

# [***At CPAC, Trump's potential running mates compete to prove their loyalty***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BDC-F2C1-DY7V-G015-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

National Harbor, Maryland (CNN) &#8212; After taking the [*Conservative Political Action Conference*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/23/politics/cpac-january-6/index.html) stage Friday to a crisply edited hype video, New York Rep. Elise Stefanik invoked Donald Trump about two dozen times as she heaped praise on the front-runner for the Republican presidential nomination.

The day before, Florida Rep. Byron Donalds had mentioned the former president by name just twice when opening the annual GOP confab, but he sounded an awful lot like Trump when laying out his foreign policy vision. Former Democratic Rep. Tulsi Gabbard of Hawaii claimed not to know that attendees could choose her in a poll to pick Trump's potential running mate, while South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem took several shots at some of the other Republicans in the mix to join the GOP presidential ticket during her turn at the mic.

The jockeying to become Trump's vice presidential pick, playing out behind the scenes for weeks if not longer, spilled into the open at this week's CPAC, the country's annual gathering of conservatives. In what amounted to an audition to be Trump's No. 2, the program inside the Gaylord National Resort and Convention Center at times appeared more like a casting call for some of the most talked-about contenders for the job.

In addition to Stefanik, Donalds, Gabbard and Noem, entrepreneur and recent presidential candidate Vivek Ramaswamy, Ohio Sen. J.D. Vance, former Housing and Urban Development Secretary Ben Carson and Arizona Senate candidate Kari Lake all addressed the Trump-adoring crowd.

While each went about the task of appealing to Trump and his supporters in their own way, it was clear proving they're up for the job meant two things: demonstrating unwavering loyalty to the former president, including the most conspiratorial elements of his movement, and showcasing how they would defend Trump and attack his political opponents.

Speaking about the four indictments, 91 criminal charges and [*escalating legal judgments against Trump*](https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2023/07/politics/trump-indictments-criminal-cases/), Carson told the crowd: "They're incredibly unfair, and if we allow this to happen, America will never be the same again."

Event organizers, the conservative media figures broadcasting live from inside the convention center and even some of the vice presidential contenders themselves didn't shy away from the perception that this year's CPAC was the unofficial kickoff to the veepstakes.

"I guess I'm on the list," Donalds said as he held court with reporters after speaking, though he quickly added: "Look at the end of the day, President Trump is gonna make that decision, not me."

Leaning into the political drama, CPAC organizers asked attendees to vote for who they want to see Trump pick as his running mate. Noem and Ramaswamy topped the poll in results announced Saturday, receiving 15% support each.

The straw poll, which covers conference attendees, is not a scientific survey and does not represent the larger GOP electorate.

"I don't think he's made his choice yet and quite honestly, I think he is going to watch these speeches here, and I think he's going to look at the results of this straw poll," Matt Schlapp, chairman of the American Conservative Union, which holds the event, told Newsmax on Wednesday.

Schlapp said the CPAC straw poll, while not scientific, provides "a real feel for where Republicans and conservatives are."

Trump himself has fueled the speculation. When asked about his search during an appearance on Fox News this week, he responded with praise for many of the Republicans appearing at CPAC and even someone who is not, [*Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/22/politics/ron-desantis-vice-president-trump/index.html).

"Honestly, all of those people are good," Trump said. "They're all good. They're all solid."

Checking the boxes

It should come as little surprise that Trump, who became a household name while hosting NBC's "The Apprentice," would turn the vital process of choosing a running mate into a monthslong reality TV show. However, it has already become that, with Trump welcoming the intrigue and publicly teasing names.

One of those names Trump has mentioned in recent week, South Carolina Sen. Tim Scott, skipped CPAC and instead joined the former president at a campaign event Friday on the eve of his home-state primary. Scott enthusiastically introduced Trump with the gusto of a professional wrestler welcoming a tag-team partner into the ring.

The various approaches to campaigning for the job were on full display inside CPAC, and it's uncertain which will win over Trump. It's a fine line to walk, and CPAC is far from the final test. Prospective running mates must both brandish their conservative credentials and extensive loyalty to Trump, but not appear too eager for the job, a person close to the former president cautioned. He is looking for someone interesting who can carry a message and is popular - but won't upstage Trump.

