



Nick Anstead

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## What the inevitable end of the Trump-Musk partnership says about the shifting influences within the White House



*Following his exit from the Trump administration at the end of May, Elon Musk began criticising the administration's "One Big Beautiful Bill", leading to a very public falling out between the former DOGE administrator and President Trump. Nick Anstead writes that one way of understanding the end of the Trump-Musk relationship is through their differing politics. This split could herald a shift in influence in the White House from Silicon Valley billionaires, who prefer smaller government, towards those on the Alt Right, who want a bigger and more authoritarian government.*

If you happened to be following social media earlier this month when the breakdown of the Donald Trump / Elon Musk relationship reached its climax, you would have encountered some spectacular political fireworks. The pyrotechnics were triggered by the final falling out of Trump and his campaign advisor / major donor / former long-term house guest / Special Government Employee / DOGE leader, Elon Musk over the **One Big Beautiful Bill Act** (and, yes, that is the actual name of the piece of legislation).

Musk's attacks on the bill stemmed from its impact on the US deficit. While the law would significantly reduce government spending in areas like healthcare, these cuts would not be sufficient to offset its very large tax decreases, which would be directed mainly at the well-off. As a result, the bill would increase the US's deficit by **\$2.4 trillion between 2025 and 2034**. Musk's criticisms of the Bill started the flame war between the two men, which took place across two social media platforms and rapidly moved away from the finer points of fiscal policy. It was spectacularly unedifying for both parties, so I won't provide a blow-by-blow account (if you somehow missed it, you can find details [here](#), plus reporting on **Musk's contrite apology**).

## Why did Trump and Musk fall out?

This might have been one of the most predictable endings in recent political history. Certainly, many commentators **saw it coming**. However, much of the reasoning behind these predictions of a breakdown in the Trump-Musk axis, as well as the analysis published after the event, **was based on psychological readings of the situation**. According to this school of thought, Trump and Musk were fundamentally unsuited to working together because they were both **alpha males** or **narcissistic egomaniacs**.

I don't have the medical knowledge to comment on the accuracy of these sorts of diagnoses and the significance they may or may not have had to the course of events, but it also seems entirely plausible to argue that the reason the Trump-Musk relationship fell to pieces was far simpler: it was all about the politics. Furthermore, if we understand the breakdown in this way, it has much wider ramifications than the relationship between two very powerful individuals. Instead, it says something broader about the tensions that exist within coalitions on the populist right.

## The fault lines in the MAGA electoral coalition

The MAGA coalition is a complex political entity, and it became even more complex in the 2024 election cycle. The voting bloc which sustains the Republican Party in office has changed significantly in the past few decades. It is now a coalition of wealthy individuals living outside cities, and lower-income voters who would have likely voted for the Democrats in the past and often live in towns rather than cities. Conversely, the rival coalition on the political left tends to be composed of both the professional classes and those on lower incomes who all reside in more diverse, urban areas.



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As election results in several countries have shown, when mobilised around cultural issues, this type of right-wing coalition can be very powerful. However, it is also potentially fragile, as the two components in it might want quite different things economically, with wealthier voters on the right favouring a more traditional form of conservative economic management, including a relatively

small state, lower taxes and control of the deficit. In contrast, the new members of the coalition, often originally part of the political left, are more likely to use and even be reliant on state provision (the political irony of the Big Beautiful Bill is that the spending cuts it contains are likely to be most harmful **in parts of the United States that supported Trump in 2024**). The fight between Trump and Musk, therefore, occurred on a key fault line within the Trump electoral coalition.

## Tech Bros vs. Alt Right

It also reflected substantive ideological differences within the MAGA elite. If Musk was the thought leader of the Tech Bro tendency within MAGA, the former Trump chief strategist and podcaster **Steve Bannon** is his counterpart on the America-first Alt Right. Even before Trump's inauguration, Musk and Bannon **crossed swords** over the issue of immigration. Musk had defended visa routes which allowed workers with high skills to access the US labour market (the kind of skills you might need to hire if, for example, you were trying to build rockets, state-of-the-art electric cars, or run a social media platform). In response, Bannon **described** Elon Musk as a "truly evil guy" and argued that "the entire immigration system is gamed by the tech overlords... The people are furious."

Musk's removal from the administration has ramifications beyond the personalities involved. It potentially marks a shift in power among the ideologies that wield influence within the White House. Musk and the wider community of tech billionaires who **attended the inauguration** largely seem to want a government that stays out of their way. This was reflected in the activities of DOGE, which were essentially about destroying the government's capacity. In contrast, the political projects of the Alt Right require a bigger, more **authoritarian government**, as evident **in the recent actions of ICE agents in various US cities**. A shift in influence between these blocs of the MAGA movement may prove to be the lasting consequence of the Trump-Musk flame war.

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