

THE AMERICA REPORT: REPUBLICANS FOR PRESIDENT

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Today, Donald Trump is far ahead in the opinion polls for the 2024 Republican presidential candidate. But Ron DeSantis, Tim Scott, and others will make sure

that there is no such thing as an inevitable frontrunner.

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According to Ballotpedia, the website that tracks elections in America, [a total of 1,212 individuals](#) registered as presidential candidates in 2020. Of them, 323 were Democrats, 162 were Republicans, and the rest represented small parties or declared themselves "independent" or "unaffiliated."

Very few of these candidates got any measurable number of votes, but that has not kept people from registering to run for president in 2024. As of May 22nd, Ballotpedia had listed 208 presidential candidates just for the Republican party. In total, including Democrats, unaffiliated, and candidates for the usual crop of smaller parties, there are probably more than 500 candidates on the books.

Anyone who is eligible under the constitution can register. The requirements are simple: you have to be an American citizen born in this country at least 35 years ago, and you cannot already have served two terms as president. Since these are pretty simple requirements, the roster will certainly keep growing. In fact, just in the last few days, three well-known Republicans have thrown their hats in the ring:

- Doug Burgum, Governor of North Dakota;
- Ron DeSantis, Governor of Florida; and
- Tim Scott, U.S. Senator from South Carolina.

They join a growing field of reputable candidates, which also includes:

- Nikki Haley, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations and governor of South Carolina;
- Asa Hutchinson, former governor of Arkansas and the first Secretary of Homeland Security; and
- Donald Trump, the one-term 45th president of the United States.

Trump has positioned himself as the undisputed frontrunner, supported by [about 60% of Republicans](#). Although he has a proven record—for obvious reasons the only candidate with "president" on his resume—his current frontrunner status does not make him the inevitable Republican candidate. There are plenty of examples of frontrunners who seemed invincible, but who fell by the wayside or into oblivion before or during the primary elections.

In an interesting review of prominent frontrunners who "fizzled," [Politico reminds us](#) of Herman Cain in 2012. A successful businessman from Georgia and former CEO of the Godfather's Pizza chain, he represented a new wave of black conservatives. He spoke plainly and came across as folksy yet sharp.

Cain had a background of success that allowed him to stand on his own two feet, independently of the so-called political establishment. In a sense, he was a preview of Donald Trump. However, unlike Trump, he faded into the background already before the 2012 primary elections began. Instead, Republicans ended up electing Senator Mitt Romney, a man who lacked Cain's ability to connect with people and appreciate the issues that they lived with.

Right in the middle of the presidential campaign, Romney made the absolutely moronic

decision [to go jet skiing](#) with his wife. Although an innocuous activity in itself, he had already earned a reputation for having no real understanding of what life is like for people who live paycheck to paycheck. After he had shown off his wealth and his detachment from middle-class life, it was easy for incumbent Democrat President Barack Obama to secure his re-election.

Speaking of Obama: remember who was the frontrunner in 2008, when he ran for president the first time? Hillary Clinton, the former first lady and at that time U.S. Senator for New York. In their exposé of fizzled frontrunners, *Politico* recounts the opinion-poll balance in October 2007, three months before the primaries began. Clinton was leading then-Senator Obama with 50% to his 21%, yet, thanks to mistakes with campaign funding and poor performance in the Democrat primary debates, she lost to the contrived but professionally scripted Obama.

On the Republican side, a year before the 2008 election, former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani stood as the unrivaled frontrunner. According to *Politico*, he had "a 13 percentage-point lead over eventual nominee," U.S. Senator John McCain from Arizona. I supported Giuliani and wrote policy platforms and speech drafts for his campaign, but I grew frustrated with him as the primaries began. Giuliani behaved as if his eminent leadership in the aftermath of the 9/11, 2001 terror attacks had built him the same reputability in Iowa as it had east of the Delaware River.

After a poor performance in the Florida primary, Giuliani was basically done for as a candidate.

Politico also reminds us of Vermont governor Howard Dean. In 2004, he lost the Democrat primaries to Senator John Kerry. In 1992, Democrat Jerry Brown told Jewish voters in New York that he considered [alleged anti-Semite Jesse Jackson](#) for vice president. Bill Clinton won the primaries and went on to serve two terms as president.

In short, history tells us that in politics, everything is possible. The question is, who could

replace Trump if his stardom begins to fade?

Nikki Haley, [a respectable candidate](#), would make a competent president. Her chances hinge on voters wanting a capable government administrator. If they prefer a political visionary, she will not be at the top of the list. However, she could be in play for secretary of state or another high-ranking cabinet position.

Doug Burgum is [a more sanguine presidential candidate](#). He is the incumbent governor of North Dakota, ending his second term conveniently when the next presidential term begins. Although North Dakota does not have a two-term gubernatorial limit, it is easy to see why Burgum might want to move 'up' in his political career.

It is also easy to see how he could emerge as the Republican candidate. His background is not in politics, but in business: he [started his own software engineering company](#) in 1983. In 2011 he sold it to Microsoft and made stints into real estate and venture capitalism.

