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POLITICS

Republican Presidential Candidates Fight to Avoid Winnowing in Iowa

Donald Trump and Ted Cruz battle to place first, while others vie for third or to slow rivals



Republican presidential candidate Sen. Marco Rubio reacts as he plays corn hole after handing out pizza to Iowa State University students in Ames, Iowa, on Saturday. *PHOTO: ANDREW HARNIK/ASSOCIATED PRESS*

By **REID J. EPSTEIN** And **JENNIFER LEVITZ**

Jan. 24, 2016 4:17 p.m. ET

PELLA, Iowa—After a year that saw political convention turned on its head, Iowa in a week will finally deliver the first official verdict of the 2016 Republican presidential campaign.

Front-runners Donald Trump and Sen. Ted Cruz are mounting a furious effort to place first, while others are vying for a third-place finish in the Feb. 1 caucuses that could beat expectations and slow any momentum for potential rivals.

Florida Gov. Jeb Bush trails far behind in Iowa, but the super PAC backing him has spent more than \$20 million slamming Sen. Marco Rubio, hoping to damage his fellow Floridian before primary contests later in February.

“If Rubio can finish a strong third and separate himself from the pack, that will help build momentum through New Hampshire,” said Kevin Madden, a top aide to Mitt Romney’s presidential campaigns who is unaffiliated this cycle.

For many of the approximately 130,000 Republicans who will vote in next week’s caucuses, the contest has yet to bring definitive conclusions.



Republican presidential candidate Jeb Bush attends a town hall in Merrimack, N.H., on Saturday. PHOTO: TOM WILLIAMS/ZUMA PRESS

“I don’t like to commit too fast because things can change,” said Rick Simpson, a community-college program director from nearby Eddyville, after a Trump rally here.

Complicating matters for him, the 58-year-old said, is that he prefers back-of-the-pack candidate Carly Fiorina, but worries his vote would be wasted on her. Mr. Simpson is now looking at Mr. Rubio, Mr. Cruz and Mr. Trump, and anticipated he would “probably go to Trump.”

Part of the calculus for middle-of-the-pack candidates is to damage their closest competitors for specific slices of the electorate. With so many rivals in the race, that strategy is producing a complicated score card for voters to follow.

Mr. Rubio is attacking Mr. Cruz because they are competing for evangelical voters. Mr. Bush is attacking Mr. Rubio because they are each aiming to become the choice of the party’s establishment wing.

Retired neurosurgeon Ben Carson, whose campaign has suffered a shake-up as top aides have publicly sparred with each other, has fallen in national polls, but still has a substantial following in Iowa among evangelicals. If Mr. Carson manages to re-energize his base and place third, it would scramble the lineup anew as the contest moves to New Hampshire.

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For such lagging candidates as Mrs. Fiorina, the former Hewlett-Packard Co. chief executive, Iowa represents a last gasp for campaigns running on fumes.

She, along with former Gov. Mike Huckabee, former Sen. Rick Santorum and Sen. Rand Paul, were relegated to the second tier of the last televised debate, and will likely be there again for another showdown Thursday night in Des Moines. Each faces the real danger that a poor showing here will end their candidacies.

“Bush has to beat Rubio, Rubio has to beat Cruz, Cruz has to beat Trump, and Trump has to beat 50%,” said Brad Todd, who served as a top adviser to former Gov. Bobby Jindal, who suspended his presidential campaign in November. “Rubio can’t win if Cruz is succeeding. Cruz probably can’t win if Trump continues to fly high.”

An irony for some campaign watchers is that all the firepower aimed by the middle of the pack at each other has left Mr. Trump, one of the most effective attackers in the race, relatively unscathed.

One sign that the GOP establishment is conceding—or even pushing for—an Iowa win by the New York celebrity businessman was the appearance by six-term Sen. Chuck Grassley at a Trump rally here on Saturday.

Mr. Grassley didn’t make an endorsement, but he sent a clear signal about where he stands in the Trump-Cruz rivalry.

“You could make the argument that Trump, more than Cruz, has the ability to bring out voters who haven’t participated in recent elections,” said Brian J. Walsh, a former top aide to Senate Republicans. “At the end of the day, he’s more of a deal-maker. He could shift his tone for the general.”

—*Heather Haddon in Nashua, N.H., contributed to this article.*

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