Tuesday, January 16 2024 / Iowa Caucused

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SCORING IN –

NOEL: The Iowa Caucuses are over. The top four vote-getters are making moves.

NOEL: Vivek Ramaswamy is out of the race:

*<CLIP:> Vivek Ramaswamy: “We did not achieve the surprise that we wanted to deliver tonight.”*

NOEL: Nikki Haley, on her way to New Hampshire, with a third place finish

*<CLIP> Nikki Haley: “and God is so good.”*

NOEL: Governor Ron DeSantis and the chip on his shoulder are heading straight to South Carolina.

*<CLIP> RON DESANTIS: They, the media was against us, they were writing our obituary months ago.*

NOEL: His real obituary may someday note he came SECOND in Iowa. He got about 20-percent of Iowa’s votes, to Donald Trump’s 50-ish.

NOEL: And the winner Donald Trump is back in court today. So a jury can decide how much money he has to pay for defaming a writer he sexually abused.

NOEL: Iowa has spoken. This is what we want, Iowa said loudly.

NOEL: Coming up on Today, Explained

*<CLIP> FORMER PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: “if you’re sick as a dog you say “darling we’ve got to make it”- even if you vote and then pass away it’s worth it”*

[THEME]

NOEL: Jonathan Martin is a political columnist for Politico… he has been *in* Iowa this election season covering the primary. Something he’s done every presidential election since 2008.

JONATHAN: This was by far the coldest and the least dramatic.

NOEL: <laughs> The coldest, the least dramatic. What's the headline this morning? What's the. What's the big takeaway for you?

JONATHAN: It's still Trump's party.

NOEL: Good, good. Short headline. Uh, you spent time talking to people on the ground. Um, sometimes this can be illuminating, sometimes not. What did you hear when you talked to voters that you thought was telling or interesting?

JONATHAN: Well, that's why it was worthwhile to be there the week before because, um, it was extraordinarily telling. I went to a couple of Nikki Haley events, and what it revealed was that she and Ron DeSantis are effectively competing against each other for what I call the sort of stub of the pre-Trump Republican Party that is still willing to participate in Republican contests now, some of them aren't even Republicans anymore. Some of them have become Democrats. Some of them have become independents, but they're still eager enough to, uh, try to save the soul, if you will, uh, of what was their party or in some cases, still and tenuously, is their party. But what we saw from the results was that the majority of the Republican Party still wants Donald Trump. Um, and that's been clear in surveys throughout 2023, but this is the first live action. This is the first time we've seen actual Republican voters in practice. And they overwhelmingly supported the former president.

<CLIP> *PHIL MATTINGLY: Trump finished the Republican caucuses with a one, with a historic 51% of the vote. You're looking at it right here. Significantly more than Ron Desantis or Nikki Haley combined.*

<CLIP> *DONALD TRUMP: Well I want to thank everybody, this has been some period of time and most importantly we want to thank the great people of Iowa [cheers]*

And here's the tricky part about winning the Republican nomination. You have to win Republican votes. Um, and so, you know, Nikki Haley, uh, obviously is confident about her prospects in New Hampshire. And we can talk more about that in a second. But her challenge going forward is going to be that, you know, Trump has got a lock on what is today's Republican Party, which is much more heavily downscale, working class. Uh, and, you know, her voters are mostly college educated and upscale, and that's just not a fair fight.

NOEL: Let's talk about the fight that was presumed to be fair at least six months ago. Ron DeSantis.

JONATHAN: Yeah.

NOEL: Ron DeSantis was going up against Trump, who's looking strong for a while. And then in Iowa, he really went all in. He visited every county.

<CLIP> GOVERNOR *RON DESANTIS: I remember, uh, Governor Reynolds telling me early on, you got to do all 99. Like, that's the people that do that are the ones that win Iowa. But it's also just an important tradition. Talk to real Americans. Listen to real Americans.*

NOEL: And yet, last night, results show he barely broke 20%. What didn't work for Ron DeSantis? Or did Ron DeSantis just not work for Iowans?

JONATHAN: Both.

SCORING IN – A Spiral Staircase

JONATHAN: Look he had a ton of hype at the end of 2022. He was one of the few good news stories for the GOP. And I think for a time, he and the people who are eager to move past Trump in the GOP thought, whoa, we've seen this movie before. Big state governor who has a good election on an otherwise tough, uh, tough cycle for our party and can unify the wings of our party going in to a presidential cycle. This feels like George W Bush going into 2000.

<CLIP> *FORMER PRESIDENT GEORGE W BUSH :04 into clip: It’s time for people to vote here Iowa in less than 2 days. The people of this great state are going to start the process to determine who is going to be the nominee of the Republican party. It’s the process that I like to say is the beginning of the end of the Clinton era in Washington DC*.

