With Trump Taking Over, A New Republican Party Is Born

By Joe Macaron
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The Republican National Convention began its deliberations on July 18 to confirm the party’s presidential and vice-presidential nominees for the 2016 US national election. Presidential candidate Donald Trump and his running mate Indiana Governor Mike Pence are expected to clinch the nomination with fanfare and perhaps some unpredictability. Three trends will define the outcome of the Republican National Convention (RNC) meeting on July 18-21 at the Quicken Loans Arena in Cleveland, Ohio: the party’s internal alliances, the political platform, and the campaign’s national base.

Trump is about to lead a broken party. After winning a contentious Republican primary, the real estate mogul shifted his criticism to the party establishment arguing that they failed to recognize the magnitude of his primary win, estimated at 14 million votes, and remain hesitant to rally behind his leadership. Indeed, all presumptive presidential candidates since 1988 are a no-show at the convention, excluding Senator Bob Dole. The party’s national security heavyweights are not taking Trump’s candidacy or foreign policy credentials seriously enough to attend the convention and some of them are flocking to the Democratic presumptive nominee Hillary Clinton.

It was not until last April that Trump began to mend fences with the RNC chairman Reince Priebus, in a late recognition of the importance of the RNC as a fundraising and political infrastructure machine. Early on, Trump operated on the assumption that the road to the White House is possible without raising financial contributions and setting up election teams throughout the United States, two tasks in which he underperformed during the primaries despite his winning streak. Furthermore, his campaign management has been often tumultuous, whether in the sporadic staff reshuffle or the problematic impact of his statements.

It is worth noting that the last time a candidate ran for president without previously holding any elective office was in 1952 with General Dwight D. Eisenhower who ended up being the 34th US President and played a key role in World War II. In 2016, neither Trump nor his running mate have had any foreign policy experience. Furthermore, Trump’s decision to select the conservative Mike Pence as his vice-presidential candidate did not only reflect his one-man show management style, but also raised questions about the chemistry between the two candidates and the extent of their agreement on key issues such as free trade and the Iraq war. Picking Pence was meant to have a running mate who will
not challenge or overshadow Trump, yet the Governor’s pro-Israel stance and evangelical background will also help the Republican nominee to galvanize the conservative vote. Indeed, Trump has been quietly opening up to the evangelical base while refraining from overt attacks on the Republican establishment.

However, the choices the campaign is making tell us what kind of Republican party will likely unfold under Trump. The convention program is focused on themes of national security, economy, nationalism and unity. The list of speakers is dominated by Trump’s family and business associates as well as prominent faces of the conservative movement. The theme of security is mostly focused on curbing immigration and the Benghazi attack. The Trump campaign appears intent on making the 2012 attack on the US consulate in Libya a major campaign issue to argue that Hillary Clinton as a Secretary of State under President Barack Obama has failed to address vital national security threats and the consequences of illegal immigration. While no major national security official is taking the floor to speak in Cleveland, the Trump’s campaign foreign policy messages will likely be delivered through the speeches of retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn and conservative Senators Tom Cotton and Jeff Sessions.

**The Rise of Social Conservatism**

The last few weeks leading to the convention have been crucial to the Trump campaign. Last week, the final meeting of the RNC Rules Committee and the write-up of the GOP platform offered a glimpse of what to expect during the Republican convention and beyond. The “Never Trump” camp failed to pass the “conscience” clause by 87 to 12 votes in the Rules Committee. The amendment was meant to free the delegates from their obligations of honoring the outcome of their state’s primary election. The roll call for nomination this week will include 2,472 delegates and Trump will need a simple majority of 1,237 votes to win the nomination. He has secured 1,542 delegates in the primaries. As negotiations failed to reach a compromise in the Rules Committee, the Trump campaign, the RNC leadership and conservatives swiftly squashed the attempt to change the convention rules, hence further weakening the establishment’s influence. Allies of former presidential candidate Senator Ted Cruz played a leading role in blocking the “conscience” clause. Both Cruz and Senator Marco Rubio are featured as speakers at the convention and it is yet to be seen if they will free their delegates (551 and 173 respectively) to vote for Trump. What the Cruz camp hopes to gain in return is amending the rules for the 2020 Republican primaries to eliminate delegates from congressional districts held
by Democrats in order to restrict the voting to the conservative base, hence increasing Cruz’s chances to win the primaries in four years if Clinton became President.

Furthermore, the Trump campaign indirectly empowered the conservative base to challenge the establishment. While the draft GOP platform is not made officially public yet, there is a sense where things stand going into the convention. The Trump campaign did not micromanage the platform deliberations as previous presidential candidates did, however this hands-off approach allowed social conservatives to exert unprecedented influence in shaping their issues of concern such as the role of religion in public life, the definition of marriage, and gun control. Moderate voices, trying to soften the platform’s language on social issues, were remarkably sidelined as the party’s draft platform was moving to the far right. The stamp of the Trump campaign was in conveying skeptical views on free trade agreements, a significant shift compared to the 2012 GOP platform, as well as in including the presumptive nominee’s promise of building a wall along the US border with Mexico. However, other major economic policies suggested by Trump did not make it to the platform such as imposing 35% tariffs on imports from US companies that move their plants to foreign countries. On foreign policy, the Trump camp did not attempt to change the language and instead maintained the Republican establishment’s rhetoric on regime change in Syria, sanctions against Russia, and a tough policy on Cuba. The draft did not have any reference to the two-state solution between Palestinians and Israelis, whereas Trump has previously indicated his intentions to relaunch the negotiations process if elected.

While the platform is not binding for Trump if elected president, this partisan document usually gives a general indication of what direction the Republican candidate will take the country. It will be interesting to see whether the Trump campaign will be more engaged in shaping the parameters of the final version of the platform this week or it will let the social conservatives have their way as a motivation to energize the base in the national elections.

Indeed, the latest polls, particularly the ABC News-Washington Post one, reflected the Trump campaign’s national base. The major indication out of these polls is that Trump is narrowing the gap with Hillary Clinton after recent attacks on police across the US and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) characterization of her email practices as Secretary of State as “extremely careless.” According to the polls on the eve of the RNC convention, the major shift in recent weeks
was that Clinton’s lead among college-educated white women has narrowed from a 22-point lead to an even split. While Trump leads by 15 points among registered white voters, he trails Clinton by 52 points among non-whites. Trump’s lead among conservatives has also increased this month from 58 to 66 percent. Picking the conservative Pence as VP will likely further expand Trump’s support among conservatives in the coming weeks and months prior to the election. Accordingly, Trump’s messaging during the convention will target maximizing the turnout of white voters to balance the minority votes for the Democrats.

If Trump wins the national elections, it will be above all a knockout for the Republican establishment. While they might be skeptical of Trump’s policies, the conservative movement sees a unique opportunity to expand its influence in the party’s structure and platform, especially on social issues. The three things to watch this week in Cleveland are whether Senator Cruz and his allies will stand with Trump on the floor of the convention, whether the presumptive Republican nominee will significantly change the traditional GOP platform, and what kind of message he will deliver for the national elections.