

# Trump, Haley Wage Spirited Battle for Soul of South Carolina

February 12, 2024 by Dan McCue



Former S.C. Gov. Nikki Haley campaigns on Saturday in Newberry, S.C. The city mayor, Foster Senn, pointed out that this was the location of the first debate in Haley's 2010 primary for the governorship.

CHARLESTON, S.C. — After a lull following the Democratic primary two weeks ago, political activity escalated dramatically in South Carolina over the weekend, as the campaigns of former President Donald Trump and former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley each kicked off their headlong run toward the state's Republican primary.

Though recent polls show the former president with a commanding, double-digit lead, there are still many in the state who believe voters in the first-in-the-South primary could live up to their reputation for doing the unexpected.

These same individuals note that until all the voters make their preferences known on Feb. 24, Haley still has a credible, though difficult pathway to an actual victory in the contest.

Early voting in the GOP primary began at 8:30 a.m. Monday morning across the state. It will continue through Saturday, and then resume next Tuesday through Thursday ahead of primary day on Saturday.

It wasn't surprising then to see Trump step up his presence in South Carolina on Saturday, holding the first of two campaign rallies scheduled over the next five days.

Trump's venue, the HTC Center, a 3300-seat venue at Coastal Carolina University in Conway, couldn't have been a better choice.

More than 50% of voters in Horry County, South Carolina, which encompasses not just the city of Conway but also nearby Myrtle Beach, voted for Trump in the 2020 presidential election, and as evidenced by the large crowd that greeted his arrival Saturday, their ardor is undiminished.

Numerous reports pegged the number of people waiting outside, unable to get in, as at least equal to the number inside.

Some of the less fortunate said they even had tickets to the event, but failed to make it inside despite lining up before 7 a.m. for the early afternoon event.

Trump acknowledged the large crowd of supporters by briefly stepping away from campaign staff and security personnel to give a small, impromptu speech in the parking lot, before disappearing inside for the main event.

Once inside, Trump made news with the kind of controversial, off-hand remarks that are both his brand and fodder for reduction to sound bites on the evening news.

“Where’s her husband? Oh, he’s away,” Trump said of Haley’s husband Maj. Michael Haley, a commissioned officer with the South Carolina National Guard.

“What happened to her husband? Where is he? He’s gone,” Trump said.

Haley, who was kicking off a multi-day bus tour of the state at the time, responded immediately during a stop in Lexington, South Carolina.

“Donald Trump had a rally today and in that rally, he mocked my husband’s military service,” Haley said. “I will say this, Donald. If you have something to say, don’t say it behind my back, get on a debate stage and say it to my face.”

Michael Haley, as his spouse has reminded attendees over the past six weeks, at campaign events in Iowa, New Hampshire and now, South Carolina, is currently in the middle of a year-long deployment with the 218th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade in the Horn of Africa.

Haley went on to defend her husband’s military service, noting that his deployment has been a family sacrifice.

“We can’t have someone that sits and mocks our men and women trying to protect America. It’s a pattern of chaos,” she said.

She also used Trump remarks to again call for mental competency tests for politicians over the age of 75.

“I have long talked about the fact that we need to have mental competency tests for anyone over the age of 75. Donald Trump claims that he would pass that. Maybe he would, maybe he wouldn’t. But if you mock the service of a combat veteran, you

don't  
deserve  
a  
driver's  
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let alone  
being

Republican presidential candidate former President  
Donald Trump speaks at a Get Out The Vote rally at  
Coastal Carolina University in Conway, S.C., Saturday,  
Feb. 10, 2024. (AP Photo/Manuel Balce Ceneta)

president of the United States.”

Nikki Haley wasn't the only member of the family to respond to Trump's attack. In an unverified account on X, Michael Haley posted a photo of a wolf with a caption that read, “The difference between humans and animals? Animals would never allow the dumbest ones to lead the pack.”

Candidate Haley continued to ratchet up the pressure on Monday, releasing a new digital **ad** that her campaign said “highlights” Trump's “long record of disrespecting veterans and mocking military members and their families.”

Most of the assertions in the advertisement harken back to September 2020 reporting in the Atlantic which detailed dismissive statements Trump is alleged to have made about the late Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., who had been a Vietnam prisoner

of war, and former President George H.W. Bush, who was shot down as a Navy pilot in World War II.

The article also reported that during a visit to France in 2018 for the centennial anniversary of the end of World War I, Trump allegedly called Marines who died at Belleau Wood “suckers” and fallen soldiers at Aisne-Marne American Cemetery “losers.”

