

# [***DeSantis is fighting for his political life along Iowa's icy campaign trail***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B3N-8VV1-DY7V-G00Y-00000-00&context=1516831)

CNN Wire

January 14, 2024 Sunday 7:23 PM GMT

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**Length:** 1641 words

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**Dateline:** (CNN)

**Body**

West Des Moines, Iowa (CNN) &#8212; [*Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/09/politics/desantis-state-of-the-state-speech/index.html) once looked like the Republican Party's future. Now, a national career that conjured White House dreams is in danger of fizzling before it really began.

His plight is not just about a rising Republican star's struggle to adapt to the biggest stage with political skills that initially were not ready for prime time. It's a revealing story about the GOP itself, its fixation with former President Donald Trump and whether grassroots Republicans really want the efficient, conservative government DeSantis promises or prefer the ex-president's furious brew of grievance and spectacle.

The Florida governor is spending Sunday braving the icy roads of Iowa in a last-ditch fight to claim the strong second-place finish in Monday's caucuses he probably needs to stay in the Republican nominating race. In December, he predicted he'd win the first-in-the-nation contest. But a [*Des Moines Register/NBC News/Mediacom poll*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/13/politics/trump-holds-wide-lead-over-gop-field-ahead-of-iowa-caucuses-poll-finds/index.html) released Saturday night brought him bad news.

His campaign is arguing that his slip into a numerical third place, albeit within the margin of error, behind former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley and far behind the runaway front-runner Trump won't actually predict caucus results. He is relying on Iowa's long history of late twists and a ground operation his super PAC spent months building to drive out voters in the extreme weather forecasted for Monday.

"They can throw a blizzard at us, and we are going to fight. They can throw windchill at us and we are going to fight. They can throw media narratives at us, and we are going to fight. They can throw fake polls at us, and we are going to fight," DeSantis roared on Saturday, inciting defiance and belief among his supporters for a last drive to the finish.

But on the eve of the caucuses, DeSantis is on the brink in a state where he's banked his entire campaign. He's in danger of suffering the same fate as two high-flying Floridians once seen as potential White House prospects - Jeb Bush and Marco Rubio, who flamed out under Trump's ruthless assault. He could end up being 2024's version of former Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, another can't-miss conservative who disappeared without trace once Trump burst onto the scene in the 2016 election.

Whenever it's Iowa or bust for a presidential candidate, a poor result can mean the end. If DeSantis finishes behind Haley on Monday night, it's hard to see how he has a path to go on, especially as the former South Carolina governor has a shot at beating Trump in the New Hampshire primary next week before moving on to her home state.

But on CNN's "State of the Union" on Sunday, DeSantis refused to contemplate an early exit. "We are in this for the long haul," he told Jake Tapper, citing the difficulty of polling exactly who would turn out in Arctic weather conditions. "We are going to do well on Monday, our voters are very motivated."

Could DeSantis spring a surprise?

One thing DeSantis has going for him is low expectations. It's not impossible he could spring a surprise. In theory, he's a good fit for Iowa. His hardcore conservatism and cultural warfare ought to play with critical evangelicals and social conservatives. His pitch for a more disciplined, results-oriented version of Trumpism is designed to attract GOP voters who liked Trump's presidency but are weary of his histrionics and legal troubles.

DeSantis became a conservative hero after defying federal Covid-19 guidance and feuding with the government's top infectious diseases specialist at the time, Dr. Anthony Fauci. Helped by a compliant Florida legislature, he implemented a hardline program as governor, targeting gender and abortion rights and what he called the "woke mind virus" in the Walt Disney Company and schools. He mastered Trump-style stunt ***politics*** by flying undocumented migrants from Texas to the liberal vacation spot of Martha's Vineyard. After his time at Yale and Harvard nurtured his disdain for "elites," DeSantis was the tip of the spear of the right's new onslaught against academia.

As his advocates keep pointing out, he did Iowa "the right way" - touring all 99 counties, spending day after day in the state. Trump spent far less time in Iowa, relying on his quasi-incumbency, his national fame and polls showing him touching 50%.

So DeSantis ought to be doing so much better, especially since his thumping reelection win in one of the only races that produced the predicted Republican red wave in 2022 contrasted with the failure of many of Trump's proteges in the midterms, which made the ex-president look like yesterday's man.

