

[Transcript] The Ezra Klein Show / Matter of Opinion: A Look at the 2024 G.O.P. Primary Field

Hey, it's Ezra. I know we've had a couple of episodes off recently, turns out moving across the country with kids is rough on the podcast schedule. Today, we have, though, a show from our friends at Matter of Opinion, which is a new time show where some of my columnist colleagues discuss the news of the day. It is great. I have been listening to it avidly. I hope you do too. You should subscribe if you haven't. But the show from them today is on the Republican 2024 field and the way it is growing and burgeoning and changing. As I mentioned, this was taped shortly before DeSantis's troubled Twitter rollout of his campaign. But nevertheless, I think actually the way they end up talking about him shed some light on why he is stumbling a bit out of the gate. So I enjoyed this a lot. I hope you do too. We'll be back with a much more normal schedule in the coming days.

What nickname do you think Trump would give to us? Do you think you'd married a nickname, Carlos? Maybe a little Carly or something like that.

He would play off like Little Marco, Little Carlo.

Lazy, Lazy Lazada.

Yeah.

Does he have a name for you, Ross?

I don't think I have a nickname. I do have, I wrote a column after he won the Republican nomination that said like, you know, what's the biggest thing you got wrong in the last year? I saw Trump couldn't win the Republican nomination and he proved me wrong. But I still don't think he'll be president. And he, somebody cut out the column for it and he like scribbled on it like, I'm going to prove you wrong again, sign Donald Trump. I, my wife actually, actually framed it.

From New York Times Opinion, I'm Lydia Polgrain. I'm Michelle Cottle.

I'm Ross Douthat.

I'm Carlos Lazada.

And this is Matter of Opinion.

We may be 77 weeks out from the election, my God, but we are back in the presidential election cycle.

There are already half a dozen Republican candidates who've declared and Florida governor Ron DeSantis is expected to announce any day now.

What do these candidates say about the party's hope of winning in a post-Trump world?

So before we dive in, I just wanted to sort of frame things by saying that this last weekend did kind of feel like an inflection point, even 7,700 weeks out or whatever we are, because first we'd just seen Trump steamroll his way through a CNN town hall, which sort of brought back fond memories of 2016. And then he and DeSantis were both supposed to head to Iowa for competing events. And Trump canceled his rally over threats or supposed threats of severe weather. And then the storm didn't materialize and DeSantis headed for the area where Trump

was supposed to appear and basically showed him up with a kind of impromptu Iowa rally. And it actually kind of felt like a real campaign moment rather than the kind of virtual, you know, Twitter-based shadow boxing. And it was also, I mean, let's be honest, one of the first really positive headlines that DeSantis has generated in the last couple of months when really most

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of the coverage has been about his polling sag and Trump's return to double-digit leads. And so maybe we should start there. Before we launch into DeSantis, which I totally want to do. You're just, you're chomping at the thing. You've got DeSantis mania.

I want to go back to the 77 weeks thing, right? It's awesome to talk about the Republican field for 2024. I want to know what everyone thinks about that. But at this stage, is it really possible to have any meaningful sense of how things are developing? In 2015, at this point, exactly, Scott Walker, Jeb Bush, and Marco Rubio were like the big thing. At this point in 2007, Rudy Giuliani was the man, right? I remember it well. Do we think there's something unique about this race, i.e. Trump, that makes things clearer and different 77 weeks out?

I think what's unique is you have a one-term defeated president who's trying to come back and that one-term defeated president is Donald Trump. And of course, in 2016, you had a wide open primary.

Now you have a sort of semi-open primary, right? Because there is this kind of quasi-incumbent who's actually not a current incumbent, which is a very unusual dynamic.

It's a very unusual situation, in part because Donald Trump turned the Republican party into a cult of personality. And it's hard to kind of move on from that. And that's what you're seeing.

And I do think it's a little early to kind of know these things go up and down and everybody can say, well, it's over. DeSantis has blown his moment. But there's a lot of folks who are still thinking about piling in. There's a lot of donors and even base voters who are very twitchy about kind of where this is all going. There is a lot of Trump fatigue. Trump fatigue is real. We're still looking at will Mike Pence jump in any day now? There's a lot going on.

