

What Did Saturday's Debate Do to Marco Rubio's Chances to Win in 2016?

A week ago, it looked like the stars were aligning for Marco Rubio. Now, as New Hampshire holds its pivotal primary on Tuesday, the Republican presidential contender has to hope the sky does not come crashing down on him.

After a surprisingly strong third-place showing in last week's Iowa caucuses, Rubio came into New Hampshire hoping for a top-tier finish in the state to buttress his argument he is the candidate around whom the party establishment should rally.

But a debate performance on Saturday night that was widely mocked by Republicans and Democrats as well as legions on social media might have changed the equation for the U.S. senator from Florida.

Now Rubio must worry that anything less than a robust performance in New Hampshire will further fuel the suggestion that his campaign suffered a critical blow at the debate.

Dante Scala, an analyst on local politics at the University of New Hampshire, said that if Rubio did not do well in Tuesday's primary, "it isn't fatal necessarily, but it makes the road to the nomination longer and riskier."

Billionaire businessman Donald Trump is widely expected to win Tuesday's contest in New Hampshire, whose primary is part of the state-by-state process of picking party nominees for the Nov. 8 election to replace Democratic President Barack Obama.

But after Rubio finished far ahead of mainstream rivals Jeb Bush, Chris Christie and John Kasich in Iowa, he appeared to be best positioned to place second in New Hampshire, perhaps

knocking Christie or Kasich out of the race and emerging as the party's best hope to derail Trump's insurgent bid.

Rubio's debate showing, in which he helped further the perception he is an overly scripted, even robotic, candidate, has been cited by other contenders as proof he is not ready to shoulder the leadership mantle.

"When the lights get that bright, you either shine or you melt," Christie, the New Jersey governor, said at a campaign event in Hudson, New Hampshire, on Monday. "We can't afford to have a president who melts."

Battle for Second Place

Rubio, in an interview with CNN on Monday, dismissed the torrent of criticism that has come his way since the debate and said his potential to be a strong general election candidate against the Democrats made him a target.

"We raised more money after this debate than any debate we've ever had and we're excited about it," Rubio said. "And there's a reason they attacked me more than anyone else."

A WMUR-CNN poll released on Monday showed Trump leading in New Hampshire with the support of 31 percent of those planning to vote in the Republican primary. Rubio was in second place at 17 percent, followed by Ted Cruz, a U.S. senator from Texas, at 14 percent.

Kasich, the Ohio governor, had 10 percent, Bush, a former Florida governor, was at 7 percent, and Christie at 4 percent, according to the poll conducted from Wednesday to Sunday, with a margin of error of plus or minus 5.2 percentage points.

The New Hampshire race promises to be dramatic on the Democratic side as well.

Bernie Sanders has a strong lead in state opinion polls over former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who narrowly beat

him in Iowa.

Clinton has sought to play down expectations for her performance in New Hampshire, noting that Sanders is a U.S. senator from neighboring Vermont. But a big loss in New Hampshire to Sanders, an underdog candidate and self-described socialist, would be an embarrassment for Clinton.

Fighting for Traction

Among Republicans, Christie has become Rubio's chief antagonist and hopes to benefit from any loss of Rubio's momentum. A finish below the top three could force Christie's exit from the race.

Kasich, who has been rising in the polls in New Hampshire, is another candidate seeking to profit from Rubio's troubles. He has long staked the viability of his campaign on the outcome in New Hampshire, and he has a deep organization in the state, with 800 volunteers manning phone banks and going door to door to court voters.

He is counting on attracting independents who can vote in the Republican primary. At an event in Windham, New Hampshire, on Monday, one undecided voter told Kasich she was trying to decide whether to support him or Democrats Clinton and Sanders.

A Rubio stumble might also be a huge boon to Bush, the son and brother of former presidents, who has had to endure calls from party elites that he drop out of the race rather than keep competing with Rubio.

Rubio's organization on the ground in New Hampshire is not as extensive as Kasich's or those of some other mainstream candidates. His strategy has long been to leverage his telegenic presence on cable news channels to build support.

His third-place Iowa finish seemed to validate that decision.

But it has also left him more vulnerable to mood swings among the New Hampshire electorate.

There remains the possibility that Rubio will silence the doubters on Tuesday, demonstrating that his debate mishap meant little to voters.

Cruz was considered to have turned in a poor showing at a debate before the Iowa caucuses. Three days later, he won them.

(Editing by Caren Bohan and Peter Cooney)

© 2016 Thomson Reuters. All rights reserved.