him.

Failing that, they should try to keep him from converting that plurality into a majority at the Republican convention. Fighting him at the convention would run the risk of alienating many of his supporters, probably to an even greater extent than fighting him in the primaries does. But it would be a risk worth taking. The alternative, giving him the nomination, would run two risks of its own. A defeat pulling down other Republicans would be the most likely outcome; the less likely but still very undesirable one would be the election of a man who, among other things,

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But Republicans could lose badly enough to lose races for many other offices too.

Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell has reportedly said that if Trump were the nominee, his colleagues would “drop him like a hot rock” as they campaigned for their own seats—a prospective strategy that assumes that Trump would be as weak in a general election as he appears to be. Senate Republicans might help themselves a little by distancing themselves from a faltering Trump. But they are defending seats in many swing states and mildly Democratic states: Florida, Illinois, New Hampshire, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. A big Republican loss in the presidential election would surely cost them the Senate. It is even possible that Republicans on the ballot in future years will suffer because of a Trump nomination: It could cause many voters to think less of the Republican party even after this election is over.

The electability argument for Trump, even if it were a strong one, would not overcome the man's manifest unfitness for the presidency. But it is not strong at all. His opponents therefore have good moral and political reasons to do what

casually promises to order troops to commit war crimes.

If fighting Trump at the convention also fails, then conservative opponents of him will have to consider mounting a third-party campaign for president. This would be a more drastic option than a convention fight: It would do even more to increase the likelihood that Clinton would win, and it might sunder the Republican party for good. Trump supporters would feel that they had had a chance to win but had been stabbed in the back.

Then again, they might feel that way even in the absence of a third-party campaign, if enough Republican officials refused to support their party's nominee. And a third-party conservative campaign could help Republican candidates for the House, Senate, and other offices, by giving anti-Trump Republicans a reason to show up to vote.

In the end, though, the most important reason to back a conservative third-party run if Trump gets the nomination is not to affect the outcome of the November elections. It's to demonstrate that conservatism stands for something better than Trump. Which is also a reason to strive to keep him from getting the nomination in the first place. **NR**