

Compliance Without Control: Selection Bias in Measures of Presidential Party Dominance

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Abstract

As of August 4, 2026, candidates endorsed by Donald Trump had won roughly 98 percent of decided Republican primaries this cycle, against 95 percent in 2018, 93 percent in 2022 and 96 percent in 2024. Press coverage and party commentary alike read this as evidence that his control of the Republican Party is at a maximum. I argue that this is incorrect, because the population the numbers are calculated on is not fixed with respect to the leader and the measure is incomplete. I distinguish three quantities that commentary and, at times, scholarship, treat as one: compliance, the behavioral conformity of surviving officeholders; institutional control, the capacity to achieve desired outcomes; and electoral productivity, the conversion of intra-party dominance into general-election seats. Since 2024 these have diverged. Observed compliance reached its highest recorded level, while defection on procedurally comparable privileged resolutions fell from 22.6 percent of the Senate Republican conference in 2019 to roughly 7.5 percent in 2025. In the two contests the president most conspicuously chose to fight, a state redistricting demand defeated 31 to 19 and a discharge petition he reversed himself rather than lose, he failed to secure the outcome and then sanctioned the individuals. The prospective electoral environment deteriorated on every indicator examined. The seventeen congressional Republicans who voted to impeach or convict in 2021 show what conventional measures omit. Five were defeated in primaries. Fourteen had left Congress or announced departures by August 2026. An analyst reading primary outcomes alone observes 29 percent of the cohort's disappearance and codes the remainder, implicitly, as loyalty. I propose attrition-adjusted bounds in place of point estimates, treating exits as substantively informative rather than as evidence of consent. The design is descriptive and identifies no causal effect of Trump's leadership on Republican performance. It establishes that unity scores and endorsement rates cannot by themselves demonstrate party control, and it commits to a dated prediction for November 2026 against which the framework can be assessed.

Keywords: party discipline, strategic retirement, personalist parties, preference falsification, primary elections, selection bias, negative agenda control.

1. Introduction

On May 26, 2026, Ken Paxton defeated John Cornyn in the Texas Republican Senate runoff with 63.8 percent of roughly 1.38 million votes, following a presidential endorsement issued one week earlier. Cornyn became the first incumbent Texas senator denied renomination since 1970. Ten days earlier Bill Cassidy had finished third in Louisiana with 24.8 percent. Three days after Cassidy, Thomas Massie lost Kentucky's fourth district to a Trump-endorsed challenger. By late May, Ballotpedia recorded Trump-endorsed candidates winning roughly 98 percent of decided 2026 primaries, against 95 percent in 2018, 93 percent in 2022 and 96 percent in 2024.

The common inference is that Trump's hold on the Republican Party has reached a maximum. That inference requires an assumption rarely stated: that the population on which these rates are computed is fixed with respect to the leader. It is not. In the same cycle, 36 House Republicans announced they would not seek reelection, exceeding the 34 who departed before the 2018 Democratic wave and producing the highest House departure total since recordkeeping began in 1930 apart from 1992. Mitch McConnell, Thom Tillis and Joni Ernst are leaving the Senate. Marjorie Taylor Greene resigned in January 2026 after a public break with the president. When members who might dissent instead leave, observed conformity among those who remain rises for reasons unrelated to persuasion.

The paper advances three claims of deliberately descending strength.

Claim 1. Common measures of party loyalty are conditioned on a changing population of officeholders and may therefore overstate the breadth and stability of underlying elite support. This claim I take to be demonstrated.

Claim 2. Retirement, primary defeat and strategic exit were disproportionately common among a defined cohort of prior Trump dissenters. This claim is persuasively illustrated by the cohort evidence below, though the counterfactual it invites, that these members would otherwise have dissented again, is not established by the evidence.

Claim 3. A leader may retain a high capacity to sanction individual defectors while losing capacity to achieve institutional outcomes or to maximize general-election performance. This is offered as a hypothesis consistent with the evidence assembled here, not as a fully demonstrated result.

