

# [***Opinion: Who won the Republican presidential debate?***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B2Y-C5M1-DY7V-G002-00000-00&context=1516831)

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(CNN) &#8212; CNN Opinion asked political contributors to weigh in on the last Republican presidential debate of the 2024 race before the Iowa caucuses. The views expressed in these commentaries are their own.

SE Cupp: Nikki Haley played the right strategy with independents

You can't be all things to all people. Never has that axiom felt truer than in this GOP primary for president. Courting former President Donald Trump's voters while also trying to appeal to independents and moderates is something of a fool's errand.

On Wednesday night, during the last Republican debate before Iowa's caucuses, I was watching to see if former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, fresh off the news of former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie's campaign suspension, would use the opportunity to speak to independents or swing for the MAGA voters in a futile attempt to jostle them loose from Trump's grip.

She did the former. When given opportunities to go where the far right has taken the Republican Party on issues including abortion, immigration, Ukraine, January 6, Trump's election lies and extremist rhetoric, Haley chose to make moderate tweaks that distinguished her from both Trump and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis in many cases.

Make no mistake, Haley made conservative arguments. But for someone looking for a Trump alternative, who's turned off by the new GOP's regressive extremism, who wants to move past Trump's chaos, Haley made an appeal to them without giving up on her principles.

And in a state with [*more registered independents*](https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2024-election/nikki-haley-bypasses-iowa-independents-democrats-ahead-caucuses-rcna130082) than registered Republicans, it's a smart idea to appeal to those persuadable voters in Iowa just five days before they vote. It makes even more sense considering that Trump's voters are presumably locked in.

SE Cupp is a CNN political commentator.

Sophia A. Nelson: Nikki Haley missed an opportunity

With former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley closing in on former President Donald Trump's lead in [*New Hampshire*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/09/politics/cnn-new-hampshire-poll/index.html), Republican voters are likely asking: Does Haley have what it takes to be the first female president of the United States? Can she go against President Joe Biden toe-to-toe and win? Or is she more likely to end up as Trump's running mate?

Haley isn't quite there yet. She certainly has the intelligence and ability to be president. But on the Iowa debate stage Wednesday night, she and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis engaged in petty, juvenile sniping at one another. She opened the night looking presidential and sounding sober-minded - right up until she told voters to go to Desantislies.com (which she repeated multiple times throughout the night). That was a low point - for me and the room full of family members I watched the debate with.

Here's the thing: With former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie now out of the race, only Haley and DeSantis remain as serious contenders to Trump. Haley missed the opportunity to share her vision, her character and her agenda for America. Instead, she spent a lot of her time attacking DeSantis, when the polls show she is the person to watch in this Republican primary season. Not him.

If she wants to beat Trump, she's going to need to give people a reason to trust her, and trust that she is ready on Day One to be the nation's first female president. On top of her recent gaffe on the civil war and slavery, she didn't convince this former Republican woman of color to vote for her. Maybe she'll do better next time. I won't hold my breath.

[*Sophia A. Nelson*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/07/opinions/fourth-republican-debate-analysis/@IAmSophiaNelson) is a former House GOP Congressional Investigative Committee Counsel and author of "ePluribus One: Reclaiming our Founders' Vision for a United America."

Carrie Sheffield: DeSantis' slam dunk on education

On the CNN GOP debate stage, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis outshined former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley on education reform and school choice. He's an effective warrior on these fronts, with proven results. Florida ranks No. 1 in public education quality, according to US News & World Report, while South Carolina limps in at No. 42. Conservative powerhouse Heritage Foundation ranks Florida No. 1 on education freedom, while South Carolina ranks 16th.

DeSantis' faltering polling after his promising start indicates that he should have burnished his state education credentials more during his presidential campaign rather than saber-rattling so loudly against Disney in the culture wars.

Education is a stronger way for DeSantis to illustrate leadership that Donald Trump legally couldn't execute as president at the federal level (although Trump Education Secretary Betsy DeVos certainly made impressive strides).

