



5 Things to Watch for at Tonight's Republican Presidential Debate

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Given the sharp criticism CNBC faced in the wake of the October 28 debate, the stakes are extra high tonight for moderators Neil Cavuto, Maria Bartiromo and Gerard Baker and for host Fox Business. The network has promised an elevated level of discussion and fairer questions, meaning if candidates are going to want a fight, they will have to pick them themselves.

"Will Donald Trump attack the good doctor? Will the problems that are showing up in Marco Rubio's background and Carson's background become part of the interplay between candidates, assuming that they're not going to be asked directly by the moderators?" said Arterton.

But republicans may should be careful what they wish for, because brushing off questions as liberal media conspiracy is one thing, but ignoring a jab from a fellow contender is another.

"It's more difficult to backhand and flippantly avoid a question if it's coming from one of your fellow candidates than it is if it's coming from the moderators because of the antipathy towards the media as evidenced in much of the Republican base constituency," said Arterton.

On the attack front, the most interesting candidate to watch may be Carson. He is facing mounting scrutiny from the media and other candidates over his rather imaginative recalling of his past, but his mild manner makes him a tough nut to crack.

"At this point, it seems like Ben Carson is fairly impervious to paying a price for saying stupid things," said Greene. "[His] personality just kind of de-escalates these sorts of things, diminishes them."

4. Where Art Thou, Ted?

"Ted Cruz is leading the most ambitious national campaign no one sees coming," declared Slate political correspondent Jamelle Bouie in a recent profile on the Texas Senator. Might we finally see flashes of what Cruz, a self-proclaimed outsider with an insider resume, has in store for the months to come?

A RealClearPolitics polling average has Cruz running fourth among his fellow Republican primary contenders, well behind Trump and Carson, who have more than 24% support, and slightly behind Rubio's 11.8% (Cruz is listed at 9.6%). But when it comes to media coverage, at this stage in the race, Cruz feels almost light years behind.

"With fewer people to compete against, this might be a time when Ted Cruz [says], 'I'm going to make my move,'" said Greene.

Cruz has four super PACs backing him: Keep the Promise PAC, Keep the Promise I, Keep the Promise II and Keep the Promise III (no one pulled any brain muscles on the naming effort). And while the groups aren't doing much spending yet, they've got cash ready and waiting. "He's got a lot of money, he's invested a lot in organization, and he's got a lot of grassroots support," Greene said.

Cruz isn't the only one who might want -- or need -- to make some extra noise tonight. Carly Fiorina's star has faded significantly since her September surge, and John Kasich is inches away from falling victim to Democratic contender Martin O'Malley's "unidentified man" fate.

Kentucky Senator Rand Paul continues to fail to resonate with voters as well. "The libertarian philosophy has yet to surface in a way that makes it strong or palpable within the party," said Arterton. "It's clearly something that Rand Paul has all to himself. It makes me wonder whether it's the messenger rather than the message."

5. Can, and Will, the Candidates Finally Talk Policy?

Most of the debate discussions up to now have been pretty policy specifics-light. If that changes tonight, it may be better for some contenders than it is for others.

"I don't know that either [Trump or Carson] is capable of participating in a more substantive policy debate," said Cass. "And that's what you've seen. For all of Donald Trump's bombastic language when invited to attack a candidate or talk about himself, he doesn't even attempt to jump in during the actual policy discussions, nor does Ben Carson."

And it's not like they don't have a need to clarify their positions.

"Does Donald Trump actually believe in limited government? Trump has taken economically liberal positions in the past on a number of key issues, like health care," said Emily Ekins, a research fellow at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank headquartered in Washington, D.C. "He should take the opportunity tonight to clarify what makes him a conservative and if he believes in the free enterprise system and in a limited central government."

What could be losses for Trump, Carson and other policy-averse candidates might be gains for others, such as Rubio, Kasich and Bush.

But the real winners could be voters.

"There are a few issues that are economic that there really are serious divides in the Republican candidates. Trade is one, and immigration is the other. If the moderators are interested in stoking a substantive policy debate, those are where they'll focus some of the questions. It will be

interesting to see the extent to which the candidates are willing to fight about that, who thinks the positions they've taken are actually winning hands with primary voters," Cass said.