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THE CURRENT

"What happened in the first GOP presidential debate and why it matters"

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DEWS: You're listening to *The Current*, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm Fred Dews, previously host of the now-archived Brookings Cafeteria Podcast, which you can still find on our website at brookings.edu slash podcasts. And now I'm joining my colleague Adriana Pita as co-host of *The Current* to bring you more analysis from Brookings scholars on breaking news and current policy conversations.

On Wednesday night, eight contenders for the Republican Party presidential nomination appeared on a Milwaukee stage together for the first GOP debate. Joining me to offer her analysis on what happened in the debate and what it portends moving forward toward the first primaries in January is Elaine Kamarck, founding director of the Center for Effective Public Management and a senior fellow in Governance Studies. She's author of the definitive history and guide to the presidential primaries, *Primary Politics, Everything You Need to Know About How America Nominates Its Presidential Candidates*.

Elaine, welcome to *The Current.*

KAMARCK: Thank you, Fred, and nice to have you back.

DEWS: Thank you. So what stood out for you in terms of who did well in the debate and who didn't?

KAMARCK: Well, what stood out for me, first of all, was the oddity of having a sort of a split-screen situation, two debates. On the one hand, you had the eight fairly serious candidates, and then there was the front-runner all by himself in a woodland-type studio with Tucker Carlson, who only years before had professed to hate Donald Trump. I mean, literally that came out, it was just weird to watch them because it came out in the trial of Fox that Tucker Carlson basically said, quote, I hate him and I can't wait to be rid of him, et cetera. So that was a little weird.

And I think Tucker Carlson spent his time grinning ear to ear and laughing loudly at his jokes and never pursuing any difficult questions because here he had landed a big interview with a guy who he said he hated. So that was strange. And it was strange to have this counterprogramming.

Now we don't have numbers yet. We don't know how effective this was, how many people watched the Fox debate versus how many people watched the Tucker Carlson-Trump debate. In typical Trump fashion he kept asserting we're gonna have more people, we're gonna have millions more people watching us than watching that terrible channel Fox, which of course he used to love. So that was weird, okay? That just was a strange situation.

DEWS: And to clarify that the Trump-Carlson interview was broadcast on X, formerly Twitter.

KAMARCK: Yes, formerly Twitter. Yes, it was broadcast. It was a good broadcast. It started on time. It was clear and there were no technical glitches. But the real question is how many people watch that versus watching the debate itself.

DEWS: So in terms of the eight candidates who were on the stage, were there any standouts for good or for bad?

KAMARCK: Well, I think there were a couple. Let's start with the good ones, okay? I think Mike Pence did a very good job. You know, he's frequently thought of as a sort of a milquetoast, but he was right in there, okay? And vigorously defending his administration, the Trump-Pence administration. And while he is widely dismissed as a candidate because of the fact that he is the person that kept Trump from overturning the election, the fact is that this had some people out there may have thought, oh, maybe the guy isn't so bad after all. And his experience and his gravitas did show through. So I think that, and of course he has that one big act of courage, which the people who don't like Trump have to give him, which is that he did, in fact, not stop the count of the vote. And so I think he had a good night.

I think Nikki Haley had a very good night. I mean, she spoke with authority. She was the only person, her status as a woman allowed her to plead for an approach to abortion that was based on consensus and not on confrontation. And while she drew rebukes for that, the fact of the matter is the Republicans have themselves in a real bind over the abortion position because they look really too extreme for most of America. So I think she was good on that and she was good on foreign policy too. You know, she strongly defended our aid to Ukraine, pushing back against the candidates who rejected it. And I think like Pence, she had sort of faded from the headlines and I think this might get her a little bit more back in the game.

If we go to the bad ones, okay, poor Asa Hutchinson didn't look great.

DEWS: Former governor of Arkansas.

