

Some Iowa voters shift favorites after GOP debate, while Ramaswamy stokes a divide

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Watch [John King's full report on reaction to the debate on CNN's "Anderson Cooper 360" at 8 p.m. ET.](#)

CNN —

Betsy Sarcone is nowhere near done looking for a presidential candidate, but the first Republican primary debate did reorder her shopping list some.

"My personal favorite was Nikki Haley," Sarcone told CNN of the former South Carolina governor after watching Wednesday's debate at her Urbandale home in the Des Moines suburbs. "She had a lot of commentary on different topics where I said, 'Wow, I agreed with everything she said right there.'"

Chris Mudd, who owns a solar energy company in Cedar Falls, is still enthusiastically for the candidate who skipped the debate: front-runner Donald Trump.

But of those on stage, entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy stood out to Mudd.

"I'm for the USA," Mudd said in a text message moments after the debate in Milwaukee wrapped up. "Trump represents that best in my opinion. Vivek sounds great."

Sarcone and Mudd are part of a group of Iowa voters CNN is tracking as part of a voter-focused 2024 reporting project, beginning in Iowa because it votes first in the GOP nominating contest, and then expanding as the campaign unfolds over the next 14 months. The goal is to watch the presidential race through the voters' eyes and life experiences, and see what, if anything, leads them to change their voting preferences or, at this early stage in the nominating process, at least how they stack their favorites.

To be clear, this is anecdotal reporting and should not be considered a scientific sampling of public opinion. But it is helpful, and at times telling, to track how voters from different slices of the Republican electorate view the same event.

To that end, these were the two biggest takeaways from our group: Haley made a strong impression, and Ramaswamy stirs an undercard version of the Trump GOP divide.

Haley first.

As the only woman in the GOP field, there is potential opportunity for her in the fast-growing Des Moines suburbs, where Trump is weakest and where many moms like Sarcone talk openly of trying to wrest the Republican Party back from him.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis topped Sarcone's list when we first visited earlier this month. He is still very much on that list. But after watching the debate with her parents, Sarcone had this to say when they both said Ramaswamy was too aggressive and would have trouble winning swing voters.

"So you want a DeSantis-Haley ticket?" Sarcone interjected. Then, quickly, this: "Haley-DeSantis. Maybe Haley-DeSantis."

"She wasn't afraid to go toe to toe with them," Sarcone said. "But she also came across as not nasty, but knowledgeable. There's a difference."

Priscilla Forsyth, a Sioux City attorney, caucused for Trump in 2016 and voted for him in the 2016 and 2020 general elections. But she wants a new candidate and said of the debate: "Nikki Haley really helped herself."

Forsyth said it was honest for Haley to say there are not enough votes in Congress to pass a national abortion ban, and she liked her tone. "She was also the one who said 'Get control of this debate' and that needed to happen."

Even Trump supporter Mudd took notice of Haley, who served as Trump's ambassador to the United Nations.

This is Mudd earlier this month: "I'm not a big Nikki Haley fan. ... I've just never really connected to her. I don't know why."

This is Mudd, still for Trump, after the debate: "Nikki Haley made good use of her time."

With Trump boycotting, it was Ramaswamy who consistently pleased the debate hall crowd with praise of the former president and embrace of most of his MAGA positions and grievances.

Mudd loved it.

"Trump was a great president like Vivek said tonight," he texted.

Forsyth, though, saw enough to cross Ramaswamy off her list. A big change.

This was Forsyth in our initial interview a few weeks ago, after attending a Ramaswamy event: "I was extremely impressed with Ramaswamy. ... I really got the feeling he's brilliant. He's got energy. He's young. I really liked him."

But she had a different take after the debate: "He just isn't grown up enough to be president. He's trying to be Trump, but he just isn't. His inexperience showed."

Sarcone and her parents had the same negative reaction to Ramaswamy's debate performance. Her mother, Susan, used the term "abrasive" – a turnoff in the suburbs but perhaps not across the GOP in the era of Trump.

"Some Trump people may have found that attractive about Ramaswamy, right?" Betsy Sarcone said. "So he might pull some of that crowd. Who knows."

One last takeaway that benefits Trump: different opinions, for now, among the suburban mothers in our group who hope that one consensus Trump alternative emerges before Iowa kicks off the voting in January.

Jaclyn Taylor manages construction projects. Earlier this month she was souring on DeSantis because of "a little stir around him."

But the debate put the Florida governor back atop her list.

"DeSantis has been elevated to me," Taylor said. "He was concise in his answers and he wasn't reactive to the people around him."

Taylor said she "lost interest" in South Carolina Sen. Tim Scott watching the debate, and would keep Haley as a possibility but scored her "a little weak" on her top issue, the economy.

Sarcone is the flipside of the suburban split.

She put DeSantis first in our initial meeting. Now Haley has that spot.

That benefits Trump, whose lead in Iowa and nationally in primary polling is beyond formidable.

But both Sarcone and Taylor stressed they were not locked in. And Sarcone made clear getting rid of Trump is her top priority and so things could change.

"Can she win, right?" Sarcone said of Haley. "So that's my main question. She personally would be my favorite candidate right now. But DeSantis, at this point, looks more viable."