

Trump's edge over Haley and DeSantis might be bigger than you think

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The anti-Trump forces in the conservative movement haven't completely given up on trying to defeat Donald Trump, as evidenced by the moneyed Koch network getting behind Nikki Haley on Tuesday.

But the odds of success today appear as long as they ever have — and not just because of Trump's overall lead in the polls.

A conceit of the effort has long been that if the race can be distilled down to one candidate to challenge Trump, the lone survivor will have a shot. It's part of the reason you see the candidates attacking each other more than they attack the former president.

But it's looking increasingly as if they're fighting over a prize that isn't worth much. That's because along with his growing lead in national polls, Trump has also grown his leads in potential head-to-head matchups in recent months — substantially.

And those are the matchups that could wind up mattering most as the field is winnowed.

There was actually a time when this prospective path to a GOP primary victory for someone who is not Trump appeared quite viable, if not likely.

In fact, between Trump's disastrous Election Day 2022 and mid-February of this year, 14 high-quality polls tested a head-to-head matchup between him and Ron DeSantis, who was fresh off a big reelection win as Florida governor. DeSantis actually led in every single one, by an average of 10 points.

That is, to put it mildly, no longer the case. DeSantis has trailed by an average of 37 points in his four most recent head-to-head polls with Trump.

Some pollsters have tested this matchup repeatedly, and Trump has gained even more ground on this measure than in his overall poll numbers.

In polling from Marquette University Law School, Trump has gone from trailing DeSantis by 20-plus points in November 2022 and January 2023 to leading by 42 points this September and 29 points earlier this month.

In Monmouth University's polls, Trump went from trailing by 13 points in February to a 20-point lead just five months later, in July.

And in polling from Yahoo News and YouGov, Trump has gone from being down single digits around New Year's to leading by 37 points in the most recent Yahoo/YouGov poll, in August.

Much of this, of course, is because DeSantis has fizzled as a candidate. But he's not the only one over whom Trump has significantly extended his head-to-head lead.

The other top challenger right now is Haley. And while polling of a head-to-head between her and Trump is sparser, the trajectory is in the same direction.

Haley hasn't lost as much ground, but that's largely because she was never that close to begin with. And despite the likes of the Koch network reasoning that she is their best hope — the flagship Koch group, Americans for Prosperity Action, said in a memo that Haley "is in the best position to defeat Donald Trump in the primaries" — she continues to trail by more than DeSantis.

Yahoo/YouGov polling has repeatedly tested that head-to-head. Haley has gone from down 27 points in February to down 48 points in its poll this month.

So, despite her rising in the early-state primary polls and polling as the GOP's best general-election candidate, the GOP nomination has arguably become more elusive for her.

As troubling for the likes of the Koch network is that she continues to fare worse than DeSantis in head-to-head polls with Trump. Her average deficit in three polls conducted since last month is 44 points.

In no poll does she get even half of Trump's support. In some, she's actually stuck with less than one-third of it.

Her best poll since February (trailing by 39 points in a Marquette poll) is similar to DeSantis's worst poll ever (trailing by 42 points). And that's out of nearly 50 polls that have tested a Trump vs. DeSantis head-to-head.

Things could certainly change as voters get to know Haley, who only relatively recently asserted herself as perhaps the leading Trump alternative. But it shouldn't be too encouraging for Haley's backers that right now her path to victory appears to involve a bank shot in which one major candidate (Chris Christie) drops out but the others (DeSantis and Vivek Ramaswamy) don't. And that's just to give her a chance in one early primary state (New Hampshire).

After that, the race could indeed be distilled to two or three candidates, at which point these head-to-head national polls would start to become operable as a reflection of how Super Tuesday might look.

And those head-to-head polls suggest there would need to be a sea change to make it happen for Haley — or anyone else.