

US Republican presidential campaign sinking into crisis

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Donald Trump fired his campaign manager, Corey Lewandowski, on Monday, in a shake-up that saw his closest political aide marched out of Trump Tower by armed security guards. Lewandowski's sudden departure was widely portrayed in the American media as a sign of severe crisis in a campaign which faces declining poll numbers and the drying up of financial support.

There are also reports that a sizeable group of delegates to the Republican National Convention in Cleveland is seeking a rules change whose adoption would allow delegates bound to Trump to vote for another candidate, potentially blocking a first-ballot nomination.

While internal conflict within the Trump campaign has been widely reported for months, since Trump brought on long-time lobbyist and political operative Paul Manafort to serve as chief delegate counter and campaign chairman, Trump aides had repeatedly denied there were tensions between Manafort and Lewandowski.

Manafort ran operations at campaign headquarters and handled relations with Republican Party officials and office-holders, as well as appearing regularly before the media as a Trump surrogate. Lewandowski handled the candidate's day-to-day schedule and accompanied him to every rally and campaign appearance.

Press reports described a showdown Monday morning when Lewandowski was summoned to a meeting with Trump and several of his adult children, sparked by rumors that the campaign manager had been promoting negative press accounts of the role in the campaign of Jared Kushner, the husband of Trump's daughter Ivanka, and the publisher of the right-wing *New York Observer*.

According to the account in *New York* magazine, the Trump children "peppered Lewandowski with questions, asking him to explain the campaign's lack of infrastructure. Their father grew visibly upset as he heard the list of failures. Finally, he turned to Lewandowski and said, 'What's your plan here?' Lewandowski responded that he wanted to leak Trump's vice-president pick. And with that, Lewandowski was out."

The conflict between Lewandowski and Manafort was not merely a personal power struggle, but reflected tensions between the semi-fascistic elements that were the initial core of

the Trump campaign—Lewandowski is a former policeman and one-time organizer for the ultra-right political operation of the billionaire Koch brothers—and the more traditional influence-peddlers like Manafort, who was a Republican campaign operative as far back as the Ford administration, before making a fortune as a lobbyist for right-wing and authoritarian regimes.

Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus was reportedly one of those pushing for Lewandowski's removal. The RNC and Republican congressional leaders have been increasingly vocal about the disarray and disorganization of the Trump campaign, which has been largely inactive since Trump won the May 3 Indiana primary and his two remaining rivals, Texas Senator Ted Cruz and Ohio Governor John Kasich, suspended their campaigns.

According to reports filed with the Federal Election Commission Monday, the Trump campaign has only \$1.3 million in its bank account, compared to more than \$42 million amassed by presumptive Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton. The presidential campaign has fewer liquid resources than any Republican senator seeking reelection. Some 50 House Republicans have larger campaign war chests.

The Trump campaign has not run a single paid advertisement since May 3, while Clinton has poured \$24 million into campaign ads in so-called battleground states, those judged to be the most competitive in the November election, including Ohio, Florida, Colorado and Virginia. By comparison, in June 2012 Republican nominee Mitt Romney spent more than \$38 million on campaign advertising in targeted states.

The FEC filing revealed that the Trump campaign has only 69 paid staffers, compared to 685 working for Clinton. In several battleground states, notably Ohio and Florida, Clinton has more full-time campaign staff in the state than Trump has in the entire country. The campaign spent only \$115,000 on online advertising and just \$48,000 for "data management," the basis of get-out-the-vote efforts in the fall.

The filing with the FEC underscores the peculiar character of the Trump campaign, which appears to serve as a money-making operation for the candidate and his family, despite his claim to be "self-financing." In May, for example, Trump raised only \$5.4 million, of which \$2.2 million was a loan from the candidate. The campaign spent \$6.7 million, of which more

than \$1 million was to Trump-controlled companies for travel services, such as Trump's personal jetliner, while amounts nearly as large were laid out for rental of Trump-owned premises like the Mar-e-Lago resort in Palm Beach, Florida.