The design is descriptive and case-comparative. It does not identify the causal effect of Trump's leadership on Republican electoral performance, and the confounds—inflation, foreign conflict, and

in the Biden comparison the Dobbs decision—are severe enough that no such identification is attempted. The contribution is to measurement: the quantities routinely cited as evidence of party control measure something narrower than party control, better-bounded alternatives are available, and those alternatives support different conclusions.

2. Three constructs

Compliance is the behavioral conformity of officeholders who remain in office. Presidential support scores, party unity scores and endorsement success rates measure it. It is observable and cheap to compute, and it is conditional on survival.

Institutional control is the capacity to achieve desired outcomes: to pass, to block, to install. In the congressional parties literature this maps onto the distinction between positive and negative agenda control (Cox and McCubbins 2005). Control and compliance can diverge. A leader may command deference from individual members and still lose votes where constituency pressure runs the other way, or where privileged procedures such as the discharge petition permit a minority to bypass leadership gatekeeping.

Electoral productivity is the conversion of intra-party dominance into general-election seats. I separate *realized* productivity—completed election outcomes—from the *prospective electoral environment*, comprising polling, special-election results, approval and race ratings. Only the first is productivity. The second is a set of leading indicators, and conflating the two is a category error that the 2026 evidence actively invites.

That these can diverge is established. Malzahn and Hall (2025) find that election-denying Republican statewide candidates in 2022 underperformed co-partisans by roughly 2.3 percentage points after controlling for 2020 presidential vote share, while finding no comparable underperformance in House races and a possible but imprecisely estimated primary advantage. Their own characterization is important and I adopt it: the performance gaps are relatively small in a polarized environment. Heseltine (2023) finds that Trump-endorsed candidates received a consistent and substantial benefit in Republican primaries across 2018–2022, with endorsements arriving increasingly early in the cycle. Ballard, Hassell and Heseltine (2021) find general-election costs. The pattern of positive primary effects alongside neutral-to-negative general-election effects is the divergence this paper generalizes from candidates to the party leader.

The comparative literature on personalist parties supplies the succession framework, though it must be imported carefully. The claim is not that the Republican Party resembles an authoritarian ruling

party. It is that concepts developed to study leader-centered organizations—institutionalization, depersonalized rules, transferability of organizational assets (Panebianco 1988; Levitsky et al. 2016)—illuminate questions about succession that candidate-centered accounts of American politics address less directly. Andrews-Lee (2021) is the important qualification: successor viability in charismatic movements depends on the capacity to reactivate attachments to the founder, so neither automatic transfer nor inevitable collapse should be assumed. Section 6 offers an operationalization.

Kuran (1995) supplies a micro foundation for public conformity under private dissent. Where dissent is costly and privately held preferences are unobserved, public loyalty rates convey limited information about private preference. The methodological implication is that settings in which preferences are expressed privately are disproportionately informative, and Section 5.4 exploits the principal such setting in American legislative politics while being explicit about what it can and cannot show.

3. Selection into the observed caucus

Let a caucus contain N members. Let D be the number who would dissent on a given question absent anticipated cost, and D^* the number observed to dissent. Three mechanisms separate them.

Conversion: members genuinely change preferences, and the resulting conformity is real.

Suppression: members retain private dissent but conform because dissent is punished. Exit: members who might dissent leave the chamber and are absent from the denominator entirely.

Exit is not right-censoring in the classical sense, and the distinction sharpens rather than weakens the argument. Right-censoring ordinarily implies the subject remains at risk beyond the observation window. Retirement and primary defeat are absorbing states that remove the member from the risk set, which makes this a competing-risks problem with informative attrition. This matters because dependent competing risks bias naive estimates in a specific direction: where the hazard of exit is correlated with the latent propensity to dissent, the surviving caucus is not a random subsample and observed loyalty converges upward regardless of the underlying preference distribution. Non-informative censoring would not produce this pattern; informative attrition does.

