

# [***DeSantis and Haley face daunting and uncertain paths as Trump continues to dominate***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B46-W221-DY7V-G00P-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; GOP presidential candidates [*Ron DeSantis*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/desantis-town-hall-01-16-24/index.html) and [*Nikki Haley*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/16/politics/nikki-haley-says-us-not-racist-country/index.html) are rushing to redefine their paths to viability after former President Donald Trump's resounding victory in the Iowa caucuses crushed their cases to the next round of GOP voters.

The two arrived in New Hampshire grasping for silver linings in their disappointing Hawkeye State performances and scrambling to find a message that could convince Republicans the race is far from over.

DeSantis, the governor of Florida, and Haley, a former governor of South Carolina, had hoped to slow Trump's momentum and further establish themselves as the best alternative to the front-runner. But hundreds of appearances, more than $120 million in advertisements, five debates and a record-shattering arctic blast failed to blunt Trump in Iowa.

As the campaigns move on to the next stage of the primary calendar, the contours of the race remain unmoved.

The two candidates have been hesitant to declare "must win" states or raise expectations too high. Following Trump's 51% win in Iowa, they have yet to show that a majority of Republican primary voters want someone else. And, despite their pronouncements on the trail, they have yet to show that the primary is a two-person contest for first place.

Inside DeSantis' political operation, no one is defining immediate success as a strong showing in New Hampshire and, in an ironic twist, they are now rooting for Trump to edge Haley there, even as they hold out hope they can overtake the former president later on.

Haley's allies aren't projecting a win, either. New Hampshire GOP Gov. Chris Sununu, who endorsed Haley last month, told Fox News Tuesday he expects Haley to finish with a "strong second" in his state.

"You can't underestimate the importance of momentum in presidential ***politics***," said Alex Conant, a Republican strategist who worked on Sen. Marco Rubio's 2016 presidential campaign. "Winning begets more winning, losing leads to more losing. And Trump had really, really good press today."

[*CNN's Iowa caucuses entrance poll*](https://www.cnn.com/election/2024/primaries-and-caucuses/exit-polls/iowa/republican-caucus/0) suggests that Trump's support is both broad and deep. He was the leading candidate among men and women; urban, suburban and rural voters; voters over 30; evangelical and non-evangelical voters; and voters with or without degrees. Trump won 55% of conservative respondents, while Haley won the support of 63% of people who described themselves as moderate or liberal. Voters overwhelmingly said that Trump would be fit for the presidency even if he is convicted of a crime, including 65% of all respondents and 72% of Trump backers.

Trump praised his primary opponents after the Iowa contest, [*a short break*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/16/politics/nikki-haley-says-us-not-racist-country/index.html) from the harsh attacks and name calling he deployed ahead of voting and a sign he was seeking to unite the party behind him.

Allies of the former president, including Florida Rep. Matt Gaetz and Georgia Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, have called on Haley and DeSantis to drop out. Gaetz and Greene said they would campaign for Trump ahead of New Hampshire's January 23 primary. Biotech entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy, who dropped out Tuesday and immediately endorsed Trump, attended a Trump rally in Atkinson, New Hampshire, Tuesday. Trump is set to deliver remarks in Portsmouth on Wednesday.

Gary Leffler, a Trump campaign caucus captain, said he expected Trump's Iowa victory would "send a clear message" to the other early states.

"Maybe this primary caucus season will go on through South Carolina," he said. "Then I think it's a wrap."

For now, DeSantis has set his sights on Haley's home base, seeking to knock her out of the race by winning over Palmetto State conservatives. Haley has doubled down on New Hampshire, where [*a recent CNN poll*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/09/politics/cnn-new-hampshire-poll/index.html) showed her within single digits of Trump, and started writing off the Florida governor.

But whether the two will face off directly is unclear. Haley said Tuesday that she would not participate in any future debates unless Trump also attended. DeSantis committed to attending two New Hampshire debates, one on January 18 hosted by ABC News and another on January 21 hosted by CNN. ABC News announced Tuesday that it had canceled the event after Haley and Trump failed to confirm they would attend.

"At the end of the day, [Trump is] the frontrunner. He's the one that I'm seven points away from. He's the one that we're fighting for," Haley said on CNN's "Inside ***Politics***" on Tuesday. "There is nobody else I need to debate."

A big bet on Iowa

The challenge ahead is especially daunting for DeSantis, who staked his campaign on a strong performance in Iowa - once even vowing to win the state.

Never Back Down, the super PAC overseeing the get-out-the-vote effort for him, claimed to have caucus commitments from 40,000 Iowans. But when the results were tallied, his support was roughly half that, and the candidate who visited each of Iowa's 99 counties didn't come out ahead in any of them. Even Haley managed to win one county - albeit by a single vote.

DeSantis' distant second-place finish had allies and advisers in dour spirits at the hotel bar outside his election night watch party, with some acknowledging the outlook appeared bleak. The mood was in direct conflict with the defiant and upbeat tone the Florida governor took while addressing supporters from the stage: "We've got our ticket punched out of Iowa."

