

Haley Supporters Convinced a Primary Win Still Possible in SC

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Former S.C. Gov. Nikki Haley campaigning in Summerville, S.C. on Tuesday, Feb. 13, 2024. (Photo by Dan McCue)

SUMMERVILLE, S.C. — When it comes to a political event, the scene couldn't have been more bucolic.

Assembled in a raised pavilion about halfway between the clubhouse and golf course at the Summerville Country Club, were about 400 anxious supporters of former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley.

After the previous day's heavy rain, a downpour that dropped as much as three inches of rain in some parts of the state, the temperature hovered in the comfortably-high 60s, and almost everyone had broken out their spring attire to acknowledge the fact.

Children raced around the greens next to the club's picturesque pond, and quite a few of the older men in attendance sported bow ties and pastel summer-weight jackets.

As each attendee was encouraged by volunteers to sign in and perhaps join them in taking an active role in Haley's campaign for the Republican nomination for president, the sunlight painted dappled patterns on the palm trees and oaks that surrounded the venue.

Ascending the short flight of stairs that led to the seating area, a space most often used for community meetings and Carolina "shag" dance lessons, Tom Thurman stopped to talk to a Haley campaign volunteer.

"There probably isn't anyone but God who can straighten out this mess our government is in, but if there's a human being who can do it, it's Nikki Haley," the broad-shouldered retiree said.

"I will do anything I can to help her win this primary," he said.

As he spoke, adding his name, address and phone number to the sign-in sheet, the volunteer checked off boxes next to his information: "willing to make phone calls" and "willing to knock on doors" and then circled the entries for emphasis.

"In my opinion, she's probably the best governor we've ever had," Thurman told The Well News later.

"She was a governor of every one of the people, not just of a specific interest group or special this or special that," he said.

"Today you see all kinds of people in politics who seem to thrive on creating chaos, something, in my view, that only subtracts from what they're supposed to be trying to do in office," Thurman continued.

“Nikki’s never done anything like that,” he said. “She’s never done anything that was controversial for controversy’s sake. And on top of that, she’s a true conservative, not just in her approach to government, but in the way she does just about everything.”

Thurman, who lives in the suburban neighborhood near the country club, began to take a seat next to his wife.

“You know, when she was governor, she promoted everything that needed to be done in South Carolina at the time,” he said. “I know people have said things about China and other foreign investors in the state, like Volvo, but we needed jobs in this area.

“We lost a shipyard here a few years ago. We needed jobs. And she got us jobs. She does things like that instead of constantly being in the news for something she said or something she texted,” he added.

Finally taking his seat, Thurman said the “chaos” and “controversy” associated with former President Donald Trump, Haley’s competition in the primary, “are two things we definitely don’t need in this country right now.”

“I mean, you don’t need to respond to every criticism or what you perceive as a criticism, that’s lobbed at you,” he said. “If somebody says something ugly to you, well, that’s their opinion. Just leave it. And that’s what Nikki Haley has done.

“When she was running for governor, people said all kinds of nasty things, and she just walked away from it all. She showed class by just leaving it alone,” he said.

When it was jokingly suggested he seemed to have made up his mind whom to support, Thurman laughed.

“Listen, I would have written her name in if she hadn’t formally entered the race,” he said.

Thurman was far from alone in this sentiment among those waiting to see the former governor at this, one of several stops on her ongoing bus tour of the state.

In fact, the vast majority of those joining him at the country club — maybe as high as 80% — expressed an unreserved interest in wanting to roll up their sleeves and help her win the primary.

About one-in-10 attendees said curiosity drove them to spend an hour or so of their afternoon with Haley, while the final one-in-10 admitted they were leaning toward supporting Trump, but were nevertheless still comparison shopping.

Like Haley herself, who has been crisscrossing the state on the “Beast of the South,” her campaign tour bus, most of the former governor’s supporters have been all-in since she announced her candidacy for the Republican nomination almost a year ago.

And despite a new Winthrop University poll of 1,717 voters that shows Haley being walloped by Trump by a two to one margin on primary day, those who form the grassroots support for her campaign, still believe she — and they — can pull off what just might be the greatest political upset in South Carolina history.

“Listen, we’ve got a week, week-and-a-half left, and if I can get 10 neighbors to give their support to Nikki Haley and each of them can do the same with their neighbors and friends, it’s possible,” said “Jack,” a former Merchant Marine and nuclear engineer from New York who is now retired and living in the South Carolina Lowcountry.

“We’re not going to let up,” the fast-talking 81-year-old said. “We are going to call people, knock on doors and we’re going to

get our signs out, and put them in places along the roads here where no one can simply pull them up and throw them away.”

The effort is both decidedly traditional and yet markedly 21st century at the same time. For every newly minted volunteer in Summerville who walked away with an arm full of paper door hangers describing Haley’s career and vision of the future, was another who was downloading a campaign app.

“Have you heard about the app?” Jack asked.