Well, it couldn't have demonstrated in 2023 couldn’t have demonstrated just how much the party has changed anymore in the two decades plus since Ron DeSantis turned out to be, uh, a dud of a candidate. Now, he put a lot of work in a lot of sweat equity into Iowa. He won some key endorsements, but ultimately he was effectively challenging a de facto incumbent in in Donald Trump. Um, and the other challenge was that once Nikki Haley came on in the fall with a series of good debate performances, you know, she locked in a lot of what I was saying earlier, kind of the pre Trump Republicans insert the this was squeezed right. He he wasn't getting the Trump people and he was losing uh, the kind of old guard types who would left the party. And so he didn't have much to show for it.

Scoring out – A Spiral Staircase

NOEL: Nikki Haley comes in right behind DeSantis, but still right behind. DeSantis is third place. Last week we talked about how well Haley appeared to be doing in some polls. Where do the results from Iowa leave her going into the New Hampshire primary?

JONATHAN: Uh, not very well. Look, she was hoping to ride the momentum from her debate showings. The buzz she had picked up, the surge of financial support. This pining among a lot of, again, the old guard of the party for anybody but Trump. And then they see her head to head. Numbers against Biden in a trial heat general election, and she's winning overwhelmingly. And so for a lot of Republicans who are embarrassed by Trump and just want to find somebody that can be the nominee and defeat Biden. Wow. I mean, this is somebody who's compelling, right? And so I think she didn't have much organization. You smartly pointed out that DeSantis had done 99 counties in Iowa. She hadn't done that, and she concentrated instead on where ultimately most of her voters were the cities and high income suburbs in Iowa. But ultimately, uh, it was too little, too late, and there just weren't enough of those folks, uh, to to give her a good showing, especially given that she was competing with DeSantis for that very anti-Trump voter in a lot of cases.

NOEL: Jonathan, in a state with more of those folks, though, might Nikki Haley have a much better showing? Might she be proving something if Iowa wasn't quite Iowa?

JONATHAN: Well, that's precisely why she's optimistic going into New Hampshire. But it's also why New Hampshire could pose what I wrote last week is something of a false dawn.

SCORING IN – Richard Goes Skating

Um, because New Hampshire is an outlier when it comes to the Republican nominee process. We saw that speaking in 2000. We saw this in 2000 where where John McCain won and there was a moment where, is Bush really in trouble?

<CLIP> *FORMER SENATOR JOHN MCCAIN: My friends, a wonderful New Hampshire campaign has come to an end, but a great national crusade has just begun. [cheers]*

Well, no, New Hampshire is overwhelmingly compared to other states, high income, secular educated. When the rest of the party is the opposite of those things. And you add to that the fact that as you're going to hear a zillion times in the next week, independents can vote in New Hampshire. And when there's no major action in the other party, and there's really not that much this year on the Democratic side, a lot of those independents go play in the Republican primary. And so, yes, Nikki Haley is going to go to New Hampshire, and she's going to find a lot more of the kind of voters that she was trying to win in Iowa.

<CLIP> *FORMER UN AMB NIKKI HALEY: Tonight, I will be back in the great state of New Hampshire. And the question before Americans is now very clear. Do you want more of the same or do you want a new generation of conservative leadership? [cheers]*

And I expect her to be much more competitive in New Hampshire. But to what end? To what? And to because where did she go from there?

Suggestion – scoring out – Richard Goes Skating

NOEL: Okay, so it sounds like the takeaway is nothing guaranteed for Haley. Anything else in New Hampshire worth looking out for? Does the broader electorate do the people watching? Do we need to care how Ron DeSantis does in New Hampshire?

JONATHAN: I think DeSantis matters in New Hampshire mostly as, uh, is he taking votes from Trump or from Haley? And I think that's where DeSantis, uh, could be a factor here in New Hampshire. Um, it's totally possible that, you know, he sits on votes that Nikki Haley otherwise needs in. Is she losing to Trump there by nine or by two? Um, that's a totally plausible scenario, especially if DeSantis is in the race and taking votes. Um, and her choice as to whether or not to go on the South Carolina, I can assure you, is going to be shaped in part by whatever the margin is there. Now, if she wins New Hampshire, DeSantis or no DeSantis, I think she almost certainly goes on to South Carolina. But if she loses there to Trump, I think the margin does shape her decision going forward.

SCORING IN - sad little skulls

NOEL: Politico’s Jonathan Martin. Coming up, what happened to Teflon Ron? The rise and fall and fall of Ron DeSantis

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

<CLIP> RON DESANTIS: “*We’ve got our ticket punched out of Iowa!* [CHEERS]”

ZACK: I'm Zach Beauchamp. I am a senior correspondent at Vox, uh, where I cover, uh, democracy in the United States and abroad in the far right. And I have a forthcoming book titled The Reactionary Spirit, which covers the rise of right wing, anti-democratic politics around the world.