And you've got to let this play out. Yeah, I'd love for somebody to make the case that DeSantis hasn't peaked. One sign is that Trump has yet to settle on a truly winning nickname for him.

I don't think Meatball Ron really does it. I like putting fingers. I think Meatball Ron is actually the winner. I think it taps into latent, mild, but real anti-Italian prejudice in a way that... What? No, I'm actually, I'm only 50% kidding here. I think it is more effective than DeSantis. A word lots of people don't even recognize that doesn't even apply really.

You know, Mike Pence is Sanctimonious. Ron DeSantis isn't. But yeah, I... But I really, I want to talk about like who DeSantis is and what he stands for. And I'm curious,

I mean, Carlos, you know, God bless, you've done a lot of reading of DeSantis.

Are you saying you haven't all read The Courage to Be Free Florida's Blueprint for America's Revival?

I've witnessed Florida's blueprint. I don't know why. I have eyes to see and ears to hear.

I mean, so I watched the speech that he gave in Iowa. And what's interesting is that he has a real script because a lot of it is verbatim from The Courage to Be Free. Florida's Blueprint for America's Revival, hashtag trademark. Yeah. So for better or for worse, you know, it's got...

What is it? It's, you know, the anti-woke, anti-DEI, anti-Disney stuff, which has become kind of like standard DeSantis, you know, stump speech to the extent that he's doing stump speeches.

His case against Trump specifically, I think, is more interesting. It's kind of stylistic, it's tactical. It's not super substantive. It's what passes for subtle in American politics now, right? So he stresses that, and he did this in the speech and in the book, that government is not about entertaining or about building your social media brand, you know, hint, hint. He says the key is to expand the base, not just appeal to current Republican voters, hint, hint, and to

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present a vision of the future, not wallow in the past, i.e. 2020, hint, hint. He doesn't mention January 6th at all in the book, but he does say that executives should govern within the confines of the constitutional system. He criticizes elected officials who want to perpetuate themselves in office. Again, none of this while mentioning Trump. So he's got the talking points down. I think the case he's making is like, yeah, I'm as much of a culture warrior as the next guy, but I'm a competent cultural warrior. Well, that speaks directly to what appeals to a lot of donors and non-Trump Republicans is that he is Trump, but not crazy. I mean, that's always been his selling point. So he is just as conservative and just as anti-woke, which is also in these polls, something that is very big for Republican primary voters. They want somebody who's anti-woke, but he's not a lunatic. And so he's not going to wind up mired in two impeachments. But how much of a lunacy is also part of the appeal? I mean, for some people, that is part of the appeal. And my question with DeSantis has always been, can you be a demagogue if you're completely anti-charismatic? Well, part of the question though too, right, is that, yes, in certain ways he is casting himself as the competent Trump, the guy who fights the liberals, fights the woke, fights the progressives and actually wins. But then there are other ways in which so far he's not Trump, I'm stealing this from someone on Twitter. So apologies to whoever said this, but there's a way in which he's sort of like trying to be Ted Cruz, except not Ted Cruz, right? Because if you look back at 2016, what was Ted Cruz's strategy? Ted Cruz's strategy was to be just as sort of vehement as Trump in going after the liberal media and progressives and cultural liberals and so on, to win Iowa by rallying social and religious conservatives. And this is clearly part of the DeSantis strategy. He is somewhat to Trump's right on abortion, and that will play better in Iowa than it will in some other states. And if you look at what DeSantis has done in Florida, it's been incredibly legislatively successful. But a lot of it is sort of where the conservative movement wants you to be. It's school choice, it's immigration and so on. But I think that's just a big open question, right? Because we watch Cruz run this play against Trump, say, I'm the truer conservative, I can fight the Libs too, and it didn't work. One reason it didn't work though was that the entire Republican establishment hated Ted Cruz and lots of establishment Republicans in the end were like, okay, binary choice, Ted Cruz, Donald Trump, I gotta go with Trump. And DeSantis is, I think, assuming that that will not be the case with him. One difference in the Cruz-DeSantis thing though is that when Cruz was doing this, it was still premised on the notion that eventually Trump's support would collapse. And you had to be ready, waiting to catch all those voters, right? It didn't. And now we know that Trump can win, right? So you can't just sort of sit there in the holding pattern, waiting for the support to collapse, thinking that you have the kind of the proper set of views that will allow you to scoop up those voters. So I don't know that the Cruz playbook then makes a lot of sense. Yes, I think that's right. Precisely because Republican voters have now voted for Trump twice in presidential elections, there is this bond with him even through January 6 and afterward. That kind of full tilt, never Trump kind of line is not what you want to do. And instead, you have to hope that you can say, look, Trump says the election was stolen, but who was in charge when the Democrats were supposedly stealing it? Trump says we should have opened sooner, but who appointed Fauci, right? Trump says