The immediate concern is money. DeSantis entered October with just $5 million available to spend in the primary, and notably his campaign has not publicly announced how much it had raised in the final three months of 2023.

His ground operation, hailed as his ace-in-the-hole, proved an expensive failure, and his advertising budget is running out of reserves. Neither DeSantis' campaign nor aligned super PACs have aired a television ad in New Hampshire since mid-November. They haven't purchased airtime in South Carolina since last July.

While campaigning in Greenville and Columbia Tuesday, DeSantis told reporters his campaign would be more visible in South Carolina between now and the state's February 24 primary.

"We've got a good footprint, but I think you're gonna see us be present more, not just in terms of me being in the state more, but also in terms of paid media, where we're going to be able to tell our story," he said in Columbia.

In his remarks, DeSantis attacked Haley's record as governor with renewed gusto - the beginning of an urgent push to turn Haley's former Palmetto State constituents against her.

One person with knowledge of the financial position noted that the campaign held back some money for the early nominating states. As DeSantis flew out of Iowa, fundraisers for the governor remained in Des Moines and met with campaign manager James Uthmeier, who was direct in acknowledging the fundraising difficulties after Monday's outcome. Their pitch going forward, one fundraiser, is this: "Second place and it's a marathon. We need to stick it out until Nikki gets out after South Carolina, making it a two-man race."

Beyond that, there's not a state on the upcoming nominating calendar that stands out as especially favorable to DeSantis. Next week's primary in New Hampshire is setting up as a two-person contest between Trump and Haley. The pro-Trump state GOP in Nevada has tilted the early February caucuses seemingly in the former president's favor. South Carolina is Haley's home state and even she trails Trump. Michigan, in late February, is another MAGA-friendly battleground.

Even Florida's primary, scheduled for March 19, is shaping up to hand its twice-elected governor a potentially embarrassing defeat.

Pressed earlier this month to name a state he could win, DeSantis said, "Wait till what happens when we get out of Iowa."

But advisers say DeSantis is emboldened to stay in not by the political map but because of the perceived weaknesses of his two rivals. After cautiously navigating the race for much of 2023, Haley has stumbled of late under increased scrutiny and the DeSantis campaign "smells blood in the water" in South Carolina, a source familiar with their thinking said.

"Nikki Haley spent more money per vote than any other candidate in Iowa to get a disastrous third - proving no amount of money can erase her record of caving to the left on every issue important to conservatives. While it may take a few more weeks to fully get there, this will be a two-person race soon enough," said DeSantis spokesman Andrew Romeo.

Despite months of evidence to the contrary, DeSantis remains hopeful that Trump's legal woes could eventually catch up to him, especially once his trials start. But DeSantis could only take advantage of a seismic shift from a Trump conviction if he is still a candidate, the internal thinking goes.

Less Trump-friendly territory

Haley finds herself in a slightly different situation. Her campaign announced earlier this month that it had raised $24 million in the last quarter of the year, a period that saw her rise in the polls, gain attention from major donors, and face serious media attention for the first time since launching her presidential bid in February.

Her campaign had more than $11.5 million cash on hand at the end of September.

Now, she is looking to New Hampshire and South Carolina, but also pushing a general election message. In a new Granite State ad, Haley says she's the best chance to avoid a Biden-Trump rematch, echoing comments she made as she addressed Iowa supporters Monday night.

But Haley's claims that the GOP contest is now a two-person race have left some unconvinced.

"I think that's a pretty funky argument," said Brett Doster, a Florida-based GOP consultant who worked on Jeb Bush's 2016 campaign.

"What Haley does have is she's got a lock on the moderate wing of the party right now," he added. "That's why she's going to perform well in New Hampshire and she'll probably hold her own in South Carolina. The question is can she do anything beyond that, and I don't know that she can."

In a state of the race memo, Haley campaign manager Betsy Ankney downplayed Trump's 30-point victory margin in Iowa and called the state's caucusgoers "among the most pro-Trump of any electorate in America."

"The race now moves to less Trump-friendly territory," Ankney wrote, arguing that Haley and Trump are the only candidates with substantial support in New Hampshire and South Carolina.

Haley has also been dismissive of DeSantis' attempts to gain ground in her home state.

"Look, it really doesn't matter to me why he went there," Haley said on CNN's "Inside ***Politics***" on Tuesday. "He's in single digits in South Carolina and single digits in New Hampshire. He's been invisible in both states. He is not my concern, I'm going after Trump."

Katon Dawson, a former chair of the South Carolina Republican Party and a Haley backer, said that though the former governor is a conservative, she has an ability to bring in moderates, and would be able to expand the electorate in her home state come February.

"Nikki is drawing people to her that have not been coming out to our primaries because, to be frank with you, we got too Trumpish," he said. "If it's just Nikki and Trump on the ballot in South Carolina it's going to be a real race."

CNN's Alayna Treene, Jessica Dean, Veronica Stracqualursi and Ebony Davis contributed to this report.

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