

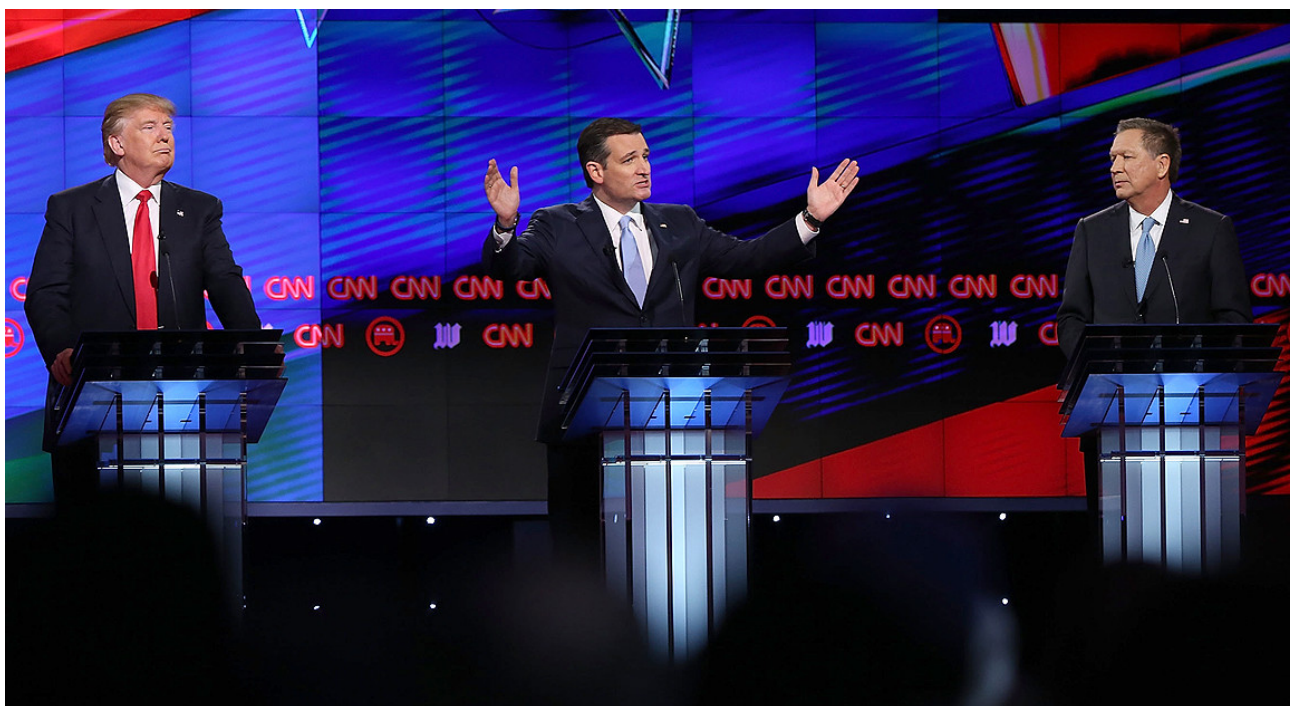
# POLITICO

2016

## **GOP establishment on the ropes**

A contested convention seems like the last chance to stop Trump, if the party has the resolve.

By **ELI STOKOLS** and **ALEX ISENSTADT** | 03/16/16 01:16 AM EDT



Donald Trump, Texas Sen. Ted Cruz and Ohio Gov. John Kasich debate during the March 10 Republican presidential debate in Coral Gables, Florida. | Getty

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The Republican establishment is just about out of candidates — and if the delegate math is tough for Donald Trump, it's far worse for everyone else.

The donors who pumped millions into an anti-Trump campaign are now assessing whether to continue the fight. And while some mainstream Republicans are girding for a likely floor fight at the July convention, others are losing their resolve.

“Only in the minds of the delusional DC establishment is there a brokered convention at this point,” said Tony Fabrizio, a longtime GOP pollster who advised Rand Paul’s campaign.

“And if the elites try and steal the nomination from Trump, the riots at the '68 Democratic Convention will look like a garden party.”

By taking Florida, along with Illinois, North Carolina and the North Marianas Islands (Missouri was still too close to call), Trump racked up more than 200 additional delegates, increasing his lead and further dimming the hopes of those desperate to stop him.