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all these people betrayed him, but who appointed them and see if that works. I don't know if it will, but I think that's the needle thread you have to try. What's interesting, both in the speech and in the book, DeSantis, when he talks about Florida's COVID response and he's bragging about that, the contrast is always with Anthony Fauci. It's never with Donald Trump, right? It's always Fauciism and the iron curtain of Fauciism descended upon America and Florida was West Berlin and all the rest. And it's this attack on the Fauci and dystopia and never on the person who was in charge during the first year of COVID. He's attacking him by proxy, right? It's always this kind of subtlety to it and subtlety doesn't really play so well with primary voters in the GOP. Certainly not at this primary voting base. I mean, that will be one of the interesting things to see as is, as the primary heats up and you have to have head-to-head conflict, how is DeSantis going to thread that? I mean, Trump has said that he will probably skip a couple of primary debates, but he's presumably planning to show up for some of them. Kind of what does that look like? The stage could collapse by that point. There could be so many people on it, but DeSantis won't be able to duck that forever in part because, as you say, you can't just be subtle in this political environment. I mean, I think the other thing is that, you know, aggrieved victimhood is the most comfortable groove for Trump to be in when he's appealing to his base. And I think that there's something very powerful in that, you know, I am your vengeance. I am the person who stands in for you. And I think that if you couple that, and Ross, you alluded to this, to his very careful positioning on abortion, I think he has a very clear sense that that's a vulnerability going into the general election and that that is a place where he has in the past and can continue to in the future, bob and weave and find a way through and perhaps have a shot at, you know, taking back some of the upper Midwest. If abortion is not on the ballot, then his kind of squishy stated opinion of like, we're going to leave it to the states, maybe prevents a huge turnout from coming out in a state like Michigan and gives him a shot at it again. That feels like an unlikely set of events, but the combination of grievance and the ability to kind of hold multiple contradictory views at once feels like very powerful. Well, this is the advantage of being someone who's running on a personality based campaign, as opposed to somebody who's running on principles or policies or ideology. Trump is just all about, I'm a victim, you're a victim, they're out to get us, and that gives him an awful lot of wiggle room. One thing I wanted to get your read on about Rhonda Santis is this weird tick he has. It came up in the Iowa speech, he mentions it twice in the book, where he often talks about how much money he could have made if he had gone on to practice law after Harvard Law School rather than going into the Navy. And I think of that in terms of the sort of discussions about populism and like what lane he represents. Is it because like he said in the Iowa speech, he said, I could have made boatloads of money, but I didn't, you know, I chose to serve. Is that a contrast to Trump being wealthy and not serving? Is that him saying, well, I could be a rich guy too? It's connected to his very kind of conflicted relationship with his education. He talked about his academic pedigree in Iowa, which was super weird. And he often talks about, you know, how he went to Yale and Harvard, but like how much he hated it. You know, he both wants the like elite validation of Yale and Harvard and the street cred.

