Why Trump Is So Hard to Beat

July 31, 2023

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The first Times/Siena poll of the G.O.P. primary shows he still commands a seemingly unshakable base of loyal supporters.

https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/31/upshot/poll-trump-republican-primary.html

By Nate Cohn
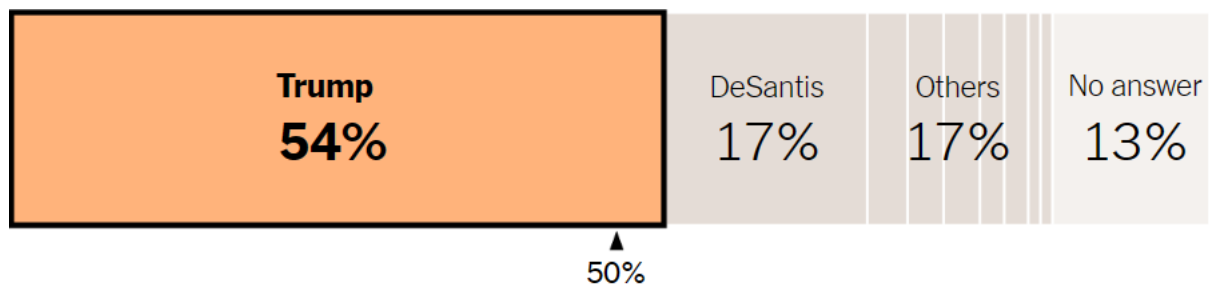
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Nate Cohn, The Times's chief political analyst, makes sense of the latest political data. Get it with a Times subscription.

In the half century of modern presidential primaries, no candidate who led his or her nearest rival by at least 20 points at this stage has ever lost a party nomination.

Today, Donald J. Trump's lead over Ron DeSantis is nearly twice as large: 37 points, according to a New York Times/Siena College poll of the likely Republican primary electorate released Monday morning.

Which candidate would you be most likely to vote for in the Republican presidential primary?

| Trump 54% | DeSantis 17% | Others 17% | No answer 13% |

▲
50%

New York Times/Siena College poll of the likely Republican electorate, July 23-27

But even if it might be a mistake to call Mr. Trump "inevitable," the Times/Siena data suggests that he commands a seemingly unshakable base of loyal supporters, representing more than one-third of the Republican electorate. Alone, their support is not enough for Mr. Trump to win the primary. But it is large enough to make him extremely hard to defeat — perhaps every bit as hard as the historical record suggests.
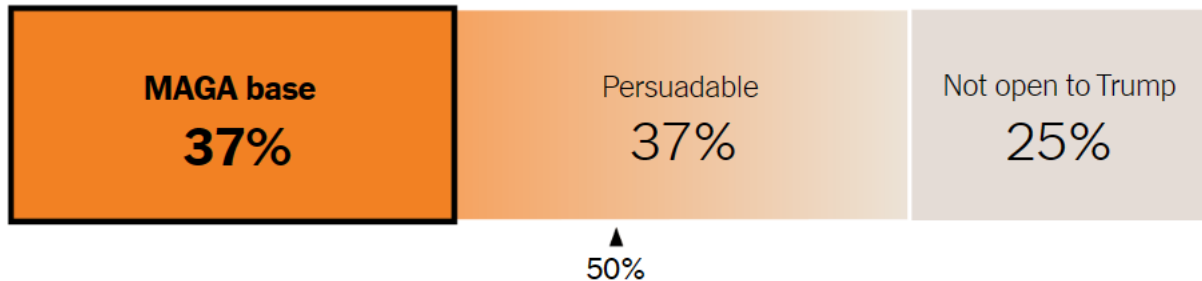
Here's what we know about the depth of the support for — and opposition to — Mr. Trump from our poll, and why it's so hard to beat the former president.

The MAGA base, defined

It's populist. It's conservative. It's blue collar. It's convinced the nation is on the verge of catastrophe. And it's exceptionally loyal to Donald Trump.

As defined here, members of Mr. Trump's MAGA base represent 37 percent of the Republican electorate. They "strongly" support him in the Republican primary and have a "very favorable" view of him.