But DeSantis is not the first candidate to find out that running for president is the toughest mission in ***politics***. A disastrous campaign launch on Elon Musk's Twitter, now known as X, was marred by his live stream's failure to connect and provided a metaphor for his awkward public appearances to come. Big donors soon discovered that the Florida governor could be a flat and uninspiring candidate. But his summer campaign slump really started when the ex-president invigorated his campaign by weaponizing his multiple indictments and criminal charges into an effective narrative of political persecution. DeSantis was soon laying off staff, amid reports of infighting between his super PAC and his campaign brain trust and had no choice to bet it all on Iowa. But a recent polling surge by Haley means she's now in pole position to become the alternative to Trump in the only possible, if unlikely, scenario that could deprive him of the nomination.

The former South Carolina governor, sensing blood, teased DeSantis remorselessly during their one-on-one CNN debate last week, which Trump declined to attend. She taunted him over his use of private jets and his tumbling poll numbers, inflicting an indignity he would not have expected a year ago. "Ron is lying because Ron is losing. Everybody in the country sees it for what it is," she said. In another insult, DeSantis was handed a participation trophy by a comedian at one of his events on Saturday. It was a cringeworthy moment that could become a pitiful emblem of busted hopes if the Florida governor doesn't mount a comeback on Monday.

Supporters at the West Des Moines headquarters of the pro-DeSantis "Never Back Down" super PAC are drawing allusions to former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, former Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum and Texas Sen. Ted Cruz, who won upsets in Iowa. But even these comparisons hint at diminished hopes for a campaign that once aimed far higher than a symbolic win in the caucuses.

Still, Bob Vander Plaats, the Iowa social conservative leader who is backing DeSantis and is often called the kingmaker of the state's ***politics***, predicted the governor would do far better than expected, citing a statewide get-out-the-vote operation that he said was superior to any other campaign and that could be critical as dangerous polar weather scrambles turnout models. "If the number that we have is anywhere close to reality, he's going to have a very, very good night," Vander Plaats said.

What do Republicans really want?

An Iowa defeat for DeSantis would be especially bitter, because after months on the trail, he's a far more polished candidate. He's energetic, interacts well with audiences and takes more media questions than most counterparts. He's got a snappy pitch that encapsulates his campaign in a few words - a mark of any successful candidate. "Donald Trump is running for his issues. Haley's running for the donors' issues and I am running for your issues," he tells voters. Still, it might be too late. DeSantis may be one of those candidates who only really hit their stride when the pressure lifts, when there's no more to lose, when the campaign is already toast.

But Steve Deace, an Iowa-based conservative talk show host, argued Saturday that Republican voters would be letting themselves down if they chose Trump over the Florida governor. "Ron DeSantis has already done everything all Republicans have been talking about for all of our lives," Deace said. "This is really about us. Do we really believe the things we have claimed all these years to believe? Candidates like this don't come around every cycle. It's a once in a generation opportunity."

If DeSantis does succumb to Trump, campaign postmortems will ask whether he was too opportunistic and should have waited his turn, perhaps until 2028. At the same time, however, he would never have been as hot a commodity as he was coming out of his reelection triumph and with conservative memories fresh of his pandemic apostasy.

In recent days, DeSantis has suggested the deck was always stacked against him and that the ex-president is getting an easy ride.

"Donald Trump is not willing to debate because I think he wants to have these pre-cooked forums like he did on Fox News the other night where he's not really asked any difficult questions," DeSantis told reporters in Urbandale, Iowa, on Friday. "He's got a Praetorian guard of the conservative media, Fox news, the websites, they don't hold him accountable because they are worried about losing viewers. That's just the reality, that's the truth. I'm not complaining about it," DeSantis said.

Blaming the media is usually the last resort of a failing campaign, and it's rich for DeSantis to rebuke Fox after his own long list of softball appearances on the conservative network.

But Bob Rommel, a Florida state lawmaker who swapped the 81 degrees of Naples to travel to frigid Iowa to be with DeSantis in the final days, still believes.

"I voted for Trump in the general election. But I won't be voting for him in this general election. I will be voting for Ron DeSantis."

Analysis by Stephen Collinson, CNN

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**Load-Date:** February 13, 2024

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