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**Gone Rogue:
Time to Reform the Presidential Primary Debates**

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How would the course of history been altered had P.T. Barnum moderated the famed Lincoln-Douglas debates in 1858?

Today's ultimate showman and on-again, off-again presidential candidate Donald Trump invited the Republican presidential primary contenders to a debate he planned to moderate and broadcast over the Christmas holidays. One of a record 30 such debates and forums held or scheduled between May 2011 and March 2012, this, more than any of the previous debates, had the potential to be an embarrassing debacle.

Trump "could do a lot of damage to somebody," said Karl Rove, the architect of President George W. Bush's 2000 and 2004 campaigns, in an interview with Greta Van Susteren of Fox News. "And I suspect it's not going to be to the candidate that he's leaning towards. This is a man who says himself that he is going to run—potentially run—for the president of the United States starting next May. Why do we have that person moderating a debate?" ¹

Sen. John McCain of Arizona, the 2008 Republican nominee for president, also reacted: "I guarantee you, there are too many debates and we have lost the focus on what the candidates' vision for America is... It's evolved into making mistakes... [T]hat's not what debates are supposed to be about, and I don't think it's helping the Republican Party or our candidates." ²

In an interview with *The New York Times*, former White House press secretary Ari Fleischer called Trump's debate "an invitation to a circus." ³

Only former House Speaker Newt Gingrich and former Sen. Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania accepted Trump's invitation. When former Ambassador to China Jon Huntsman and Rep. Ron Paul of Texas declined, Trump called them "joke candidates." But according to conservative commentator Charles Krauthammer, "A debate in which the moderator chooses a nominee afterwards, I think, is a reality-TV show. It's not a debate. It is a joke." ⁴

The process of electing the next president of the United States is not a joke. Though Trump backed out of moderating the debate after broad criticism, it still leads us to the question: Does the current primary debate process best serve voters, the candidates, the parties and the nation, or is there a better way?

Why Debates Matter

“Oops.”

That was the singular utterance few will forget, delivered during a presidential primary debate nationally televised on Nov. 9, 2011.

Certainly, Texas Gov. Rick Perry would like to forget the preceding 53 seconds of painful searching for the right answer with millions of potential voters watching live and a million more viewing the viral video the next day. But it is unlikely even therapy could erase from his memory banks that moment of eternity as it inarguably led to the collapse of a campaign most political observers expected to be a top contender for the 2012 Republican nomination.

Perry’s “oops” moment was the third in a series of disastrous debate performances. He compounded the already difficult challenge of running for the nation’s top office by entering the contest in August, late in the calendar, and by agreeing to participate in a series of debates only weeks later without time to prepare properly.

Perry’s paralysis is only exhibit A in the proposition that debate performances increasingly—and sometimes, instantly—matter in modern presidential campaigns. Consider the impact of the debates on the prospects of four other Republican frontrunners in the very volatile 2012 campaign season:

- Rep. Michele Bachmann of Minnesota began rising in national prominence following her breakout debut at the June debate in New Hampshire, and then in Iowa at the August debate where she won the first straw poll. But after a succession of less stellar debate performances, including a strategic mis-fire aimed at Perry during the two Florida debates in September, her overall popularity plummeted.
- After preparing to run for president for years, former Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty dropped out of the race just three months after officially declaring his candidacy, largely due to his failure to directly take on former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney during a key exchange on health care at the June debate in New Hampshire. Though Pawlenty finally challenged Romney at the August debate in Iowa, the damage already had been done.

- Businessman Herman Cain rocketed to the lead nationally by showcasing not only his oft-repeated 9-9-9 tax plan but also his personable outsider appeal in a solid series of debates. Though atop the leader board mid-October through mid-November, Cain was not immune to damaging personal allegations, and he continued to lose ground at two national security and foreign policy debates in South Carolina and Washington, D.C., in November. He then suspended his campaign in December.
- Finally, the remarkable resurgence of former House Speaker Newt Gingrich—after a campaign meltdown and loss of staff in June—was based almost solely on the continual strength of his performances throughout the seemingly never-ending string of debates in the summer, fall and winter of 2011. With his wit, knowledge and candor on display at the debates, Gingrich re-emerged from the scrap heap after his campaign melted down in the summer and became the frontrunner, leading in national polls by double digits.

Setting the Stage

Fittingly, the first nationally broadcast presidential debate occurred during a Republican primary season. In 1948, New York Gov. Thomas Dewey and former Minnesota Gov. Harold Stassen argued the merits of outlawing the Communist Party while an estimated 40 to 80 million citizens listened in via radio. The first televised primary debate was in 1968 between Democratic Sens. Robert F. Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy, just four days before Robert Kennedy's assassination.

In the decades since, memorable debate moments have helped shape presidential primary contests. In 1980, when the Federal Elections Commission ruled a two-person Republican primary debate sponsored by the *Nashua Telegraph* would violate campaign contribution laws, GOP candidate and former California Gov. Ronald Reagan personally financed the debate—and invited all of the candidates to participate. When Reagan attempted to introduce the candidates who joined him on stage where only two chairs were set by the original sponsor, the moderator tried to cut him off mid-sentence. Reagan sharply rebutted, "I am paying for this microphone, Mr. Greene." The crowd roared, the moment made the headlines and Reagan surged in the polls.

In the 2004 primary debates, CNN's Anderson Cooper asked the Democratic candidates on a Boston stage if any of them were "willing to admit having used

marijuana in the past.” Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts, Sen. John Edwards of North Carolina and former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean all replied with single-word affirmations, offering nothing in the way of qualifiers or caveats. The casual exchange was a remarkable sign of both a definitive shift in U.S. political discourse and the modern expectations of a national political candidate.

Four years later, with Sen. Hillary Clinton of New York and Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois locked in a heated battle for the Democratic nomination for president, the candidates took to the stage for a debate in New Hampshire. The moderator asked Sen. Clinton, “What can you say to the voters tonight who see a resume and like it, but are hesitating on the likability issue, where they seem to like Barack Obama more?”

“Well, that hurts my feelings,” replied a broadly smiling Clinton. “But I’ll try to go on. He’s very likable—I agree with that. I don’t think I’m that bad.”

Barely looking up from his notes, Obama leaned into the microphone to casually interject, “You’re likable enough, Hillary.”