KAMARCK: Yeah, the former governor of Arkansas. And then there was this child, Ramaswamy, who was just so happy to be on the stage. He was just grinning ear to ear as if he were 12. And he was relentlessly attacking everyone on stage. I think his aggression combined with sort of an audacity, I mean who was he after all to attack former vice presidents of the United States and senators, et cetera. I think it may have backfired. I don't know. I mean he's got no experience in elective office or foreign policy and he doesn't seem to have a lot of personal maturity. The way that I think to compare him is to compare him to Pete Buttigieg, who was about the same age in the Democratic field. And Pete managed to come across as very likable, even

though people had doubts about his lack of experience, et cetera. Pete at least came across as likable. He was a veteran, et cetera. And I think Ramaswamy was just a little bit over his skies as we like to say.

DEWS: Well, when the 2015-2016 cycle started, of course, Donald Trump had no elected experience either. And it seems that Vivek Ramaswamy is kind of occupying the lane as the most vocally pro-Trump candidate, even called Trump the best president of the 21st century. I mean, what do you think his motivation could be in running for this nomination?

KAMARCK: Like many of them, frankly, Ron DeSantis too, I think they hope that Trump collapses and that once Trump collapses, they are the ones there to pick up the pieces. The only reason to run as the Trump candidate, the mini Trump so to speak, with Trump in the race is that you hope that something's going to happen. He loses in Iowa, for instance, comes in second or third place in Iowa. He, you know, drops out of the race because of his legal problems, things like that. So I think that's the game they're playing, which is try to get the Trump base.

Now, it's a dangerous game because it involves a fair amount of falling on the part of Trump. And as we know, he withstands crises that would have done in other politicians ages ago. But I think that's where they are.

Maybe it's best to talk about the lanes, you know, in presidential primary politics. People often talk about a lane to the nomination. And I think this crowd in this nomination race, the Republicans have three lanes. The first lane is, okay, be Trump. Be as Trumpy as you possibly can in hopes that for some reason, you can get that Trump base to come to you.

The second lane is to be absolutely, clearly anti-Trump. And that's where Chris Christie is, that's where Asa Hutchinson is, just as … and Will Hurd as well, who is kind of back there in the pack. But that's the second lane.

Then there is this big murky middle where most of them are. And I think Mike Pence is probably and maybe Nikki Haley are maybe the masters of that murky middle, because Mike Pence spoke very well last night about the achievements of the Trump-Pence administration. So he can make the case about, for I would be Trump without all the drama. And so I think he has a shot at doing that. And then there's others in there trying to straddle that line, right? It is noteworthy that with the exception of Vivek, everybody raised their hand and did agree that Mike Pence did the right thing on January 6th. So that is kind of settled. And then the question is, what else?

DEWS: Well, let's shift then to what you think about some of the more substantive policy issues that you heard in the debate. We talk a lot about the some of the zingers or the things that play well on social media the next day, there's a lot of great lines. We mentioned Ukraine, you mentioned the abortion question, what kind of substantive policy issues stood out for you in the debate?

KAMARCK: Well, more importantly is which didn't. Okay? I mean, no one had a comprehensive, coherent economic policy. Okay? None of them. There were stories

last week about Trump putting together an economic policy, the center of which would be a 10% tariff on everything. And it was quickly shot down, including by people who had worked for Trump on the Council of Economic Advisers, as being basically a disaster for American consumers, a disaster for American manufacturers who rely on parts abroad, et cetera. Just, you know, just basically a sort of crazy idea. Bold, yes, but sort of crazy.

So interestingly enough, in his interview last night, which I watched in its entirety as a glutton for punishment, in his interview last night, Trump never mentioned the tariff issue. In fact, other than to say people are hurting from inflation, there was no economic counter from anybody in the Republican Party. And I think that's a real "the dog that didn't bark." I mean, that is a real issue there that they skipped it.

