

GOP Catch 22: Hard to Win with Trump; Hard to Win Without Trump

I got an email from a friend recently who is as perplexed as I am about Donald Trump's popularity among Republican voters, despite the massive damage he's done to his party.

"Trump lost the House, the Senate, the Presidency, Arizona, Georgia, and the suburbs for the GOP," he wrote. "Not to mention trying to steal an election which resulted in a domestic terrorist attack on the U.S. Capitol. And these [Republicans] still worship the guy and want more."

It's nothing less than astounding, but it's true. Donald Trump, despite all the chaos he's caused, remains his party's most popular – and most divisive – figure.

And it's not only his diehard fans at CPAC yesterday who love and adore him and want him to run again.

A recent Quinnipiac survey found that 87% of Republicans believe Donald Trump should be allowed to hold office again, compared to only 43 percent of Americans overall. And 75% want him to continue to play a "prominent role" in the Republican Party, compared to only 34 percent overall.

Only 11 percent of Republicans believe Donald Trump was responsible for inciting violence on Capitol Hill on Jan. 6, according to the poll, while more than half of all Americans – 54 percent – think he was responsible.

"He may be down, but he is certainly not out of favor with the GOP. Twice impeached, vilified by Democrats in the trial, and virtually silenced by social media ... despite it all, Donald Trump keeps a solid foothold in the Republican Party,"

according to Tim Malloy, who conducted the poll for Quinnipiac University.

And here's some on the ground evidence of that: The seven GOP senators who voted to convict Donald Trump at his impeachment trial have either been censured by their local or state Republican parties or are facing blowback from voters back home.

Whether they realize it or not, those GOP committees are giving Democrats just what they want. Their goal all along has been to divide Republicans over loyalty to Trump. Democrats may viscerally detest everything about him, but they know he is the gift that keeps on giving.

And herein lies the problem for the Republican Party. As long as Donald Trump is around and remains his bellicose self – note what he recently said about Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell – the party will have a tough time winning back those moderate suburban voters in 2024 – voters the GOP has counted on in the past but lost the last time around because they couldn't stomach four more years of Donald Trump.

In fact, Mr. Trump's own pollster has concluded that he lost "largely due to a massive swing" among independents along with the defection of more moderate Republican voters.

While they cheered for him in Orlando, the people who attended CPAC are hardly typical of the American electorate. Most Americans simply do not like the former president, if you'll excuse the understatement. He never reached 50 percent approval during his four years in office. And if they did like him, he probably would have beat Joe Biden.

Winning a straw poll at CPAC was easy for the former president. But it's hard to see how he could win a real election if he decided to run again in 2024. But it's also hard to see how, because of his popularity among the more passionate GOP base, any Republican could win if the candidate

doesn't have Donald Trump's enthusiastic support. And here's where it gets tricky: Mr. Trump's support not only could help a GOP candidate, but also could be a detriment. As the former president's pollster learned: to a lot of swing voters he's toxic.

So yes, it's possible that Republicans could take control of the House in two years, maybe even the Senate. But what the candidates have to say about Donald Trump, whether they embrace him or stay clear of him, whether he endorses them or gives them a "thumbs down," will go a long way in determining whether they win or lose.

"The country is moving past the Trump Presidency, and the GOP will remain in the wilderness until it does too," says an editorial in the Wall Street Journal.

I think that's right. His loyal supporters still love him but since most Americans don't it comes down to one of those sticky catch 22s: Republicans might not be able to win with Donald Trump but it looks like they'll also have a tough time winning without him.

If he gets too close to any future candidate, the moderates who find Trump toxic might sit home on Election Day. And if he doesn't get close enough, the base might find better things to do than vote for a candidate who Trump doesn't find worthy. Heads I win, tails you lose.

Of course, there's always the possibility that Democrats will move so far left that they'll somehow manage to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. Republicans can only hope.