Trump's base makes up more than a third of the likely Republican electorate

The MAGA base includes those who "strongly" support Trump in the Republican primary and view him "very favorably."

Zero percent — not a single one of the 319 respondents in this MAGA category — said he had committed serious federal crimes. A mere 2 percent said he "did something wrong" in his handling of classified documents. More than 90 percent said Republicans needed to stand behind him in the face of the investigations.

Perhaps Mr. DeSantis or another Republican will peel away a few of these voters, but realistically this group isn't going anywhere, maybe not even if Mr. Trump winds up being imprisoned. This group is probably about the same as the voters — 37 percent — who supported Mr. Trump in the polls on Super Tuesday in 2016. It's probably about the same as the group of Republicans — 41 percent — who supported him at his low point in January, in the wake of last November's midterm elections.

This is an impressive base of support, but it still is not quite a majority of the Republican primary electorate. Most of the Republican electorate either doesn't strongly support Mr. Trump in the primary or doesn't support him at all. Most don't have a "very favorable" view of the former president, either. In theory, it means there's an opening for another candidate.
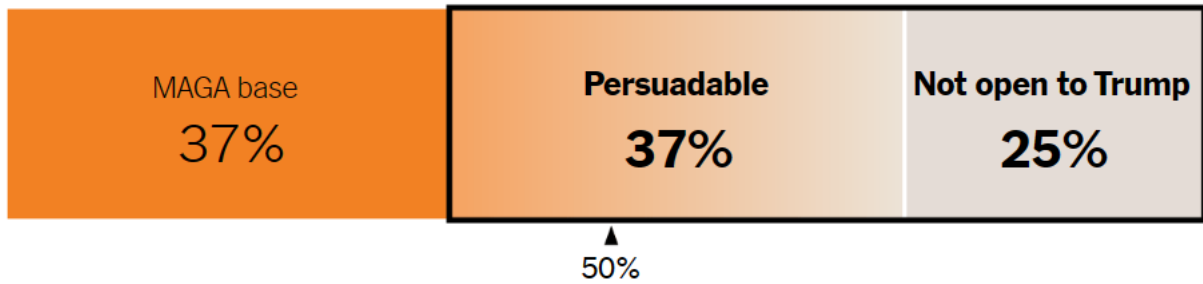
But with so much of the G.O.P. electorate seemingly devoted to Mr. Trump, the path to defeating him is exceptionally narrow. It requires a candidate to consolidate the preponderance of the rest of the Republican electorate, and the rest of the Republican electorate is not easy to unify.

The divided Republican Party

The MAGA base lends itself to easy description. The rest of the Republican electorate does not.

But broadly speaking, the rest of the Republican electorate can be divided into two groups.

More than half of remaining Republicans are still open to Trump

"Persuadable" refers to Republicans who remain open to supporting Trump; the "Not open to Trump" group is not considering him.

There's the group of voters who may not love Mr. Trump, but who remain open to him in the primary and in some cases support him over the alternatives. It's a group that's broadly reflective of the Republican electorate as a whole: It's somewhat conservative, somewhat favorable toward Mr. Trump, somewhat favorable toward Mr. DeSantis, and split on whether to support the former president, at least for now.

There's also a second group of voters who probably won't support Mr. Trump. They represent about one-quarter of the primary electorate and they say they're not considering him in the primary. These voters tend to be educated, affluent, moderate, and they're often more than just Trump skeptics. A majority of these voters view him unfavorably, say he's committed crimes and don't even back him in the general election against President Biden, whether that's because they actually prefer Mr. Biden or simply wouldn't vote.

Breaking Down the Republican Electorate

How Republicans who strongly support Trump, those who are open to him, and those who are not considering him differ, according to a recent New York Times/Siena College poll of likely primary voters.