But DeSantis spent more time trying to mimic Trump's brashness - an impossible task - rather than standing tall on his policy strength. As cable host Bill Maher put it, GOP primary voters wouldn't select DeSantis playing the role of Trump's "tribute band" when they could select the original band itself.

When asked by CNN's Jake Tapper whether DeSantis wanted "to implement Florida's education policies nationwide," DeSantis gave a compelling, nuanced answer, saying it depends: He said that school choice should be incentivized nationally through scholarships and tax credits. But DeSantis also rightly rejected a national curriculum and called for eliminating the federal Department of Education to "get that weight off the backs of the state and local governments," though I'm not sure abolishing the Education Department and disbursing its duties to other agencies is feasible. DeSantis was additionally right in pointing out that the outsized power of teachers' unions must be broken.

DeSantis has provided a blueprint for improving education, and it stood out against Haley's much weaker record. But he needed to sell that blueprint better throughout his campaign, not just in the waning days before the Iowa caucuses.

Carrie Sheffield is a senior policy analyst at [*Independent Women's Voice*](https://www.iwv.org/people/carrie-sheffield/).

Roxanne Jones: Haley is ready - and Trump should be nervous

Former US Ambassador Nikki Haley was a force at Wednesday night's GOP presidential debate with Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis at Drake University in Iowa. It was the final debate before the Iowa caucuses and Haley's strongest debate yet. She had DeSantis up against the ropes from the start.

Haley, the former South Carolina governor, took command early when she outshined DeSantis by leaning into her vast foreign policy expertise and her unique ability to throw pointed barbs at her political competitors without sounding petulant. For the most part, she presented herself as the most formidable executive leader on the stage by pointedly answering questions and laying out her policy plans - something DeSantis still fails to do much of the time.

Asked whether a president should have immunity for any conduct, Haley quickly answered, "No, that's ridiculous."

DeSantis danced around the question. His response: "I will follow the Constitution, and we are going to uphold the best traditions of the office and I am going to be a president you can be proud of," he said.

The two candidates traded insults and scraped until the end for second place in the GOP presidential primary race, while former President Donald Trump sat this one out again. But Haley, who is gaining momentum in the polls, felt confident enough to take a clear shot at Trump.

"I think the next president needs to have moral clarity ... I don't have vengeance. I don't have vendettas. I don't take things personally," she said, trying to distance herself from Trump. "I wish Donald Trump was up here on this stage. He is the one that I'm running against."

Well, Haley will soon get her chance to see how she matches up against Trump with the voters. The Iowa caucuses are on January 15 and the New Hampshire primary is January 23. And I'm betting the frontrunner is about to get very uncomfortable.

Roxanne Jones is CEO of the Push Marketing Group and talks ***politics***, sports and culture weekly on Philadelphia's WURD radio.

Geoff Duncan: Chris Christie did the right thing

Former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie exited the presidential race with a bang Wednesday night, excoriating former President Donald Trump and urging the rest of the Republican field to follow suit.

"Anyone who is unwilling to say (Trump) is unfit to be president of the United States is unfit themselves to be president of the United States," [*Christie declared*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/10/politics/chris-christie-ends-presidential-campaign-2024/index.html) from New Hampshire. "I would rather lose by telling the truth than lie in order to win," [*he added*](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/10/us/politics/chris-christie-drops-out.html). He's right on all counts, and the clock is ticking for the remaining candidates to speak with a similar level of clarity.

Less than a week before Iowa's Republican caucus, Trump remains the clear frontrunner in the Hawkeye State. While public polls have been scant, the former president has a daunting 34.6-point lead, according to [*FiveThirtyEight*](https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/polls/president-primary-r/2024/iowa/).

It's a different story in New Hampshire, whose first-in-the-nation primary takes place eight days later. A new [*CNN poll*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/09/politics/cnn-new-hampshire-poll/index.html) conducted by the University of New Hampshire Survey Center shows former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley just seven points behind Trump, 39% to 32%.

