

‘Baby steps aren’t going to cut it’: Debates do little to dent Trump dominance

Once seen as candidates’ best chance at a game-changing moment, the televised showdowns have reinforced Trump’s advantage in the eyes of many Republicans

*By Hannah Knowles, Marianne LeVine, Meryl Kornfield and Dylan Wells
The Washington Post*

Nikki Haley delivered the night’s most memorable zinger. Nonconfrontational Tim Scott went on the offensive. Ron DeSantis came out swinging at an absent Donald Trump and got the best ratings from voters in a post-debate poll.

But even as the candidates worked to capitalize on their performances Wednesday night, the chances the debates could significantly weaken Trump’s stranglehold on the GOP presidential race appeared slim, with the former president declining to participate and having little reason to change course.

“Many of the candidates landed some punches on Trump,” GOP strategist Mike Dennehy said. “But ... not enough to make an impact. At the end of the day, I believe it is the status quo.”

Once seen as presidential candidates’ best chance at a game-changing moment, the Republican debates so far have in many ways reinforced Trump’s dominant position in the 2024 race — showcasing the fierce fighting to emerge as his most viable challenger while the former president counterprograms with a dark message for reelection. Trump will campaign in California and Iowa in the coming days, as he tries to close off any openings for an upset in key states.

More candidates took aim at Trump this time around, with DeSantis in particular ramping up his criticism. The next debate in November could help narrow the field with a higher bar to participate, and rivals are betting that intensive campaigning in early nominating states can create momentum to

displace Trump. But many across the GOP are skeptical that this cycle's debates can fundamentally shift the race, arguing that scattered shots against the former president don't amount to an effective effort against him. The race beneath Trump remains unsettled, as several candidates who trail him by a wide margin aimed Thursday to seize fresh momentum.

The fracturing of support among the non-Trump candidates factors into at least one effort to stop Trump. The head of Win It Back, an organization that has been airing ads designed to erode the former president's support, wrote in a memo Thursday that it concluded many messages it has tried don't work. But it has identified ads that lowered Trump's support and plans to deploy them when there are "signs of consolidation" among the non-Trump vote, which it acknowledged has yet to occur.

"The data show we can and did move the needle," the official, David McIntosh, told The Washington Post. But the memo, first reported by the New York Times, also concluded that all "attempts to undermine his conservative credentials on specific issues were ineffective," adding, "even when you show video to Republican primary voters — with complete context — of President Trump saying something otherwise objectionable to primary voters, they find a way to rationalize and dismiss it." More effective are ads that turn to "non-scripted Republicans" and attempts to "disarm" viewers by introducing people who previously backed Trump but who are now advocating change, the memo added.

Some donors deeply invested in defeating Trump, who faces 91 criminal charges across four indictments, were gloomy heading out of the debate that anything had changed, and Trump's team dismissed Wednesday's faceoff in Simi Valley, Calif., as inconsequential.

"Baby steps aren't going to cut it," said Dennehy, who argued that candidates will need to take big risks to move the dial. "It's time for the Hail Mary."

For multiple contenders, there was still plenty to celebrate from Wednesday's debate as they hurtle toward the end of the third-quarter fundraising period Saturday. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis — who spent Thursday at three sold-out fundraisers in California, according to a senior campaign official — had donors

and other supporters buzzing with his more aggressive approach compared with the first debate, where he stuck to promoting his own record.

Nearly a third of potential Republican primary voters watched Wednesday's debate, according a 538/Washington Post/Ipsos poll of viewers, and a plurality — 33 percent — said DeSantis had the best performance. Haley, a former U.N. ambassador, came in next at 18 percent and business executive Vivek Ramaswamy third with 15 percent. The share of viewers considering Trump declined a couple of points, while several debate participants got bumps of a few points.

But no one got an increase in interested viewers as dramatic as what Haley saw after the first debate. Trump sought Wednesday to distract from the debate with a trip to Michigan, where President Biden had visited the picket lines of an autoworker strike a day earlier. The second debate, held at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, averaged 9.5 million viewers, according to Nielsen, down from nearly 13 million for the first debate in August.

"This debate did not change the trajectory of the Republican primary at all, so there comes a point in time where you've got to ask yourself, 'What's the point?'" Trump senior campaign adviser Chris LaCivita said. "All of this is a sideshow. I actually call it ... an interview for who's going to be the designated survivor."

DeSantis ranked up top for speaking time Wednesday, calling Trump "missing in action" and criticizing his recent comments that six-week abortion bans are "terrible." It's a message that could be particularly helpful in the first-in-the-nation GOP caucus state of Iowa, where Republicans have passed such a ban. (The law is not in effect pending a court challenge.)