The exchange helped cast what became one of the most important narratives in the primary. Clinton had the important experience, but for that cycle and that electorate, Obama had the more important charisma.

Debates “Gone Rogue”

While external events—over which presidential candidates have little control—often impact election outcomes, there are four opportunities when campaigns have an opportunity to substantially affect public opinion and move poll numbers:

1. The announcement and rollout of the candidacy
2. The convention nomination speech
3. The selection of a vice president, and
4. The debates.

Candidates have complete control over their announcements, convention speeches and choice of vice president. And they certainly have control and responsibility for the quality of their debate performances. But, as evidenced by the 2012 Republican primary process, control of the debates has been lost. That is a danger.

Bob Goodwin, veteran of seven presidential campaigns, wrote in an August editorial:

It is important to remember that primary, and later general election, debates remain the single most sustained dose of candidate exposure that any candidate will ever have, and so they take on immense importance for the candidates, the media and the voters. ⁵

As the presidential primary debates have become more frequent and more potent drivers of voter perceptions, the sponsoring networks, media and third-party groups have wrested away control of the primary debates from the candidates and the national parties. Partnering state party organizations are not equipped to battle the broadcast behemoths driven by ratings and their own agendas.

Brett O'Donnell, chief strategist for the Bachmann 2012 campaign, reacts:

It's been crazy. The networks have not been responsive at all... They've just said this is how it's going to be, take it or leave it. They rig it to be good television for them, at least what they think is good television. And so they instigate food fights.

It's in the interest of the parties to have their candidates look like serious, substantive people... The fact that we've had virtually no luck in convincing the networks about the way they are producing the debates cuts against that and means that they've really taken over control of the process. ⁶

"The debates have just become vehicles for the networks," says Russ Schriefer, lead media strategist of the Romney for President campaign. "It's a branding exercise." ⁷

A veteran reporter responded off the record to the general criticism: "We have our own agenda which sometimes ends up being more about entertainment, eyeballs and profits than it does serving the broader public interest." ⁸

From my perspective, both as a one-time insider and now outsider to the process, the debate formats, timing, moderators and questions no longer showcase the candidates' strengths or encourage dialogue on the substantive issues most important to primary voters. Creating reality-TV conflicts, seeking unrealistic 60-second solutions to unrest in the Middle East and allowing only 30-second sound bite rebuttals may drive better ratings but not a better democratic process.

“The job of a debate should be to inform, not entertain,” says Jim Lehrer, PBS anchor and moderator of 11 past presidential debates. “I can embarrass anybody, if that was the purpose. But you should do that for game shows, not debates.”⁹

While some may be entertained by the theatrics of today’s primary debates, and media entities may be rolling up record ratings—5.4 million viewers for Perry’s first debate from beneath the wings of Air Force One in the Reagan Presidential Library on Sept. 7, 2011, and the high of 7.58 million for the Dec. 10 debate in Des Moines—the question is: Does the current primary debate process best serve voters, the candidates, the parties and the nation, or is there a better way?

In talking to candidates, campaign managers, party officials, members of the media and voters at large over the last few months, frustration with the current process has been growing, punctuated by Trump’s toying in an attempt to steal the show. And, no surprise, they express a clear desire to reform the primary debate process before the next presidential contest in 2016. As one man-on-the street interview succinctly stated: “American Idol is a lousy way to select the next leader of the free world.”¹⁰

The four central criticisms of the current debates “gone rogue” are the frequency, format, selection criteria and content.

Frequency

Here a Debate, There a Debate, Everywhere a Debate

As media entities and sponsors increasingly recognize the attention and value a debate can bring, it is no surprise the campaigns are swamped with requests.

During this campaign season, there have been 16 Republican primary debates or forums hosted, and broadcast or streamed online, through Dec. 10, 2011, with 14 additional debates scheduled through March 2012, for a total of 30, and growing. (No Democratic primary debates have been held, of course, with the incumbent president facing no challenges for his party’s nomination.) By contrast, Democrats held two primary debates in 2004 and Republicans held three in the 2000 race, according to *The Washington Post*; however, in 2008, there were 19 Republican primary debates and 16 Democratic.¹¹

For those who closely follow the 2012 presidential race, the increasing number of debates are “increasingly intolerable to watch,” observed Jason Linkins of *Huffington*

Post,¹² yet there are three Iowa debates planned for one week in December and two debates in two days in New Hampshire in January.

A campaign's most limited resource is the candidate's time. Consider then the impact of 30—or more—primary debates on a campaign that must:

1. Facilitate the debate requests
2. Schedule the debate
3. Negotiate the details of the debate
4. Prepare the candidate, and
5. Block off at least three days on the campaign calendar for the actual debate.

Just two months into an abbreviated calendar, Perry campaign adviser Dave Carney told *The Wall Street Journal*, "The entire campaign is important—all the inputs." But the frequency of debates, he added "is a total distraction to what a campaign would like to do, which is to go talk to voters directly."¹³

With the candidates and their campaigns spending more time dealing with debate-related logistics, they have less time to participate in other historically valuable activities, like development and delivery of policy speeches, and retail campaigning one-on-one on the trail and at townhall meetings where candidates can learn directly from voters' questions. As proven in the smaller first primary states like Iowa and New Hampshire, "direct contacts shape how much voters know and like about candidates."¹⁴

Former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, winner of the 2008 Iowa Republican caucus, in an interview at this year's Ames, Iowa, straw poll, commented on the value of this early face-to-face campaigning:

Without this, I think the candidates really don't understand the value of retail politics. Once it gets into the funnel of the long-term campaign, these candidates are going to fly in on a chartered jet, they're going to get on a very secure bus and, other than work a rope line, they're not going to sit down and talk to people in a diner. They're not going to go to a farm and talk to some guy who's pulled over a tractor to talk to him. I want the guy sitting in the Oval Office to understand what real Americans are having to put up with today and not just the ones going to a rah-rah rally or writing a check.¹⁵

Hoping for a breakthrough in New Hampshire's open primary, Jon Huntsman said in an interview with the *Nashua Telegraph*, "This is a state that values retail politics. You've got to shake hands. You've got to lay out your vision, your view for this country." ¹⁶

"Candidates should be doing more than just debating," says *Time* magazine political editor Mark Halperin. "They should be giving policy speeches, talking to voters and doing things like going on *Charlie Rose*, *Morning Joe* and *Meet the Press*." ¹⁷

Veteran reporter Dan Balz of *The Washington Post* says that television competition to host debates is overwhelming: "The networks are so aggressive. The competition to host is so competitive, it's creating more debates than you need or want. And they come at the exclusion of other things that are important to evaluate candidates." ¹⁸

Mike McCurry, a former White House press secretary and co-chair of the Presidential Commission on Debates says though the general election debates play a much different role, the primary debates' goal now is to "create news and support on-air talent" of the sponsoring network. ¹⁹

Howard Fineman, editorial director of AOL Huffington Post Media Group, says the debates become the defining event of the campaigns:

The candidates are just swinging vine to vine with all these debates. They take candidates away from talking to voters in unstructured situations. Which is clearly a loss because that used to be where candidates did their learning before going into the bubble. Now you go into the bubble immediately.

