

## THE AUSTRALIAN

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### Where to for Republicans after rise and fall of Donald Trump?



Illustration: Eric Lobbecke

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When Walt Whitman, writing in 1856, observed that Americans aspire to a “democracy of manners”, he meant that they expect to be treated not only equally but also respectfully. Well, you don’t need to know much about politics to know that Donald Trump’s remarks about groping women don’t meet that standard.

Those remarks, which have caused a slew of prominent Republicans to call on Trump to withdraw just four weeks out from the election, compound the Trump campaign’s woes before today’s important debate.

Of course, the Clinton camp has also had its troubles. But although the electorate neither likes Hillary Clinton nor trusts her, those concerns are already factored into voting intentions, with most polls giving Clinton a reasonably solid four to six point lead over Trump.

Faced with the polls, Trump’s problem is simple. Not having made any headway among blacks and Hispanics, who together account for 28 per cent of the American electorate, he cannot win without securing an overwhelming majority of white voters. However, the most recent *ABC/Washington Post* poll shows him trailing Clinton among white women with college degrees — a group Mitt Romney won — by an extraordinary 30 percentage points: and that was before the latest revelations hit the media. At the same time, Clinton is narrowing Trump’s lead among white men with a college degree, which now stands at 11 points.

Given that college-educated white voters (and especially white women) have reliably higher turnout rates than their less educated white counterparts, and that this is likely to be the first American election in which college-educated voters form a majority of the white electorate, those numbers alone could dash Trump's chances.

By preventing Trump from expanding his support base, while making the 44 per cent of Clinton supporters whose main motive is to cast their ballot against Trump even more determined to vote, Trump's vulgarities seem likely to reduce his already poor prospects below the point of potential salvation.

None of that should come as a surprise. That Trump's past was littered with hostages to fortune was no secret; and it was also clear that he lacked the political experience needed to ride out the shocks the campaign would inevitably bring. Yet as the risk of defeat looms, the question for the Grand Old Party is what its future holds.

That question is more complicated than it seems. There is, no doubt, some truth in the conventional wisdom that views the Trump nomination as a defeat for the Republican establishment, with its aggressive internationalism and its commitment to conservative economic policies. The reality, however, is that establishment Republicanism lost control of the GOP long ago, and what little power it had left was shredded by the Tea Party revolt in 2010.

Rather, the main victims of the Trump nomination were the twin pillars that survived the Tea Party revolt: the GOP's libertarian, small-government wing, which views Trump's fiscal irresponsibility and especially his "rock solid" commitment to preserving the existing social security system as anathema; and even more importantly, the party's dominant Christian, social conservative wing, which has nothing in common with a twice-divorced, foul-mouthed New Yorker.

Each of those groups will view a Trump loss as an opportunity to restore its previous control over the party's fortunes; but if the GOP is to remain competitive, it is clear that it cannot simply revert to where it stood four years ago.

The demographic trends are telling: in 2000, white voters, on which the party relies, accounted for 79 per cent of American voters; this year, that share will be about 72 per cent, while by 2024, minorities are expected to constitute

nearly one-half of young adult eligible voters and 40 per cent of those aged 30 to 44. Unless the party can broaden its ethnic and racial appeal, its electoral base will shrivel.

However, every bit as threatening to the GOP's outlook is the peaking in the evangelical wave.

Over the period from the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960 to Barack Obama's election in 2008, the share of evangelical Christians in the American electorate rose by a third. As that happened, the proportion of evangelical Christians among Republican activists rose from a fifth to a half, with white evangelicals providing the GOP with the grassroots networks needed to win elections.

But there are myriad signs that the great evangelical revival has ended. Thus, white evangelical Protestants now constitute 27 per cent of seniors but only 10 per cent of Americans under 30 — a loss of nearly two thirds from the oldest to the youngest generation of adults. And while the strength of American evangelicals has long been in the high share of children from evangelical families who remain within the faith, recent surveys show that retention rate dropping significantly. Were recent trends to persist, 2024 will be the watershed election at which white Christians fall below being a majority of the American electorate.

The challenge that poses to the Republican Party, which rode the evangelical wave to the Nixon, Reagan and Bush presidencies, is of historic dimensions.

But that doesn't mean extinction looms.

After all, America's political structure, with its vast number of offices subject to frequent election and for which selection occurs through party-organised primaries, institutionalises the two-party system to a very high degree, providing the parties with considerable resilience. Moreover, Clinton, were she elected, would soon provoke a fierce reaction, revitalising the Republican opposition.

Quite what form that reaction will take is unpredictable; what is certain is that the next four years will reshape the GOP. Trump's parting gift to the Republicans may therefore prove every bit as tumultuous as his rise — and as his now increasingly likely fall.