But the remarks about Haley’s husband weren’t the only troublesome statements Trump made during his speech.

At another point he sought to highlight his skills as a negotiator while also reaffirming his belief that the United States’ support for NATO is overly burdensome and drains the nation’s financial and other resources.

The same message appears on his campaign website.

Onstage in Conway, Trump revived an anecdote in which he told European leaders they had to “pay up” the money they owed the 75-year-old military alliance if they wanted continued support from the United States.

The controversy isn’t actually over unpaid debts to NATO, but rather over the fact that some NATO members are spending below an unofficial commitment to devote 2% of their economic output on defense.

In Trump’s telling on Saturday, the former president said the leader of “a big country” asked him what would happen “If we don’t pay and we’re attacked by Russia.”

“Will you protect us?” the leader purportedly asked.

Trump said he asked whether the leader’s country was one of those delinquent in their payments. The answer was yes.

“Then no, I would not protect you,” Trump recalled telling the individual. “In fact, I would encourage them to do whatever the hell they want. You’ve got to pay. You gotta pay your bills.”

This time, it wasn’t Haley, but the White House that felt the need to respond immediately to Trump’s comments.

In a statement, White House spokesman Andrew Bates called the former president’s statements “appalling and unhinged” and said that they endangered “American national security, global stability and our economy at home.”

“Rather than calling for wars and promoting deranged chaos, President Biden will continue to bolster American leadership and stand up for our national security interests — not against them,” Bates said.

Trump’s next rally is scheduled for Wednesday night at the Charleston Area Convention Center in North Charleston.

While all this was going on, Haley began her cross-state bus tour, a multi-stop event through the heart of South Carolina, that will continue through Tuesday.

Though Haley’s crowds were harder to quantify, being spread out over several locations over a series of days — her message was largely upbeat, forward-looking and not a little cheeky — for instance, her campaign team handed out mental competency tests ahead of her first stop, in Newberry, South Carolina on Saturday.

But her speeches were soon filled with responses to the former president’s latest inflammatory comments.

At a Monday morning appearance in Laurens, South Carolina, Haley told several hundred attendees that she felt Trump’s



performance on Saturday was “unbecoming of a president” and said his comments on NATO made her “sick to my stomach.”

How all of this is playing out on a granular level is still hard to say. A canvas of county Republican committee websites in South Carolina shows that some local committees — particularly in the hardcore Republican upstate — are actively playing a role in the Trump campaign effort.

A notice on one website states the Trump campaign “has asked for volunteers” to man phone banks and go door-knocking on its behalf through the election.

Similarly, the Horry County GOP has featured Trump-centric events on its website for weeks.

Other county committees are staying neutral. Among the most important to the outcome of the race is the Richland County Republican Committee, whose jurisdiction encompasses the state capital of Columbia.

“This is where we’ve charted our path,” Tyson Grinstead, chairman of the Richland County Republican Committee, told The Well News over the weekend.’

“We’ve definitely put out information for both candidates, and we’ve got folks in my precinct who are leaders for both campaigns ... but as a group we felt strongly that we have to be a little bit more ... unbiased ... because we represent the state capital and we’ve got folks on both sides,” he said.

Grinstead, who served as Sen. Lindsay Graham’s political director from 2013 through 2015, said if there’s one factor that has defined the Trump/Haley race locally, it’s that “we know both candidates really well.”

“We’ve had President Trump in South Carolina a good bit — he spoke at our Silver Elephant fundraising dinner in August — he’s had several rallies here since, and the folks who are activists and party leaders and the like have obviously worked on his campaigns in 2016 and 2020,” he continued.

“And of course, the same sense of familiarity extends to Gov. Haley. She was our governor. I think we had eight years of positive experience with her in the governor’s mansion. And a lot of folks who are active in campaigns know her personally and know her well.”

A Nikki Haley sign near the battery in the historic section of Charleston, a city she has to do well in to close the gap with former President Donald Trump in the S.C. GOP primary. (Photo by Dan McCue)

Because Richland County doesn’t endorse a nominee ahead of the primary, county leaders here are a bit more passive in their collection of electoral intelligence than other committees in the state might be at this point.

“We are obviously going to events for both candidates and seeing who’s there and so forth but at this point, it’s really the



candidates and their campaigns who are capturing that information,” he said.

“Once we have a nominee, when all that is said and done and we’re looking toward the convention and the general election, then you’ll see us far more engaged,” he continued.

