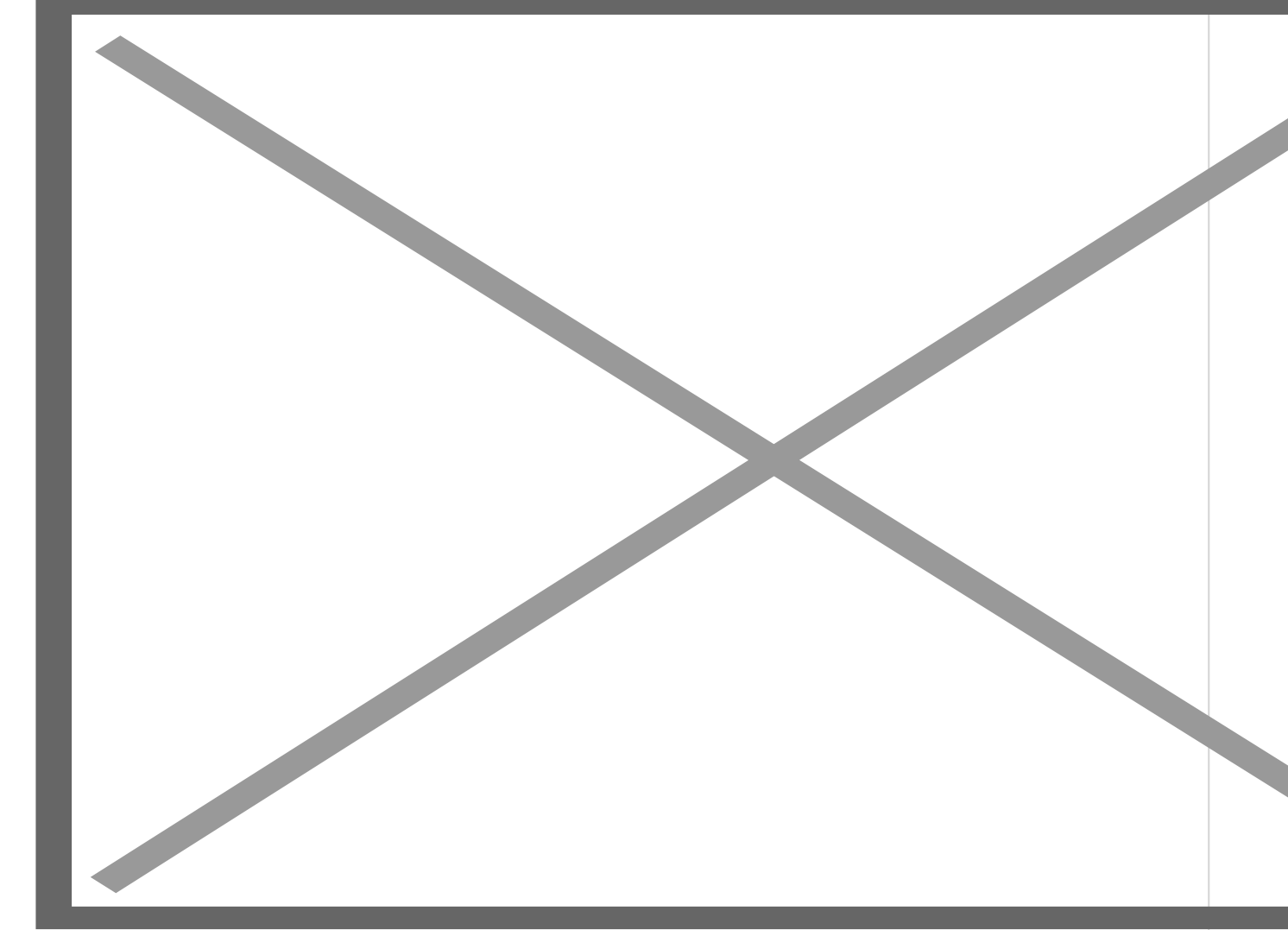


Pro-Trump forces dominate conservative conference

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'Trump 2024' t-shirts for sale outside the Conservative Political Action Conference in Orlando, Florida. [Photo: Octavio Jones/Reuters]

Orlando, February 28 (RHC)-- The Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), the U.S.'s largest annual gathering of Republicans, has over the years served as a gauge for the direction of the party and its supporters.

