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POLITICS

# Wary of Donald Trump, G.O.P. Leaders Are Caught in a Standoff

By JONATHAN MARTIN DEC. 1, 2015

WASHINGTON — For months, much of the Republican Party's establishment has been uneasy about the rise of Donald J. Trump, concerned that he was overwhelming the presidential primary contest and encouraging other candidates to mimic his incendiary speech. Now, though, irritation is giving way to panic as it becomes increasingly plausible that Mr. Trump could be the party's standard-bearer and imperil the careers of other Republicans.

Many leading Republican officials, strategists and donors now say they fear that Mr. Trump's nomination would lead to an electoral wipeout, a sweeping defeat that could undo some of the gains Republicans have made in recent congressional, state and local elections. But in a party that lacks a true leader or anything in the way of consensus — and with the combative Mr. Trump certain to scorch anyone who takes him on — a fierce dispute has arisen about what can be done to stop his candidacy and whether anyone should even try.

Some of the highest-ranking Republicans in Congress and some of the party's wealthiest and most generous donors have balked at trying to take down Mr. Trump because they fear a public feud with the insult-spewing media figure. Others warn that doing so might backfire at a time of soaring anger toward political insiders.

That has led to a standoff of sorts: Almost everyone in the party's upper

echelons agrees something must be done, and almost no one is willing to do it.

With his knack for offending the very constituencies Republicans have struggled with in recent elections, women and minorities, Mr. Trump could be a millstone on his party if he won the nomination. He is viewed unfavorably by 64 percent of women and 74 percent of nonwhite voters, according to a November ABC News/Washington Post poll. Such unpopularity could not only doom his candidacy in November but also threaten the party's tenuous majority in the Senate, hand House seats to the Democrats and imperil Republicans in a handful of governor's races.

In states with some of the most competitive Senate contests, the concern is palpable, especially after weeks in which Mr. Trump has made a new series of inflammatory statements.

"If he carries this message into the general election in Ohio, we'll hand this election to Hillary Clinton — and then try to salvage the rest of the ticket," said Matt Borges, chairman of the Republican Party there, where Senator Rob Portman is facing a competitive re-election.

Pat Brady, the former state Republican chairman in Illinois, where Senator Mark S. Kirk is also locked in a difficult campaign, was even more direct. "If he's our nominee, the repercussions of that in this state would be devastating," Mr. Brady said.

Another Republican strategist in Ohio replied to an email asking about Mr. Trump's effect in the state by sending a link to a Wikipedia page on the 1964 congressional elections, when Barry Goldwater's presence atop the Republican ticket led the party to lose 36 House seats.

In Washington, many of the party's top operatives believe that there is no way even the strongest Senate candidates could overcome the tide if Mr. Trump were leading the ticket.

"Senator Portman is a great example I like to use when talking about this,"

said Brian Walsh, a Senate campaign veteran. “He’s very well prepared, has tons of cash in the bank, and he got his campaign organized and up and running early. But if we nominate a bad presidential candidate like Trump, senators like Portman or Kelly Ayotte aren’t going to be able to outrun Hillary by that much. And there goes the Senate.”

Asked about concerns over Mr. Trump’s potential influence on other contests, his spokeswoman, Hope Hicks, said, “I think the facts indicate the exact opposite is true,” and emailed a link to a consumer marketing firm’s assertion that Mr. Trump would ensure the highest general election turnout from Republicans, Democrats and independents alike.

Yet the clamor for a “Stop Trump” effort has become pervasive at the Senate’s highest levels, where members up for re-election are realizing that they can no longer dismiss as strictly theoretical the possibility of his capturing the nomination. Mr. Trump’s persistent ranking at or near the top of the polls is prompting urgent calls for an advertising assault to try to sink his campaign.

“It would be an utter, complete and total disaster,” Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, himself a presidential candidate who has tangled with Mr. Trump, said of his rival’s effect on lower-tier Republican candidates. “If you’re a xenophobic, race-baiting, religious bigot, you’re going to have a hard time being president of the United States, and you’re going to do irreparable damage to the party.”

Mr. Graham recounted separate phone calls with two of the party’s most sought-after donors last week, people who he insisted not be named but who give tens of millions of dollars to Republicans every election year. He said they had expressed alarm at Mr. Trump’s durability and asked what could be done.

“I said, ‘If you care about the future of the Republican Party, and you want to have a viable Republican Party, you better start moving,’” Mr. Graham said. “If they don’t push back, they’ll have nobody to blame but themselves.”

“There is not a bit of confusion among our members that if Donald Trump

is the nominee, we're going to get wiped out," a prominent Republican senator said about Mr. Trump's effect on Senate races in states such as New Hampshire, Pennsylvania and Ohio.

Pleading for an outside group to run ads highlighting, for example, people who lost their jobs because of some of Mr. Trump's business deals, the senator warned, "Until somebody with A, the money, and B, the incentive to step up comes along, I worry he kind of glides along unmolested."

But the same reason the senator insisted on anonymity explains why, just two months before the Iowa caucuses, there has been no such ad campaign: To step up in that way would be to invite the wrath of Mr. Trump, who relishes belittling his critics.

Two of the most potent financial networks in Republican politics, that of the hedge fund billionaire Paul Singer and another led by the industrialists Charles G. and David H. Koch, have each had preliminary conversations about beginning an anti-Trump campaign, according to strategists involved. But Mr. Trump has already mocked Mr. Singer and the Kochs, and officials linked to them said they were reluctant to incur more ferocious counterattacks.

"You have to deal with Trump berating you every day of the week," explained a strategist briefed on the thinking of both groups.

The sidelines are crowded. The Las Vegas casino magnate Sheldon Adelson; the U.S. Chamber of Commerce; American Crossroads, the group led by Karl Rove; and Right to Rise, the "super PAC" supporting Jeb Bush, have no immediate plans to go after Mr. Trump, officials said.

The exceptions so far: The super PAC supporting the presidential bid of Gov. John R. Kasich of Ohio has attacked Mr. Trump, but partly to gain attention and raise money. The Club for Growth, a conservative group, ran a short-lived and unsuccessful ad campaign against Mr. Trump in Iowa this fall but has limited resources.

Slowly, some members of the party's establishment are reckoning with the idea of a Trump ticket. The National Republican Senatorial Committee has cautioned its incumbents in blunt terms not to let themselves be linked to him.

But beyond sheer intimidation, some members of Congress worry that if the party's establishment went after Mr. Trump, it would only fuel his anti-Washington appeal.

"I think it would play into his hands and only validate him," said Senator Lamar Alexander, Republican of Tennessee. "A 'Stop Trump' effort wouldn't work, and it might help him."

And some Republicans repelled by Mr. Trump feel little urgency to attack him because, they say, he is preventing what they see as an even less desirable standard-bearer — Senator Ted Cruz of Texas — from consolidating the votes of hard-line conservatives.

"He's keeping Cruz where he is," Scott Reed, a veteran Republican strategist, said of Mr. Trump.

In the House, where the Republican majority is safer, there is less worry about Mr. Trump. While the most competitive Senate races are in swing states, many House districts tilt toward the right, and the populist fervor that is lifting Mr. Trump may also aid Republican candidates for those seats.

But there are also some Republicans who, while uneasy about Mr. Trump, believe that he could attract new voters to the party. "He may bring out people who don't usually vote, which could be helpful to some of my colleagues," said Senator Susan Collins, Republican of Maine.

Yet Ms. Collins conceded that she had not fully thought through that notion. "I'm not up next year," she said, "so I don't have that dilemma."

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