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Who doesn't? Who hasn't taken that approach in their professional career, Carlos? Come on. But like Trump, you know, Trump straight up brags about Wharton, right? Like, you know, he's made his choice, right? DeSantis is trying to kind of both, both be like, you know, fancy school educated guy and populist. And that just doesn't, it doesn't ring true. You got to pick, you got to pick who you are. You find this with a lot of the top Republicans. I mean, Ted Cruz has the Ivy degrees and he gets to sit around and complain about the elites. I mean, Tom Cotton, a lot of these guys try to do that. And with Trump, I think what worked for him is he grew up rich, but nobody ever respected him. The elites always looked down on him. And he knew that and he carries that bitterness with him. And it is genuine. It is possibly the most genuine thing about Trump is just his aggrieved sourness that nobody ever gave him what he deemed the proper respect. So if you're a DeSantis, you have to kind of figure out how you're going to do that. So you make this big deal about, you know, I could have been one of the elites, but I have shunned them. I have chosen to be among the people. That's as good as he gets. Well, and I think we shouldn't, speaking on behalf of conservatives who have attended Ivy League schools, there's no reason to assume that that actually isn't genuine, that DeSantis doesn't in fact carry both the sort of banal, you know, conservative among the liberal Ivy Leagueers resentment and the more boutique I went into the military rather than going to work for a fancy law firm kind of resentment, like it may not play on the campaign trail. I wouldn't sort of chalk it up to a pose. I think the fact that you sort of notice this suggests to me in this way suggests to me that maybe it's really genuine. Like he really comes up all the time. I think it's definitely genuine. I will just say that there's nothing more elite than getting a very, very high toned education and then going into a prestigious but low paid field like public service. Or podcasting. I want to move on from DeSantis because it turns out there are half a dozen other non-Trump candidates also in the race. So when we come back, we're going to talk about them and what they tell us about the party's attempts to move beyond Trump. And we're back. So I wanted to push the conversation a bit further than Trump and DeSantis because I think there are actually really interesting insights into the Republican party at large that you can get from looking at the rest of the field. And I'm curious, who are the candidates that you're most interested by find that they reveal something rich and interesting about the Republican Party today? Michelle, you're looking at me. You have a thought. I do have a thought. I think Tim Scott for me is what the Republican Party kind of wants itself to be on some level. It's like the only black Republican senator and that gives the party sort of this way to not think of itself as a bunch of grumpy old white racist guys. So he is out there and he's going more for mourning in America than American carnage. And I think this is a very upbeat, diverse, forward-looking way that the Republicans want to see themselves, but it's not going to get him very far. But that's who I find as a window. Well, one big challenge that he has is that he's a favorite son of South Carolina. There's another South Carolinian in the race and that's Nikki Haley, former governor. She also represents diversity. She's Indian-American and also I think does not have a prayer of winning the nomination. I mean, I think Haley and Scott together, I agree with Michelle that they sort of represent a self-image of the Republican Party, especially the pre-Trump Republican Party.

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You know, the Republican Party as the party of free market-oriented, multi-racial optimism about the future of America. The one I'm fascinated by is Mike Pence. I think just the dramatic arc of his story is really interesting. Here's a guy who goes all in with Donald Trump, spends four years giving that like worshipful, resting Pence face gaze, you know, standing behind Donald Trump. Does everything ask of him? Every compromise, you know, makes every excuse. And then at the end, when he doesn't do the one thing that Trump wants him to do, toss out the election results, he's cast out, right, hang Mike Pence. So now what does he want to do? He wants to kind of pretend it never happened, right? He, you know, our colleagues on the new side of the New York Times have reported that he intends to run as an old school pre-Trump Reagan coalition conservative,

right? Pro-free trade, hawkish foreign policy, fiscal conservative, anti-abortion.

It's all the old hits. Right. You can just like erase the blackboard and start again.