“But what I can tell you is that we’ve experienced a real uptick in the turnout for our monthly meetings recently ... with the people turning up running from those who are always active with the campaigns to those who are only now getting involved for the first time.”

Grinstead said at this point in the campaign both the Trump and Haley teams are “activating” their coalitions for that one last, vital push to primary day.

“I can tell you, based on my background with Sen. Graham, that this is the time where you are going to be going to the phones and going door-to-door, trying to solidify your support. I mean, just yesterday I had someone knock on my door for Nikki Haley,” he said.

“The events today [Saturday] are another part of that. Trump’s starting to have his big rallies in the state. Rep. Elise Stefanik, R-N.Y., is also in South Carolina this weekend, campaigning on Trump’s behalf,” he continued. “And I think what you can expect to see over the next two weeks is events getting more frequent and crowds getting bigger.”

One lingering question, of course, is why Haley, who most in-state Republicans agree was a successful governor, continues to trail Trump in the polls by so much.

Grinstead’s theory is that though Trump has now been out of office for nearly four years, in many GOP voters’ minds, he’s

still, almost, an incumbent.

“So that makes it a tough race. And then, on top of that, Trump won big in Iowa. He won big in New Hampshire, so he’s coming into South Carolina with a lot of momentum,” he said.

“That said, I also don’t think the margin in the polls is any indication of negativity being felt toward Gov. Haley. I think people here still like her. And I think they’ve been happy that both she and, before he pulled out, Sen. Tim Scott, ran for president.

“South Carolina is a focus of the presidential politics that happens every four years, and we are glad that we are and we want to keep it that way,” Grinstead said. “At the same time, this is a tough race for the governor. Like I said, she’s running against an individual who is pretty much the incumbent of the party.”

Grinstead is among those who believe if Haley’s going to do well in South Carolina and have any momentum going into the Super Tuesday contests, she needs to do “really well” in certain key Palmetto State counties.

In addition to his own Richland County, Grinstead also pointed to Charleston and Beauford and “other counties making up the South Carolina Lowcountry,” as well as the suburbs along the top tier of the state, near Charlotte, as places where Haley needs to pull big numbers on primary day.

“Essentially what I’m saying is she needs to dramatically offset the vote coming out of the Upstate, in places like Greenville and Spartanburg, where voters tend to be social conservatives and typically make up — if memory serves — between 10% and 15% of the Republican primary vote,” he said.

“So you have a big number of voters in the Upstate, and they’re voters who have supported people like former Sen. Rick Santorum, R-Pa., and former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, in the past, not to mention President Trump, who did really well there in 2016,” he said.

“Now, Richland County and Charleston County are a little different,” Grinstead said. “These are places Sen. Marco Rubio did well back in 2016. The Republicans in these areas, I think, are more business-oriented than their counterparts in other parts of the states.

“I wouldn’t say more moderate, necessarily, but their brand of Republicanism has more of a pro-business focus than that in other parts of the state, and those are the voters Gov. Haley needs to do well with,” he said.

One theory Grinstead rejected was that Democrats or independents might vote in the primary to try to skew the outcome against Trump.

South Carolina doesn’t have its voters registered by party affiliation and the bar for opting to vote in one party primary or another is exceedingly low. On top of that, only 5% of registered voters participated in the Democratic primary, presumably leaving many Democrats and independents with a vote to cast if they so choose.

“I think that’s overblown, to be honest,” Grinstead said. “I mean, there are some people who will do that, but at the same time, I personally know a few folks who are self-described Democrats who have told me they plan to vote for President Trump. As a result, I don’t think their participation, to whatever extent it occurs, will change the outcome materially.”

Overall, Grinstead said, the run-up to the South Carolina primary has been a little quieter this year than in past election cycles.

“I think that is attributable to two things,” he said. “One is, I think people have become attuned to paying attention to their favorite media source, and so candidates don’t feel as compelled to launch widespread media campaigns with lots of commercials and the like.

“The other thing, as we’ve already discussed, is we already know these candidates. Neither of them has to make a huge effort to introduce themselves to South Carolina. Most voters in South Carolina understand who they are and what they are for and against.

“What that means is, this race is really a matter of turning out your vote, and reminding people that the primaries are coming up on Feb. 24,” Grinstead said.

*Dan can be reached at [dan@thewellnews.com](mailto:dan@thewellnews.com) and at <https://twitter.com/DanMcCue>*