

Opinion | Without a Platform, Trump Falls

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If President Trump loses his race for re-election and takes Republican incumbents down with him, historians may see June 10 as an important day in the story. That is when the Republican National Committee announced that for the first time since its founding before the Civil War, the party would not draft a new platform but would carry over the 2016 platform, word for word.

This decision symbolized Mr. Trump's takeover of the party. It deprived the party's candidates of an authoritative account of the Trump administration's accomplishments. Perhaps most important, it meant that the party would not offer an agenda for the president's second term. The plan would be whatever Mr. Trump says.

In an ordinary year, this might not have mattered. The conventional wisdom is that elections featuring a sitting president are referendums on the incumbent's record—unless the challenger can be depicted as unfit to replace him.

But former Vice President Joe Biden has turned out to be an elusive target, and the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted Mr. Trump's campaign theme of a strong economy. The president's instinct was to treat Covid-19 as a temporary interruption: Until the Wuhan virus reached our shores, he argues, tax cuts and regulatory reforms and trade deals had the U.S. economy breaking all the records, and when the virus goes away, I'll do it again. He asks voters: Do you really believe that a career politician like Mr. Biden, who presided over the slowest economic recovery in our history, knows how to create growth and jobs?

Unfortunately for Mr. Trump, many voters have a different view. They experienced the pandemic as a life-changing and often life-threatening disruption, and they looked to the president for leadership. Drafting a party platform would have forced the administration to consider a plan for bringing the novel coronavirus under control beyond relying on a speedy vaccine. Instead, the president minimized his role and devolved responsibility to the states, who struggled to obtain essential medical supplies. The president's derisive skepticism about wearing masks further complicated the efforts of governors and local leaders.

Instead, Mr. Trump tried to separate the coronavirus from the economy. If states reopen, he argued, people would go about their business and learn to live with Covid-19 until vaccines and therapeutics were developed. This is not what happened. People voted with their feet, staying away from restaurants and airports and entertainment venues. The president's demand to reopen public schools met resistance from fearful parents, teachers and local officials.

Stamping out the pandemic, it turned out, was a necessary precondition for getting the economy and society back to normal. White House chief of staff Mark Meadows' recent statement that "we're not going to control the pandemic" was a confession of policy bankruptcy—and a self-inflicted wound.

As unemployment surged, millions of Americans [faced the possibility](#) of losing their employer-provided health insurance, and the expiration of enhanced unemployment benefits has made it harder for them to afford alternatives. This was a poor time for Mr. Trump to attack the Affordable Care Act.

Throughout his presidency, Mr. Trump has promised an alternative to the ACA that would preserve its popular features—such as guaranteed coverage for people with pre-existing conditions—without the mandates to which he and his party object. The president has never offered such a plan. That reality has bedeviled Mr. Trump and Republicans in Congress since the party failed to repeal the law in 2017. Drafting a party platform might have forced the administration to fill this void. Instead, the president was reduced to empty promises in his debates against Mr. Biden. Voters have no reason to believe that a second term of President Trump would be different from the first.

More bad news for Mr. Trump: A headline in Monday's Wall Street Journal announced that "[Tariffs on China Fail to Aid U.S. Factories.](#)" The trade deficit—the president's favored if controversial measure of success—is higher than ever. Manufacturing jobs haven't been brought back to the U.S. Manufacturing job growth had slowed and production had peaked well before the pandemic hit. Worst of all, at least if you're Mr. Trump, is that the trade deficit with China is as high as it was when the president took office.

Mr. Trump's trade policies have been controversial within the Republican Party, and they have divided the corporate community. [In a recent survey](#), executives cite U.S.-China business relations as one of their top concerns about a second Trump term. The stock market—another of the president's favorite benchmarks—has shrugged off the rising prospects of a Biden victory, even though the former vice president's plan to raise corporate taxes is bound to reduce profits in the short term.

Here again, drafting a platform could have been the occasion for a midcourse correction. Instead, Mr. Trump is likely to do worse in the business community—as measured by dollars and votes—than any other candidate in the history of his party.

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