

How Trump and the RNC teamed up to stop a delegate revolt

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Story highlights

- Trump and RNC operatives teamed up to block efforts to unbind the delegates
- The voting stretched close to midnight, as Trump and RNC forces kept the meeting going to prevent opponents from regrouping

*Cleveland (CNN)*In the end, Never Trump never stood a chance.

Despite plenty of positive media coverage and an active social media and email campaign, the effort to wrest the nomination from presumptive GOP nominee Donald Trump in the 11th hour fizzled in a Cleveland conference room thanks to an alliance between the ultimate outsider candidate and insider party operatives.

The Trump campaign -- worried about efforts to unbind delegates -- tied itself to the Republican National Committee and their operations prepared to work together, sources involved told CNN.

Wednesday night, on the eve of the crucial Rules Committee meeting, Trump and RNC staff gathered friendly delegates on the 6th floor of the downtown Westin, the Trump campaign's home base here. RNC Chairman Reince Priebus personally addressed the room, and delegates were introduced to staff whips for each side and to delegates that would be offering guidance on the whole range of issues before the committee.

Trump's campaign created a texting system so that Rules Committee delegates could be alerted in real time to preferred positions on various amendments.

Running things for Trump was Bill McGinley, a veteran political attorney from Jones Day. On the RNC side, it was chief of staff Katie Walsh and chief operating officer Sean Cairncross.

Delegates were told to look for Maine's Alex Willette, Massachusetts's Vincent DeVito and California's Harmeet Dhillon on the Trump side of things and Georgia's Randy Evans, New Hampshire's Steve Duprey, Tennessee's John Ryder, also the general counsel for the RNC, and Texas' Steve Munisteri for the RNC perspective.

The preparation paid off. On vote after vote in the 112-member meeting Thursday, RNC and Trump supporters were largely in lockstep.

In addition to quelling efforts to unbind delegates from voting for the presumptive nominee, Trump's supporters helped the RNC to fight back a series of efforts by former Ted Cruz delegate guru Ken Cuccinelli and his supporters to reshape the primary map in 2020. One of the proposals, meant to close primaries and caucuses from non-Republicans, would have offered huge delegate bonuses to states that close theirs and making it so early state South Carolina couldn't be winner-take-all.

Trump and the RNC's strategy even extended to keeping Thursday's session going well into the night rather than recessing for the day and coming back Friday. That would have given Trump opponents time to regroup.

"When you're winning on the issues, you want to keep going," Duprey said. "And we were winning on every vote. When you're winning -- don't stop."

Nevada GOP whip and delegate Jordan Ross said the whole idea that the RNC and Trump delegates were out of step with the grassroots was a misnomer.

"The supposed grassroots movement was neither grassroots, nor was it a movement. It was AstroTurf," Ross said. " (Unbinding is) all as fake as somebody peddling aluminum siding on the Internet. It was not real, it was not a real movement. Fourteen million people supporting Donald Trump -- that's a movement." Ross, proposing two amendments meant to close off any alternate interpretation of party rules, said his constituents in Laughlin overwhelmingly voted for Trump.

"I have no intention of returning to those people who I rely on to keep me in office and telling them I had some part in shredding their votes," Ross said.

One of the intellectual fathers of the movement to unbind delegates, North Dakota RNC Committeeman Curly Haugland, said that the fight was over for 2016.

But, he added: "I've never seen anybody work so hard to win a one-horse race."

"The Trump campaign is definitely establishment now," Haugland said. "The RNC has obviously joined forces, completely lockstep with the campaign."

When the actual vote came on the delegate question, it didn't take long to see how things would go.

Ross Little Jr., a Louisiana RNC committeeman and major Cruz ally, had not told anyone what he would do on the issue of whether delegates had to vote based on primary results, or if they could be "unbound" to vote for whomever they wanted to. But Little stood up and put his thumb on the scale of keeping delegates bound.

From there, the unbinding effort was cooked. Ross's amendments passed 87-12, with even fewer supporters than some conservative whip counts had estimated unbinding to have. It's less than half the delegates that would be needed to force the issue on the floor with what's called a minority report, which requires 28 committee member signatures.

Delegates Unbound, which is working with Free the Delegates, has vowed to continue and is sending its supporters text messages that the fight goes on. Without more support, however, it's unclear how they could get recognition on the floor under the rules written Thursday, which will need to be formally adopted on Monday and then confirmed by the floor.

The combination of Trump and RNC forces also helped sink Cuccinelli's efforts to change the 2020 calendar.

Proceedings on Thursday were delayed three hours as the two sides negotiated. One of the biggest sticking points was Cuccinelli's proposal for a hefty bonus to states that close their primaries. He wanted 20% more delegates for those states; the RNC thought that was too substantial. Knowing they had the votes to defeat him, the RNC held out. Cuccinelli told reporters he plans to try to get 28 signatures for a minority report for a package of his proposed changes and criticized the Trump-RNC alliance.

"Well, the dynamic changed (Wednesday) when the Trump people threw in with Reince, they flat-out said we're going to follow Reince's lead, so, so much for being anti-establishment," Cuccinelli told CNN.

What happened to Mike Lee?

A question mark going into Thursday had been Utah Sen. Mike Lee. He spent the weeks leading up to the convention weighing both sides of the unbinding argument, he said, and insiders had thought he might be able to tip a narrow margin either way with an impassioned speech, given his stature.

Instead, Lee was on the losing side in every contentious fight, including unbinding, despite his vocal support.

"I say to Mr. Trump and those aligned with him, make the case, make the case to those delegates who want to have a voice," Lee said during Thursday's session, raising his voice. "Don't make the case that their voices should be silenced. That's not going to help, that's not going to help make him president that's not going to help our party in the long run."

Only 10 others joined him and his wife.

Afterwards, Lee was coy about next steps, saying only: "We'll see," he told inquisitive reporters.

"Didn't turn out how I wanted it to, but by the end, it wasn't a huge surprise," he added of the final vote.

Committee members had nothing but praise for Lee, but it was clear that his influence was limited.

"I don't know what Sen. Lee's role actually was, but that side lost on every single issue," Duprey said. "We have great respect for Sen. Lee, but the committee does its independent work and comes to its own conclusions, I don't think we're swayed by a senator."