

September 13, 2011 Tuesday

Rick Perry Faces Heat from GOP Rivals

BYLINE: Alex M. Parker

SECTION: POLITICS & POLICY Vol. No.

LENGTH: 781 words

HIGHLIGHT: Romney, Bachmann, Santorum, Paul blast Perry on Social Security, taxes, immigration, vaccines

Even if you hadn't read any polls in the GOP primary, it wouldn't be hard to guess who was the front-runner during Monday night's CNN/Tea Party debate. Texas Gov. Rick Perry, who's leapt ahead of his fellow [Republican](#) challengers in the race for his party's nomination, faced the uncomfortable side of winning as the other contenders took turns taking shots against his record, his past statements and his bona fides as a true conservative. Perry managed to get through the night without any big blunders, but apparently there's blood in the water.

The debate lived up to its title, with audience members loudly cheering Tea Party favorites like Minnesota Rep. Michele Bachmann and Texas Rep. Ron Paul, while giving a cold shoulder to former Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman and former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney. (Though Paul did elicit some heckling for his foreign policy stances.) Romney came out aggressively against Perry and his statements on Social Security, and landed a few decent punches. But the attacks didn't seem to register with the crowd, and they didn't force Perry to better define his vague positions on the government program.

[\[See cartoons about the GOP hopefuls\]](#)

But although Romney may have failed to set Perry's candidacy back, the wide field of long-shot candidates may yet do that for him. Perry faced arrows from his right over the size of government in Texas, his policies on illegal immigration and a 2007 executive order which required vaccination of schoolgirls for the human papillomavirus, or HPV, the most commonly sexually transmitted infection and a cause of cervical cancer. (Perry repeatedly pointed out that the order included an opt-out clause for parents.) While Romney tried to blast Perry as having little to do with job creation in Texas, Paul likely hurt Perry's chances more by noting that many of the jobs are with the federal government. Paul also blasted Perry for raising taxes during his tenure. "So I would put a little damper on this, but I don't want to offend the governor, because he might raise my taxes or something," the fellow Texan quipped. Paul's claim of increased taxes likely refers to a 2006 tax reform effort which raised some taxes while lowering others, and was attacked at the time by many anti-tax conservatives.

[\[Vote: Who is your pick for the GOP nomination?\]](#)

Perry also took a drubbing from Bachmann over the HPV vaccinations. The controversial issue, which touches on issues of sexual politics as well as fears of government intrusion on family life, seemed to fluster Perry more than any other during the debate, especially when Bachmann suggested that the Texas governor only signed the order to aid the drug manufacturer, a Perry contributor who had hired his former chief of staff as a lobbyist. "If you're saying that I can be bought for \$5,000, I'm offended," Perry told Bachmann, who was undeterred. "I'm offended for all the little girls and the parents that didn't have a choice. That's what I'm offended for," she replied.

Santorum joined Bachmann to blast some of his stances on border security and [illegal immigration](#), perhaps Perry's biggest vulnerability in the GOP primary. Perry's support for a bill which allows foreign-born children of illegal immigrants to pay in-state tuition--similar, though not identical, to Obama's DREAM Act--elicited booing from the crowd. Yet, Perry was unrepentant. "I'm proud that we are having those individuals be contributing members of our society rather than telling them, you go be on the government dole," Perry said.

[\[Check out editorial cartoons about immigration.\]](#)

Perry may have won the debate simply by surviving the onslaught. Once again, he didn't exactly wow Republican observers, but he didn't spook them, either. But while Romney failed to knock down the new front-runner, the current situation may play in his favor. The only path to the nomination for the moderate governor is to see the ultra-conservative GOP vote divided in crucial contests such as New Hampshire and Florida. Romney himself may not be able to bring him down, but trusted conservatives such as Bachmann and Santorum might, paving the way for a Romney victory. Michael Tanner, a political analyst with the libertarian [Cato](#) Institute, said that the immigration issue was likely Perry's biggest vulnerability -- although, Monday night, it didn't seem to work. "I don't think they really knocked him down this time," Tanner says. "[Immigration] is something that could come back and bite him. But right now, that issue and the social issues are so eclipsed by the economy."

--See [political cartoons about the Tea Party](#).

--See [photos of the GOP hopefuls](#).

--See [a slideshow of the Republican contenders](#).