

What to Watch in the Fourth Republican Presidential Debate

Nikki Haley is expected to be a top target, with three other candidates on stage and Donald Trump again skipping the event

By John McCormick and Alex Leary
Wall Street Journal

TUSCALOOSA, Ala.—The Republican presidential primary debate stage will shrink to four participants Wednesday evening, with the event expected to focus on two remaining competitors vying to be the main 2024 alternative to former President [Donald Trump](#).

Former South Carolina Gov. [Nikki Haley](#) and Florida Gov. [Ron DeSantis](#), whose campaigns have become increasingly combative in recent days, are trying to sell themselves as the most able to challenge Trump as the Jan. 15 Iowa caucuses and the start of GOP nomination balloting approach.

Trump, who has sought to project inevitability about what would be a third consecutive GOP nomination for him, won't be on the stage and instead will attend a private fundraiser. He has skipped all of the debates and lobbied for their cancellation, citing his polling dominance.

Donald Trump said if he is re-elected as U.S. president, he would use his powers to close the southern border with Mexico and increase oil drilling. He made the comments during a town hall with Fox News host Sean Hannity on Tuesday.
Photo: Charlie Neibergall/Associated Press

Also participating will be former New Jersey Gov. [Chris Christie](#) and entrepreneur [Vivek Ramaswamy](#). The last debate featured five participants. This one, the fourth, comes after Sen. Tim Scott of South Carolina dropped out.

The two-hour event at the University of Alabama is scheduled to start at 8 p.m. ET and will be moderated by Elizabeth Vargas of NewsNation, former Fox News anchor Megyn Kelly and Eliana Johnson of the Washington Free Beacon. The debate will be broadcast on [NewsNation's cable network](#) and livestreamed at NewsNationNow.com and on [Rumble](#). It will be simulcast in the Eastern and Central time zones on [Nexstar's](#) broadcast TV network, the CW.

Here is a look at how each candidate is likely to tackle the debate:

Nikki Haley

Haley, who has moved up in polls in recent weeks and is gaining support from [donors on Wall Street](#) and elsewhere, is likely to be a top target as DeSantis tries to slow her momentum. Haley has sparred with the Florida governor in recent weeks but [is more prone on the campaign trail](#) to mention Trump in a negative way than DeSantis.

In the first three debates, Haley won strong reviews for her poise and ability to deliver her message in a mostly positive tone. [Her exchanges with Ramaswamy](#) have been sharper and more personal.

Last week, Haley [won the backing](#) of billionaire Charles Koch's political network. Americans for Prosperity Action is expected to spend heavily on advertising to promote Haley and leverage its grassroots volunteers and data capabilities to help turn out the vote for her.

Haley also attracted the support of a major Democratic donor, LinkedIn co-founder Reid Hoffman, who gave \$250,000 to a super PAC supporting her candidacy. The donation, earlier reported by the [New York Times](#), was confirmed by a political adviser to Hoffman, Dmitri Mehlhorn. He said Hoffman still prefers President Biden in the general election, but views Haley as the best-positioned Republican to stop Trump.

Her campaign has also started to spend its money on ads in Iowa and New Hampshire, where the nominating balloting moves after Iowa. As of Monday, Haley's campaign had more advertising booked between now and the Jan. 23 New Hampshire primary than any other candidate, according to ad tracker AdImpact.

Ron DeSantis

Despite arguing only he can take on Trump, DeSantis finds himself stuck in a battle with Haley. He is expected to take a tougher approach to her during the debate, criticizing her record as governor and suggesting she can't assemble a coalition to win the nomination—one that would have to include some current Trump backers.

During an interview Monday with conservative host Mark Levin, DeSantis described Haley as "a last gasp of a failed Republican establishment from yesteryear." He has played up conservative fights over cultural issues and has noted that as governor, Haley rejected calls for legislation restricting which bathrooms transgender people can use. Haley has said those decisions can be addressed at the local level.

DeSantis will also look to use the debate to criticize Trump, casting the former president as having failed to follow through on some of his biggest campaign promises, such as completing a Southern border wall or eliminating the Affordable Care Act. Some of DeSantis's allies think he waited too long to engage with Trump, failing to give voters much of a reason to choose him.

The Florida governor scored points with conservatives for [his televised debate](#) last week with Democratic California Gov. Gavin Newsom and he has landed big endorsements in Iowa, including from Republican Gov. Kim Reynolds. Yet his campaign is mired in internal drama, with a number of officials having left a super PAC that has handled the bulk of his organizing and advertising effort.

Chris Christie

Christie, a strong debater with a long history of throwing sharp political punches, has become more vocal in criticizing Haley and DeSantis. Until recently, he kept his focus almost entirely on Trump, and his attacks on the former president have often drawn boos from GOP audiences.

Polls show him in third place in New Hampshire, where he has almost entirely focused his campaign, behind Trump and Haley. Christie came close to not meeting the Republican National Committee fundraising and polling requirements for participation in this debate, but was given the green light Monday evening. A failure to make the stage would have likely put additional pressure on Christie to get out of the race, as anti-Trump Republicans remain concerned that there are still too many candidates splintering the opposition.

Vivek Ramaswamy

Ramaswamy, [a biotech company founder](#) who has spent heavily from his own fortune to finance his campaign, has proven to be a vocal debate participant. His performance in the first debate drew [significant attention](#) from voters and the media. His aggressive approach in the next two debates didn't wear as well, however, and his poll numbers have plateaued.

While he has tried to sell himself as a next-generation version of Trump, Ramaswamy hasn't been a serious factor in the race. The moderators will have to decide how much they want the debate to focus on Haley and DeSantis as they weigh how much speaking time to grant to Ramaswamy.

Donald Trump

Trump's strategy of skipping debates might not serve voters but it has allowed him to avoid being pressed on policy positions such as abortion, and to avoid a contrast with younger opponents who hope to make the 77-year-old former president's age an issue. Trump is hoping for a sizable win in Iowa's caucuses to propel him into New Hampshire, where polls show him holding a significant lead.

Trump has sought to hold competing events during the debates. He sat down with Tucker Carlson as the first debate kicked off in August in Milwaukee. This time Trump will be attending a fundraiser for the super PAC that is backing him. On Tuesday, Trump appeared in Iowa at a town hall hosted by Sean Hannity of Fox News.

During the event, Trump initially sidestepped a question on whether he had any plans to abuse power to seek retribution against his enemies—something Democrats and some Republicans have highlighted as Trump lashes out over the various investigations he has faced.

Hannity asked again and Trump said he wouldn't act like a dictator "except for day one," explaining he would seek to secure the border and to push for more domestic oil drilling. "After that, I'm not a dictator."