

Trump dominates GOP field while campaigning less than foes

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Many days this summer, former president Donald Trump played golf.

Trump skipped the party's first debate and has said he is skipping the second one.

As rivals circled primary states, he largely stayed in New Jersey, discussed the felony charges against him with his lawyers, posted thousands of times on Truth Social, strategized for a general-election campaign against President Biden, criticized challenger Ron DeSantis and DJed music on his golf club's patio.

He held fewer events than most all of his GOP foes, according to a Washington Post analysis of campaign stops from May until September. And he is still ahead by a long shot in national and state polls, dominating a field that has struggled to gain oxygen even as they appear in more places more frequently than Trump does.

Some backers of DeSantis say Trump's lack of campaigning in Iowa poses a vulnerability for the former president and that the Florida governor is campaigning in the state's 99 counties and building a formidable ground operation Trump does not have — and that their hundreds of events will accrue to their favor in the long-term.

His relative absence has been noted in some early GOP enclaves. Trump has skipped several major cattle calls in Iowa, including this past weekend's Iowa Faith and Freedom Coalition dinner — a chance for candidates to court more than a thousand highly engaged voters likely to participate in January's caucuses. He has been to South Carolina and New Hampshire twice each in the last four months, less than others in the field.

Iowa Faith and Freedom Coalition President Steve Scheffler said in an interview that the former president "should have been here," even as he acknowledged that Trump's prominence probably means he doesn't have to campaign as heavily as others in Iowa.

“I know caucus-goers, and they want engagement one-on-one,” Scheffler said. He declined to get into his conversations with the Trump team beyond saying that his group “made every effort” to encourage Trump to attend.

Trump’s team provided a list of 60 campaign-related events since late May to The Post. Six events — or 10 percent — included attending Saudi-backed LIV Golf events at his clubs in New Jersey and Virginia in which he has a financial interest. Eleven of the 60 events were held at his private club in Bedminster, N.J. Three of the events were remarks he made next to his plane after being indicted on federal or state charges. Five were virtual events. Many of them were multiple events on the same day, such as stops at restaurants en route to the airport. About half were traditional campaign stops — speeches, rallies or meet-and-greets with voters.

Other candidates have done more. A spokesman for DeSantis said he had made more than 100 campaign stops since announcing his candidacy. A representative for former U.N. ambassador Nikki Haley said she had held more than 120 grass-roots events since May. Tim Scott has done “more than 60 campaign events on the campaign trail” since May, his spokesman said.

“The irony is he’s running the campaign he criticized Biden for running against him,” said Marc Short, a longtime top adviser to former vice president Mike Pence, who has done 55 such events, according to his spokesman. “I’m not sure how much it matters with him, but my sense is, in Iowa, they want you to be there.”

Trump aides note his large lead in polls and say his schedule is likely to accelerate in the coming months. In addition to an event held Wednesday, four other events are planned in Iowa before the end of October, the campaign said.

Jason Miller, a senior Trump adviser, said the crowds Trump attracts far eclipse the numbers drawn by the remainder of the field.

“Not all campaign events are created equal, and President Trump’s event in South Carolina that drew 75,000 people is a greater audience than every single DeSanctimonious or Always Back Down event of 2023 combined,” Miller said, referencing a July event in Pickens, S.C., and using a derogatory nickname for DeSantis. “President Trump is drawing 75,000 people to rallies. Ron DeSanctimonious has to wear a name tag on his sweater vest so anyone even knows who he is.”

Officials in Pickens County estimated the crowd at about 50,000, according to local news reports. No other candidate has drawn anywhere near such a large number of people at a campaign event.

Trump advisers and some GOP strategists say he often secures larger crowds and therefore doesn't need to go as often. He is also a known commodity to voters, they say, having run for president three times and served for four years.

Steven Cheung, a Trump spokesman, said the campaign would have an "aggressive" travel schedule going into the fall. "We have a robust couple of months. There is not going to be any lull in the schedule," he said.

The finances of Trump's team have been strained in recent months by expensive legal fees being paid for a range of current and former advisers related to cases regarding his handling of classified documents and attempts to overturn the 2020 election. Trump spends some of his time these days meeting with lawyers, whether in person or by phone.

Trump — who has residences at two of his clubs, in Bedminster and Palm Beach, Fla. — told aides he wanted to enjoy this past summer in New Jersey, but advisers say he is unlikely to do the same next summer in the throes of a 2024 campaign, if he is the presumptive or confirmed nominee. Privately, he has also told advisers he wants to skip certain early events in part to evince an air of inevitability.

One close adviser described the former president this summer as "saving his energy for the long haul. No one is paying attention in the summer anyways." This adviser said Trump has been heavily focused on the campaign, including spending hours in the minutiae of advertisements, but has not viewed nonstop travel as necessary thus far.

In 2015, for example, Trump did fewer events than he has done so far in 2023, according to a Post analysis. He won the nomination decisively.

DeSantis advisers say current polling doesn't reflect the full impact of their on-the-ground operations and heavy campaigning — arguing the benefits will kick in closer to caucus night, when their groundwork translates into turnout. DeSantis's team has also ridiculed Trump's plans to do more events in Iowa, saying DeSantis

attended more this past Saturday than Trump has pledged for the next seven weeks.

Kristin Davison, the COO of Never Back Down, a pro-DeSantis super PAC, noted that the former president has not rescheduled a rally in Iowa after one was canceled in May amid bad weather.

“Pointing out one lone event in another state doesn’t make a whole lot of sense when they have glaringly avoided rescheduling a quote-unquote rally in another state that they are known to be weak in,” Davison said.

Andrew Romeo, communications director for the DeSantis campaign, said in a statement: “No one is entitled to the nomination and voters deserve to hear from candidates in-person about their records and visions for the future. Donald Trump’s basement campaign would be a losing strategy against Joe Biden in the general election, just like it will be in the Iowa Caucus when he cedes that state to Ron DeSantis as a result of taking Iowans for granted.”

In South Carolina, Trump appeared twice this summer — once for the large event in Pickens and another time at an annual dinner in Columbia called the Silver Elephant Dinner. He is expected to return to the state on Monday.

A number of operatives in the state have noticed his absence compared with other candidates but said they are not sure it will matter. A Post/ABC News poll earlier this month showed Trump leading his rivals in South Carolina by more than 2 to 1.

“Trump has uniquely saturated every part of American life, and that includes early primary state voters and caucus-goers,” said Rob Godfrey, a former top aide to Haley. “You may hear gripes about lesser-known candidates visiting South Carolina, but you don’t really hear that about President Trump.”

In Iowa, there was chatter at the dinner Trump skipped about his recent comments on abortion. He angered some voters with his vague suggestion he will “negotiate” with Democrats on the issue and his harsh criticism of a six-week abortion ban passed in Florida. Iowa Republicans have passed a similar six-week limit.

Nicole Schlinger, a longtime Iowa operative who attended, said people want to hear more explanation from Trump on that issue.

“The best way to win is for him to be here and show up,” said Schlinger, who isn’t aligned with any candidate this cycle.

Trump’s plans to make more Iowa stops soon suggest “he isn’t going to take Iowa for granted,” she added.