	MAGA base 37%	Persuadable voters 37%	Not open to Trump 25% Views on Trump
Think G.O.P. needs to stand behind Trump	94%	80%	32%
Would vote for Biden over Trump in '24	0	1	29
Think Trump committed crimes	0	9	49
			69
Have unfavorable view of Trump	0	12	**Views on issues**

Say America is in danger of failing	80	61	37
Oppose immigration reform	71	57	37
Oppose more aid to Ukraine	64	58	26
			28
Say punish woke businesses	43	41	**Demographics**
Very conservative	57	31	25
Earn $100k or more	30	35	49
Have a college degree	26	33	56
Moderate or liberal	14	28	49

New York Times/Siena College poll of the likely Republican electorate, July 23-27

These two groups of voters don't just differ on Mr. Trump; they disagree on the issues as well. Mr. Trump's skeptics support additional military and economic aid to Ukraine, and comprehensive immigration reform, while they oppose a six-week abortion ban. The persuadable voters, on the other hand, take the opposite view on all of those issues.

Yet to beat Mr. Trump, a candidate must somehow hold nearly all of these voters together.

The DeSantis challenge

It would be hard for any candidate to consolidate the fractious opposition to Mr. Trump.

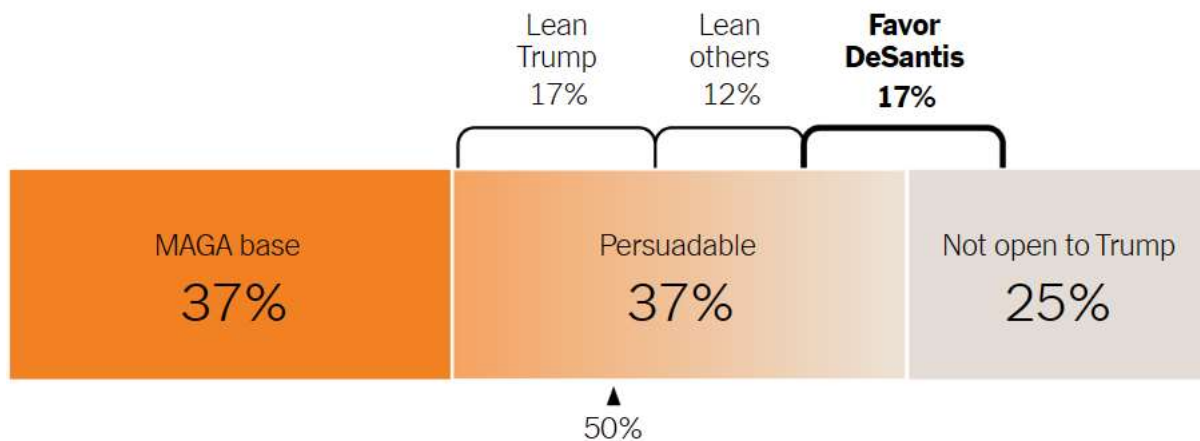It has certainly been hard for Mr. DeSantis, the Florida governor.

At the start of the year, it seemed he figured out how to win both conservative and moderate skeptics of Mr. Trump by focusing on a new set of issues — the fight against "woke" and freedom from coronavirus restrictions. This seemed to excite establishment donors and even some independents every bit as much as conservative activists and Fox News hosts.

It hasn't turned out that way. The fight against woke has offered few opportunities to attack Mr. Trump — strange social media videos notwithstanding — while Covid has faded from political relevance.

Without these issues, Mr. DeSantis has become a very familiar kind of conservative Republican. As with the Ted Cruz campaign in 2016, Mr. DeSantis has run to Mr. Trump's right on every issue. In doing so, he has struggled to appeal to the moderate voters who represent the natural base of a viable opposition to Mr. Trump.

Mr. DeSantis is faring poorly enough among Trump skeptics to give other candidates an opening, much as Mr. Cruz's conservative brand created a space for the ultimately nonviable John Kasich, Marco Rubio and Jeb Bush candidacies.