What follows is that exits should be treated as informative rather than, as at present, coded implicitly as loyalty. I therefore report bounds rather than a point estimate. Let a cohort of prior dissenters have size C , with S members surviving and observed to comply. The conventional measure is the lower bound on dissent, $L_{\text{lower}} = S_{\text{loyal}} / C_{\text{surviving}}$, which conditions on survival. The upper bound, $L_{\text{upper}} = S_{\text{loyal}} / (C_{\text{surviving}} + \text{exits})$, treats every exit as a suppressed dissent. Neither is the

true value. The distance between them is a sensitivity range that makes the assumption visible instead of burying it, and where that distance is large the conventional measure should not be reported alone.

The stronger analysis this invites is a member-cycle dataset with outcomes of continued service, observed dissent, primary defeat and voluntary exit, predicted by prior dissent, age, prior margin, district partisanship, redistricting exposure, seniority and leadership status. A competing-risks or multinomial specification would let the counterfactual be estimated rather than assumed. That extension is beyond the present descriptive scope, and I note it as the natural next step rather than claiming its results.

4. Data and measures

Roll-call data are from clerk.house.gov and senate.gov, cross-checked against at least two contemporaneous accounts. Primary returns and endorsement records are from Ballotpedia with Associated Press calls. Retirement records are from Ballotpedia and the NPR congressional retirement tracker. Special-election swings are from MultiState Elections and The Downballot, each computed against the 2024 presidential margin in the same district. Survey data are from Gallup, AP-NORC, Economist/YouGov, Morning Consult and Decision Desk HQ. Ratings are from the Cook Political Report. All contemporary data are frozen on August 4, 2026.

On legislative loyalty I avoid aggregate presidential support scores, which are confounded by what leadership schedules and therefore by the agenda power being measured. I use instead a procedurally comparable series: privileged joint resolutions to terminate declared national emergencies and their International Emergency Economic Powers Act analogues. These reach the floor irrespective of leadership preference, which removes agenda-control confounding, and they were used against the same president in both terms.

This is a procedurally comparable series and not a matched instrument in the causal sense, because issue content differs. The 2019 resolutions concerned border policy and the diversion of appropriated military construction funds; the 2025 resolutions concerned tariffs. That difference is a limitation, but its direction deserves note, because it is not obviously adverse to the finding. Tariffs impose concentrated, visible and traceable costs on identifiable state constituencies in agriculture and manufacturing in a way a border wall did not. A constituency-based account of legislative behavior (Mayhew 1974; Fenno 1978) predicts more defection in 2025, not less. The observed decline therefore plausibly understates the shift in the willingness of Republican senators to challenge unilateral executive action by a co-partisan president. I report it as a procedurally comparable descriptive series, not as a matched design in the causal sense.

On endorsements I report raw and restricted rates separately. The raw rate is near-uninformative because the denominator is dominated by unopposed or safe incumbents. Heseltine’s (2023) finding that Trump’s endorsements arrive increasingly early, and disproportionately for likely winners, is the published statement of the endogeneity problem: the endorsement is partly a forecast of the outcome. The restricted category—contested primaries in which the endorsement ran against an incumbent—is the informative one.

5. Results

5.1 Observed compliance

Table 1. Senate Republican defection on privileged emergency-powers termination resolutions

Date	Measure	Result	R defect	Conference	Rate
Mar 14, 2019	Border emergency (H.J.Res.46)	59–41	12	53	22.6%
Sep 25, 2019	Border emergency, second	54–41	11	53	20.8%
Apr 2, 2025	Canada tariffs (IEEPA)	51–48	4	53	7.5%
Apr 30, 2025	Global tariffs (IEEPA)	49–49, failed	3	53	5.7%
Oct 28, 2025	Brazil tariffs (S.J.Res.81)	52–48	5	53	9.4%
Oct 29, 2025	Canada tariffs (S.J.Res.77)	50–46	4	53	7.5%
Oct 30, 2025	Global tariffs (S.J.Res.88)	51–47	4	53	7.5%

Rate is Republican votes to terminate as a share of the full conference. The March 14, 2019 defectors were Alexander, Blunt, Collins, Lee, Moran, Murkowski, Paul, Portman, Romney, Rubio, Toomey and Wicker (confirmed against contemporaneous accounts and Wicker’s own statement of March 14, 2019). The April 30, 2025 figure is depressed by McConnell’s absence. The 2025 defectors are Paul, Collins, Murkowski and McConnell, joined by Tillis on the Brazil resolution.