"DeSantis is running a campaign to beat Trump in Iowa," said Hal Lambert, a DeSantis donor. "Last night showed he has the ability to do it, and people are fired up."

Slater Bayliss, a bundler for DeSantis who was in California for the debate, said he woke up to voice mails from people "on the sidelines" and said DeSantis's contrasts with Trump are "putting lots of wind in the sails."

Other fundraisers for DeSantis said it has been harder to get checks as the governor loses ground or sits stagnant in polling — and after many donors have already maxed out their ability to contribute to the campaign, which can take no more than \$6,600 per person throughout the election cycle.

But the super PAC backing DeSantis exceeded its goal of raising \$10 million last month, according to a person familiar with the numbers. A fundraising swing through Texas last week raised more than its \$1 million goal for the campaign.

Polls in the month after the first debate in Milwaukee have showed Haley running a distant second to Trump in South Carolina; ahead or about even with DeSantis and a couple of others in New Hampshire; and pulling into third in Iowa. While Haley has focused on New Hampshire, she is heading to Iowa after the debate with a town hall set for Saturday in Clive.

“Nikki is second in New Hampshire and second in South Carolina, and we’re coming for Iowa, too. She’s in it to win it,” said spokeswoman Olivia Perez-Cubas, who argued that it looks increasingly likely that Haley will emerge as the most viable Trump alternative.

In a post-debate memo, Mark Harris, the lead strategist of Stand for America, a pro-Haley PAC, pointed to an email sent by the Trump campaign criticizing Haley as proof that “the former president no longer views DeSantis as the threat to his second term.”

DeSantis allies say it’s a race between DeSantis and Trump, and note that the super PAC supporting Trump recently spent more money against them. DeSantis polls strongest in Iowa — 21 percent to Trump’s 51 percent in a recent CBS News poll.

The same poll found that in Iowa, 31 percent of likely GOP primary voters are not considering Trump, while 20 percent are only considering him and close to half are considering Trump along with other candidates. Numbers in New Hampshire were similar.

“It was a mistake for [Trump] not to be here because the governor was able to hold him account for his failures and lay out how the governor would be

different,” said Andrew Romeo, the DeSantis campaign communications director who noted that the Florida governor was amplifying contrasts he’s made with Trump on the trail for months.

A person close to the DeSantis campaign, who like some others spoke on the condition of anonymity to candidly discuss the race, was dismissive of Ramaswamy and Scott, and said the primary “really comes down to, other than Trump, [Haley] and DeSantis.” But Haley, the person argued, has a “low ceiling” in the primary while DeSantis’s message appeals to a broader, more Trump-friendly swath of the GOP electorate.

“Right now, it’s less about Trump than it is survive and advance,” the person said. “It’s like March Madness, right, you’ve got to get to the finals ... so if you come out on the top of that bracket, then you get to the championship game. And once you get to the championship game, anything can happen.”

Scott’s campaign senior communications adviser, Matt Gorman, said the senator from South Carolina was “happy” and “energized” after his second-ever national debate. Asked about Scott’s more combative approach in this debate that earned him more speaking time, Gorman said the campaign had previously said it wouldn’t shy away from contrast, “but it’s going to be on our timeline.”

Metals magnate Andy Sabin, who is supporting Scott, said he was pleased that Scott spoke up more Wednesday night than he did in the first debate. But Sabin said he’s not expecting his candidate to make a dent in Trump’s dominating lead without the former president dropping out.

“Nothing in a debate is going to sway that core Trump base,” he said. “The best shot is Trump implodes with all his legal problems. The second best shot is he gets the nomination and he picks one of them as his vice president.”

Bobbie Kilberg, a donor staunchly opposed to Trump and supporting former New Jersey governor Chris Christie, praised Christie and Haley’s performances but added, “Did anybody have a really breakthrough moment? No, not really.”

She posited that the debates might have a cumulative effect against Trump as more candidates join Christie in sharply attacking the former president. But she and many others were focused on intensive early state campaigning as candidates' best shot to move the needle.

"The debates are interesting, but I'm not sure ... at this point in time, we'll learn much more from them," Kilberg said.

After Wednesday's event, DeSantis challenged Trump to a one-on-one debate, which the Trump team swiftly rejected.

Trump's dark tone in Michigan echoed his interview with former Fox host Tucker Carlson that was released during the first debate, in which Trump suggested the United States could see more political violence.

"For years, foreign nations have looted and plundered your hopes, your dreams and your heritage," the former president said from a factory floor in Clinton Township, Mich., on Wednesday. "And now they're going to pay for what they have stolen and what they have done to you, my friends."