DeSantis's support is split between those who are still open to Trump, and those who are not
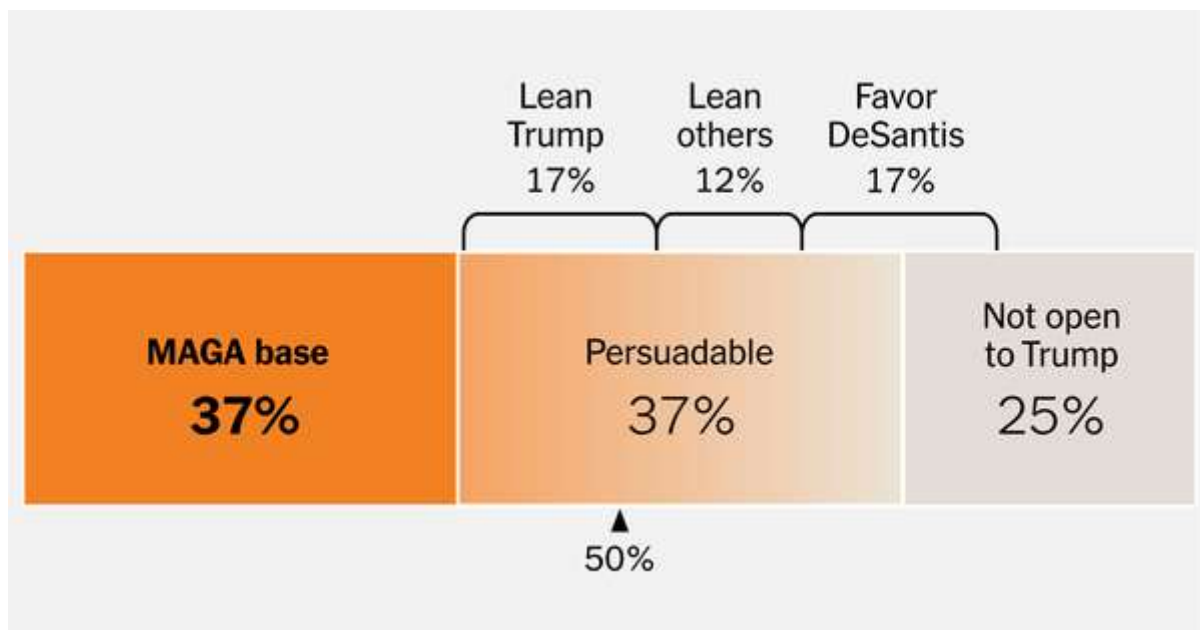
Overall, Mr. DeSantis holds just 32 percent of voters who aren't considering Mr. Trump, with the likes of Chris Christie, Tim Scott, Mike Pence, Nikki Haley and Vivek Ramaswamy each attracting between 5 percent and 10 percent of the vote.

Among the "Never Trump" group of voters who don't support Mr. Trump against President Biden in a hypothetical general election rematch, Mr. DeSantis only narrowly leads Mr. Christie, 16 percent to 13 percent.

Of course, Mr. DeSantis's challenge runs even deeper than divisions among his potential supporters. Republican primary voters don't even believe he would do better than Mr. Trump in the general election against Mr. Biden, overturning an advantage that DeSantis backers might have taken for granted six months ago.

And Mr. DeSantis would face an entirely different set of challenges if he aimed his appeal at Mr. Trump's deepest skeptics. He might alienate the mainstream conservative center of the Republican Party if he started to speak the moderate and anti-Trump language of Mr. Trump's critics — and meet the same fate as Mr. Rubio and Mr. Kasich.

But the promise of the DeSantis campaign was that he could appeal to the otherwise disparate Trump-skeptics factions of the Republican Party, and avoid the challenges that doomed Mr. Trump's opponents eight years ago. So far, it hasn't worked.

Lean Trump 17%   Lean others 12%   Favor DeSantis 17%

MAGA base 37%

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Of course, there's still plenty of time left before the Iowa caucuses in January. The candidates haven't even set foot on a debate stage. And while no candidate has ever lost a nomination with so much support, no candidate with so much support has faced so many criminal indictments and investigations, either.

But even if it might be a mistake to call Mr. Trump "inevitable," the Times/Siena data suggests that he commands a seemingly unshakable base of loyal supporters, representing more than one-third of the Republican electorate. Alone, their support is not enough for Mr. Trump to win the primary. But it is large enough to make him extremely hard to defeat — perhaps every bit as hard as the historical record suggests.

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The MAGA base doesn't support Mr. Trump in spite of his flaws. It supports him because it doesn't seem to believe he has flaws.

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