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Trump Won New Hampshire, but There Are Warning Signs for November

Former president showed weakness with independents, who will help decide the general election, and some Republicans say they won't back him

By Aaron Zitner, Dante Chinni and Jack Gillum

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For Donald Trump, New Hampshire served up a set of danger signs along with a resounding victory.

With his convincing win over Nikki Haley in the GOP primary, the former president showed that a dominating share of the Republican Party's core voters are still with him and that his momentum toward the party nomination grows. But the New Hampshire results also signaled that Trump risks losing enough Republicans—as well as a substantial share of independent voters—to create a problem for him as a general-election candidate in November.

The first task for any candidate is to unify the party. But 19% of Republicans who cast ballots in New Hampshire said they would be so dissatisfied with Trump as the nominee that they wouldn't vote for him in November, according to AP VoteCast, a survey of primary voters. Similarly, 15% of Republicans who participated in Iowa's caucuses last week said they wouldn't support Trump in the general election.

“In a polarized country, any candidate has to win 90% or more of their party to win an election,” said Whit Ayres, a longtime Republican pollster and strategist. “You can't be competitive if you're not close to 90%.” In 2020, Trump lost 9% of his own party's voters, AP VoteCast found, and still came up short in the election.

Most national polls show Trump tied with or narrowly leading President Biden in a hypothetical 2020 rematch, and some recent surveys of battleground states have given Trump clear leads.

But while Democrats have fretted for months about Biden's coalition fraying, due largely to low enthusiasm among young and minority voters, the early signals from GOP nominating contests suggest that Republicans might also have trouble holding together their voter coalition.

Parties often develop rifts during a primary season that eventually heal, but Trump is an

unusual figure in that he is universally known, and opinions of him among many voters have been fixed for years. That suggests it could be harder to persuade Trump skeptics within the party to back him.

Moreover, Trump in New Hampshire was carrying 33% of independent voters who chose to cast ballots in the GOP primary, another yellow warning light for his candidacy. He won a larger share of independents in 2020—some 37%, AP's VoteCast found—and still lost that election.

And among the independent voters in New Hampshire's GOP primary, 66% said they wouldn't vote for Trump in November if he was the nominee.

David Winston, a veteran Republican strategist, has long argued that independent voters are the key to presidential elections. In a report on the 2020 election, he found that Trump went from winning independents by 4 points in 2016 to losing them by 13 points in 2020—a bigger losing margin than any major party candidate since Democrat Walter Mondale in 1984.

In Iowa, 20% of all caucus participants, including 15% of self-identified Republicans, said they would be so dissatisfied with Trump as the GOP nominee that they wouldn't vote for him in November.

Dave Kochel, the former executive director of the Iowa Republican Party, called that “a huge warning sign.”

“I mean, that's a big number, and I think that's probably a wake-up call for their campaign to see that kind of resistance,” Kochel said of the 20% figure. “They're going to have to figure out what to do about that, because you can't win an election if you lose a quarter of the GOP vote.”

Kochel said he believed the polls reflected genuine feelings about Trump and not just sour grapes from voters supporting another candidate. “Iowans are not known for lying,” he said “And they're a little more levelheaded. They don't get wrapped up in the moment.”

At the same time, Trump's victory in New Hampshire offered little to suggest that his momentum toward the GOP nomination will stall.

The Republican primary voters there were among the least-friendly to the president that he is likely to find in states with early slots on the nominating calendar. They were less conservative and more working-class than GOP primary voters overall.

Those groups become more plentiful in many of the states to come, and they are groups that tend to strongly back the former president.

More than two-thirds of ideologically conservative voters, for example, backed Trump in New Hampshire. They made up 58% of the voter pool, AP VoteCast found. But conservatives make up nearly three-quarters of Republican primary voters nationally, NBC News found when it merged all of the polls it had conducted through 2023.

Similarly, Trump won close to two-thirds of voters who don't have a four-year college degree, often considered working-class voters by political analysts. They made up 63% of the New Hampshire primary voters, but they account for 69% of GOP primary voters nationally in NBC News data.

Write to Aaron Zitner at aaron.zitner@wsj.com, Dante Chinni at dante.chinni@wsj.com and Jack Gillum at jack.gillum@wsj.com