

Iowa Goes Into Overdrive as Haley, DeSantis Meet in Final Pre-Election Debate

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DES MOINES, Iowa — It was Iowa in winter, so it stood to reason the snow would be falling as Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley squared off in the final candidate debate ahead of real votes being cast in the 2024 election.

The news of the night actually came about an hour before the flakes started to fall over Des Moines, when former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie abruptly ended his own presidential campaign at a town hall in Windham, New Hampshire.

“Campaigns are run to win. That’s why we do them,” he said.
“It’s clear to me tonight that there isn’t a path for me to win the nomination.”

The announcement seemed to come out of left field as CNN was putting finishing touches on the debate it was hosting at Drake University, and the immediate response of the pundits on the perimeter of the press filing center was Haley would be the main beneficiary of Christie's decision.

Since November multiple polls — including those from YouGov/Georgetown/University of Pennsylvania the Clarity Campaign Labs and Suffolk/USA Today — have shown that when Republican primary voters were asked about their second choice for president, more than half of Christie supporters nationwide (52%) chose Haley, while only 2% said they would migrate to former President Donald Trump.

But Christie notably chose not to endorse any of his rivals as he stepped away from the race. If anything, he continued to denounce both Haley and DeSantis for their ongoing public deference to Trump.

It also wasn't at all clear how Christie's announcement would play with Iowa voters, who barely saw him at all as nearly every other Republican hopeful had some kind of campaign in the state.

At present, it appears whatever bump occurs likely won't manifest itself until voters go to the polls in New Hampshire on Jan. 23.

For now, most polls show Trump sitting at about 42% in New Hampshire, while Haley is at 30% and climbing and Christie is — or was — a distant third with 12%.

But all this was prologue to the spirited, two-hour debate that transpired onstage in Drake University's Olmstead Center.

Both candidates were trying to exceed expectations and get a little more — for DeSantis maybe even the chance to at least

hang on until South Carolina. And for Haley there was the need to do a little more, say a little more, to separate herself from the former president who named her ambassador to the United Nations.

Trump qualified to participate in the debate but as he has throughout the campaign, he declined to appear, instead holding his own event 1/2 mile away at the Iowa Event Center.

CNN co-host for the debate, Dana Bash, opened with mention of Christie's announcement, and asked each candidate why voters should turn to them as an alternative to Trump.

"Donald Trump's running to pursue his issues. Nikki Haley's running to pursue her donors' issues. I'm running to pursue your issues and your family's issues and to turn this country around. I'm the only one running that's delivered on 100% of the promises that I have made," DeSantis said.

Turning on Haley, DeSantis also launched the evening's first broadside, saying, "We don't need another mealy-mouthed politician who just tells you what she thinks you want to hear just to try to get your vote, then to get in office and to do her donors' bidding.

"She was in another state, and she said the people of Iowa's votes need to be corrected. This is somebody that wrote in her book that Hillary Clinton inspired her to first run for office," he continued.

"I remember Hillary denigrating people on the Republican side as deplorables. We don't need a candidate who's going to look down on Middle America. We have had enough of that. I'm the only one that's going to be able to lead this country's revival," he said.

Haley responded by saying the time has come for generational change.

“Well, I think this is a time that we know we need a new generational leader.

“We have watched our country be in disarray. We see the world on fire, and we need someone who’s had executive experience. I have been a two-term governor that took a double-digit unemployment state and turned it into an economic powerhouse. I was at the U.N. I dealt with Russia, China, Iran every day,” she said.

Then she went after DeSantis, mentioning for the first of many, many times, the website DeSantisLies.com.

The website details “the many lies he’s told about me during this campaign, and the lies he’s told about his record,” she said.

She also said the website would reveal “He is only mad about the donors I have now because the donors used to be with him, but they no longer are.”

“And that’s because he is upset ... his campaign is exploding. You’re going to see the fact that he has switched his policies multiple times, and we’ll call that out tonight. But, every time he lies, Drake University, don’t turn this into a drinking game, because you will be overserved by the end of the night.”

CNN’s other co-host, Jake Tapper, began his questioning with Christie’s withdrawal, and particularly, the former New Jersey governor’s assertion that the most important issue in the 2024 race for the GOP nomination is “the character of the candidate.”

