

# Mike Pence suspends his struggling 2024 campaign

The former vice president was unable to gain traction in the face of Donald Trump's dominance in the race

By [Maeve Reston](#) and [Marianne LeVine](#)  
The Washington Post

LAS VEGAS — Former vice president Mike Pence suspended his campaign for the GOP presidential nomination Saturday, facing the reality that there was little appetite for his candidacy among the legions of Republican voters who remain loyal to his former running mate Donald Trump and viewed Pence as a traitor because he refused to follow Trump's demands to overturn the 2020 election results.

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After staying fiercely loyal to Trump for nearly four years in the White House, Pence sharply and publicly broke with Trump over his efforts to overturn the election and his inaction during the Jan. 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol. During his announcement speech in June, Pence argued that Trump's efforts to overturn the 2020 election were disqualifying, declaring that "anyone who puts themselves over the Constitution should never be president of the United States."

That approach fell flat with the party base.

"After much prayer and deliberation I have decided to suspend my campaign for president," he said in a speech here at a gathering of the Republican Jewish Coalition, drawing extended applause and a standing ovation from a room that has long admired his staunch defense of Israel.

He said he had concluded this moment was not his time and appeared to make an implicit appeal against Trump, urging GOP voters to choose a Republican standard-bearer who — in the words of Abraham Lincoln — would "appeal to the better angels of our nature, and not only lead us to victory, but lead our nation with civility back to the time-honored principles that have always made America strong and prosperous and free."

Pence's years-long descent from first in line for the presidency to an also-ran reached a conclusion at a high-profile summit which brought together some of the most powerful Republican donors in one room. The gathering drew nine presidential candidates to speak Saturday morning, including Trump, who made no mention of his former vice president even though he took the stage a short time after Pence announced that he was dropping out.

The former vice president, who previously served as a governor and congressman, becomes the highest-profile Republican to leave the race, exiting at a moment when support for the non-Trump candidates

has splintered, leaving Trump on a glide path to the nomination less than three months before the Iowa caucuses launch the primary season.

The splintered field has worried many Republicans looking to stop Trump, putting pressure on other struggling candidates like Sen. Tim Scott (R-S.C.) to show a viable path to the nomination. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and former U.N. ambassador Nikki Haley have been battling at the top of the lower tier to secure a distant second against Trump.

Pence's decision to end his campaign — which drew an audible gasp from the audience as he shared his news — underlined his desire to command a supportive audience for his parting words as he urged the United States to continue to play a leading role in the defense of both Israel and Ukraine.

Advisers said he decided to make his announcement at the RJC because he wanted to underscore his view that the United States must continue to play a central role in backing Israel in its war with Hamas, which is emblematic of the message he has been driving: that the party should reject the populist and isolationist tendencies that are increasingly being embraced by the far-right flank of the Republican Party. That includes the idea that America has a critical role to play in helping democracies like Israel and Ukraine defend themselves.

While Pence had not made Jan. 6 a key focus of his campaign early on, his rare challenge of a president under whom he served in the No. 2 slot, and his central role in Trump's legal entanglements, as a key witness, added another extraordinary layer to the competition.

The warm reception Trump received minutes later after Pence's remarks, even as he faces legal peril, reflected the former president's dominance in the race and the challenges candidates like Pence have faced in trying to topple him.

Taking the stage immediately after Pence, DeSantis made no mention of the former vice president or his decision to drop out of the race, instead issuing a statement on X, formerly known as Twitter. Haley, by contrast, opened her remarks by praising Pence, calling him "a good man of faith" and "a good man of service" who has fought for America and for Israel.

The former U.N. ambassador also stepped up her criticisms of the former president at the same gathering, praising his record supporting Israel, rejecting the Iran deal and recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

Her rival's departure from the race created an opening for Haley to further lay claim to the traditional hawkish GOP lane on foreign policy, advocating strong support for Israel and Ukraine. While largely united on Israel, much of the party, including Trump, have taken a more skeptical posture toward helping fund Ukraine's war against Russia.

“But as Americans, we need to ask a critical question. We all know what Trump did in the past. The question is: What will he do in the future?” she said. “The stakes couldn’t be higher. And given those stakes, we cannot have four years of chaos, vendettas and drama.”

