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Don't Take Ben Carson Seriously (Except In Iowa — Maybe)

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Dr. Ben Carson gives the keynote speech at the Wake Up America gala event on Sept. 5 at the Westin Kierland Resort in Scottsdale, Arizona.

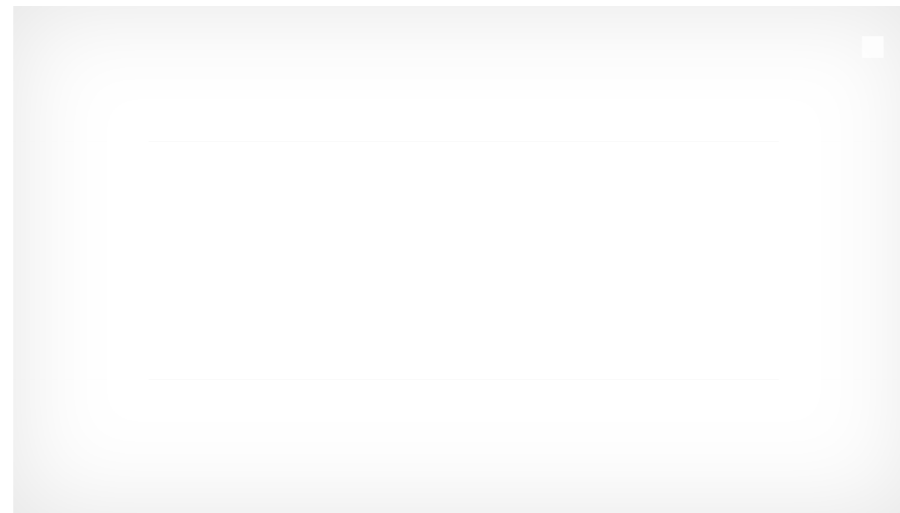
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“Who is Ben Carson? Where did he come from?” [asked CNN’s Jake Tapper](#) after a CNN poll revealed that Carson, a political novice, was running second to former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush for the Republican nomination for president in 2016. Carson has also placed second in other national polls, second in [Iowa surveys](#) and in the [high single digits](#) in New Hampshire.

So just how seriously should we take Carson’s potential bid for the White House? Seriously enough. He could make some noise, particularly in Iowa. But not seriously enough to believe that he has any real shot of winning the nomination.

It’s hardest to dismiss Carson’s support in Iowa. He came in second place in a [Des Moines Register survey](#) conducted in October with 11 percent — even though only 49 percent of potential caucus-goers knew enough about him to form an opinion. His ratio of support to name recognition was higher than that of any other candidate polled, including 2012 Republican nominee Mitt Romney. Carson has a chairperson in [each of Iowa’s 99 counties](#); he has a real following in the Hawkeye State.

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Carson also has some history on his side in Iowa. Political novices who haven’t held elected office have a bad record in nomination fights overall, but they’ve done OK in Iowa. In 1988, the Christian Broadcasting Network’s Pat

Robertson earned a second-place finish in the [Iowa caucuses](#). In 2000, businessman Steve Forbes earned the runner-up spot. Forbes also came in a respectable fourth in the caucuses four years earlier, the same year [he won](#) the Arizona and Delaware primaries.

Carson's problem, though, is that his high ratio of support to name recognition is likely a mirage. He was a contributor to Fox News [through this past November](#). These appearances allowed him to build up his brand among Republicans without negative attacks. Combine his role on Fox News with the fact that he is [already airing television ads](#), and it's clear why Carson is so well liked — he's had the stage to himself.

He won't once the campaign begins in earnest. Carson's opponents will start airing their own ads. They will be able to build up their own name recognition and tell their own stories. Carson is only in the low teens in support at this point, which won't be anywhere near enough to win a single caucus or primary. It's likely other candidates will storm past him.

Moreover, if Carson is perceived to be a real threat, he'll have some mud coming his way. And his opponents will have a lot to work with. Carson has made a number of statements that will make GOP voters who are concerned about electability cringe: He has [compared gay marriage to bestiality](#), Obamacare to slavery and nazism to the United States. He came to the defense of [Ray Rice](#).

Carson — a darling of the far right — may also have some policy problems. [OnTheIssues.org](#), a nonpartisan nonprofit that scores politicians' ideology based on their public statements, rates Carson as a “moderate conservative” because some of his statements about free trade, gun control and health care have flirted with moderation.

Finally — as I mentioned above — it's very difficult for a candidate who hasn't held elected office to win a party's presidential nomination. (FiveThirtyEight's presidential model [looks at](#) experience in elected office in assessing a candidate's chances. It's predictive.) Forbes and Robertson, for example, faded after their showings in Iowa and didn't seriously contend for the nomination. A candidate without elected experience hasn't been nominated by either major party since Dwight Eisenhower in 1952.

And the last time I checked, Carson didn't win World War II.