“It helps you better target your outreach, letting you know who to talk to and who you can just as well leave alone,” he said.

“Another part of the app allows you to enter information while you’re going door-to-door, so there’s almost a running tabulation of what’s going on ‘out there’ with likely voters,” he said.

“It can be a little cumbersome,” Jack admitted. “But it’s the kind of information you need if you’re going to maximize your effectiveness.”

Like Jack, Cindy Tripp, of Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, is among the army of volunteers who have been planting Haley campaign signs on every piece of public property they can in the lead-up to the vote.

“Early morning is really the best time to get out there,” Tripp told The Well News.

“No one’s on the road here at 6 a.m. and if you plan things right, you can get a lot of signs in place before people head out to start their day,” she said.

Tripp said her most recent foray during the pre-dawn hours was the previous Saturday, when she recruited her husband to drive

her from prime spot to prime spot.

“He was like, ‘I need to get coffee.’ But I said, ‘No, I’ll buy you a coffee after,’” she laughed. “But it really worked like magic, our working together.”

Tripp explained her obvious fervor for the Haley cause with a single phrase.

“It’s crunch time,” she said.

“That’s why I’m here,” she continued. “I mean, I know [a Haley victory] is a long shot right now, but this is really the only shot we have to get the country back to where we think it should be. This can’t wait until the general election.”

As Tripp told her story, other volunteers offered their perspectives.

One opined that in her view, “Trump has held the Republican Party hostage long enough.”

Another, nodding, added, “we need to get off the crazy train.”

“The reality is most Republicans ... are moderates,” the first woman said. “And yet this minority faction is controlling everything.

“That’s not okay,” she said. “Not okay at all.”

All three women said they didn’t vote for Trump in 2016 or 2020, and couldn’t conceive of supporting him in November even if he’s the GOP nominee.

“For a variety of reasons,” one of the women said.

Tripp said holding such a position has come at a cost.

“Oh, my family hated me for not supporting Trump in 2016,” she said. “They were like, ‘You’re a traitor!’”

“But I said, ‘Look, you’ve got a right to your vote and I’ve got a right to mine, and I’m going to exercise it as I see fit,’” she said.

Today, Tripp says she evangelizes for Haley whenever and wherever she can.

“I keep reminding my friends that it’s primary season and that they ought to get out and vote for Nikki Haley, and while I can’t say for certain whether I’m making any inroads, I hope I am,” she said.

“I mean, I was just at my hairdresser today and mentioned I’d been to a Nikki Haley rally last night. And she said, ‘You were where?’ kind of surprised. So I mentioned two or three reasons I support Nikki and then I dropped it.

“If you really want to persuade people, you can’t hit them over the head with your beliefs. Gentle. Gentle messages. That’s the way to go. Otherwise you just push people over to the other side,” she said.

Steven Wright, chairman of the Dorchester County Republican Party, told The Well News this week that he’s been encouraged by the excitement surrounding the various Republican campaigns for president this year, though the committee is taking no official stance on the candidate the voters should support.

Since last summer, the committee has hosted a series of events — called “Sweet Tea Stops” in acknowledgement of sweet tea’s Dorchester County roots — featuring GOP candidates.

Vivek Ramaswamy was the first of this year's crop of candidates to participate and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and Donald Trump followed. Haley's appearance this week closed out the series.

Wright said while some Republican county committees have thrown their support behind one candidate or another, in Dorchester County, "we don't believe that we're so important that we should put a thumb on the scale.

"I trust people to make the best decision," he said.

While such a position might strike the ear as potentially wishy-washy, there's no arguing with Wright and his committee's success.

Dorchester County, South Carolina, is one of the only county's south of the state Capitol in Columbia where every elected official is, in fact, a Republican.

"And in 2022, we even beat [Democratic Rep.] Jim Clyburn in Dorchester County," he said. "Granted, he went on to win his bid for reelection, but from a county perspective, that had never been done before. So we feel like we have a really good formula for electing Republicans here, and this is absolutely an area that anybody that wants to win statewide needs to win."

Asked to expand on what exactly that winning formula is, Wright, speaking on the sidelines of Haley's Summerville event, said, "It's exactly what you are seeing here today — a candidate coming here to speak directly to the voters.

"Voters in South Carolina expect the candidates to come and speak with them directly," he said.

Later, Wright spoke of the outsized influence the South Carolina primary has on the rest of the presidential election cycle.

“The fact is, we’re a unique state,” he said. “The reason we’re one of the first contests in the nation, and first in the South, on the Republican side, is because we are a microcosm of the party.

“You have social conservatives, you have evangelicals, you have national security conservatives, with the military bases here, and lots of veterans. You have fiscal conservatives. So we really represent every facet of what the Republican Party is today,” he said.

“That’s why, if you look at history, you’ll see that since Ronald Reagan, every winner of the South Carolina primary who has gone on to be the party’s nominee has won the White House. No other early voting state has that record,” he said.

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(Photos by Dan McCue)

