

Trump allies reelected to lead RNC as party faces reckoning Print



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While RNC Chair Ronna McDaniel ran unopposed, the normally sleepy race for co-chair emerged as a proxy battle between pro-Trump forces and those looking for a cleaner break from the president. | Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

Donald Trump will have two staunch allies atop the Republican National Committee as he enters his post-presidency, an illustration of the hold he retains over the party even as some GOP leaders desert him in the wake of Wednesday's riot at the Capitol.

RNC chairwoman Ronna McDaniel and co-chairman Tommy Hicks easily won reelection on Friday at the party's annual winter meeting on Florida's Amelia Island. With Trump eager to retain influence over the GOP and quash dissent as he leaves office, their victories ensure that two party officials who've been close with the president will oversee the Republican Party infrastructure for the first two years he's out of office.

While McDaniel ran unopposed, the normally sleepy race for co-chair emerged as a proxy battle between pro-Trump forces and those

looking for a cleaner break from the president. Hicks, who had the support of Donald Trump Jr., overcame several rivals, including Vermont committeeman Jay Shepard, who has drawn private criticism from Trump aides, and Utah committeeman Bruce Hough, an ally of Sen. [Mitt Romney](#).

McDaniel and Hicks will serve through the end of the 2022 midterms, during a period when Republicans will be shut out of the White House and in the minority in both chambers of Congress.

Republicans at the meeting, which came on the heels of Wednesday's deadly siege on the Capitol, wrestled with questions about the future of the party in the post-Trump era. The private meetings and sideline conversations illustrated the growing divide in the party, with establishment Republicans eager to rid themselves of the president and more hardline pro-Trump activists, who have increased their numbers in the RNC fold over the past four years, standing by him.

"I think most of the members down here are very loyal to the president, and I can appreciate that. But at some point country is more important than party," said New Jersey committeeman Bill Palatucci, who has played key roles in several past Republican presidential campaigns.

"We are at a critical juncture," added Palatucci, a confidante of ex-Gov. Chris Christie, who has also criticized Trump's role in the insurrection. "What's our strategy for surviving and doing well in a post-Trump world? We don't have a future as a party if we can't win Arizona, Georgia, Pennsylvania and Michigan. It's an important self-examination we need to go through to figure out how we do better, and it is a waste of time to chalk it up to just saying, 'It was stolen from us.' In my view, that's not good enough."

Some at the meeting privately expressed anger over Donald Trump Jr.'s remarks at the rally before the president's supporters stormed the Capitol, where he said, "This is Donald Trump's Republican Party!" There was also a desire in some corners for the committee to formally condemn the president, which it ultimately didn't do.

But many Trump supporters made clear they weren't backing away an inch from the president, who is weighing a 2024 comeback bid. Trump got a rapturous reception when he called into a Thursday morning breakfast meeting. Trump made no mention of the previous day's events and said nothing about conceding the presidential race.

Several attendees were struck during the meeting by some RNC members who made the case that most of the protesters had been peaceful, arguing that the bad behavior of a relatively small number of people was resulting in the whole movement getting unfairly maligned. Few in the breakfast recognized Trump's role in the riot or acknowledged that he had encouraged the rioters to march on the Capitol, attendees said.

While presiding over the breakfast, McDaniel stressed that the riot had damaged the Republican Party, arguing that images of Trump supporters breaking into the Capitol wouldn't play well with the public. She also used the breakfast to make the case that the party needed to keep Trump supporters in the fold.

While McDaniel ran with the support of the president, she also pledged to RNC members during her reelection campaign that she would be neutral in her leadership. In a show of independence, McDaniel [invited several potential 2024 contenders](#) other than Trump to the meeting.

Yet some members say they remain concerned about the decision to keep the committee's current leadership in place.

"I think we should have made some changes. I think that would have shown some impartiality," said Jonathan Barnett, an Arkansas committeeman.

Among the would-be 2024 candidates making appearances were Kentucky Sen. [Rand Paul](#), South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem, and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis. Nikki Haley, who served as UN ambassador during the first two years of Trump's term, [used her speech to criticize the president over the Capitol Hill violence](#).

"President Trump has not always chosen the right words," Haley said during her dinnertime speech on Thursday. "He was wrong with his words in Charlottesville, and I told him so at the time. He was badly wrong with his words yesterday. And it wasn't just his words. His actions since Election Day will be judged harshly by history."

Haley also weighed in on the party's future, arguing that it needed to embrace a more inclusive approach.

"This Republican Party is a home for anyone, because we stand for the principles that matter to everyone," she told the group.

Potential 2024 candidates also spent the RNC meeting making behind-the-scenes moves. Paul was spotted chatting with Drew McKissick, the GOP chairman in the key early primary state of South Carolina. And hours before Friday's party elections, Arkansas Sen. [Tom Cotton](#)

threw his support to his home state Republican Party chairman, Doyle Webb, in the co-chair race. Cotton broke with another potential 2024 hopeful, Texas Sen. [Ted Cruz](#), who backed Hicks, a Texan whose father used to own the Texas Rangers baseball team.

With Trump still two weeks away from leaving office, some were struck by the early start to the 2024 Republican contest.

“I think we’re going to see more in early action from these people,” said New Hampshire committee member Juliana Bergeron, whose state hosts the first-in-the nation primaries. “It used to be a year, then it was two years, and now it’s like a four-year campaign.”

But it was questions about what happens next for the party that dominated the meeting.

Henry Barbour, an influential Mississippi committeeman and the nephew of ex-RNC Chairman Haley Barbour, stood before the group at the closing session to say that the party needed to take a clear-eyed look at itself if it wanted to get back into power.

“These are tough times,” Barbour told fellow members. “It hurts because there are no medals in politics for second place.”

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