Furthermore, independents can vote in the GOP primary in New Hampshire. With President Joe Biden's name [*not on the ballot*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/24/politics/biden-new-hampshire-democratic-primary/index.html) in the Granite State, now is the time for Republican candidates to reach beyond the Trump-enthralled base.

Rather than try and thread an impossible needle by courting the Trump-loving base, Haley and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis should make an appeal to the majority of Republicans in New Hampshire who are supporting a candidate other than the former president. Unfortunately, during Wednesday night's debate in Iowa, they both [*largely avoided*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/cnn-debate-iowa-01-10-24/h_bdeaa1918ad363277d78577b74d44bfb) critiquing the frontrunner for anything other than not showing up to debate them.

Christie did the right thing by narrowing the field. The [*CNN*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/09/politics/cnn-new-hampshire-poll/index.html) poll showed him with 12% of the vote - almost double the margin separating Trump from Haley. The odds of upending Trump may still be long, but they are better than when the day started.

Geoff Duncan, a CNN political contributor and Republican, served as Georgia's lieutenant governor from 2019 to 2023.

Kate Bedingfield: Nikki Haley lacks authenticity

Former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley turned in a substantive - if speedily delivered - performance in Wednesday night's debate. She showed command of a wide array of policy areas and drove a hard and consistent line of attack against Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis as both desperate and dishonest.

She made a far more cogent case for a conservative presidency than Republican frontrunner Donald Trump has, and she spoke from experience as governor of a diverse state. And she closed her debate performance with an electability argument: that polls showing her beating President Joe Biden head-to-head make her the best bet in the Republican primary field.

But in an effort to not get nailed down on some of her more conservative opinions, she was evasive on a number of the key issues that will very likely drive voters' choices in 2024 - like abortion and protecting democracy. On the topic of abortion, Haley danced around any definitive language on national bans and talked more generically about being pro-life, but as recently as a few months ago, she said she'd sign a six-week state ban if she were still governor.

When asked directly whether there was any meaningful difference between her and Trump on the Constitution, she went further than she previously has in stating that Biden won the election and January 6 was bad, but she chose not to make a full-throated defense of democracy.

Evasive framing may make her seem like a more appealing general election candidate, but it lacks authenticity. Her conservative record will be a liability in a general election, where the Biden campaign will be looking for every opportunity to paint her as a MAGA extremist.

Kate Bedingfield served as White House communications director in the Biden administration and was the deputy campaign manager on Biden's 2020 presidential campaign.

Jeff Yang: I'm groaning at DeSantis' 'pale pastels' line and missing Vivek Ramaswamy

Throughout the last Republican debate before Iowa, my mind kept drifting toward the most visibly absent person on the stage - the candidate whose presence was most missed on a night where neither of the two remaining candidates proved that they were ready for the primaries, much less to serve as president.

That candidate? Vivek Ramaswamy, the one-man tsunami.

Still nominally running, still lobbing wild shots from the wings - in this case, an ad he dropped during the debate consisting of a peanut cluster of conspiracy theories tied around a bleeped profanity - and yes, still far more interesting than the weirdly stiff and undynamic duo at Drake University.

Given that no one in the GOP's junior league lineup seemed to stand a chance at being elected president this year and probably ever, the debates where Ramaswamy was present and chaotically spraying foam-flecked nonsense in all directions were at least entertaining.

The only curious bit of color at Wednesday night's wan, meaningless final preseason tilt: Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis's persistent attempt to slam former UN Ambassador Nikki Haley for ... wearing pink? Whether his bit about "bold colors" versus "pale pastels" was a tacit poke at Haley's gender or simply a misguided attempt to drag her fashion sense, it didn't land, and made DeSantis sound like a failed Project Runway contestant.

[*Jeff Yang*](https://twitter.com/originalspin) is the co-author of the bestselling book, "[*RISE: A Pop History of Asian America from the Nineties to Now*](https://www.amazon.com/Rise-History-Asian-America-Nineties/dp/0358508096)."

