



OPINION: THE PATHS FORWARD FOR THE GOP PRESIDENTIAL FIELD - JOSH HAMMER

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Wednesday evening's much-anticipated first Republican presidential primary debate came and went without an obvious "winner" or dominant figure. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, the onstage front-runner given the conspicuous absence of former President Donald Trump, performed ably with numerous compelling and substantive answers, but pre-debate expectations were high enough -- and his national horse race polling deficit with Trump wide enough -- that it was left unclear whether such a performance might suffice. Some of the second-tier candidates, such as former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley, likely outperformed; some, such as Haley's fellow South Carolinian, Sen. Tim Scott, likely underperformed. And there was the glib charlatan Vivek Ramaswamy, whose egomania and insufferably grating nature were finally exposed before a national television audience; his personal favorability polling metrics have cratered, accordingly.

Of those who participated, DeSantis was the steadiest hand and delivered the best performance overall. He was righteously indignant when such indignation was called for, and he reminded the viewers of his transformative governing track record in Florida at the right moments. It would have been gratifying to see DeSantis knock down Ramaswamy a few notches, but the governor came across as competent, untouched, and above the fray. A post-debate Fox News focus group and most available post-debate polling revealed DeSantis as the most popular choice when those who had watched the debate were asked to identify the "winner."

But it was not a thoroughly memorable or dominant performance, either -- not exactly a first-round, Mike Tyson-style knockout blow. And a certain Palm Beach denizen, now fending off four separate criminal indictments from this most vindictive of regimes, was notably absent from the Milwaukee melee. More data is needed before offering any firm conclusions, but it is difficult to foresee the next batch of polls moving the needle a great deal. It must also be noted that a multicandidate debate format simply does not play to DeSantis' strengths as a politician; he has many strengths, but this is just not one of them. So perhaps we cannot reasonably expect more than Wednesday's cool, composed and low-key winning performance in future crowded debates. The question thus becomes whether, at this current trajectory, "slow and steady" will indeed "win the race," as Aesop once taught.

The first possibility for the GOP presidential field's path forward is this perpetuation of the Aesopian status quo. Barring any major changes before January's first-in-the-nation Iowa caucuses, it is difficult to confidently project that the tortoise will catch the hare. Trump's core supporters are unyielding in their fervor for the beleaguered ex-president, and it is clear that the regime's sprawling lawfare up and down the Eastern Seaboard does not dent the intensity of their loyalty. It is true that there are also many "soft," woblier Trump

supporters who could be persuaded to switch their allegiances; but as long as the field of non-Trump competitors remains anywhere near as large as it presently is, consolidation around an alternative is mathematically impossible.

That brings us to the two other possible paths forward for the GOP field.

The question looming over the entire 2024 election cycle right now is that pertaining to Trump's legal woes. The timing for the 45th president's various forthcoming criminal trials in New York, Washington, D.C., Georgia and Florida is all yet to be determined, but the prosecution in each case is aiming to expedite proceedings as much as possible. Fulton County, Georgia District Attorney Fani Willis, for instance, may try to get the ball rolling in her case -- the most perilous of all four Trump indictments -- as early as October.

Perhaps the most straightforward possible way that Trump might conceivably fade before Super Tuesday and the heart of the Republican primary calendar, then, is for Trump himself to be stretched so thin for both physical courtroom time and ever-mounting legal bills that his donors, prominent Republican elected officials in Washington, and Republican National Committee grandees alike sound the alarm and urge him to step aside for the mere sake of maximizing the probability of defeating the extraordinarily weak incumbent President Joe Biden. It is impossible to predict how four judges in four separate jurisdictions will go about scheduling their own trials, so this sequence of events is not outside the realm of possibility -- although it *is* outside the candidates' direct control.

Barring that, the only other straightforward way of ensuring a close race for the Republican presidential nomination is for the field to consolidate quickly. And there is only one option for the non-Trump field's consolidation, in order to give Trump a run for his money: DeSantis. The Florida governor is the candidate in the field with the strongest polling after Trump, the broadest support among different wings of the party, the most well-funded supporting super PAC, the most intensive ground game in the early nominating states (especially Iowa), the most dynamic governing record, the soundest overall political instincts, the firmest grasp of policy and substance, and the clearest understanding of the current lateness of the hour in our republic (as his repeated references to "decline" in the debate aptly illustrated). DeSantis is also, not coincidentally, the most likely to defeat Biden -- and is certainly far likelier to do so than a four-times-indicted near-octogenarian would be.

Consolidation around any other alternative, such as the deeply uninspiring, stuck-in-the-1980s spiritual boomer conservatives ("BoomerCons") like Haley, Scott, and former Vice President Mike Pence, would similarly ensure a primary victory for Trump. All the intellectual ferment that has followed in the aftermath of Trump's breakthrough 2016 victory, and the GOP's course-correcting turn toward a more nationalist and populist hue, would have been for naught. Many dispirited "New Right" conservatives, including this columnist, would stick with Trump in such a mano-a-mano -- his four indictments and palpably diminished energy notwithstanding. There is truly only one person around whom such a consolidation might be feasible, and he happens to be the de facto winner of Wednesday's debate. A deeply wounded Trump very well might still prevail against DeSantis in such a scenario, but at least it would be a fight.

Given the stakes for the republic, and given Trump's extremely low odds of defeating Biden in a general election rematch, that is a fight worth bringing.

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