**DeSantis is hoping Iowa evangelicals can make his campaign born again**

[**https://www.politico.com/news/2023/07/13/desantis-iowa-evangelicals-00105994**](https://www.politico.com/news/2023/07/13/desantis-iowa-evangelicals-00105994)

The Florida governor is scrambling to turn around a campaign beset by lagging poll numbers and increasingly negative headlines.



For Ron DeSantis, the pressure to find momentum anywhere is growing. Though Donald Trump remains far ahead in polling in Iowa, people in DeSantis’ orbit view the state as an opportunity. | Scott Olson/Getty Images

By [**SALLY GOLDENBERG**](https://www.politico.com/staff/sally-goldenberg)

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As Ron DeSantis loses believers in the Beltway, he finds faith among some Iowa evangelical leaders.

The Florida governor and his super PAC have been feverishly working the religious circuit in the nation’s first caucus state, trying to capitalize on Donald Trump’s [unleashing of vitriol](https://www.politico.com/news/2023/07/11/five-laps-ahead-trump-thumbs-his-nose-at-iowa-traditions-00105773) against the state’s Republican governor, Kim Reynolds.

Now DeSantis has his best chance yet to appeal to this influential voting base and try to rewrite his campaign’s narrative amid [lagging poll numbers](https://www.politico.com/news/2023/07/09/desantis-campaign-obstacles-media-00105331) and a barrage of increasingly [negative headlines](https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/ron-desantis-rupert-murdoch-donald-trump-1234786639/). On Friday, he will address The Family Leader, an influential Christian organization that draws a large crowd of conservative pastors.

“I really think America wants to turn the page,” Bob Vander Plaats, CEO of The Family Leader, said in an interview. “If you’re looking for an alternative to Trump, I think Gov. DeSantis is the frontrunner right now.”

For DeSantis, the pressure to find momentum anywhere is growing. Though Trump remains far ahead in polling in Iowa, people in DeSantis’ orbit view the state as an opportunity.

[](https://www.politico.com/news/2023/07/09/desantis-campaign-obstacles-media-00105331)

[**ELECTIONS**](https://www.politico.com/news/2023/07/09/desantis-campaign-obstacles-media-00105331)

[**DeSantis brushes off early campaign obstacles**](https://www.politico.com/news/2023/07/09/desantis-campaign-obstacles-media-00105331)

BY KELLY GARRITY

The super PAC supporting DeSantis’ candidacy, Never Back Down, told POLITICO it has already knocked on 165,273 doors in Iowa. It has spent more than $4 million so far on ads in the state, including [one attacking Trump’s record on abortion](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gaQ_Z443gBA), according to the ad tracking firm AdImpact.

The PAC is also on pace to have five offices throughout the state and has received 5,000 nonbinding commitments from caucus-goers, said a top adviser to the group granted anonymity to freely discuss strategy. Meanwhile, DeSantis and his wife, Casey, have been making frequent trips to Iowa and will stump across the state before The Family Leader summit.

DeSantis isn’t alone as he stumps through Iowa. Former Vice President Mike Pence announced his presidential candidacy there and, like other candidates, has been campaigning throughout the Hawkeye State. Despite his public criticism of Reynolds, the popular governor, Trump rallied supporters in Iowa last week. And while no single entity has spent as much as Never Back Down, Sen. Tim Scott and his super PAC have collectively shelled out nearly $6 million on ads.

“The beauty of Iowa is … you can actually go on the ground and sense a trend before it picks up in the polls,” the adviser said. “Ron DeSantis has great favorables in Iowa right now, … and he still has a chance to tell his story.”

Inside what is expected to be a packed convention center in Des Moines on Friday, DeSantis will be interviewed by ousted FOX News anchor Tucker Carlson. And while he won’t have the dais to himself — Pence, Scott, Nikki Haley, Vivek Ramaswamy and Asa Hutchinson will all take a turn on stage — DeSantis will appear as the decided frontrunner in the absence of Trump. The former president leads Iowa polls by [double digits](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2024/president/ia/2024_iowa_republican_presidential_caucus-8164.html) and opted to skip the assembly.

DeSantis could hardly have asked for a more favorable setting.

The Florida governor will field questions from a well-known TV personality whose [disdain for Trump is well-documented](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/08/business/media/tucker-carlson-trump.html). And in front of an audience of like-minded conservatives who take seriously their [first-in-the-nation role](https://www.politico.com/news/2023/07/08/iowa-gop-presidential-caucuses-00105309), he has an audience that may be more receptive to his argument of electability — albeit one weakened by [his refusal to acknowledge Trump lost his 2020 reelection](https://www.politico.com/news/2023/05/15/trump-2020-election-desantis-bind-00096852).

Vander Plaats said he prays for Trump but voiced doubt that he can win the general election. And he said he plans to make a primary endorsement at some point — but not before the contenders pay homage to his organization.