His, the guy setting up the pro-Pence Super PAC, Rand Bob Dole's campaign, it just feels Scott, Scott Reed, Scott Reed is back. It feels, it's very retro, you know. The irony, of course, of, you know, bringing back the Reagan coalition being the pitch is twofold, right, that Reagan wouldn't hack it in today's Republican Party. Also, Mike Pence didn't vote for Reagan in 1980. He voted for Jimmy Carter. He mentioned that in his memoir, which I was very, very interested by. These are, I mean, and this is similar to Nikki Haley, right? They're running for the nomination of a Republican Party that has ceased to exist. And maybe they'd be competitive in such a Republican

Party. Pence is sort of the exception to my view that, you know, you can't get that far attacking Donald Trump's fitness because Pence is the guy where the only narrative arc for him that makes any sense is to be the guy who says the Trump administration was great and Trump himself wrecked it. Not that I think it would work and make him the nominee, but if I were advising Pence, I would say, look, DeSantis is trying to just sort of softly usher Trump offstage. You need to actually try and pick a fight and generate drama and out alpha male him, which I do not anticipate happening. But like that, I think is the only thing that would justify a Pence campaign.

Is the argument you're saying that he could say basically everything was fine until January 6th?

Well, yes, that would absolutely be the argument he would make. Yes.

Okay. So Ross, I have a question for you along those lines though. My question with Pence is, what does he offer? I mean, if we're looking at this as a style election, as we were with Trump, it's about being aggrieved and macho and angry. He doesn't really work in that way. And if you're looking at policy, yes, he's very conservative and he wants to double down on things like abortion, which could be a problem in the general. But when you're talking about even the primary, he's not a populist. He's kind of actually going in the exact opposite direction, which I think is a problem for the base. If he's talking about cutting Social Security and Medicare and ramping back on that stuff, who is he talking to? He doesn't have the charisma. He doesn't have the policy. Carlos is the one who is championing the fascination of Pence. I'm not championing his chances. I'm championing the story. I think one challenge is you've got Pence and Haley and Tim Scott right now competing for what probably maxes out at 35 to 40% of the party in a field where DeSantis diminishes. I'm curious, Ross, who are you excited about?

The candidate who's actually closer to blending the Republican Party's multiracial future with the actual mood of conservatives right now is Vivek Ramaswamy. Oh yeah, Ramaswamy head.

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Yes. So he is the one, if you were going for analogies to the last Democratic go-around, it's one part Andrew Yang, one part Pete Buttigieg, right? He is the young, good at talking fast on television sort of policy-oriented to a slightly crankish degree. In some cases, I think he just came out for predicating the right to vote for early 20-somethings on military service. Or a civics test. Or a civics test, right, which sounds like the right-wing version of the kind of ideas that showed up on Andrew Yang's long lists. But he's doing well by the standards of non-Rondesantis, non-Donald Trump candidates in the polls. He demonstrates in part that there's a lot of conservatives who just like seeing conservatives who can go on television and argue with liberal hosts. This is a really important skill set for a Republican primary. He's basically doing a really, really intense anti-wokeness argument that focuses on wokeness's connection to civil rights law, civil rights bureaucracy, sort of diversity, equity, and inclusion enforcement in major corporations as downstream from how the federal government enforces civil rights law. He's certainly much more interesting than what Haley and Scott and Pence are offering to date.

Well, he represents something that feels fresher, right, and more attuned to where the Republican Party actually is. I think that it taps into the grievance thing that we were talking about with Donald Trump earlier, that implicit, and it should be said that Ramaswamy is a very, very rich man and has hundreds of millions of dollars from a biotech company, I believe, also went to Yale like Ron DeSantis. He's a rich guy, but he's a rich guy that was not born with a silver spoon in his mouth and can credit himself for being a very successful businessman. I think that his pitch about socially responsible investing and DEI and all this kind of stuff goes into that, this is why you're being kept down. This is why you're not getting rich, is because corporate America has sort of bought into the woke agenda, and that means that ordinary Americans are not able to have access to prosperity in the same way as if it were about that as opposed to the collapse of late capitalism.