Observed defection falls by roughly two-thirds on a procedurally comparable instrument.

Composition is more informative than rate. The 2019 group spanned the mainstream of Senate conservatism. By October 2025 it comprised four members, of whom McConnell had announced retirement, Collins faced a toss-up reelection, and Paul holds a libertarian brand insulated from ordinary party pressure.

The disposition of the twelve is worth stating precisely, because it distinguishes persuasion from turnover. Of the twelve, five left the Senate voluntarily (Alexander, Blunt, Portman, Romney, Toomey); Rubio entered the administration, which is exit from the chamber and arguably co-optation rather than persuasion; Lee is a genuine conversion case, having become among the president’s more reliable allies; Wicker remains and has largely aligned; and Collins, Murkowski, Moran and Paul remain with varying records. The accurate statement is that the earlier dissenting group largely

disappeared from the chamber, with one clear conversion and one appointment, rather than that a body of opinion was persuaded.

One finding cuts against a simple consolidation account and should be stated plainly. On signature distributive legislation, defection has not fallen. Three Republican senators opposed the One Big Beautiful Bill Act in July 2025 (Collins, Paul, Tillis), 5.7 percent of the conference; three opposed the 2017 ACA skinny repeal (Collins, Murkowski, McCain), 5.8 percent of the then 52-member conference. These are indistinguishable. Compliance appears to have tightened on executive-power and identity dimensions and not where members face concrete distributive stakes. Any account of uniform consolidation is contradicted by this comparison.

5.2 Institutional control, and the denominator problem

Two episodes in 2025 show that compliance did not deliver control.

Indiana. On December 11, 2025, the Indiana Senate rejected a mid-decade congressional map sought by the White House, 31 to 19, with 21 of 40 Republican senators joining all 10 Democrats. The map would have converted a 7–2 delegation to 9–0. Pressure was documented and substantial: two vice-presidential visits, calls from the Speaker and White House deputy chief of staff, and public threats to primary members voting no, including the Senate President Pro Tem by name. Indiana was, on contemporaneous accounts, the first Republican-controlled legislature to decline a mid-decade redistricting request from this White House in the 2025 round; I limit the claim to that universe rather than to legislative history generally. Indiana permits a special session, so the map was not procedurally dead; no revival occurred before the candidate filing deadline for the 2026 election.

The Epstein files. In November 2025 a discharge petition led by Massie and Khanna reached 218 signatures over the opposition of the Speaker and the White House. Four Republicans signed: Massie, Greene, Mace and Boebert. The White House lobbied Mace and Boebert to withdraw and did not succeed. With passage assured, the president reversed publicly on November 16 rather than lose the vote, and the Epstein Files Transparency Act passed 427 to 1 on November 18. The House then adopted a rule, 217–210, tabling the underlying discharge resolution once the bill was transmitted. Procedural control was reasserted after substantive control had been lost.

The Epstein case is the theoretically significant one, because the discharge petition exists precisely to defeat negative agenda control and it worked. The aftermath requires disaggregation. Massie was defeated in a primary in which the president invested heavily. Greene resigned following a public break, which is not equivalent to removal by the leader. Mace left the House to run for governor, a

career choice with its own logic. Boebert remained in office, having drawn a public threat of a primary challenge. The correct characterization is that three of the four had left, been defeated, or announced another race, and the fourth faced an explicit threat; the episode demonstrates sustained post-dissent pressure with heterogeneous outcomes, not the uniform removal of dissenters.

Two salient failures cannot establish the level or trajectory of institutional control without a denominator comprising the full set of presidential demands. A leader may lose two conspicuous fights while winning many others. What these cases establish is that control is not absolute and that it failed in two instances of unusual salience, not that control has declined systematically. Establishing the latter requires coding a defined universe—publicly identified legislative priorities, public interventions in conference elections, publicly opposed discharge petitions, state redistricting requests, and nominations receiving explicit intervention—against desired outcome, salience, public investment, and whether opposition was prevented, overridden or punished afterward. I flag this as the principal empirical extension.

