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Can nothing break Donald Trump's surreal hold over the GOP?

4-minute read

Carl Golden Special to the USA TODAY Network

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When America went to sleep on the night of Aug. 23 at the conclusion of the Republican presidential candidates' debate, the Real Clear Politics polling averages put former president Donald Trump at 55 points, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis at 14 points and the rest of the field barely out of the starting gate at less than 1% to 7%.

When the sun rose the following morning, Trump, under arrest, was on his way to surrendering at the Fulton County, Georgia, jail to be fingerprinted and to sit for a mugshot in response to a 41-count indictment alleging criminal racketeering conduct to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election.

The Real Clear Politics polling average on that morning had Trump at 53 and DeSantis at 14.

A week previously, the averages put Trump at 52%, DeSantis at 12% and the rest of the field still at the starting line with between 0 and 8%.

It showed also that Trump remained in a statistical tie with President Biden in a 2024 hypothetical matchup.

In short, nothing had changed in what has become arguably the most surreal state of American politics in history.

With a consistent gap of between 40 and 50 points between him and his closest rival, Trump skipped the much heralded debate but, in his absence, his shadow hovered over the proceedings and he received nearly as great a level of media attention as the eight candidates on the stage. The next debate is scheduled for Sept. 27 at the Ronald Regan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, Calif., and he'll likely ignore that one as well.

Four criminal indictments do not deter GOP fanatics

His staying power and the loyalty he receives from his party base is unprecedented. Through four criminal indictments — two Federal and two state — lodged against him since April, his support has not only remained unshakeable but has increased in some instances.

At its most charitable, the performance of DeSantis, his closest rival, has been disappointing, a victim of unrealistic expectations, a testy relationship with the media, a multi-turnover in campaign staff and mistakes and missteps normally committed by untried and untested candidates on the large national stage.

The remainder of the field has failed for months to break from single digit support. Former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, for instance, began his campaign with a singular focus on being the leading anti-Trump candidate, convinced that he'd found the straight lane to his nomination ran directly through the former president.

Instead of an unobstructed path, Christie is trapped in a cul-de-sac, going around and around while hurling increasingly vitriolic and personal insults at Trump to little avail.

Entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy — the newcomer in the field and the only one with no electoral experience — came across in the debate as an over-caffeinated hamster setting a land speed record in his exercise wheel while mounting a ringing defense of Trump and his Administration. His latest polling average stood at seven.

Former vice president Mike Pence has joined former North Carolina governor Nikki Haley and North Carolina Sen. Tim Scott as nearly interchangeable parts with support holding steady at between 2% and 5%.

If, as the old saying goes, “It ain’t over till the fat lady sings,” she’s already warming up her vocal cords to serenade former Arkansas governor Asa Hutchinson and current North Dakota governor Doug Burgum, both of whom have struggled to reach or break 1% and who may fail to qualify for the California debate.

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Are Republicans simply bracing for the inevitable?

As troubling as it may be to many in the Republican establishment who fear another Trump candidacy, the sense of inevitability — particularly in light of the failure of criminal indictments to

pierce his armor — has crept in.

Decisive victories in the Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire primary in January — he holds commanding leads in both — may seal the deal for Trump and place the nomination beyond the grasp of his competition.

The window for coalescing behind an alternative to Trump is closing steadily and, by the time the snow flies in early 2024, may slam shut directly on the fingers of the party establishment.

Bringing Trump to trial guarantees years of litigation, absent plea bargains or early dismissals before trial — both of which appear unlikely at this stage.

The primary season and general election campaigning will play out against a complex and, to the overwhelming number of voters, a bewildering background of motions, hearings, legal briefs, arguments over arcane points of law and, in the event of convictions, appeals to higher courts and potentially to the U. S. Supreme Court.

Prosecutors have already begun to jostle for position as the first to go to trial and capture the initial surge of media attention for placing the ex-president in the witness chair.

The scheduling contest along with the size and complexity of the cases has created the chaos and tumult in which Trump has always thrived as the center of attention.

He's taken advantage of the prosecutorial scramble to relentlessly drive his narrative of an out of control group of government bloodhounds ganging up on him and singling him out as a political opponent who must be destroyed by whatever means possible.

That his rhetoric strikes a responsive chord is undeniable.

There is no more vivid example of the depth and strength of his support than his team's immediately seizing the mugshot taken at his Fulton County appearance, slapping the scowling image on T-shirts, hoodies and coffee mugs and reaping \$4.1 million in sales revenue in 24 hours.

Novice lawyers have historically been advised the following: "When the law is on your side, pound the law. When the facts are on your side, pound the facts. When neither is on your side, pound the table."

There is no more accomplished a table pounder than Donald Trump.

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