Susanne Ramirez de Arellano: Both candidates weaponized immigration

Former UN Ambassador Nikki Haley and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis faced each other during the final GOP debate before the [*Iowa*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/02/politics/iowa-caucuses-what-matters/index.html) caucuses and did the expected: weaponize immigration and turn the issue into the red meat they hope would convince die-hard Donald Trump supporters that one of them can step into the frontrunner's shoes.

"We will build the wall. We will actually have Mexico pay for it in the way that I thought Donald Trump was," DeSantis said.

Haley called for defunding sanctuary cities (which she blamed for an increase in crime) and reinstating the "remain in Mexico" policy. Both said they would be in favor of mass deportations.

"You have to deport them, and the reason you have to deport them is they're cutting the line," Haley said. DeSantis went one further: "They all have to go back. We have to enforce the rule of law in this country," he said.

It was unclear how they would deport 10 million people. It was just more of the same buzzwords: Label immigration as a "ticking time bomb," rinse and repeat about the wall and not much else.

Long gone are the days when the conversation on Capitol Hill between Republicans and Democrats was how to effectively secure a pathway to citizenship or hammer out work permit solutions that would motivate people to come to the United States legally.

The debate now centers on measures to keep migrants out and insisting on more authoritarian policies as the price for approving additional aid to Ukraine. It is driven by phrases such as "catch and deport" instead of immigration reform. It's Trump speak for Trump voters.

Susanne Ramirez de Arellano, a writer and cultural critic, is a former news director for Univision Puerto Rico.

Patrick T. Brown: Debate revealed sharp contrast over 'woke' corporations

It was a debate that got more substantive as it picked up steam. Former UN Ambassador Nikki Haley wasted too much time endlessly lobbing accusations of lying. Seeking to avoid a one-and-done showing in Iowa, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis swung wildly, saying Haley was "fighting for her donors" rather than Republican voters, at once point absurdly accusing her of possibly being more liberal than California Gov. Gavin Newsom.

But one actual disagreement underscored a live and unresolved debate on the right: whether the goal of government is best understood as getting out of the way, or whether a more active hand on the tiller is needed. DeSantis strongly defended having signed laws stripping the Walt Disney Company of [*certain privileges*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/02/27/politics/desantis-disney-reedy-creek/index.html) after its [*advocacy*](https://www.npr.org/2022/03/08/1085130633/disney-response-florida-bill-dont-say-gay) against laws around [*sex- and gender-related content*](https://www.wtsp.com/article/news/verify/florida-dont-say-gay-bill-explained/67-569c99fa-d1d2-426a-99af-1a9c66f8f88c) in elementary classrooms. For a Republican primary base that is tired of seeing GOP elected officials cave on "culture war" issues, DeSantis' track record remains unimpeachable.

Haley, on the other hand, said government shouldn't "bully our businesses." It was a traditional limited-government sentiment that may have [*drawn applause*](https://x.com/FrankLuntz/status/1745279074648605156?s=20) from GOP pollster Frank Luntz but speaks to a fault line on the right. Is the role of government to stand up to corporations pushing a "woke" agenda? Or to take a hands-off approach?

These debates will continue to roil the GOP. But former President Donald Trump's ideological flexibility won't give Republicans much clarity - and either candidate's hope of being able to pin down the former president rests on an Iowa surprise the debate didn't show much sign of producing.

Patrick T. Brown is a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, a conservative think tank and advocacy group based in Washington, DC. He is also a former senior policy adviser to Congress' Joint Economic Committee.

W. James Antle III: A lot of 'ifs' for Haley

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and former UN Ambassador Nikki Haley were united Wednesday night in saying former President Donald Trump should have been on the debate stage with them, defending his record.

But if the Iowa caucuses on Monday night are indeed DeSantis' swan song and Haley is able to make a real race out of it in New Hampshire, the debate gave a preview of what a Haley-Trump matchup would look like and where she might land some punches.

