

THE GREAT UNDERESTIMATION OF DESANTIS STARTS TO UNRAVEL

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This past weekend, Governor Ron

DeSantis (R-Fla.) reminded voters, and a skeptical press that has spent an inordinate amount of time writing his political obituary before he even launched his candidacy, that he not only possesses the promise and nimbleness needed to be a candidate for president but that he also has the staff and network needed to pull off just the right move to strike a blow against his rival, former President Donald Trump.

People underestimate DeSantis only at their own peril.

The Florida governor began the weekend Friday (5/19) in Illinois as the keynote speaker at the Lincoln Day Dinner for Peoria and Tazewell counties. The *Peoria Journal Star* said he drew a crowd of more than 1,100 to the Peoria Civic Center.

Early Saturday morning (5/20), DeSantis started his first campaign event in Sioux Center, Iowa, as a guest at Rep. Randy Feenstra's annual Feenstra Family Picnic, spent time greeting folks at a classic car museum, stopped at a Pizza Ranch, and finished out the day at an unplanned event, standing on a table with his wife at Jethro's BBQ.

All of DeSantis' headline events went off without a hitch. In that regard, they were very similar to speeches I attended several weeks ago that he gave in Camp Hill, Pennsylvania, and Akron, Ohio, where he was greeted with robust support after delivering speeches that outlined his aspirations for the country, his accomplishments as a governor and his promise to take on the cultural headwinds in our country.

DeSantis and Trump were scheduled on Saturday to be in Iowa, the state with the first-in-the-country contest for 2024, but Trump's team canceled the event after the threat of a tornado warning. DeSantis took full advantage of his absence with an impromptu stop in the same area Trump was supposed to be, thus casting shade on the former president, who has spent months maligning DeSantis's character.

"My better half and I have been able to be all over Iowa today, but before we went back to Florida, we wanted to come by and say hi to the people of Des Moines," DeSantis said to a cheering and surprised crowd at the barbecue as he and his wife Casey stood on a picnic table outside. "So thank you all for coming out. It's a

beautiful night. It's been a great day for us."

DeSantis, to the frustration of a press hungry for a battle, has pointedly not responded to Trump's attacks as a not-yet-declared candidate as he finished his legislative session in Florida. That vacuum has allowed polls to favor Trump for months and caused impatient pundits to underestimate DeSantis' abilities and instincts.

DeSantis' unscheduled stop speaks to the scope of the organization he already has in Iowa and its competency. Several Iowa Republicans said they were surprised that when Trump decided to cancel the rally, he didn't try to do something else, even if it were on a smaller scale.

In 2016, Senator Ted Cruz (R-Texas) won the Iowa caucus over Trump, largely on his appeal to evangelical voters, who make up the bulk of the Republican electorate in the Iowa caucus. However, Trump would go on to win over the evangelical vote in the rest of the contests and in the general election over Hillary Clinton.

Evangelicals were the most rewarded voting bloc in the Trump coalition during his presidency with his picks of Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh, and Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court. If Trump is failing with those same voters in Iowa, that may be a sign of a fissure in his support that could be game-changing.

For the past few months, the media have been intent on writing DeSantis off. Yet if there are two things I have learned over the years in covering presidential elections, one is to listen to what voters tell you they want, not what you think they need, and two, never, ever underestimate any candidate, especially when everyone else is.

*Salena Zito is the author of **The Great Revolt: Inside the Populist Coalition Reshaping American Politics**.*

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