One feature of these two cases limits the concern. They were not selected for convenience or on their outcomes. Both were fights the president chose publicly, invested in repeatedly, and could have avoided, which makes them selections on the leader’s own revealed priorities. If anything that biases toward finding control, since these were the contests he was most motivated to win. The two episodes also occupy different institutional arenas—a state legislature and federal House agenda control—and their commensurability rests on the claim that both test the same relationship between a personal leader and officeholders nominally subject to his sanction, which is an assumption rather than a demonstration.

5.3 Dissent-cohort attrition

The cleanest available cohort is the seventeen congressional Republicans who voted to impeach in January 2021 or to convict in February 2021. The cohort is defined by a single documented act of dissent, which limits the attribution problem that otherwise attends retirement analysis.

Table 2. Disposition of the 2021 impeachment and conviction cohort, August 2026

Cohort	n	Primary defeat	Voluntary exit	Serving and seeking reelection
House (impeach)	10	4	5	1
Senate (convict)	7	1	4	2
Combined	17	5 (29.4%)	9 (52.9%)	3 (17.6%)

House primary defeats: Cheney, Herrera Beutler, Meijer, Rice (2022). House voluntary exits: Gonzalez, Katko, Kinzinger, Upton (2022), Newhouse (announced December 2025). Senate primary defeat: Cassidy (2026). Senate voluntary exits: Burr, Toomey

(2022), Sasse (resigned 2023 for a university presidency), Romney (2024). Remaining: Valadao, Collins, Murkowski. Collins faces a 2026 race rated toss-up.

These figures describe attrition, not agency. The numerator comprises primary defeats plausibly attributable in part to presidential intervention, ordinary retirements, an age-related departure, and a resignation to lead a university. No causal claim about who produced the attrition is warranted, and none is made.

Stated this way the descriptive finding loses nothing. The cohort experienced 82 percent attrition, of which 29 percent took the form of primary defeat. Three of seventeen remained in Congress and were seeking reelection. Applying the bounds of Section 3: conditioning on survivors yields a dissent rate near zero, since the three survivors have not repeated the 2021 vote; treating every exit as suppressed dissent yields the opposite extreme. Neither is credible on its own. The width of that interval is the finding. An analyst reporting only primary defeats observes 29 percent of the cohort's disappearance and codes the remaining 53 percent, implicitly, as ordinary attrition unrelated to the conflict that defines the cohort.

The current cycle shows the same structure. Thirty-six House Republicans are not seeking reelection against 34 in 2018 and 21 to 22 Democrats this cycle. Tillis illustrates the mechanism: he voted against the reconciliation bill on July 1, 2025, and announced his retirement the following day. Under the conventional measure he appears once as a defector and then leaves the denominator, raising every subsequent compliance rate. Whether he would have dissented again cannot be known, which is precisely why the exit should be reported rather than absorbed.

5.4 A secret-ballot diagnostic

On November 13, 2024, days after Trump's election and amid a public campaign by several of his allies for Rick Scott—though without a formal endorsement from Trump himself, a limitation that belongs in the same breath as the result—Senate Republicans elected a leader by secret ballot. Thune received 23 first-ballot votes, Cornyn 15, Scott 13 of 53. Scott was eliminated; Thune won the second ballot 29–24. In November 2022, Scott had challenged McConnell and received 10.

This is a diagnostic rather than an estimate of a suppression wedge. A leadership election is a multidimensional institutional choice involving competence, seniority, committee allocation, fundraising and temperament, and it is not a private version of a public loyalty vote. The relevant contrast is not private versus public support for Trump but private preference over one candidate publicly associated with his allies versus public deference toward Trump. Those constructs are related and not equivalent.

The defensible statement is that the result is consistent with a substantial gap between public expressions of alignment and private senatorial preference over institutional leadership, and that the gap cannot be decomposed into opposition to Trump versus evaluation of Scott. Two observations at 19 and 25 percent do not estimate a parameter. They do indicate that in the one recurring setting where Senate Republicans choose privately, the faction identified with the president has twice finished last.