They know they are in deep trouble on abortion, but they are also looking to have the first contest in Iowa. And in Iowa, the evangelical vote is a big vote. And so nobody really wants to piss off evangelical voters. And so that I think kept everybody. But you know, as Nikki Haley did, and she stood out for doing it, they've got to come to grips with this because they were absolutely on the wrong side of it and every time there's either a referendum or an election that is clearly about abortions Republicans are not just losing, they're losing big, they're losing by nearly ten points. So they've got to do better on that.

And on Ukraine the far-right Republicans are simply moving against the tide, America is still backing Ukraine, Mitch McConnell is backing Ukraine, most of the Republican Congress is backing Ukraine. So I don't think there's much place for them to go further to the right on that.

DEWS: So, thinking broadly about the Republican Party, and maybe with some reference to Donald Trump's interview with Tucker Carlson, since he wasn't at the debate, do those two events tell you anything about the state of the GOP today or where it's going as we head into the 2024 presidential election?

KAMARCK: Yeah, they're locked … they're like in a headlock, right? And the guy doing the headlock is Donald Trump. Okay? They really have so, with Donald Trump in the race, with his constituents so firmly behind him, and you know, the estimate is that the hardcore Trump are anywhere from 25 to 37% of the Republican electorate. Okay? So they're a subsection of the Republican electorate, but an important one.

You know, it's like the party can't move. It's like it can't get on. Notably missing, you'll see in the piece that Bill Galston and I wrote today, notably missing from both the Trump interview and the debate was any pivot to the future. Okay? Trump especially, but really all of them, they're living in the past. Ron DeSantis is trying to make a campaign out of wokeness that sort of doesn't really … a lot of people don't like wokeness, but it also doesn't really affect many people's lives in one way or the other.

Donald Trump, it was interesting at one point last night, what he did was, Tucker Carlson asked him, hey, if you're elected, what can we expect? He gave him the future question, and Trump made a coherent answer about immigration, one of his important issues, but then immediately, with very little connective tissue, went to

talking about the crowd on January 6th and how it was filled with people with love and compassion in their hearts. And it was weird, right? It was like he is so stuck in the past that I think he's keeping a lot of the rest of the Republican party stuck in the past as well.

DEWS: But despite that, would it be fair to say that today's Republican Party is Trump's party?

KAMARCK: I think it is Trump's party, but it's not as much of Trump's party as people make it out to be. Again, the very fact that you had on that stage, with the exception of Vivek Ramaswamy, you had seven respectable, lifelong Republican officeholders who had served their party and served their nation in the government—that has to tell you that people are trying to break free of the Trump party. They just are not quite sure how. I don't think anybody has really found their footing yet. And that's why I think the next debate will be a pretty interesting debate.

DEWS: Well, Elaine, as we wrap up here, do you think these debates really matter? I mean, who are they for?

KAMARCK: I think these debates are mainly for the political class, people who are active in politics, who will go volunteer in campaigns, who will write $50 checks, for the reporters who are watching them and trying to get a sense of who these people are and how to cover them. I think that they're very important for the political class.

And I do think that they shape coverage and they have an impact on things like money. I mean, I wouldn't be surprised if Mike Pence and Nikki Haley get a little boost in money from last night, okay, because they did pretty well. Nobody stepped in it last night, right? Nobody really did poorly last night.

So they are an important part of the process these days and frankly for democracy they're a good look at the candidates, right? I mean, there's a lot of things I'd do differently about the debates, but frankly, they're a good look at the candidates. We still have some months to go before the Iowa caucuses, and I would not be presumptuous enough to predict a winner based on one debate, but a picture will emerge about each of these people, and I think that's important.

DEWS: Well, Elaine, as always, it's great fun to talk with you. I always learn a lot and I look forward to speaking with you more about this process in the future. So thank you for taking the time today.

KAMARCK: Well, thank you, Fred.

DEWS: You can read Elaine's analysis with Bill Galston about the debate on our FixGov blog and for key election metrics for presidential candidates, also check out the Tracking the Invisible Primary series on that blog on brookings.edu.