It's broader than the Disney alone attack, right? He's taking that but nationalizing it. Well, and to have a brown person make that argument, right, to have someone who is not an aggrieved white guy but a child of an immigrant who has a kind of up from the bootstrap story say, actually, this whole system is hurting all of us, and my story wouldn't be possible if the vision of the woke left for corporate America were to come true. And to me, that feels like a very potent story to be telling. If Ramaswamy could get to 30 or 40 percent of the vote, that is how he would do it, potentially, with that kind of narrative that basically links says, look, woke capitalism is responsible for economic disappointment, wage stagnation, all of these kind of things. I think right now, his message is very effective but for a fairly narrow group, but I agree that long term, meaning four to eight to 12 years, the candidate who can link a critique of wokeness to some kind of economic narrative of American stagnation or what have you, will have a very effective narrative for Republicans. And Ramaswamy is like such an effective and clear communicator, right? And I think he knows all the lingo and all the jargon of the anti-woke vocabulary, but he I think has a way of doing it differently. And the other thing that I wanted to say is that he manages to sort of have a bit of a happy warrior affect as well. There's something kind of sunny and winning about him. And I think that the trick is that, and this I think really gets to what I think is the kind of fundamental vibe of the Republican Party right now, is that it's not sort of sunny times, city on a hill, optimism or anything

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like that, but it's also not kind of dour, everything is terrible. And I think that the thing about Ramaswamy is that he sort of does what Trump does, has that happy warrior sense in a much sunnier package that feels appealing and new and fresh in a way that's different. And wow, I can't believe I'm even saying this. No, they're Ramaswamy. Ramaswamy had Lydia Polgreen. I think that the mood in the Republican Party is definitely way darker than it was when Reagan was doing his thing. But there is still a premium for being able to do what Trump does basically and say things are dark. They're the worst they've ever been. But we're turning it around. Make America great again. Things are going to be amazing. And yeah, I agree. Ramaswamy does that more effectively right now than DeSantis in certain ways. So darker than city on a hill, less dark than American carnage. A sweet spot. All right. Okay. I know for a fact, between here and November 2024, God help us, we will be talking about many of these people again.

But for now, let's put the 2024 race on ice. Speaking of, when we come back from the break, things are going to get hot or cold.

And we're back. Let's do our hot cold. It's the moment when one of us shares something that we're hot for, cold on, or somewhere on the thermometer between. Michelle, you said you have a hot cold this week. Oh, I am red hot on the flash cult of Hannah Waddingham. Now, she is a longtime theater actress, mostly in the West End in London. But she also had a tiny role as Sceptic Nella on Game of Thrones. And most American audiences know her as Rebecca Welton on Ted Lasso. She's the team owner. But she has, in recent weeks, emerged as this global phenom as one of the presenters on Eurovision. We all love Eurovision. Yes, just the international music competition where you have every, you know, all these like dozens of bands come together or singers come together and compete. And it was basically, the show was stolen by Hannah. She is five foot 11 with platinum blonde hair and a voice that just goes through the roof. And so she would do these amazing vocal riffs, or she would do these wacky dances and you're in your, you know, in these massive rainbow hued ball gowns with heels. And it was just this great spectacle. And the audience went crazy. I was like, I had to actually go back and look up even who won this year. Sweden, incidentally, Sweden won Eurovision. But it was really Hannah Waddingham who had everybody going crazy for her. And what I am hoping now is that Ted Lasso is in its final season. She's coming off Eurovision. I'm now hoping, you know, maybe she could run for president. I mean, she's British, but does that really matter? I mean, maybe a nice cabinet position, perhaps, but it was just kind of this glorious moment where this kind of everybody was cheering this bizarre theater phenom who was taking over the airwaves. But she was, she was the host. She was not a contestant. No, she was, she was one of the presenters, but it didn't matter. I am completely in the tank here and she is now my, she's now my hero. I'm just glad that something good will come out of the horror of the last two seasons of Ted Lasso. The first season was so great. And then it just really went downhill. So yeah. But at least they're calling it quits. There are a lot of shows calling it quits. And that's one of them. It's time, it's time to pull the block. Listen, speaking of pulling the block. Surprise announcement. Episode two will be our concluding episode. We've enjoyed our time with you. Sorry, sorry guys. No, you're not getting off that easy. We're going to keep making this podcast, whether you like it or not. But I think that that's a wrap. So we will see you guys next week. Bye guys.

Thanks for joining our conversation. If you liked it, be sure to follow us on your favorite

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