5.5 Nomination influence

The raw 2026 endorsement rate of roughly 98 percent across more than 295 endorsements is not a measure of influence. Reported state-level counts show the denominator dominated by incumbents without serious opposition. The restricted category is the informative one: Ballotpedia records 17 primaries across Trump’s first presidency in which he endorsed a challenger to a Republican incumbent, of which six succeeded, a rate of 35 percent. The 2026 comparable rate is markedly higher, including Cassidy, Cornyn, Massie and at least four sitting Indiana state senators unseated in May.

Two limits on the inference. First, endorsements are vetted before issue and arrive increasingly early and disproportionately for likely winners (Heseltine 2023), so the observed rate is an upper bound on causal influence. Second, the Cornyn endorsement came one week before the runoff, when Paxton’s position was established. A defensible quality-weighted rate requires endorsement-timing data matched to primary dates and pre-endorsement polling, which is not currently available in structured form. I report the restricted rate and decline to compute a weighted one.

5.6 Realized productivity and the prospective environment

Table 3 reports only completed outcomes. The 2026 indicators are reported separately in the following paragraphs and are not productivity.

Table 3. Realized Republican electoral performance, 2017–2025

Cycle	Outcome	Note
2017	Democratic sweep, VA and NJ	VA House of Delegates net +15 D
2018	R –40 House, +2 Senate	Majority lost; 34 R retirements preceded
2019	D holds VA; wins KY governorship	
2020	Presidency lost; House losses trimmed	Down-ballot outran the top of ticket
2021	R wins VA governorship	Strongest cycle; nominee distanced from Trump

Cycle	Outcome	Note
2022	R +9 House, −1 Senate	Underperformed fundamentals; Dobbs a major confound (Jacobson 2023)
2023	D holds KY governorship; OH Issue 1 fails	
2024	Presidency, Senate, House won	Trump on the ballot
2025	D sweep: VA, NJ, NYC; CA Prop 50 passes 64.4–35.6	

Sources: certified returns; Sabato’s Crystal Ball.

Across nine completed cycles, Republican performance is strong when Trump is on the ballot and weak when he is not. This is consistent with a low-propensity coalition, in which the marginal Trump voter is less likely to participate absent his candidacy. If so, intra-party dominance and general-election productivity are not merely distinct but partly opposed, because dominance operates through primary electorates that are systematically narrower and differently composed than midterm general electorates. The two electorates overlap substantially and differ in composition, intensity and turnout.

The prospective 2026 environment is unfavorable. Across roughly 39 to 40 contested state legislative specials, Democratic candidates have run a median of 10.4 to 11.5 points ahead of the 2024 presidential margin, overperforming in 34 of 39. Democrats have flipped 30 legislative seats since November 2024 and Republicans none. The largest swing was Texas Senate District 9, a D+31.8 shift in a seat Trump carried by 17.4. The generic ballot runs D+4 to D+7. These are leading indicators, and the 2018 precedent shows they moderate: that cycle opened near D+18, closed at D+14.5, and produced 40 seats.

Texas illustrates the divergence in one contest. Paxton trailed Talarico 40–45 in a July 15–17 survey; the same firm had 44–47 immediately post-runoff. Cook moved the seat from Likely to Lean Republican. Talarico raised \$28 million in the second quarter against Paxton’s \$1.6 million. Post-runoff polling found 44 percent of Cornyn runoff voters intending to support Paxton. Two cautions: the polling firm is directed by a former Democratic state party official, and undecideds are high. The ratings change and the fundraising disparity are more robust than the ballot test.

5.7 Mass-level loyalty

Table 4. Trump approval among Republicans, second term

Date	Overall	Among Republicans	Source
Aug 2025	40%	93%	Gallup
Nov 2025	36%	84%, from 91% in Oct	Gallup, Nov 3–25

Date	Overall	Among Republicans	Source
Nov 2025	33%	68%, from 81% in Mar	AP-NORC, management of federal government
Jul 2026	33%	—	AP-NORC, Jul 23–27
Jul 2026	34%	78%	Economist/YouGov; enthusiasm 19%, from 38% spring 2025

Question wording differs across houses. Only within-series comparisons are valid.