“Do you believe Donald Trump has the character to be president again?” Tapper asked.

“I think the next president needs to have moral clarity. I think you need to have moral clarity to understand that it’s taxpayer money, not your own money. I think you need to have moral clarity to understand that when you’re dealing with dictators in the world, that we always have to fight for democracies and human rights and protecting Americans and preventing war,” Haley said.

But she refused to walk away from Trump entirely, saying she continues to believe “he was the right president for the right time.”

“I agree with a lot of his policies, but his way is not my way. I don’t have vengeance. I don’t have vendettas. I don’t take things personally,” she said. “For me, it’s very much about no drama, no whining and getting results and getting things done. So, I don’t think that President Trump is the right president to go forward. I think it’s time for a new generational leader that’s going to go and make America proud again. That’s what I’m going to try and do.”

“I appreciated what President Trump did,” DeSantis said. “But, let’s just be honest. He said he was going to build a wall and have Mexico pay for it. He did not deliver that. He said he was going to drain the swamp. He did not deliver that. He said he was going to hold Hillary accountable and he let her off the hook. He said he was going to eliminate the debt and he added \$7.8 trillion to the debt.”

That seemed to inspire Haley to take another shot at distancing herself from the former president.

“I wish Donald Trump was up here on this stage,” she said. “He’s the one that I’m running against. He needs to be defending his record.

“Right now he’s not defending the fact that he allowed us to have \$8 trillion in debt over four years that our kids are never going to forgive us for. The fact that he didn’t deal with China when it came to stealing intellectual property. The fact that they gave us COVID. The fact that they have gone and continued to put up Chinese police stations and continue to threaten our military,” Haley continued.

“He didn’t do enough to make sure that we were really standing with our friends and doing some other things. What we need is a leader that’s not looking at four years and eight years. We need a president that’s looking at 20 and 30 years. Because I want my kids to have a good future. I want them to have one without debt, one where they can read, one with secure borders, one where we have law and order, and one where America is strong,” she added.

Tapper and Bash steadily guided the candidates through a dozen or so key issues, but it was the jabs that inevitably inspired the biggest response from a crowd evenly divided between Haley and DeSantis supporters.

In addition to repeatedly calling out DeSantis for lies he’s alleged to have told on the campaign trail, Haley hit the Florida governor particularly hard on the state of his campaign, accusing him of “blowing” \$150 million in donor money on private jets to get around rather than investing it in political advertising to advance his bid for the White House.

DeSantis countered by saying such criticism showed Haley was out of touch with “the real issues” voters care about.

“But if you can’t manage a campaign, how are you going to manage a country?” Haley asked.

The two sparred on throughout the evening, tearing at each other's records in public office.

DeSantis may also have added a new phrase to the political lexicon when he said Haley was practicing “ballistic podiatry” — shooting herself in her own foot.

“I think I hit a nerve,” Haley said.

Later, she slammed his political viability, saying DeSantis has been “invisible in New Hampshire, invisible in South Carolina ... and you are going down in the polls in Iowa.”

“You’re focused on political process that doesn’t matter to people,” DeSantis said.

As the debate came to a close, the candidates were asked to deliver their closing arguments to the voters of Iowa.

Haley said that every Iowa voter she met “knows that we can’t go through four more years of chaos. And if it’s Donald Trump, there will be four more years of chaos.”

She also said that “we can’t go through another nail-biter of an election,” going on to claim that recent polls show her beating President Joe Biden by a large margin, where as Trump is “head to head” with Biden.

DeSantis returned to his basic theme, portraying himself as the only candidate in the race running to address the issues voters care about.

Tapper tried to bring the evening to a close on a conciliatory note, but both candidates seemed to bristle at the effort.

DeSantis uncomfortably praised Haley for speaking out “strongly on some key issues” during her time as an ambassador to the

United Nations.

He also said he appreciates “the state of South Carolina” and noted that his wife is a graduate of the College of Charleston.

“There’s a lot of great people there and I think ... to have been able to be governor there is a great achievement and I really appreciate everyone I’ve gotten to meet in South Carolina,” DeSantis said.

When the same question was posed to Haley, her disdain was hard to miss.

“I think he’s been a good governor,” she said without elaboration, inspiring a nervous chuckle from DeSantis and the moderators.

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