Debates have allowed the press to elbow their way in front of voters for commercial purposes. And debating skills are skills you never use again as president. The presidency is not the House of Commons. ²⁰

After all, we call the president the commander-in-chief, not the debater-in-chief.

Format

Let's Get Ready to R-u-u-m-b-l-e

Perhaps the only theatrical element missing from some of the highly staged debates this year: a ring announcer. "Everyone has given up on the idea that the debates should be informative. It's become all about performance," says Balz of *The*

Washington Post. “Who’s on the hot seat and why, as opposed to what did we learn and what do the candidates actually think. All they are now is ‘Fight Night’.”²¹

Moderators becoming the story, questions designed to spur conflict, buzzers limiting answers to 60 seconds, and candidates constrained to one-liners has created a new genre—politainment, as described by Ryan Lizza in *The New Republic*.²²

One observer comments, the debates “are like underwater kayaking,” and “they are slithering in the direction of sheer entertainment.”²³

From the viewpoint of Bachmann campaign strategist Brett O’Donnell:

The networks want the debates to appear like a game show. No substance. They want things to move fast. And they want the candidates to fight. Because that’s what makes for great TV. So they will try and make a format that is most conducive to producing fights on stage.

It’s all sensational stuff: time limits on answers, the way they ask questions, the moderators. And we’ve had zero input. It’s made for some moments that are unhealthy...²⁴

“Part of the problem,” according to a staffer for one of the campaigns, “is questioners confuse substance and snark. You get, ‘Let’s just try and trip ‘em up and create some kind of confrontation so we can make news.’ Their goal is not to allow a forum where the candidates can talk about issues, but to get them to fight with each other.”²⁵

Reality is shaped by perceptions created, and the most damaging reality of the 2012 debates: Serious candidates are not taken seriously.

In a Catch-22, frontrunners are favored with more time on camera at the debates than those deemed second- or third-tier, thereby further securing their frontrunner status. Rep. Paul, for example, was allotted only 89 seconds in the first hour of the Nov. 13 debate in South Carolina.²⁶ The consistent leader in speaking time at most debates was Mitt Romney, who was also rewarded with center or near-center podium status. The disparity in times only fuels suspicion of the media picking winners and losers rather than the voters, as voiced by Rep. Bachmann after a CBS memo became public suggesting she be given less time to answer foreign policy questions.²⁷

“Candidates shouldn’t be short changed,” suggests PBS anchor Lehrer. “Everybody should be heard. They should all be treated equally. And place on stage should be determined by drawing straws not polls.”

Four longer-format forums, sponsored by independent groups and individuals rather than mainstream media, broke through the bickering debate mold, delivering a depth and quality of information from the candidates and conversations with them not possible within the artifice of 30- and 60-second constraints. With no major gaffes and no blood drawn at these roundtable discussions or single-candidate grillings, including by a panel of attorneys general, they unfortunately generated less media hype and therefore reached smaller audiences.

Selection Criteria

Just Get Me On the Stage

The selection criteria for the 2012 Republican primary debates and forums held through Dec. 3, 2011, have been constant only in the candidates excluded. Because of an absence of any central organizing entity or party control, there were no clear or consistent criteria for qualifying for the debates. The criteria changed from debate to debate. One threshold adopted by a number of the debate sponsors was that the candidates had to poll at one percent nationally.

Debate	Sponsors	Participants	Criteria	Also Invited	Excluded
May 5, 2011 Greenville, SC	Fox News, SC Republican Party	Cain, Johnson, Paul, Pawlenty, Santorum	1% in five national polls, exploratory committee formed	Romney	Gingrich, Fred Karger, Buddy Roemer
June 13, 2011 Manchester, NH	CNN, WMUR- TV, New Hampshire Union Leader	Bachmann, Cain, Gingrich, Paul, Pawlenty, Romney, Santorum	2% in at least three national polls (from set group)	Rudy Giuliani, Huntsman, Sarah Palin	Johnson, Karger, Roemer
Aug. 11, 2011 Ames, Iowa	Fox News, The Washington Examiner, Republican Party of Iowa	Bachmann, Cain, Gingrich, Huntsman, Paul, Pawlenty,* Romney, Santorum	1% in five national polls	--	Johnson, Karger, Thad McCotter, Roemer
Sep. 5, 2011 Columbia, SC Forum	Sen. Jim DeMint (R-SC), American Principles Project	Bachmann, Cain, Gingrich, Paul, Romney	5% on Real Clear Politics average poll on 08/22/11	Giuliani, Palin, Perry **	Huntsman, Johnson, Karger, McCotter, Roemer, Santorum