Within the Gallup series, Republican approval fell from 93 to 84 between August and November 2025. Within Economist/YouGov it stands at 78 percent, a second-term low in that series, with enthusiasm roughly halved. Claims here are confined to named series; no minimum across houses is asserted.

This is the observation least consistent with a consolidation account. Observed elite compliance reached its highest level in the same period in which within-party approval declined on every series examined. That is difficult to reconcile with a model in which elite behavior tracks base preference, and readily reconciled with one in which elite behavior tracks the expected cost of dissent—a function of control over primary electorates and of sanctioning capacity, not of popularity.

6. Operationalizing personalism

The paper treats the Republican Party as leader-centered. That requires a classification rule rather than an assertion. I treat personalism as continuous rather than categorical, and distinguish it from presidentialization and ordinary candidate-centered politics by locating the leader’s authority in personal sanction rather than in office or in party institutions.

Table 5. Dimensions of party organization

Dimension	Organizational party	Personalist party	Republican evidence, 2017–2026
Candidate selection	Rules, coalitions, committees	Leader endorsement	Endorsement decisive in contested and counter-incumbent primaries; Cassidy, Cornyn, Massie
Elite careers	Institutional pathways, seniority	Personal loyalty	Dissent cohort attrition; 2019 defector group largely departed
Program	Negotiated platform	Leader-defined	Platform drafting centralized 2024 relative to 2016
Sanctions	Party committees, leadership	Personal retaliation	Post-Epstein pressure on individual signers; Indiana primary challenges
Succession	Institutionalized rules	Uncertain, personal	No designated heir as of August 2026

Dimensions adapted from the party institutionalization literature (Panebianco 1988; Levitsky et al. 2016). Placement on each dimension is a judgment, and the state-level evidence is mixed: several state parties retain independent organizational capacity, as the Indiana episode indicates.

7. A contrasting case: Biden, 2021–2024

This is a contrasting case rather than a control case. The two periods differ in economic conditions, approval, the post-Dobbs issue environment, candidate composition, district maps and chamber exposure, so comparability on relevant confounders cannot be assumed. Its value is limited but real.

Biden’s observed intra-party compliance was conspicuously lower. Two Democratic senators blocked his signature legislation outright. Progressive members defected publicly on the November 2021 infrastructure vote. He faced a primary challenge and an organized uncommitted vote in 2024. His position failed terminally in July 2024, when his party forced him from the ticket, an outcome with no Republican analogue here. Democrats nonetheless gained a Senate seat in 2022 and lost a net nine House seats, among the smaller midterm losses of the modern era.

The defensible conclusion is narrow: low visible intra-party compliance can coexist with relatively strong midterm performance. The case does not establish that permitting dissent produced the better result. Dobbs is a competing explanation of comparable magnitude, and Jacobson (2023) treats the 2022 result as a test of referendum theory in which abortion politics did substantial work. What the contrast establishes is that high compliance is not itself evidence of electoral strength, which is the paper’s claim.

8. A structured judgmental forecast for November 2026

What follows is a structured judgmental forecast, not a model-derived prediction interval. No statistical model generates the numbers below; they are expert judgments informed by the indicators in Table 6 and by historical mappings. No probability interval is attached, because none could be justified without a specified model, uncertainty assumptions and out-of-sample validation.

Table 6. Forecast inputs, August 4, 2026

Indicator	Value	Historical mapping
Presidential approval	33–39%	Presidents below 45% have averaged large midterm House losses
Generic ballot	D+4 to D+7	2018: D+8.6 → D+40; 2010: R+6.8 → R+63
Special-election swing	D+10.4 to D+11.5 median	2018 opened D+17.9, closed D+14.5, produced D+40
Net retirements	36 R vs. 21–22 D	2018: 34 R vs. 18 D
Redistricting	R net roughly +5	Cook central estimate; no modern precedent at this scale
Seats needed	D +3 to +5 net	From a 218–213 baseline with vacancies

A reasonable range is a Democratic House gain of 5 to 40 seats net of redistricting, with 15 to 30 as the central scenario. Democrats are favored to take the House. The Senate requires a net gain of four

and is a harder path; Maine, North Carolina, Michigan and Georgia are the rated toss-ups, with Texas now Lean rather than Likely Republican.

