

If Trump is impeached, it will be hard for Senate Republicans to vote to convict him

They need to do it anyway.

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Official White House Photo by Shealah Craighead

In December, the House Intelligence Committee released its impeachment report, and its conclusions are stark: President Trump tried to strong-arm Ukrainian leaders into investigating his political rival Joe Biden. He pushed them to inquire as well into the baseless claim that it was Ukrainians, not Russians, who interfered in the 2016 US election. He applied pressure by withholding almost \$400 million in aid to Ukraine, along with dangling the idea of hosting President Volodymyr Zelensky at the White House. And he tried to cover it all up.

Most of this has been known for weeks. While the impeachment hearings have confirmed the initial whistle-blower report and added much detail, their role has not been primarily a fact-finding one. The basic facts have long been clear. The question is whether the president will be held accountable. If the House does impeach him, a trial will follow in the Senate—where Republicans have more than enough votes to acquit. Will they remain firm in support of the president, despite the evidence against him?

If so, their reasons won't be trivial or strictly tribal. Many senators identify strongly as social conservatives—a group for whom Trump's election has functioned as a levee against a wave of progressive cultural change, especially on issues of gender and sexuality. His presence in office prevents a Democratic administration from codifying such change and pressing it further.

Though the president hasn't seemed much interested in governing, and the Senate Republicans haven't been doing much legislating, they do share one big, ongoing project: flooding the federal bench with conservative judges. These judges are poised to restrict abortion access, limit the reach of LGBTQ protections, roll back environmental laws, and erase worker rights; they may even gain new veto power over all federal regulation. They will shape American law and policy for decades. It's perfectly rational for senators who share their views to prioritize this effort.

Then there's the fact that a decision to turn on the president would spell the end of many Senate careers. So Republicans are in a genuine bind.

Imagine a liberal president every bit as venal, incompetent, and criminal as Trump. If Democratic senators were in a position to help that president to, say, reshape the judiciary to bolster the labor movement, promote equal rights, and confront climate catastrophe—and if that president enjoyed broad support among their own constituents—it would be very hard for them to confront the president over his abuse of power.

Nevertheless, confronting the president's abuse of power is what senators are called by their office to do. Trump's behavior is unacceptable not by an ideological standard but by a constitutional one. An unaccountable president is a threat to democracy and the rule of law. Stopping such a threat is worth losing your job, even if you're a senator. Refusing to do so will only embolden future presidents—of whatever party—to be as bad or worse.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "A tough, necessary choice."