Debate	Sponsors	Participants	Criteria	Also Invited	Excluded
Sep. 7, 2011 Simi Valley, Calif.	NBC News, Politico, The Ronald Reagan Foundation	Bachmann, Cain, Gingrich, Huntsman, Paul, Perry, Romney, Santorum	4% in one national poll (from a set group)	--	Johnson, Karger, McCotter, Roemer
Sep. 12, 2011 Tampa, Fla.	CNN, The Tea Party Express	Bachmann, Cain, Gingrich, Huntsman, Paul, Perry, Romney, Santorum	2% in at least three national polls (from set group)	--	Johnson, Karger, McCotter,* Roemer
Sep. 22, 2011 Orlando, Fla.	Fox News, Google, Florida GOP	Bachmann, Cain, Gingrich, Huntsman, Johnson, Paul, Perry, Romney, Santorum	1% in five national polls	--	Karger, Roemer
Oct. 11, 2011 Hanover, NH	Bloomberg, The Washington Post, WBIN-TV	Bachmann, Cain, Gingrich, Huntsman, Paul, Perry, Romney, Santorum	Participation in three previous debates, \$500,000 in 2Q campaign funds reported	--	Johnson, Karger, Roemer (Note: Perry did not meet 2Q \$)
Oct. 18, 2011 Las Vegas, NV	CNN, Western Republican Leadership Conf.	Bachmann, Cain, Gingrich, Paul, Perry, Romney, Santorum	2% in at least three national polls (from set group)	--	Johnson, Karger, Roemer
Nov. 5, 2011 Houston, Texas Forum	Texas Tea Party Patriot PAC	Cain, Gingrich	By invitation	Group offered separate forum for Perry and "X"	Johnson, Karger, Roemer and remaining primary field
Nov. 9, 2011 Rochester, MI	CNBC, Michigan Republican Party, Oakland University	Bachmann, Cain, Gingrich, Huntsman, Paul, Perry, Romney, Santorum	3% in at least one poll (from set group)	--	Johnson, Karger, Roemer
Nov. 12, 2011 Spartanburg, SC	CBS News, National Journal, SC Republican Party,	Bachmann, Cain, Gingrich, Huntsman, Paul, Perry, Romney, Santorum	1% in Real Clear Politics average poll for Oct.	--	Johnson, Karger, Roemer
Nov. 19, 2011 Des Moines, Iowa Forum	The Family Leader	Bachmann, Cain, Gingrich, Paul, Perry, Santorum	By invitation	Huntsman, Romney	Johnson, Karger, Roemer
Nov. 22, 2011 Washington, D.C.	CNN, The Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise Institute	Bachmann, Cain,* Gingrich, Huntsman, Paul, Perry, Romney, Santorum	2% in at least three national polls (from set group)	--	Johnson, Karger, Roemer

Debate	Sponsors	Participants	Criteria	Also Invited	Excluded
Dec. 3, 2011 New York City Forum	Former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, Fox News	Bachmann, Gingrich, Paul, Perry, Romney, Santorum	By invitation	Huntsman	Johnson, Karger, Roemer
Dec. 10, 2011 Des Moines, Iowa	ABC News, ABC5/WOI-DT, Des Moines Register, Republican Party of Iowa	Bachmann, Gingrich, Perry, Paul, Romney, Santorum	5% in an Iowa or national poll	--	Huntsman, Johnson, Karger, Roemer

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* Withdrew prior to next debate

** Returned to Texas to manage wildfire disaster recovery

Note: For more complete information on the selection criteria and analysis of each debate, see Appendix.

All the world is a stage, but only some players are given a microphone. Consider the plight of Charles “Buddy” Roemer, a 2012 Republican candidate for president who was not allowed in a single debate or invited to any forum.

Roemer is a former four-term congressman and governor of Louisiana. He is a graduate of Harvard University and Harvard Business School. He is a trained economist and a highly successful banker and private businessman.

A thought leader in combating the influence of money and corruption in government, Roemer passed the most radical campaign finance reforms in Louisiana history and some of the toughest in the country. He has experience in international trade as a result of frequent work in China. And his considerable debating skills were instrumental in his 1987 defeat of incumbent Gov. Edwin Edwards, a crafty Louisiana politician who had never lost a race in 19 elections.

Roemer decided to run for president in the 2012 Republican primary. Despite his considerable experience and resume, he was not allowed in a single debate. Meanwhile, Herman Cain, a fast-food executive with no experience in government was allowed to participate in every debate until he suspended his campaign.

Former New Mexico Gov. Gary Johnson was another candidate routinely excluded from the debates. He did pass the one percent threshold and was allowed to participate in two debates.

Why is it that Gary Johnson could meet the one percent threshold but not Buddy Roemer? Was it possible that Johnson was truly recognized and rewarded more than Buddy Roemer, even though they shared similar backgrounds and had both been out of the political game for awhile?

To test the theory, a national random-sample poll was conducted with 1,000 respondents. The polled names were switched to Buddy Johnson and Gary Roemer; neither being actual candidates for president, or known entities. "Gary" Roemer received two percent of the vote, theoretically qualifying him for most of the early debates. And "Buddy" Johnson received zero votes, suggesting the real problem for Roemer in qualifying for the debates may simply have been the name "Buddy" — a nickname voters may find un-presidential.

However, not all candidates were included in the actual polls used to determine qualification for the primary debates. "If that's not some kind of a conspiracy, I don't know what is," says Johnson.²⁹ And given the insignificant difference between a one percent or two percent polling number, particularly early in the primary calendar, it is easy to question the entire system upon which the criteria for entering into primary debates has been constructed.

While difficult to prove, the three most significant GOP candidates kept out of the debates all make claims of institutional discrimination. Roemer is sure that his career spent running against the corrupting influence of money in politics keeps him out of the limelight.³⁰

Johnson believes that his rather unorthodox position on the drug war, rather than his polling numbers, is the real reason why he's been sidelined:

I happen to know of very large Republican donors, historically speaking, who think that I'm the devil incarnate for espousing the legalization of marijuana. Are those same individuals on the board of CNN? By no means are these people in the majority, but are they pulling the strings? 'Look we gave you a million dollars last year,' they say, 'but if you include Johnson we won't give you a nickel.' They probably have nothing to do with it, but if I'm aware of just a few of those people, chances are there are more.³¹

Fred Karger has gone further than either of his excluded colleagues, filing lawsuits alleging the violation of federal election campaign laws against a pair of debate sponsors that kept him off their stages.

The first case charges the Iowa Faith and Freedom Coalition (IFFC) of exclusion from their March 7, 2011, Presidential Forum “based on the subjective prejudices of the IFFC’s President, Mr. Steve Scheffler.” Citing an email exchange between himself and Scheffler, Karger claims that he was not invited to the forum based on his support for gay marriage and general advocacy in favor of the “radical homosexual community.”³²

The second case accuses the Fox News Channel and its owner News Corporation of discrimination in spite of Karger meeting the necessary polling numbers for the Aug. 11 debate. “It appears that because I met their originally stated criteria, Fox News changed their criteria in order to exclude me,” concludes Karger.³³

Roemer was the only Republican candidate for president with legislative and executive experience to go along with his success in the private sector, yet he was denied access to every single debate.

