Opinion

NCR Voices



Top row, from left: Ron DeSantis (OSV News/Reuters/Scott Morgan), Vivek Ramaswamy (Wikimedia Commons/Gage Skidmore), Chris Christie (OSV News/Reuters/Elizabeth Frantz); center: Nikki Haley (OSV News/Reuters/Kevin Lamarque); bottom row, from left: Mike Pence (OSV News/Reuters/Elizabeth Frantz), Doug Burgum (CNS/Reuters/Dan Koeck), Tim Scott (OSV News/Reuters/Elizabeth Frantz).



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Tonight's Republican presidential primary debate is likely to be dominated by one candidate who is not on the stage. Former President Donald Trump has decided not to join the other contestants in Milwaukee, and will be doing an interview — I use the term liberally — with Tucker Carlson instead. Still, the threshold question for the Republican Party today is whether or not it will remain a Trumpian cult, and all the candidates will need to calculate how to address that question.

We know that former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie is likely to come loaded for bear and has no compunction about criticizing the former president. The problem is that even if Christie delivers a deft and incisive criticism of Trump, he and the other people on the stage will spend several minutes in back-and-forth talking about the person who is not on the stage.

We also know that Christie is an excellent debater. He eviscerated the candidacy of Florida Sen. Marco Rubio during a debate in 2016, calling attention to Rubio's penchant for pivoting to a canned, memorized 25-second campaign speech. When Rubio repeated the exact same words within minutes of each other, Christie leaned in: "There it is." It was devastating.

This time around, Christie may have the opportunity to deliver the same kind of knockout punch against Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis. For reasons known but to God, a firm that works with DeSantis' SuperPAC posted memos about his debate strategy. The governor, who is currently running second in most polls, was instructed to: "1. Attack Joe Biden and the media 3-5 times. 2. State GRD's positive vision 2-3 times. 3. Hammer Vivek Ramaswamy in a response. 4. Defend Donald Trump in absentia in response to a Chris Christie attack."

If DeSantis does any of those, look for Christie to point out that a parrot could have been taught to utter the words, and the country needs a president who can think on

his feet.

DeSantis may be second in the polls, but his star has been falling. In both national and state polls. As regular readers know, I do not put much stock in polls when it comes to predicting the ultimate outcome. After election night 2016, who can? But at this stage in the race, polls drive the discussion, and they pave the way for increased media access and donor commitments.

Regular readers will also know that I predicted DeSantis would flame out back in May when he officially got into the race: "The governor whose impressive reelection victory propelled him into the spotlight is not ready for the spotlight."

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The reason DeSantis' advisers wanted him to "Hammer Vivek Ramaswamy" is that the 38-year-old former pharmaceutical executive is climbing in the polls. FiveThirtyEight has Ramaswamy at 9.3% in its polling average, almost double the polling average for former Vice President Mike Pence, who is sitting at 4.7%. Ramaswamy's youth stands out, especially after a gaggle of stories about octogenarians in government, including President Joe Biden.

Ramaswamy would scare the hell out of me if I thought he had a chance. He is very quick and very smart and, in this interview with CNN's Dana Bash that made him something of a hero in alt-right media circles, he twice warned about the "federal administrative police state." By this, he means Attorney General Merrick Garland. The YouTube channel that posted it said he "DESTROYS CNN, tells host to do her job." Yikes. His reckless statements on foreign policy show Ramaswamy is not ready for prime time.

As for the others, it is hard to know. Former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley will be the only woman on the stage and there may be an opening for her to lean into that fact. South Carolina Sen. Tim Scott is channeling the late Ronald Reagan, and he might deliver the kind of hope-filled line that sets him apart from DeSantis' perennial nastiness and strikes a chord with voters tired of Trump's dystopian vision of America. Former veep Mike Pence will be Mike Pence: solid, articulate, but with no possible lane in a party still dominated by the man he served so loyally but who now portrays Pence as a modern-day Benedict Arnold. I am not sure how many

Americans could pick North Dakota* Gov. Doug Burgum out of a line-up and would be surprised if that changes in the course of the debate.

One thing we Catholics know is that no one on the debate stage will be defending Catholic social doctrine.

Look for at least one of the candidates to go hard after migrants. Scott's sunny disposition cannot hide the fact that he is committed to the kind of trickle-down economics that is profoundly at odds with Catholic teaching. No one on the stage is going to call for the kinds of significant steps to curtail the use of fossil fuels that are already past due.

The abortion issue will make all of them nervous, as they navigate the moral claims that undergird the pro-life movement with the political reality unleashed in post-*Roe* America.

The thing about debates is this. Most Americans will not be tuned in, but they will inevitably see the soundbites in the days that follow. It is well-nigh impossible to deliver a pitch-perfect sound bite that doesn't sound canned. It is the moments when the politicians engage each other that yield the sound bites, and no one knows when or on what issue that engagements will become heated.

That is why debates are such good theater. So much of tonight's debate is predictable, except the part that no one predicts, and that is the thing most likely to be dominating the news coverage tomorrow morning.

**This story has been updated to correct Gov. Doug Burgum's home state.*