DeSantis hit Haley as a globalist creature of the United Nations who would cut entitlements at home while sending money abroad, caring more about Ukraine's borders than the United States'. Haley repeatedly called DeSantis a liar who neither allies nor retirees could trust and pushed back against populism. She said DeSantis was copying Trump.

Haley sounded like someone looking to take on the genuine article - the Republican frontrunner. Her refrain of "make America proud again" appropriated Trump's signature line while suggesting his term wasn't always a source of national pride. She went even more directly against his divisiveness and conduct during the January 6 Capitol riot.

There's a limit to how far that will take you in a Republican primary, as former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie can attest after campaigning hard against Trump only to drop out Wednesday. And some of DeSantis' anti-Haley attack lines might be more effective coming from Trump. But if Haley can dispatch DeSantis and put up some resistance to Trump, the frontrunner might have difficulty continuing to avoid debates - and might not benefit from joining her on stage.

But that is still a lot of "ifs" for Haley.

W. James Antle III is the ***politics*** editor of the Washington Examiner and author of "Devouring Freedom: Can Government Ever Be Stopped?"

Laura Belin: Nikki Haley continues balancing act on abortion

On Wednesday night, during the last televised debate before the Iowa caucuses, former UN Ambassador Nikki Haley showed why she has been able to draw support from Republicans with varying views on reproductive rights. Threading that needle could help her finish ahead of Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis in the GOP primary race.

DeSantis [*accused Haley of*](https://news.yahoo.com/desantis-touts-conservative-credentials-days-021006239.html) indulging in "left-wing tropes" about abortion, such as the idea that some women could receive jail time for getting an abortion. When it was her turn to speak, Haley approached the topic [*the same way she did at the first Republican presidential debate*](https://www.bleedingheartland.com/2023/08/24/nikki-haley-is-playing-the-long-game/) last August - and to great effect.

"[*I am unapologetically pro-life*](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/desantis-haley-liars-last-gop-debate-before-iowa-caucuses/)," she said, mentioning her husband, who was adopted, and her own difficult pregnancies.

Haley added: "These fellows don't know how to talk about abortion. I have said over and over again, the Democrats put fear in women on abortion and Republicans have used judgment. This is too personal of an issue to put fear or judgment.... We're not going to demonize this issue anymore. We're not going to play ***politics*** with this issue anymore. We're going to treat it like the respectful issue that it is."

Meanwhile, Haley's campaign [*has been running a television ad*](https://blog.4president.org/2024/2024/01/nikki-haley-releases-iowa-ad-featuring-conservative-leader-marlys-popma.html) featuring Marlys Popma, former president of Iowa Right to Life. Popma vouches for Haley as a "sister in Christ," as the viewer sees the candidate holding a baby and the words "Christian. 100% Pro-Life" on screen. (Team Haley [*tweeted out the ad*](https://twitter.com/NikkiHaley/status/1745286177236586788) during that segment of the CNN debate.)

Yet, Republican voters are not monolithic. An October 2022 [*Iowa Poll by Selzer & Co*](https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/politics/iowa-poll/2022/10/23/iowa-poll-abortion-laws-fetal-heartbeat-ban-roe-v-wade/69563125007/) for the Des Moines Register and Mediacom found that 34% of Republicans thought abortion should be legal all or most of the time.

The pro-choice Republicans I know who plan to attend the Jan. 15 caucuses back Haley or are leaning her way. I also know Haley supporters who favor the near-total abortion ban Iowa Republicans enacted last July. (That law is now tied up in court, so abortion [*remains legal here up to 20 weeks*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/16/politics/iowa-supreme-court-abortion-ban/index.html).) Her approach to abortion may be one reason Haley's able to connect with so many Republicans.

Laura Belin is the publisher and primary author of the website [*Bleeding Heartland*](https://www.bleedingheartland.com/), where she has covered Iowa ***politics*** since 2007, and the co-host of [*"Capitol Week" on KHOI Radio*](https://khoifm.org/talk-programs/capitol-week) in Ames, Iowa. You can follow her on X/Twitter, Bluesky or Post @LauraRBelin.

Opinion by CNN contributors

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