Adding insult to injury, when Roemer went to file to be on the ballot in Florida, he was told that to qualify, he had to have been in a debate (even though in Florida he was polling at three percent ahead of Johnson and Santorum, and was tied with Huntsman, all of whom qualified to be on the ballot).

“So who chooses the choices for the voters of Florida?” Roemer asks. And answers, “The news media because they decided who gets in the debates.

“It hurts you in ways uncounted,” not to be included in the debates Roemer says. “It hurts your credibility as a candidate. Doors shut in other venues. You don’t get on the ballot in Florida. You don’t get invited to editorial boards. And it dictates how people run for president in the future. They run by being famous, not by being good.”³⁴

Roemer has now signaled his intention to seek the nomination of an alternative nominating platform, Americans Elect, while Karger continues his shoestring and unorthodox campaign for the Republican nomination, and Johnson is reportedly considering a third-party run as a libertarian.

Content

The Euro Is Imploding But...Elvis or Johnny Cash?

“Dancing with the Stars or American Idol? Spicy or mild? Elvis or Johnny Cash?”

The unemployment rate ticked up to 9.1 percent, Nasdaq turned negative for the year, unfunded liabilities for the United States topped \$61.6 trillion, covert airstrikes in Yemen intensified, Europe's financial crisis worsened and Iran talked of testing a nuclear bomb, but the candidates for president of the United States were asked a series of silly "this or that" questions during the June 13 debate in New Hampshire.

Ideally, debate questions should be timely, relevant and thought-provoking. They should be focused on substantive issues, and should test the breadth and depth of each candidate's knowledge. Not all questions asked at the debates so far have met that standard.

As Daniel Horowitz posted on the conservative blog *Red State*, "Although a debate stage with eight candidates is inherently conducive to a circus atmosphere, the debate moderators need to focus on questions which elicit substantive answers to specific policy questions from the candidates." ³⁵

Strategist Goodwin offered organizers these insights:

It is important for debate sponsors and their moderators to ensure that their debates have a focus and a goal. That goal should be to discuss some issues in depth. How many issues? That depends on the number of participants and the freedom to abandon the stated format on occasion in order to obtain informative answers...

Debates should have an approximate 50/50 balance of both domestic and national security/foreign policy questions. The reason is simple. All of the viewers don't watch all of the debates. Some might watch only one. The candidates want the voters to know where they stand on both domestic and foreign policy issues." ³⁶

And voters need to know where the candidates stand on both.

The questions asked—as well as those not asked—often reveal the bias of the moderators and panels, whether the more liberal view of some media or the more conservative view of Tea Party panelists. Advice from Horowitz:

[M]oderators from *Politico* and NBC should remember that they are overseeing a Republican debate. As such, their questions should stem from conservative premises, and should provoke thoughtful responses from the

candidates—responses that will demonstrate their visions of conservative governance to a conservative electorate.³⁷

Corralling Cats

When Reince Priebus became chairman of the Republican National Committee in January 2011, among his first orders of business was to try to get his arms around the primary debates.

When we came in the door, I put together a debate commission committee made up of six members of the RNC and six others. We would agree that the candidates would only do one debate a month starting in July or August, that we would spread out debate partners and there would be a fundraising component for the RNC. We wanted to have the Party play a meaningful role that would inform our voters who share the goal of defeating Obama. The media wants to create news, I want to defeat this president.³⁸

But, even before Priebus arrived at the RNC, eight debates had already been scheduled. The previous RNC chairman, Michael Steele, had told the networks the RNC would not be playing a role.

“When we walked in, there were already eight debates on the calendar. I needed to get my arms around the existing ones and try to create a plan on format for future debates,” Priebus says. “We appointed a Debate Committee, talked to most of the campaigns, and in addition to sanctioning one debate a month we came up with criteria for participation based on either polling numbers or money raised.”³⁹

But without the advantage of early leverage, and under the unique circumstances of this particular election and field of candidates, there wasn’t much Priebus, or anyone, could do to control who sponsored debates and who accepted them. There was no mechanism to stop a media entity looking to brand its network from proposing events, and nothing to discourage candidates seeking attention from jumping at the opportunity.

And Priebus had no help from the campaigns. “This is a matter that should be left to the campaigns,” *Politico* reported a campaign staffer saying. “The ownership over this belongs to the campaigns.”⁴⁰

Which is how we ended up with the announcement that Donald Trump was moderating a debate with *Newsmax* and ION Television, just 10 days before the Iowa caucuses. To his credit, Priebus intervened and said he could not advise candidates to attend the debate because Trump had refused to rule out a run for president as an independent. “It would be malpractice for me to allow Republican candidates to participate in a debate with a moderator who would be potentially running against them,” he says. ⁴¹

Under the headline “Donald Trump and Newsmax to Host the Dumbest/Most Watchable Debate of the 2012 Campaign,” Dan Amira of *New York* magazine wrote:

In what seems like a plot dreamed up by the DNC to turn the GOP primary campaign into as much of a clownish spectacle as possible, national laughingstock Donald Trump and conservative website *Newsmax* have announced plans to moderate a debate on Dec. 27 in Des Moines, Iowa, to air on ION, that broadcast network you watched one time for two minutes by accident.

This actually seems like a pickle for the serious candidates in the GOP field. Do you attend and risk tainting your gravitas among moderates by answering insane questions from a birther reality TV star? Or do you beg off but risk alienating the GOP base, which reads *Newsmax* and for some reason doesn’t realize how much of a joke Trump has become?

This “clown-like” idea, as a boycotting candidate Paul calls it, is the exact sort of impetus that caused people like Newton Minow, former chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, to begin thinking about reforming the general election debate process 20 years ago.

As I participated in the frustrating inside negotiations for the 1980 debates, I began to think that sponsorship of the debates needed to be strengthened if they were to continue. Institutionalizing presidential debates had been the goal of the League of Women Voters, but by 1984 it was clear to me that despite its valiant efforts, the League simply did not have the clout to succeed. ⁴²

Minow further laments that the debates were “ad-hoc” affairs put on at a moment’s notice, and were susceptible to behind-the-scenes manipulation by the campaigns:

In 1976, 1980 and 1984, the debates occurred only after a long period of sporadic negotiations followed by a late flurry of eleventh hour negotiations

between the leading candidates and, in an ever-diminishing role, the League...

