



A person holds a donation flyer at a caucus site to choose a Republican presidential candidate at Fellows Elementary School in Ames, Iowa, Jan. 15, 2024. (OSV News/Reuters/Cheney Orr)



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Former President Donald Trump had reason to sleep well Monday night. Trump voters in Iowa proved that they are resilient and resistant. Undeterred by the subzero weather, they turned out for their candidate, handing him a [majority of the vote with 51%](#), besting [George W. Bush's 41% in 2000](#) as the highest percentage of votes for a nonincumbent.

Trump's voters, indeed the Iowa GOP as a whole, are also fact-resistant: [Sixty-six percent of Iowa caucusgoers said](#) they did not think Joe Biden won the presidency legitimately. No one thought to include a polling question on whether GOP voters think the Apollo 11 moon landing was faked. The results might have been instructive.

The point about Trump being a "nonincumbent" was made on all the cable networks. The most obvious advantage of incumbency is name recognition, but Trump had that in 2016, too. He certainly started this year's campaign with 100% name recognition — and not just his name. People know what he stands for and what he doesn't, or at least what he says he stands for.

That was the flipside of his victory: Almost half of the GOP electorate, knowing all that, chose someone else.

Unlike 2016, when Trump did not put a lot of organization into Iowa, counting on ads and celebrity, this year his campaign [had a strong ground game](#).

Former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, who only rose in the Iowa polls late in the race, did not have such a strong organization and had trouble getting her people to turn out in such miserable weather. Her third-place finish robs her of the narrative that she is the one who is catching Trump.

It is difficult to see a way forward for her or Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, whose second-place finish with 21% of the vote gives him no momentum either. He frequently touted the fact that he went to all 99 counties in the Hawkeye State and he also lost all 99 counties.

Entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy came in a distant fourth, left the race and [announced his candidacy](#) for secretary of transportation by endorsing Trump.

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The analysts at MSNBC, which included no Republicans, made much of the fact that 32% of Iowa Republicans said they thought Trump would be "unfit" for office if he were convicted of a crime. Most of those people will end up voting for Trump if he secures the nomination, because they also think Biden is "unfit" for office because of his policies. That's why they're Republicans.

That said, if similar percentages emerge in swing states, the Democrats are well-advised to focus on securing a sliver of them. Slivers might make the difference in Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin this year, as they did in 2020 and 2016.

Fifty-one percent of the electorate self-identified as "very conservative" according to the entrance polls. Another 36% said they were "somewhat conservative." Only 11% considered themselves "moderate."

The results, then, are a sad commentary on the state of the conservative movement in this country. President Ronald Reagan was possessed of a sunny disposition at almost all times. If you combine Trump's and DeSantis' numbers, one friend texted me last night, 72% of Iowa voters selected "mean."

Evangelical Christians have traditionally picked the winners of the Iowa caucuses: Gov. Mike Huckabee in 2008, Sen. Rick Santorum in 2012 and Sen. Ted Cruz in 2016. This year, they broke for Trump.

"Cruz was the favorite of voters in the most evangelical areas eight years ago. The northwest quadrant of the state was Cruz's strongest and Trump's weakest," [The Washington Post reported](#). "This year, Trump won some of his best results there, matching the much less evangelical region in the northeast. Overall, Trump improved by 35 percentage points in the most evangelical counties, one of his biggest gains."

Ryan Burge, the best demographic analyst of religion in the country, highlighted the fact that Iowa is [not a particularly religious state](#), and more counties have a plurality of Catholics than any other religion.

Christian evangelicals, however, are disciplined and organized in ways mainstream religions aren't. That is why they have such influence.



Republican presidential candidate and former President Donald Trump participates in a Fox News Channel town hall ahead of the caucus vote in Des Moines, Iowa, Jan. 10. (OSV News/Reuters/Scott Morgan)

Looking at what issues caucusgoers cited, immigration took the top slot, with 40% identifying it as the most important issue. That is a big win for Fox News, whose obsession with the immigration story is nonstop. Fox's fixation is done for ratings, not because it lays the groundwork for any kind of policy solution to the intractable problem.

The fact that many migrants are dehumanized doesn't seem to bother the Fox hosts. Now we know it doesn't bother a plurality of GOP voters either.

The economy was the second most important issue for voters according to the entrance polls, with 33% citing it as principally motivating their vote. Only 11% chose abortion, the same as listed foreign policy. Fifty-eight percent of Iowa GOP voters indicated they would support a nationwide ban on all or most abortions.

Those twin facts point to the conundrum both parties face on abortion: It is not a huge motivator for voters, but both parties have been drawn to the extremes because candidates need to win those who are highly motivated by the issue in the primaries.

The candidates now head to New Hampshire. The Granite state often rejects the candidate chosen by Iowans, but unless Trump slips on a banana peel, it is difficult to see the others overtaking him. What realistic path exists for Haley?

That said, candidates do not drop out of the race when there is no longer a realistic path. They drop out when they no longer have the money to rent the campaign plane the next day.

Further, there are 91 banana peels in Trump's path, the indictments he is facing for a variety of crimes, from mishandling top-secret government documents to subverting the Constitution.

The fact he garnered 51% of the vote in Iowa wasn't shocking or surprising. The fact voters can't see Trump for the charlatan he is speaks precisely to their alienation from, and distrust of, the typical organs of democracy: fair elections, an aggressive media, vigorous debate among the candidates, distinctions between facts and opinions. Trump has played on that alienation and distrust to create a cult around himself.

If the Democrats can't figure out a way to appeal to working-class voters before November, the Trump cult might get within striking distance of the White House. And that is a thing to be dreaded.

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