NOEL: So, Zack, Ron DeSantis came in second in Iowa. You remember the old line. Second place is the first loser. Uh, is this the end of the line for Ron DeSantis?

ZACK: Unequivocally, yes. Yes. DeSantis invested huge amounts of resources in Iowa. He moved something like a third of his campaign staff there, invested tremendous amount of money. The candidate visited all 99 counties inside Iowa. The basic idea was that DeSantis was going to win the conservative lane, right, that he was the true conservative in the race. That's the person who tends to do well in Iowa, typically social conservatives, which is the DeSantis shtick of a kind. Uh, and so he thought that maybe a surprise win here, or at least a strong performance, could get him within striking distance of Donald Trump. It turned into a two person race. Except that not what happened. He got blown out by like, 30 something points, uh, barely ahead of Nikki Haley, who was never considered a serious candidate in Iowa. Uh, and DeSantis is negligible in New Hampshire. He doesn't look like a force in South Carolina. Uh, there's there's just no other way to say it, right? His donors are fleeing. He's done. DeSantis is done. He's not quitting yet. But there's there's no chance that he wins.

NOEL: What on earth happened?

ZACK: So, I mean, look, it's important to start the story really in November 2022, right?

SCORING IN—Stacking ladders

That's when Ron DeSantis was riding really high because Trump backed candidates had performed really, really poorly in the 2022 midterms.

*<CLIP> VOA NEWS: “Democrat John Fetterman claimed victory in a tight race over celebrity doctor Mehmet Oz who was backed by Donald Trump…New Hampshire Democratic Senator Maggie Hasan fought off a challenge from Trump backed Don Bolduc…”*

ZACK: it probably cost Republicans the Senate. These really, really strange and off putting candidates that Trump had endorsed. Um, they lost Republicans, the Senate. So that looked bad for him. Uh, and DeSantis had just won Florida, which, as we all know, has been a purple state until recently by a really decisive margin.

*<CLIP> TAMPA BAY NEWS: “We usually see very tight races for Governor here in Florida, you remember back in 2018 with Andrew Gillum just how lose it was, but look at the spread here tonight 57 to 42 to Democratic challenge Charlie Christ.” …*

ZACK: So the core of his argument for the next few months, sort of implicit, he didn't really take shots at Trump, which is part of the problem. But implicit was I'm a winner and Trump is a loser. I'll carry on his kind of politics, but I'll do it while I beat Democrats at the same time. Um, and a lot of people in the Republican elite thought that would be persuasive. They really did. The problem is, they underestimated. Once again, I don't know how people keep doing this. They underestimated Donald Trump's hold on the Republican base. It just it boggles my mind that professional politicians and political operatives keep doing this after all the evidence we have for eight years. But that, like in a nutshell, that's what happened.

SCORING SPUTTERS OUT

NOEL: Let’s actually talk about this numerically first. What were the numbers showing us when Ron DeSantis was really doing well? How close was he to Trump?

ZACK: It was close-er, but not actually close. Huh? Right. DeSantis. His peak was sometime around January. February 2023. Like a year ago. Uh, and he peaked at 13 points below Trump in the Real Clear Politics average. Like in a normal primary, if the runner up is down 13 points, nobody considers that an especially competitive race. Right. But that's that's sort of the wishful thinking, was that everyone else would melt away and you'd have a DeSantis Trump race where DeSantis managed to consolidate all of the people who didn't want to vote for Trump. Uh, that's not what happened, though. Uh, and really, you can trace the beginning of the end for DeSantis to the start of Trump's indictments. Uh, DeSantis himself suggested this, by the way.

*<CLIP> GOV. DESANTIS: “I’ve criticized the cases but I also think it distorted the primary! And its been, those are kind of the main issues that have happened*

*JAKE TAPPER: “Because its helped him? Is that what you are saying?*

*GOV. DESANTIS: Both that but then it also just crowded out so much other stuff…*

NOEL: Remind me, remind me, because it's been a long year and a half. When did Trump's indictments start, and why did that signal the end for DeSantis?