The future of the debates, I believed, would require the political parties themselves to have a bigger and more public role in convening them. I am an unapologetic believer in strong political parties. The best way to have a democracy is with two or maybe three strong political parties, a tradition that is part of the stability of our nation. And so after 1984, I began to think that one way the parties could become more important, and more accountable for their actions, would be to make them responsible for the debates. ⁴³

Minow believed that the parties were the only ones with the leverage to get the major candidates to commit and then keep them in line, preventing them from shirking their respective duties and trying to manipulate the process.

After the 1984 cycle, the Harvard Institute of Politics was conducting a detailed study of the election, concentrating specifically on the debates. At the same time, Georgetown was engaged in a similar project. Minow took a leave of absence from his law firm to head up the study. It concentrated on four principle issues:

1. The impact of the debates on the public
2. Debate sponsorship
3. Their format, and
4. How to fairly accommodate third-party candidates.

Minow recommended institutionalizing the debates so that they were not cobbled together each time, each cycle. He recommended the creation of a nonpartisan "Presidential Debates Organization" to organize and sponsor, and he got the chairs of the Republican and Democratic national committees to join in his calls.

Minow believed 1988 represented the perfect cycle to implement these new general election debate rules, as it would be the first time since 1960 that no incumbent president would be in the debates. No one was positive as to who the nominees would be (George H.W. Bush was far from a sure thing), removing any charge of bias from the process as well as the influence of a sitting president.

The Twentieth Century Fund provided seed funding for the idea, and the Commission on Presidential Debates was incorporated as a private non-profit organization in Washington, D.C., on Feb. 19, 1987. Its primary purpose was to

sponsor and produce the presidential and vice presidential general election debates, and to undertake research and educational activities relating to the debates.

In off years, the commission had three main priorities:

1. Advising other countries on debate formats and scheduling
2. Advising local media and civic groups on how to best organize local debates, and
3. Preparing for the next campaign season.

Debate hosts were to be determined by meeting five specific criteria:

1. Adequate facilities that include a press center
2. Adequate hotel accommodations nearby
3. Adequate air and ground transportation to the site
4. The local community must support the debates, and
5. The host must be willing to make a sizable financial commitment to covering costs.

There was some initial tension between the commission and the League of Women Voters in 1988 over who, exactly, would sponsor that cycle's debates. The League eventually bowed out, lamenting the rise of an organization that, they claimed, was nothing more than a front for the two major parties. The commission sponsored one vice presidential and two presidential debates that cycle, and has been the organizing force behind these events ever since.

Janet Brown, currently executive director of the Commission on Presidential Debates, observes, "One of the good things about the way the commission was first put together is that it was a quite simple solution."⁴⁴

And on the primary debates today, she advises:

The best way to think about the primary debates is to deconstruct them and to think about where the moving parts are and find the lever in terms of where the power is at the primary level.

The media is an enormous factor here. They want to manage the debates. They believe that if the viewer becomes attuned to associating a network with the debate, this will carry over so that they continue watching after it finishes. As long as their name is up there and they get viewers and revenue... that's all they want. They can be quite cynical about it, and their

productions can look more like NASCAR than a serious political discussion. Part of this is the function of the personalities at the different networks, and if you have people in power to make decisions about these things... They will go after it. The people at the networks are like that right now, they are making the case internally that this is good for our organization, our department. ⁴⁵

The Way Forward

While people have varying opinions about what specific guidelines should be considered for presidential primary debates in the future, most of the candidates, campaign managers, party officials, members of the media and voters interviewed over the last few months agree on the general principles.

The objective is to establish guidelines for the 2016 presidential primary debates that provide greater insurance that the debates are conducted in a way that is consistent, predictable, fair, substantive and ultimately serves the interest of voters, the candidates, the political parties and the nation first. Both the RNC and the DNC need to develop and agree upon mutually beneficial guidelines.

In order to have any effective control and leverage over the primary debate process, both parties must be bound by a mutual agreement.

As veteran campaign strategist Goodwin notes, "You need both parties to agree. If there is not a unified agreement between the RNC and the DNC, one group of candidates is going to be advantaged or disadvantaged over the other." ⁴⁶

To bind candidates to a protocol, an agreement has to be reached well ahead of anyone announcing their candidacy for 2016.

Any agreement should establish:

1. Criteria for candidate participation
2. Length and format of debates
3. Number of debates that should be sanctioned and when they should be scheduled
4. Ideal number of candidates per debate (and strategies to accommodate)
5. Criteria for sponsorship and partnership
6. Guarantee of equal time and number of questions

7. Appropriate venues, and
8. Methods for determining podium or seating order.

Conclusion

In terms of conveying important information voters deserve to know about the candidates, debates are the most important feature of presidential politics. And therefore all of the issues surrounding primary debates (guidelines including qualifying criteria, number, format, moderators, venues, etc.) should not be left to random, casual, uncoordinated and chaotic circumstances as they are today.

There are many points of view and much disagreement about how primary debates should proceed in the future. But there is an absolute consensus that something needs to be done to get the process under control well ahead of the 2016 presidential contest.

Jim Roosevelt, co-chair of the Rules and Bylaws Committee of the Democratic National Committee, says:

This could be a very opportune time to look at it. If you had a series of debates that was sanctioned by the parties, yes there might be other debates, but the fact that a particular candidate was not permitted to or did not choose to participate in those would not have the same significance it does now... I think people who've been through this campaign and others would be supportive of the idea. The parties can play a role in sanctifying the structure. ⁴⁷

"It is clear to many observers that the present Republican primary debate process is out of control and needs to be reviewed and revised prior to the next election cycle in 2015-16," Bob Goodwin wrote to RNC chairman Priebus on Nov.18.