When voters grow tired of 'establishment candidates,' people with Burgum's background are well positioned to emerge. It helps that Burgum has enough money to self-fund his candidacy: it would give him the kind of campaign freedom that Trump had in 2016.

Although Burgum is virtually unknown outside of North Dakota, I would not dismiss him. When he ran for governor in 2016, he was likewise the 'dark horse' outsider. His disadvantage was that all the political insiders who knew every trick in the political campaign book were working for his opponents. He will have the same disadvantage in the coming presidential campaign.

Burgum also has the problem that he is governor of a state that is so small it almost disappears next to Ron DeSantis and his state, Florida. At the same time, Burgum could overcome these downsides if voters are attracted to him as being uncluttered by 'politics as usual.' If that happens, it will be because the other candidates do something to fall out of grace with the electorate. Until then, Burgum remains an unlikely candidate.

However, he is not as unlikely as Asa Hutchinson, the former governor of Arkansas. Hutchinson is everything that Burgum is not: a dyed-in-the-wool political insider. From 1991 to 1995, he was the chairman of the Arkansas Republican party. During that time, he built enough political clout to win a seat in the House of Representatives. From there, he only waded deeper into the inner circles of Washington politics.

In 2001, Republican president George Bush Jr. appointed Hutchinson to lead the Drug Enforcement Administration, a highly specialized and globally active anti-narcotics agency. Two years later, Bush asked Hutchinson to take the helm at the newly created Department of Homeland Security.

Hutchinson left office after two years and went into the highly profitable business of political consulting. Those who do that normally reinforce their insider status and establishment connections.

After two terms as governor of Arkansas, 73-year-old Hutchinson is unlikely to catch anyone's attention as a candidate for president. With his close ties to the Bush family, he is also on the far side of the Republican party from where Trump is. This puts him at odds with the majority of prospective Republican voters.

Next to the concrete-gray Hutchinson, Florida governor Ron DeSantis comes across as a rock star. He is well known for his relentless fight for conservative social values. He led the fight to remove the special tax status for Disney when [the corporation came out in favor](#) of allowing schools to expose children to sexually explicit material.

DeSantis has continued his fight for conservative social values, [recently signing](#) the "Let Kids Be Kids" package of legislation. Among the bills included in the package is one that prevents the dispensation of so-called experimental puberty blockers to kids. There is also a ban on 'sex reassignment' surgery on children.

Another [bill](#) forces schools and public buildings to make sure girls and women do not have

to share bathrooms and locker rooms with biological males. A third bill prohibits adults from bringing children to sexually explicit performances, including drag shows.

There is no doubt that DeSantis is going to be a serious competitor to Trump for the socially conservative vote. While Trump has his successful economic-policy record, DeSantis can point to [an intelligent tax reform bill](#) that he signed into law. Among other things, it

- Exempts "baby and toddler necessities" from the state's sales tax;
- Creates two sales-tax holidays for the back-to-school days when parents usually go shopping for the new school year; and
- Doubles the so-called [Strong Families Tax Credit](#).

The last-mentioned item is an interesting model for promoting charitable organizations. If a taxpayer donates to an organization listed as eligible under the tax-credit program, he or she is allowed to make a dollar-for-dollar deduction on the bill for certain excise taxes or—if a corporation makes the donation—the state corporate income tax. Eligible charities must be dedicated to helping families in need, strengthen fatherhood, and help poor families become better income earners.

This program, which [was created in 2021](#), is a nice adaptation of the welfare-reform model I proposed in my book [Ending the Welfare State](#) in 2012.

As a values-voter candidate, DeSantis will get stiff competition from Tim Scott, the staunchly conservative U.S. senator from South Carolina. Scott, a formidable speaker with a public presence that rivals Trump, has 'street cred' like few other politicians, regardless of party. Raised by a single mom and growing up in poverty, Senator Scott often talks about how he is a living example of what it means to 'make it' in America.

He made this point when he [announced his presidential campaign](#):

Speaking before a crowd his campaign estimated to be nearly 2,000 attendees, Scott described the campaign as a time to choose between "victimhood or victory" and "grievance or greatness." He portrayed himself as the candidate "the far-left fears most."

The last point, of course, refers to the fact that Scott is black, a devout Christian, and a political conservative. He has served as U.S. senator since 2012, initially to fulfill his predecessor Jim DeMint's term. In 2016 and 2022, Scott won regular elections; most recently, he gained 63% of the votes against his Democrat opponent.

Scott has a legislative record that includes leading the [development of a police reform bill](#) which would put into law many of the criticisms that left-wing organizations have had of policing in America. Scott has also led the work to create so-called opportunity zones, i.e., urban areas of special regulatory status. The purpose of these zones is to help poor and blighted neighborhoods turn around, grow, and thrive without reliance on government money.

Overall, Senator Scott and Governor DeSantis have a lot in common. They are both social conservatives, and they are hands-on oriented in the sense that they want to put their ideological values to work.

Can either of them become the Republican presidential candidate? It is definitely possible. Today, they look much more likely to replace Trump as frontrunner than Nikki Haley, Doug Burgum, or Asa Hutchinson. But as the history of American politics has taught us, there is no such thing as an inevitable frontrunner.