Tuesday night delivered more carnage for mainstream Republicans when Trump steamrolled Marco Rubio, long thought to personify the party's future, in the senator's home state of Florida. But moments after Rubio ended his presidential bid, John Kasich prevailed in his native Ohio, winning the state's 66 winner-take-all delegates — and, more importantly, keeping them away from Trump.

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2016

## **Trump KOs Rubio but falls to Kasich in Ohio**

By SHANE GOLDMACHER

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“The goal for most of us at this point is to keep delegates away from Trump, and it really doesn't matter who wins them,” said Charlie Black, a longtime GOP operative who just signed on as an adviser to Kasich's campaign as it approaches a contested convention.

“There are delegates who will be bound to Trump on the first ballot or the first two ballots who aren't going to be for Trump once they're free. If you get to a third ballot, the world changes.”

The Republican Party's #NeverTrump movement, after spending \$15 million in Florida and not putting so much as a dent in Donald Trump's armor, has only a few unpalatable options left: uniting behind Cruz, long a loathsome thorn in the establishment's side, or pinning their hopes on a long shot like Kasich and girding for a messy fight at the RNC's convention that could further fracture the GOP beyond repair.

“With Kasich winning Ohio, a contested convention is more likely than ever,” said one Republican operative in Washington. “The backside shadow campaign for delegates who will come to you on the second and third ballots begins.”

Basking in his latest victories in a lavish ballroom at his Mar a Lago resort in Palm Beach, Trump urged Republicans to stop fighting his lead and instead unite behind his campaign. He mentioned his recent conversations with GOP congressional leaders as he argued again that he is the Republican who can broaden the party's appeal.

“Paul Ryan called me the other day — tremendous call,” Trump said, also noting that he had a “great conversation” with Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell.

But the party is not about to roll over for Trump, especially with his negatives rising higher amid a spate of violent skirmishes between his supporters and protesters at several recent rallies. In fact, there’s rising chatter on Capitol Hill that the party could nominate Ryan himself at the convention.

“He probably wouldn’t [do it] but everyone thinks he’s Republican Jesus,” said one GOP Senate staffer.

Ryan said Tuesday he hasn’t considered such a possibility but stopped short of completely ruling it out.

Cruz, a divisive figure in GOP politics, now finds himself trying to coalesce the party behind him. In recent days, the Texas senator has tried to make inroads with a Republican Party establishment he once scorned. Over the last two weeks, he had phone conversations with Texas Sen. John Cornyn and South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham, both prominent GOP establishment figures.

But to win, he might need anti-Trump groups, which poured millions of dollars into airing TV ads against the Manhattan billionaire, continue the barrage. One key adviser to the effort said that the groups were reassessing their plans and that no decision has been made. A number of prominent Republican Party donors who funded the anti-Trump campaign, including New York City hedge fund manager Paul Singer and the Chicago Cubs-owning Ricketts family, plan to gather in Florida later this week for a private meeting.

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OFF MESSAGE

## **5 takeaways from Tuesday’s primaries**

By GLENN THRUSH

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Ultimately, by splitting votes with Cruz, Kasich might play spoiler, not just for the senator’s 2016 hopes but the establishment’s effort to deny Trump a majority of delegates.

“Starting tomorrow morning, every Republican has a clear choice,” Cruz said Tuesday night in Houston, implicitly dismissing Kasich’s Ohio victory as trivial because he trails by so much in the delegate fight. “Only two Republicans have a clear path to the nomination: ours and Donald Trump’s.”

Praising Rubio as he told his former rival's supporters "we welcome you with open arms," Cruz asserted that he is the only candidate who can deliver the White House in November. Trump, he asserted, "May be the one person on earth that Hillary Clinton can beat."

But many establishment Republicans aren't convinced Cruz's chances in a general election are any better than Trump's. With Rubio's collapse, they're coming to grips with the fact that the party's best chance of taking back the White House may come not in November of 2016 but 2020.

"Marco is still a rising star in the national party and has a bright future," said Matt Moore, the South Carolina GOP chairman. "He has certainly proven himself on the debate stage and represents all that our party traditionally looks for in a candidate—a proven conservative and dynamic ability to convey the message. I would not bet against him in the future."