This is true for both parties because it is likely that the Democratic party will have multiple candidates in 2015-16 and, if the Republicans are not successful in winning the White House next fall, they are likely to have multiple candidates again in the next cycle. With this in mind, it might be helpful for both the RNC and the DNC to each consider appointing a representative to act as co-chairmen of a small working group to consider ways in which the primary debate process could be adjusted to benefit both the primary candidates and the voters. ⁴⁸

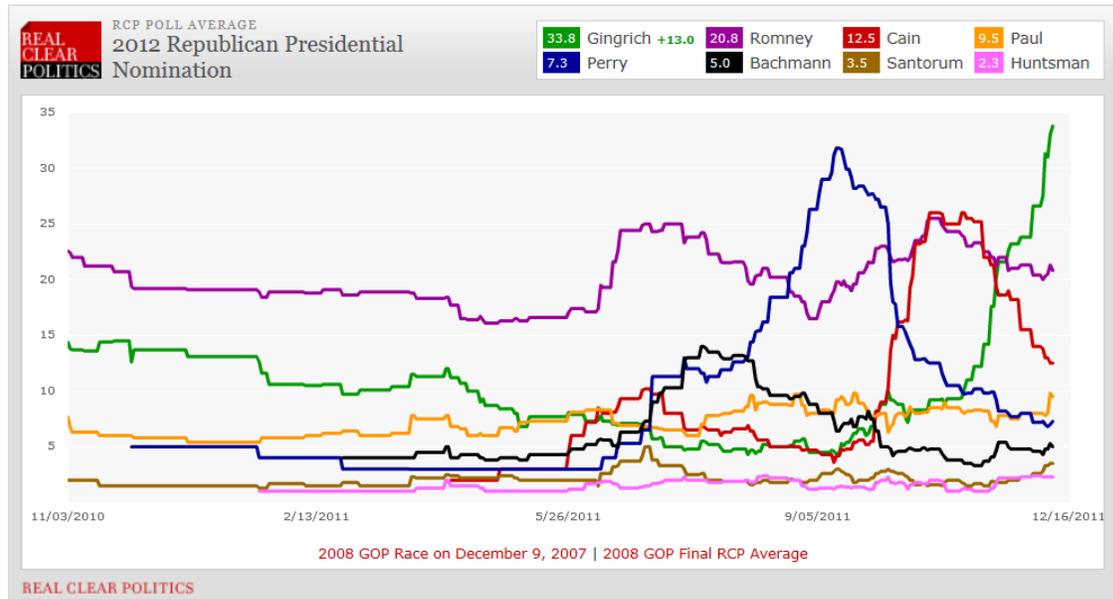
Perhaps something like the Presidential Commission on Debates should be considered for the primary debates. Perhaps something less formal. Or something altogether different. But something different than what we have today or are likely to have in 2016 unless steps are taken.

As a first step, the Institute of Politics and The Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University have agreed to sponsor and facilitate a discussion beginning with a closed-door, off-the-record session in May or June of 2012 with key players from the Republican National Committee and Democratic National Committee, as well as representatives from the Republican campaigns of 2012 and the 2008 campaigns of President Barack Obama and Sen. Hillary Clinton.

The 2012 presidential primary debates went rogue. With some serious review, discussion and deliberation, the primary debates for the 2016 election can be both entertaining and informative, and can better serve voters, the candidates, the parties and, yes, even the media.

Appendix

Real Clear Politics Poll Average



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More About the 2012 Debate Criteria and Summaries

The GOP primary debates kicked off on May 5, 2011, in Greenville, S.C. The South Carolina Republican Party and Fox News were the sponsors, setting as their main prerequisite that any candidate who wished to partake must have garnered at least one percent support in five national polls. Tim Pawlenty, Gary Johnson, Ron Paul, Rick Santorum and Herman Cain were the only participants.

Without the participation of Mitt Romney, Newt Gingrich and Rick Perry, who had not yet officially declared his candidacy, the general media consensus coming out of the debate was that the candidates on stage were an underwhelming group, with Cain the lone exception. Patrick O'Connor of *The Wall Street Journal* called Cain the "unquestioned winner" of the debate, correctly predicting Cain would be a significant factor as the race unfolded.⁵⁰

The second debate was held on June 13 in Manchester, N.H. The *New Hampshire Union Leader*, CNN and WMUR-TV (Channel 9) were the sponsors. They upped the necessary prerequisite to two percent support in at least three national polls conducted by either ABC, AP, Bloomberg, CBS, CNN, Fox News, Gallup, *The Los*

Angeles Times, Marist, McClatchy, NBC, *Newsweek*, Pew, Quinnipiac, Reuters, *USA Today* or *Time* magazine.

Romney, Gingrich and Bachmann were all present this time, making the debate a far more notable affair. Romney's turn proved to be relatively bland and unexceptional, though, while the big story on Gingrich was the recent dissolution of his staff and, seemingly, his campaign. At the time of the debate, many pundits were predicting the inevitable death of his candidacy. The biggest story of the night was Bachmann's use of the debate to announce her candidacy. Introducing herself as a former federal tax litigation attorney, businesswoman, mother and foster parent, she made a strong claim for the "Tea Party" vote.

Ames, Iowa, hosted the next GOP debate on Aug. 11. The Iowa Republican Party, Fox News and *The Washington Examiner* were the sponsors, and they used the same criteria for entry as in the first debate: one percent national support in at least five separate polls. Bachmann, Romney, Pawlenty, Paul, Cain, Huntsman, Santorum and Gingrich all participated; with the exception of Rick Perry, the die was now cast for the 2012 nomination.

Perry's shadow did loom large, however, and his absence was one of the main talking points in the run-up to and aftermath of this debate. Would he make his candidacy official? If so, could he be the one to combine establishment credentials with an emotional appeal to the Tea Party? Out of those who actually participated in the night's affair, Pawlenty proved to be the biggest story. His campaign was floundering; he wasn't gaining ground on Romney in the polls and his fundraising numbers were dismal. Pawlenty used the occasion to launch harsh attacks on Bachmann for continually making false statements (a criticism that was greeted by jeers from the audience) and Romney for his wealth. Pawlenty declined to directly attack Romney on health care, however, and then dropped out of the race three days later after placing a disappointing third in the Iowa straw poll.

Republican Sen. Jim DeMint of South Carolina and the American Principles Project hosted the Palmetto Freedom Forum on Labor Day, Sep. 5, in Columbia, S.C. Aired on CNN, the forum was designed to break the previous debate format mold. Bachmann, Cain, Gingrich, Paul and Romney participated having met the five percent threshold on the *Real Clear Politics* average poll of Aug. 22, 2011. Rudy Giuliani, Sarah Palin and Perry were also invited. Perry declined at the last moment

choosing instead to return to Texas to oversee wildfire relief efforts. Each participating candidate appeared individually on stage for 20 minutes without a podium or media member in sight to answer questions about spending, taxes and Constitutional principles. Well received by Tea Party members in the audience and nationwide, the civil and informative presentation created “no winners, no sound bites, no complaints,” according to *Real Clear Politics*.

