

Opinion: Republicans just gave us a terrifying preview of their 2024 strategy

By [Paul Waldman](#)

Columnist

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The Republican Party has just offered us a glimpse of the hell they're going to put us all through in 2024. What might appear to be a petty argument about the conditions under which general election debates will or won't be held is actually much more.

The Republican National Committee on Thursday voted unanimously to withdraw from the Commission on Presidential Debates, which has organized general election debates since the 1980s. The RNC will also require primary candidates to sign a pledge not to join any debate not approved by the party. Party chair Ronna McDaniel said the Republican nominee should not be "forced to go through the biased CPD to make their case to the American people."

The likely result in 2024 is that for the first time since 1972 (when President Richard M. Nixon refused to face George McGovern), there will be a presidential vote with no general election debates. On the surface, this is about protecting Donald Trump, who will almost certainly be the Republican nominee if he chooses to run, from the consequences of a disastrous debate.

But it's also a sign that the Republican strategy will again feature chaotic, Trumpian whining that is meant to delegitimize the entire presidential campaign process from start to finish, culminating in an attempt to take back the White House by theft if the voters don't vote the "right" way.

Let's remember that while Trump performed well in the 2016 primary debates when he was on stage with a collection of empty suits, he did poorly in every one of his debates with Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden. By the fall of 2024, he'll be 78 years old; the idea that he'll be more disciplined and focused than he was in the past is far-fetched. Everything Americans dislike about him would be on vivid display in a debate, before the largest audience the candidates will have.

If Republicans announce now, two-and-a-half years in advance, that they're refusing to participate in the debates, it could save them a last-minute act of cowardice. But the more important reason they're doing this is to reinforce the idea that every institution and practice associated with the presidential campaign must be considered corrupt and biased against Trump and therefore illegitimate, whether it's the news media, the debates, maybe even the weather — and especially the vote counting.

For the record, the Commission on Presidential Debates was formed in 1987 as a neutral body to organize general election presidential debates; it is always co-chaired by one Republican and one Democrat. You can call it stodgy, but the idea that it is somehow “biased” in favor of Democrats is idiotic.

But a core part of Trump's worldview, which has now been assimilated throughout the GOP, is that only procedures and processes biased *in his favor* are truly fair. The only fair interview is one conducted by Fox News' Sean Hannity or Jeanine Pirro; the only fair vote count is one carried out by someone who has pledged their loyalty to Trump's lie that he was the true winner of the 2020 election.

So on every day of the campaign, Trump, the RNC and all their allies will be clamoring like 5-year-olds: “No fair! No fair!”

The idea is to keep Trump's supporters in a state of perpetual agitation and grievance, one that will build and build all the way to the counting of the votes, when it could explode if Trump is not immediately declared the winner.

Don't forget that in state after state this year, Republicans are running election fantasists to administer voting at the state and local level. Some of them are absolutely unhinged, such as Mark Finchem in Arizona, a QAnon-spouting conspiracist and self-proclaimed member of the far-right Oath Keepers who could well be in charge of elections in that vital swing state in 2024.

So imagine it: After a campaign of nonstop complaining about how Trump and all his supporters are victims of a rigged process, the votes come in, and it looks like Biden has won again. Trump's angry supporters erupt into the streets, convinced that the election is being stolen. What are the Trumpist secretaries of state going to do?

Will they just certify him as the winner of their state's elections, no matter what the votes actually were? Will Republican-controlled legislatures in places such as Arizona, Georgia, North Carolina and Wisconsin simply hand him their electoral votes? And if so, how will the challenges fare with the Supreme Court's conservative supermajority?

A dispute over debates may seem far removed from that nightmare, but it isn't. It's all part of the same strategy: to convince the Republican base that the entire process is rigged against them.

This is how Republicans have decided to wage the 2024 campaign, in every way and on every day. If our democracy can escape it intact, it will be a miracle.