In 2016, Mike Pence [*checked those boxes for Trump*](https://www.cnn.com/2016/07/14/politics/donald-trump-vice-presidential-choice/). The then-Indiana governor and former congressman, a deeply religious man, also helped ease party insiders as well as evangelical Christian voters unsure about the thrice-married Manhattan socialite. Such considerations are less important this time.

Gabbard, promoting a book coming out in April about why she left the Democratic Party, appeared oblivious to the vice presidential chatter when probed by conservative podcaster and former Trump adviser Steve Bannon on his broadcast. But the 2020 Democratic presidential candidate fiercely defended Trump during her remarks from the unique vantage point of a former ally to many of his current political enemies.

"I can't think of a single one who could not only withstand all that they are throwing at Donald Trump without crumbling, but someone who would actually choose to keep fighting against the entire Washington establishment," Gabbard said. "I've known Joe Biden for a long time. I used to consider him a friend. Do you think he could handle this pressure? I don't think so."

Stefanik, the No. 4 House Republican who has not denied her interest in serving in a Trump administration, compared herself unapologetically to the former president, claiming her New York district was now "Trump and Elise country."

"They underestimate President Donald J. Trump every single day, and I'm proud to say they have underestimated me at every turn," Stefanik said. "I will never underestimate the power of you. Because I know, like President Donald J. Trump knows, that we work for you."

Perhaps the most prominent platform at the event went to Ramaswamy, who delivered the keynote address at Friday night's dinner. Since [*ending his presidential campaign*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/15/politics/vivek-ramaswamy-ends-presidential-campaign/index.html) after the Iowa caucuses, Ramaswamy has made several public appearances with Trump, whom he regularly praised on the campaign trail even when running against him.

Ramaswamy said that "a war" is ongoing "between those of us who love the United States of America and our founding ideals and a fringe minority who hates this country and what we stand for."

"I think right now we need a commander in chief who's going to lead us to victory in that war. And that's why I endorsed and will support Donald J. Trump to be the next president of the United States, as I know everyone in this room does," he said.

Noem, though, cast doubts on the Republicans such as Scott and Ramaswamy who challenged Trump instead of lining up behind his third White House bid, suggesting they had done it for their own benefit, not for the good of the party or country.

"Last year, when everyone was asking me if I was going to consider running for president, I said no. Why would you run for president if you can't win?" Noem said. "I didn't say that to be nice. I said it because it was a fact. No one that we knew could beat Donald J. Trump."

The base weighs in

CPAC attendees from across the country are already speculating whom Trump might pick and weighing the pros and cons of each of his choices.

Edward X. Young, a 64-year-old visiting from Brick, New Jersey, liked the idea of a "Donald/Donalds" ticket, which he said would make for a "beautiful bumper sticker," and he called Ramaswamy "very exciting."

"But then again, he's just like a younger version of Trump," he said. "Maybe you need a balance."

The candidates under consideration are considerably more diverse than the rest of the GOP. Bode Brewer, who will be of voting age for the first time in November, thinks that could be an advantage.

"I'm not a fan of identity ***politics*** most times," said the 17-year-old from Reading, Pennsylvania. "But I think with, as the party is diversifying, I think we do owe it to our voters to get a candidate that is more diverse."

With the country barreling toward a Trump-Biden rematch, several CPAC attendees think the party's next vice presidential pick should help usher in a new generation.

"I believe we need new people," said Genilde Guerra of Miami. "We cannot go to the old politicians that everyone's so tired of."

Trump's advanced age should be a factor in who ends up a heartbeat away from the presidency, said Philip Whitby, a 71-year-old from Winter Park, Florida. Trump would be 78 on Inauguration Day if he wins, making him the oldest person to be sworn in as president.

"It's got to be somebody who can step in to be president," Whitby said. "Because anything could happen to Trump."

But he conceded it was a fool's errand trying to guess whom Trump might pick.

"Trump's gonna surprise us because that's what he does," Whitby said.

This story has been updated with additional information.

By Steve Contorno, Aaron Pellish and Alison Main, CNN

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