Supporters of Pence’s rival candidates welcomed the narrowing of the field — which they view as an essential element in the path toward dislodging Trump, who leads the field by an average of about 50 points.

It’s not clear that the small slice of the electorate supporting Pence would break toward any one candidate because DeSantis and Scott are both also targeting the evangelical voters that Pence was pursuing in Iowa. Haley, Trump’s former ambassador to the United Nations, had, like Pence, been appealing to more hawkish GOP voters as they rebuked the isolationist tendencies that are on the rise in the GOP.

Still, “this is the first of the dominoes to fall,” said Nicole Schlinger, a longtime Republican operative in Iowa. “This is the first of the dominoes of the candidates who were on that first debate stage.”

Schlinger noted that Pence’s struggle was evident on the ground in Iowa, where the former vice president was recently “just going to places where there was already a crowd built” rather than organically drawing voters to his own events.

For weeks, Pence has looked increasingly vulnerable as he courted voters in a party that is still fully in the thrall of Trump. Though Pence was staking his candidacy in Iowa — where he hoped to building a winning coalition rooted in his support among evangelical voters — he struggled to rise out of the single digits in the polls and was running dangerously low on cash fewer than 100 days before the caucuses in Iowa.

Pence said Saturday that he and his team had always known this would be “an uphill battle,” but he said he had “no regrets.” He did not mention Trump by name in his remarks.

Pence also had not endorsed any of his rivals in his departure from the race, but at a rally later that day, Trump said former vice president should endorse him because he “had a great, successful presidency and he was the vice president.”

“He should endorse me. I chose him, made him vice president. But people in politics can be very disloyal,” Trump said.

Cam Savage, an Indiana-based GOP consultant, said that Pence was caught in virtually impossible situation as he tried to court GOP voters, because he had both alienated the Trump wing of the party with his actions on Jan. 6, yet was not a fresh enough alternative for those looking for change after Trump.

“His actions on Jan. 6 — for which I hope he is remembered as a patriot — were demonized by certain segments of the party and that made it difficult for him to gain traction with one segment of the party,” Savage said. “He also was not new. For those looking to move on, he didn’t really fit that bill either.”

Savage added that Pence’s campaign trajectory underscored the fact that “the Republican primary electorate does not yet seem to be interested in moving on” from Trump.

In focus groups and interviews with voters in early contest states, questions about Pence often yielded shrugs and expressions of disinterest, even from Republicans who admired his efforts to ensure the election results were certified on Jan. 6, 2021, even as some Trump supporters were outside on the U.S. Capitol grounds yelling “Hang Mike Pence.”

By the end of September, Pence was facing mounting debt, a very limited supply of cash to spend in the primary season and has given \$150,000 of his own money to his campaign, according to recent filings with the Federal Election Commission.

He was hovering around fifth place nationally in the polls, and sixth and seventh in Iowa and New Hampshire — key early states where he would have needed a strong finish to build momentum for the primary. He raised \$3.3 million, the least of any current GOP candidates except Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson, and spent almost the same amount in the third quarter of the year. He had \$1.2 million cash on hand and a debt of \$620,000 at the end of the quarter.

His struggle to raise money and to gain traction above single-digits in the polls — which were critical metrics for making the next debate stage in Miami in November — reflected the antipathy toward the former vice president among rank-and-file GOP voters.

He was frequently overshadowed by DeSantis and Haley, who have somewhat less complicated histories with Trump and stronger arguments about their path to the nomination.

With the Iowa caucuses fast approaching, Pence was facing serious challenges in paying for the day-to-day activities of a campaign, including the hefty fees required for candidates to get on the ballot in states all over the country.

More importantly, he faced deep skepticism among donors who could not visualize his path to the Republican nomination. Ultimately those challenges proved too difficult to overcome.

It was not immediately clear what was next for the former vice president. Before becoming Trump’s vice president, Pence was governor of Indiana. He was first elected to the House in 2000, after two previous unsuccessful bids and a stretch as a talk radio host.

“I am leaving this campaign, but let me promise you — I will never leave the fight for conservative values and I will never stop fighting to elect principled Republican leaders to every office in the land. So help me God.”

*Meryl Kornfield and Hannah Knowles contributed to this report.*