By structuring his donations to his own campaign as loans—now totaling nearly \$46 million—Trump is in a position to claim the first \$46 million in any new donations to his campaign to reimburse himself. Big-money Republican donors are well aware of this, making them doubly reluctant to write large checks to the presumptive Republican nominee.

The upheaval within the Trump campaign takes place amid new signs of opposition among delegates to the July 18-21 Republican National Convention in Cleveland. Trump has some 1,500 delegates pledged to vote for him by primary and caucus results, well above the 1,237 required for nomination.

Press reports over the weekend indicated that there was growing support for a rules change that would allow bound delegates to vote their “consciences” rather than following the outcome of the primary or caucus in their state. Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker became the latest Trump opponent to declare his support for the rules change, telling the Associated Press, “Delegates are and should be able to vote the way they see fit.”

A three-step mechanism would be required to block Trump's nomination. First, a minority of at least 28 members of the Rules Committee would have to back a new convention rule, enough to force the issuance of a minority report that would be taken up by the convention and voted on. Then a majority of the delegates would have to approve the new rule. Finally, enough delegates would have to switch their votes to other candidates to deny Trump the majority and force a second ballot, in which, by longstanding rule, all delegates cast a free vote.

There are hundreds of delegates formally bound to Trump who actually don't support him. Some are long-time party officials, while others were chosen as a result of efforts by Senator Ted Cruz to place his supporters in delegate slots filled at state or congressional district conventions. As a result, Trump may not be able to claim a majority on a vote on convention rules, where each delegate can vote as they please, without regard to the candidate's preferences.

It is significant that the opposition to Trump within the Republican Party is almost entirely coming from the right, from those opposed, not to his fascistic attacks on immigrants and Muslims, but to his comparative indifference to the social issues of concern to the Christian fundamentalists, like gay marriage and abortion, his professed rejection of cuts in Social Security and Medicare, and his erratic pronouncements on US foreign policy.

Such a political coup is still unlikely, because of concerns in the party establishment about the danger of splitting the Republican Party entirely and destroying its prospects, not only in the presidential race, but for congressional and state office as

well. That it is even being seriously contemplated is an indication of the deepening crisis, not just of the Republicans, but of the whole US two-party system.

A major factor in the delegate mini-rebellion, the financial crunch and the shake-up in the campaign leadership, is Trump's declining standing in the polls. After running neck-and-neck with Clinton in mid-May, he has slid backwards over the past month, now trailing her in the latest CBS poll by 43 to 37 percent, with 20 percent undecided or supporting Libertarian Gary Johnson or likely Green Party candidate Jill Stein.

In the competitive “battleground” states, Clinton holds a narrow but distinct leads in Florida, Ohio, Virginia, Michigan and New Hampshire, while Trump leads only in North Carolina, with a tie in Pennsylvania. Trump would have to carry nearly all of these states to gain a majority of votes in the Electoral College.

Trump's decline is not the result of any surge in popularity for Clinton, who remains the second most disliked presidential candidate of the past half-century. Only Trump himself ranks lower. Trump's 37 percent showing in the CBS poll is actually lower than the 41 percent who believe that Hillary Clinton acted illegally by using a private email server while Obama's Secretary of State.

Trump's major pronouncements over the past several weeks have contributed to his slide in the polls. This began with his racist attack on the Hispanic judge handling the civil suit by former students claiming they were defrauded by Trump University, and culminated in his self-congratulatory tweets over “predicting” the Orlando massacre and his renewed demand for a ban on Muslims entering the United States.

A *New York Times Magazine* cover story on the Trump campaign notes the increasingly frenzied character of his language: “Trump recently accused President Bill Clinton of rape, Obama of treason, Hillary Clinton of murdering Vince Foster, Cruz's dad of associating with assassins, Romney of not being a “real” Mormon ...”

This cover story, and a host of other critical commentary and exposés of Trump's shady business practices in the corporate-controlled media, indicate that sections of the financial elite and the military-intelligence apparatus are shifting toward Clinton as a more reliable servant of their interests. But with more than four months to go before the election, further shifts and upheavals are not only possible, but entirely likely, given the increasingly unstable social and economic environment in the United States and globally.



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