This year's event, just weeks after Donald Trump was acquitted in a US Senate impeachment trial for his role in a deadly Capitol riot, is taking place as the party has splintered over the former Republican president's role moving forward.

Some Republicans have publicly blamed Trump for the Capitol Hill insurrection, even voting in favor of his impeachment, and others have floated the idea of starting their own political party to get away from his influence. But CPAC speakers and attendees made their position clear on the weekend.

"Let me tell you this right now, Donald J Trump ain't going anywhere," Texas Republican Senator Ted Cruz, once a Trump opponent, said on Friday during a speech at the conference.

"How's it going, CPAC? Or I heard someone earlier phrase it a little bit better: TPAC," said Donald Trump Jr, making a "T" for Trump with his hands.

Despite repeated false claims the election was stolen from him, Trump lost the vote to Democrat Joseph Biden, who took office last month – and has faced rebuke from some members of his own party for the Capitol riot on January 6.

He was impeached in the U.S. House of Representatives for inciting the mob, and seven Republicans joined Democrats in the Senate in voting to impeach Trump this month, but the effort fell short of the majority needed to convict him. But Republican officials who want to move forward without Trump face a large challenge.

Several legislators who voted in favor of impeachment have faced censure by the Republican parties in their respective states, while Trump himself also has hit out against Republican leaders who criticised him for inciting the riot.

This month, he urged the party to dump Republican Senate leader Mitch McConnell, whom he called "a dour, sullen, and unsmiling political hack," after McConnell said Trump was "practically and morally responsible" for the riot.

But Trump won more than 74 million votes in November, surpassing any Republican presidential candidate in history, and his supporters remain passionately loyal to the former president.

A Morning Consult/Politico poll of likely Republican voters conducted in February showed that 53 percent would support Trump in the next presidential nominating contest. The closest runner-up in the poll was former Vice President Mike Pence, with just 12 percent.

A recent Suffolk University/USA TODAY poll of Trump supporters found that 46 percent would support an independent pro-Trump party over the GOP. "The GOP is Trump's party," said Jim Murray, a Republican voter who travelled to the conference from Georgia. "I firmly believe that."

Speakers at the conference remained uniformly supportive of Trump, while those in the party who are critical, including Congresswoman Liz Cheney and Senator Mitt Romney – the Republican Party's presidential candidate in 2012 who was previously celebrated at CPAC – did not attend.

In a statement inserted into the congressional record last month, Romney called Trump's conduct as president reprehensible. "I consider an attempt to corrupt an election to keep oneself in power one of the most reprehensible acts that can be taken by a sitting president," Romney said after casting his vote to convict Trump in his second impeachment trial.

In an exhibition hall, vendors sold red pro-Trump trucker hats, flags and bedazzled purses with Trump's name on the front, while another table displayed "MAGA hammocks" with Trump slogans like "Fake News", "Deplorable" and "Make America Great Again" sewn across them.

Nearby, attendees waited in line to have their picture taken with a golden idol made in the likeness of the former president. Organisers asked people to wear masks and observe social distancing guidelines, but attendees regularly flouted the rules, including Florida Representative Matt Gaetz and Trump Jr, who were seen walking through the halls maskless.

As a sign of the types of issues pro-Trump Republicans will continue to emphasise, CPAC speakers challenged the existence of systemic racism, opposed “political correctness” and criticised the Black Lives Matter movement.

Some also took up Trump’s combative style of politicking during the weekend.

“We’re not going to apologise to anyone,” Senator Rick Scott told the crowd. “We are never, ever going to retreat.”

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