ZACK: So the first Trump indictment was on March 30th. And in the next week or so, DeSantis deficit with Trump roughly doubled from around the 13 ish 13, maybe 15 to, uh, something in the high 20s, right? And maybe a little bit over a week. So we're talking really rapid, the kind of thing that suggests that the event really did matter. Read the indictment. And it wasn't just like something else was going on. Um, so why did this matter? Right? It mattered because it exposed the flawed premise at the heart of the DeSantis campaign, which is basically this. Ron DeSantis was campaigning on the idea that he was basically Trump but smarter, Trump a more effective Trump, a more competent Trump, but a winner, right? The problem is, why would any voter opt for Trump-but when they could have actual Donald Trump, the things that were appealing about like real on brand Trump were not. Just that he beat Democrats. It's that he had this whole set of grievances that he was able to mobilize and tap into, and a sense of identity that he could speak to in a really deep way in his voters that DeSantis couldn't replicate. Um, and he knew that Trump was very favorably regarded by most people in the Republican base. He knew that the majority of Republican voters, in poll after poll believed Trump's lies about the 2020 election. So DeSantis didn't challenge the premise of Trump's candidacy, which was you need me to win to avenge the defeat in 2020, or rather, the stolen election in 2020. Uh, he couldn't attack that, right? He couldn't. And he couldn't do that. He had to, like, go along with this Trump script of the deep state being biased against him and so on. Uh, so when the indictments hit, right, the rubber hits the road. DeSantis, if he was had like a real challenge to Trump, would need to say, look, he just got indicted. This guy can't be our standard bearer. He might be in jail by the time the general election rolls around. But instead of being able to say that outright, he defended Trump against the indictment in a competitive primary.

*<CLIP> RON DESANTIS, MARCH 2023: “That is when you know the law has been weaponized for political purposes, that is when you know the left is using the law to target their political opponents…”*

ZACK: And again, that was true in all the indictments, like the first indictment in New York, is legally the most iffy. So I can sort of see questioning that indictment. But on down the road, some of them are really ironclad and some of them are really serious. Right. And DeSantis is, throughout the entire indictment period, just defending Trump, defending Trump, defending Trump, uh, and saying the deep state is biased against him doing this kind of weird performative thing where he says,

*<CLIP> MSNBC: Florida quote will not assist in an extradition request give the questionable circumstances at issue with this SOROS backed Manhattan prosecutor, and his political agenda…”*

ZACK: Which like, come on, man. Right. Like none of that is going to happen. And all of this is just saying you're just confirming Trump's narrative. You're saying he's right about everything. He's the real victim. He's the he's the big centerpiece of American politics. And everything revolves around Donald Trump. And his grievances with the American political and legal system. And once you concede that premise. Right? What's even the point of campaigning? Right. Why? Like you're going you're not going to beat the guy who you're basically saying, ‘I'm his sidekick.’

NOEL: So DeSantis made a bet that he could separate Trumpism from Donald Trump. He could be Trumpy, but without Trump's problems. And it didn't work. What does that tell us about the rest of this primary season?

ZACK: Well, at one point, uh, I described the contrast between Trump and DeSantis as being between the ID of conservative populism and the ego of conservative populism. Right. One is just wild, willing to cause chaos, to assail institutions willy nilly in the most dramatic ways. Whereas DeSantis style, uh, far right politics was methodical. It was rather it was comparatively less bombastic. It was legalistic. Uh, and what's clear is that the majority of the Republican base preferred the bombast. They prefer the conflict. They don't have the patience for this kind of quiet stuff or the appreciation for it.

NOEL: Let's bring it back at the end to Ron DeSantis. He is still the governor of Florida. It's still a big job. He wanted to be bigger, and that didn't work. So what happens to Ron DeSantis-sees his national political career now? Does he have one? Is it over?

ZACK: That's really hard to say. I think DeSantis has done immense damage to his national aspirations. Immense.

SCORING IN—DAMN YEAH, SHEBEASTS!

The question is whether it's recoverable. And that depends a lot on events that are really outside anyone's ability to predict. For example, first and foremost, how long does Donald Trump live? Does Donald Trump's criminal trial seriously affect his ability to compete in the 2024 presidential presidential election? With the Trump show, there's so many unpredictable events that could take place that some of them could end up rehabilitating DeSantis down the line or vindicating certain elements of his critique. What we can say with real confidence is that Ron DeSantis has done tremendous damage to himself, and if he wants to be a national political figure going forward, he needs to do something that can rehabilitate his image and that can address the flaws, the sort of media narrative of him being a kind of incompetent campaigner who doesn't mesh well with with actual voters, like he needs to do something to fix that. And I just don't know what it is that he will do or what he can do.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: Vox's Zach Beachum. Zach, thank you so much for taking the time for us. We really appreciate it.

ZAK: Thanks a lot.

NOEL: Today’s show was produced by Miles Bryan and Isabel Angell. Amina al-Sadi edited. Patrick Boyd and Rob Byers engineered. Laura Bullard fact-checked with an assist from Victoria Chamberlin. I’m Noel King. It’s Today, Explained.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]