



How Incumbent Presidents, Including Trump, Control Their Party's National Committee— and Why It Matters

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Since the inauguration of Donald Trump in 2017, the Republican National Committee – RNC for short – has become strongly supportive of him, even on matters that are controversial with some other Republicans. Not only has it created and aired early advertisements supporting Trump's 2020 reelection campaign, it also followed his orders to reinstate campaign support to Alabama senatorial candidate Roy Moore following allegations that he had engaged in sexual misconduct with minors. Additionally, the RNC has spent considerable money for events or office rentals at Trump owned properties, hired many staffers from Trump's inner circle, and covered part of Trump's legal fees in the Russia investigation.

The RNC – like the Democratic National Committee – is the only institution that is supposed to represent the interests of all Republicans and the national party as a whole. Its main job is to ensure that party candidates across the country get elected. Yet during a rough midterm election year for many Republicans, the RNC is nevertheless functioning – in the words of its chair Ronna Romney McDaniel – as “Trump's political arm.”

My research helps explain why presidents, including controversial newcomers like Donald Trump, manage to control and direct the national committees governing their party.

How Presidents Control National Committees

My research shows that presidents gain control over their party's national committees for one specific reason: they can hire and fire the chair of the committee. This power is a holdover from an earlier era when the national committees were largely responsible for organizing the full presidential election campaigns.

When national committees ran the campaigns, presidential *candidates* were given the power to select the chair after the party's national convention. But since 1984, when Walter Mondale failed to appoint his preferred DNC chairman, this power has been taken away from nominees. Committee chairs of parties not previously holding the presidency are selected by the members of the national committee. However, incumbent presidents have retained the right to select the national chairs – and, crucially, presidents can also replace their party's national chair.

This means that presidents have two ways to control their party's national committee. They can appoint chairs that are in line with their personal preferences; and, if for some reason they are disappointed in the chair's performance, they can replace him or her with someone new. As my research makes clear, presidents not only formally have, but actually use this power. Consequently, chairs of parties that are in the White House have considerable shorter terms in office than those of out-parties. To be precise, controlling for a number of variables chairs of committees under control of an incumbent president serve, on average, on 493 fewer days

in office than chairs of committees without an incumbent president.

Why Presidential Control Matters

Historically, presidents in both parties have used their influence to have the national committee engage in activities aimed at promoting their political agendas, and themselves. The national committee thus turns the party into “the president’s party” even if there is internal debate about policy directions or future nominations. In addition, the committee allocates resources that might otherwise be used to help other party members to support the incumbent president.

- During the 1980s, for example, the RNC focused on celebrating President Ronald Reagan. In 1981 and 1982, the RNC spent more than \$12 million on TV advertisements in which it promoted the GOP as Reagan’s party. The committee endorsed Reagan for reelection before the president even announced his intention to run again. Reagan’s control was so complete that in 1986 he appointed his daughter Maureen – a relative political novice – as RNC vice chair.
- Similarly, the DNC in the 1990s mostly worked to promote Bill Clinton. For example, starting in 1995, the DNC spent more than \$25 million on ads backing Clinton’s reelection. As part of a strategy designed by Dick Morris, Clinton’s personal pollster, who was put on the DNC’s payroll in 1995, these ads promoted Clinton’s image as a crime fighter and extolled his positions on Medicare, welfare reform and tax cuts. Although the DNC paid for the ads, they were mostly the product of the White House, with Clinton himself directly involved in their creation.

Such choices can make some strategic sense. Indeed, because Reagan was more popular than his party, branding the GOP as “his” was reasonable. But in other circumstances, the unconditional support national committees provide for their presidents can lead the party to promote policies not supported by all in the party, or to neglect campaigning for other members of the party.

Trump and the RNC

Party tensions are apparent under Trump. As the RNC spends a considerable part of its resources to promote Trump and buoy his properties, it endorses policies such as tariffs that are controversial among other GOP elected officials. This makes it harder for Republican incumbents and candidates to distinguish themselves, even in districts where the president is not popular.

Trump may also use his control over the RNC to reward or punish Republican candidates in the 2018 midterms and beyond. The RNC provides financial support to candidates, as well as access to datasets that allows candidates to run more effective campaigns. Traditionally, national committees are cautious about withholding such support, but Trump is quite willing to pick fights with co-partisans and use his party powers differently. The same will be true in 2020. Both the DNC and RNC have, in the past, endorsed incumbent presidents for re-nomination – as, for example, when George H.W. Bush faced a primary challenge in 1992. Following this pattern, any Republican challenger in 2020 will face opposition not just from Trump’s reelection campaign, but from the Republican National Committee as well.

Read more in Boris Heersink **"Trump and the Party-in-Organization: Presidential Control of National Party Organizations"** *The Journal of Politics* 80, no. 4, 2018: 1474-1482.