Two related propositions are stated as hypotheses rather than findings, because nothing here tests them. The first is that a within-party approval threshold exists below which differential turnout dominates the seat-change relationship; the 75 percent figure sometimes suggested is a conjecture. The second is that a narrow Paxton margin would indicate a nomination penalty large enough to offset a fourteen-point state baseline; candidate quality, spending, opponent strength and national conditions are alternative explanations this design cannot exclude.

The perishability of this section is a feature rather than a defect, provided it is dated. The forecast is a falsifiable prediction generated from a stated framework at a stated time, and the framework can be assessed against the November result in a way that a purely retrospective measurement argument cannot be. That is the reason to publish it before the election rather than after.

9. Succession

The 2021–2024 period is usually read as settling the durability question: out of office and without patronage, Trump retained the party and returned. That reading omits a feature internal to the case. Throughout that period he was a candidate, and every actor was pricing a live probability of restoration. Compliance was in part an investment in a future patron. After January 2029 there is no restoration to price. The question is not whether authority survives absence from office but whether it survives the removal of the prospect of return.

Table 5 makes the prediction concrete by asking which assets transfer. Programmatic commitments transfer, because tariffs, immigration restriction and anti-institutionalism now have independent constituencies. Party organization transfers, because it is institutional. Primary-electorate deference transfers partly, at a discount, and only if a single successor is designated. Personal sanctioning capacity does not: it depends on a principal who is present, motivated, and expected to fund and campaign against defectors personally. Massie was not defeated by a program; he was defeated by a challenger the president recruited in a race he funded and campaigned in.

Andrews-Lee (2021) supplies the qualification. Successor viability in leader-centered movements depends on the capacity to reactivate attachment to the founder rather than on either automatic inheritance or inevitable collapse. The implication is that the outcome is contingent on successor performance and not determined by the structure alone.

Two observable tripwires would discriminate among scenarios before mid-2027. Whether Trump designates a single heir or permits a field to form, since contested succession fragments the one transferable mass-level asset. And whether an endorsement moves a contested 2028 primary in which the loser faces no credible prospect of retaliation. If endorsement effects persist where sanction is absent, the authority was informational and transfers; if they do not, it was coercive and does not.

10. Limitations

The design is descriptive and no causal effect is identified. The 2022 comparison is confounded by Dobbs and the 2026 environment by inflation and foreign conflict, either sufficient to explain declining approval without reference to intra-party dynamics. The paper claims only that compliance and the electoral environment diverged, which holds regardless of what produced the divergence.

The cohort analysis rests on a counterfactual that cannot be verified. Retirement is multiply determined; Newhouse was 70 and held a safe seat. This is why bounds replace point estimates and why no causal attribution is offered.

The secret-ballot evidence compares dissimilar decisions and is reported as a diagnostic. The control section rests on two cases without a denominator. The endorsement analysis lacks the timing data required for a defensible weighted rate. The special-election series is drawn from low-turnout electorates with variable candidate quality and is a noisy proxy for congressional outcomes.

11. Conclusion

Observed party unity can rise because dissenters are deterred, defeated, or depart, even where a leader's capacity to achieve institutional and electoral objectives is not rising. That proposition is the paper's durable contribution, and it does not depend on the November result.

The 2021 dissent cohort makes the magnitude legible. Twenty-nine percent were defeated in primaries; eighty-two percent left Congress. An analyst reporting the first number describes a minority of the cohort's disappearance. Neither number licenses a causal claim, and the interval between them is what an honest measure must display.

For November 2026 the prospective indicators point consistently in one direction and the compliance indicators are not informative about the outcome. For 2029 the question is which of the currently bundled assets survive separation from the person holding them. The observable test—whether an endorsement moves a race its author cannot punish—arrives before the transition.

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