Official support from Vander Plaats — an attainable feat for DeSantis — would come with the security of a strong track record. The organization’s leader backed Republicans who went on to win the Iowa caucuses in the competitive 2008, 2012 and 2016 primaries. All three — Mike Huckabee, Rick Santorum and Sen. Ted Cruz — failed to clinch their party’s nomination, but their early success in Iowa underscores the influence of Vander Plaats and the evangelical movement.

And within that movement, church leaders — [if not the rank-and-file](https://static.foxnews.com/foxnews.com/content/uploads/2023/05/Fox_May-19-22-2023_Cross-Tabs_May-24-Release.pdf) — are welcoming DeSantis.

“Within the church world, there are many that do like DeSantis quite a bit,” said Mike Kalstrup, a pastor of Fellowship Church in Oakland, Iowa. “My guess is that he’s probably going to have a pretty strong showing in Iowa.”

Kalstrup highlighted DeSantis’ similarities with Reynolds, noting the two “are espousing some sensibility. Within our community, that goes a long way.”

Several pastors cited the importance of funding for children to attend nonpublic schools, which DeSantis has championed by [expanding Florida’s voucher program](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2023/03/28/desantis-signs-floridas-biggest-school-voucher-program-expansion/11556334002/) and exacerbating his ongoing feud with the teachers’ union.

And then there’s abortion.

Both DeSantis and Reynolds took aggressive stances on abortion following the Supreme Court’s overturning last year of *Roe v. Wade*. As he wound down Florida’s legislative session this year, DeSantis signed into law a six-week abortion ban he’s calling the “Heartbeat Bill” — akin to a [measure Reynolds is supporting this week in her home state](https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/politics/2023/07/11/iowa-legislature-special-session-six-week-abortion-ban-fetal-heartbeat-pregnancy-republicans-gop-law/70398531007/). While strict abortion measures are unpopular among general election voters, DeSantis’ stance has appealed to Iowa’s evangelical pastors, several said in interviews.

“Life is the most important thing, and if you don’t get that one right, why would you get anything else right?” said Lance Fricke, pastor of Triumphant Church in Independence, Iowa. Fricke, who lamented the “vitriol” toward Trump this cycle, nevertheless predicted a strong showing for DeSantis among evangelicals in Iowa.

Monte Knudsen, a pastor at Faith Christian Outreach Church in Mount Pleasant, Iowa, compared DeSantis to Pence — the former vice president and evangelical who hasn’t broken out of the bottom tier this election — saying he would “have greater confidence in DeSantis because of his track record.”

DeSantis’ team stepped up its criticism of Trump this week, lacing into his approach to campaigning in Iowa.

“[Trump] isn’t organizing in the state. They don’t believe in that. They didn’t do it in 2016,” when Cruz won the Iowa caucuses, the Never Back Down adviser said. “They don’t appear to be taking the Iowa caucus process seriously.”

“You’re starting to see an erosion there and his behavior matches it,” the aide added.

[**The GOP’s 2024 primary field: How they win, how they lose**](https://www.politico.com/www.politico.com/interactives/republican-candidates-2024-gop-presidential-hopefuls-list)

BY STEVEN SHEPARD

In response, Trump spokesperson Steven Cheung attributed Trump’s absence at The Family Leader summit to a “scheduling conflict” and added: “The president will be in Florida this weekend headlining the premiere national young voter conference with Turning Point Action, while DeSantis is nowhere to be found.”

A DeSantis spokesperson, when asked for comment, referred to the candidate’s recent interview with the Christian Broadcasting Network in which he laid out his case for winning over evangelical voters. The Florida governor noted his landslide re-election victory last year was bolstered by support from Sunshine State evangelicals, and cited his record on priorities for that community, including the state’s six-week abortion ban and increase in state-funded vouchers for non-public schools.

“I don’t think there’s any elected official in the country who’s not only stood up for the values that we all share, but has actually beat the left back on these things,” DeSantis said. “We’re winning in Florida against gender ideology. ... So I don’t think there’s been anyone that’s really been delivering on these key issues more consistently than me.”

DeSantis, who is Catholic, does not have the same personal connection to evangelicals as Pence or Scott. But he has spoken more about religion of late, [telling the Christian Broadcasting Network of his desire to have met Jesus’ disciples](https://www2.cbn.com/news/us/ron-desantis-talks-faith-family-cbn-exclusive-were-christ-centered-household).

In a [Fox News poll in May](https://static.foxnews.com/foxnews.com/content/uploads/2023/05/Fox_May-19-22-2023_Cross-Tabs_May-24-Release.pdf), DeSantis was lagging far behind Trump among GOP primary voters nationally who identify as born-again or evangelical Christians — 59 percent to 16 percent. But among some evangelical leaders in Iowa, his message appears to be resonating.

“My pulse on Christian evangelical voters is that they’re split somewhere between Trump and DeSantis, and in my circles, people are leaning more toward DeSantis because he seems to be more authentically conservative,” said Mike Augsburger, lead pastor of Soteria in Des Moines. “If DeSantis can get his message out there, I think he can be a draw for evangelical voters.”