The next GOP debate was held on Sept. 7 in Simi Valley, Calif. The Ronald Reagan Foundation, NBC News and *Politico* were the sponsors, and they ratcheted up the necessary polling numbers for entry. A candidate needed to demonstrate a minimum of four percent support as the preferred nominee among Republicans in at least one poll conducted by either Gallup, Bloomberg, NBC/*The Wall Street Journal*, ABC/*The Washington Post*, CBS/*The New York Times*, CNN, Fox News or the AP. Romney, Santorum, Gingrich, Bachmann, Perry, Paul, Cain and Huntsman were all in attendance, finalizing the main players seeking the GOP nomination.

Perry’s official entry into the field immediately re-drew the contours of the race, as a number of polls put him at equal or slightly greater support than Romney. A significant amount of Perry’s potential supporters were presumed to have defected from the Bachmann camp. Much of the oxygen in this debate was consumed by the Perry vs. Romney dynamic, setting a template for a handful of debates that followed. Perry spent much of this particular night defending his Texas record and his book, *Fed Up*. He also called Social Security a “monstrous lie,” while during the post-debate spin-fest his campaign manager labeled it a “Ponzi scheme.” Perry’s performance was generally regarded as erratic and underwhelming, though it turned out to be a simple hors d’oeuvre.

Less than a week later on Sept. 12, the candidates met again in Tampa, Fla. The Tea Party Express and CNN were this round’s sponsors, and they borrowed the same prerequisites from the June 13 debate. The same candidates as last time took the stage, and Perry continued to be the center of attention as he rocketed up to the lead in national polls. Bachmann hit him with accusations that, as governor of Texas, he tried to mandate HPV vaccinations for “little girls.” Santorum criticized Perry as soft on immigration, noting that illegal immigrants are allowed to pay in-state tuition at Texas public universities. Both criticisms stuck, defining Perry’s narrative in the short-term.

A scant 10 days later, Orlando, Fla., hosted the next debate. The Florida GOP, Fox News and Google were the sponsors, and they dropped the necessary polling number back down to one percent. This allowed Gary Johnson to take to the stage with the eight other candidates from the last two affairs. Again, Perry spent much of the night on the defensive, suffering the same attacks from Bachmann, Santorum and Romney over the HPV vaccine, immigration and Social Security respectively. Towards the evening's end, Johnson delivered the line of the night, stating that his neighbor's two dogs had "created more shovel-ready jobs than the Obama administration."

The GOP primary debates continued on Oct.11 at Dartmouth College in Hanover, N.H. *The Washington Post*, Bloomberg and WBIN-TV were responsible for the event, and they utilized the most unorthodox prerequisites of the season thus far. Candidates had to demonstrate a "measurable popular support in a range of national polls," must have participated in at least three nationally televised Republican debates during this 2012 election cycle and reported to the FEC at least \$500,000 in second quarter campaign contributions. In spite of not meeting this final requirement, Perry again joined the now standard other seven candidates (Bachmann, Cain, Gingrich, Huntsman, Paul, Romney, Santorum).

At the outset of the debate, Perry's status as Romney's most significant challenger for the nomination had already started to wane. Based largely on his three prior debate performances, Perry's numbers were dropping precipitously, and on this particular night, Romney no longer felt compelled to engage with Perry in any substantive way. That dynamic was played out; the winner had been decided. Instead, Herman Cain found himself under the bright lights for the first time in the race, literally positioned at the center of the stage and the top of the polls. Many pundits thus declared the debate a victory for Cain based solely on his status as the new subject of mass attention.

The Sands Expo Center in Las Vegas, Nev., was the site of the CNN and Western Republican Leadership Conference debate on Oct.18. The necessary prerequisite for entry was the ability to demonstrate at least two percent support in at least three national polls conducted by ABC, AP, Bloomberg, CBS/*The New York Times*, CNN, FOX, Gallup, *The Los Angeles Times*, Marist, McClatchy, NBC, *Newsweek*, Pew, Quinnipiac, Reuters, *USA Today* and *Time*. The standard cast all participated save

Jon Huntsman, who boycotted the event in support of New Hampshire's demand that Nevada reschedule its caucuses.

Romney came under considerably intense attack during the debate. Perry went after the former Massachusetts governor for "knowingly hiring illegals" at his home, and Santorum leveled the familiar charge that Romney's Massachusetts health care reform was the basis for "Obamacare." Nevertheless, Romney remained above the fray and emerged unscathed. Cain was the other major story of the night. The initial minutes of the debate found the other candidates attacking Cain's 9-9-9 plan on the basis that it would actually raise taxes when all was said and done. Cain did his best to defend himself, offering up a convoluted defense that exposed his lack of political experience. His performance didn't seem to hurt him; he remained atop national polls from mid-October through mid-November.

On Nov. 5, Cain and Gingrich met in The Woodlands, Texas, by special invitation of the Texas Tea Party Patriots PAC, for a civil exchange markedly different from the heated discourse that characterized a number of the previous debates. A similar invitation was simultaneously extended to Perry, and a contender of his choice, for a later, separate forum. The format was meant to emulate the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates as a substantive exchange of ideas, minus the hoopla and distraction added by the media. The "forum" served as a fundraiser for the PAC but was also broadcast to a national audience by C-SPAN. The two candidates took every opportunity to compliment each other, agreeing on the need to radically re-imagine Social Security and Medicare. In retrospect, this closeness proved remarkably prescient on Gingrich's part; when Cain dropped out of the race a few weeks later, Gingrich absorbed more of his former supporters than any of the remaining Republican candidates.

The next debate of the season was held in Rochester, Mich., on Nov. 9. CNBC, the Michigan Republican Party and Oakland University were the sponsors, utilizing a necessary prerequisite of three percent in at least one poll conducted by either Gallup, Bloomberg, NBC/*The Wall Street Journal*, ABC/*The Washington Post*, CBS/*The New York Times*, CNN, FOX or the AP. With Huntsman back in the mix, eight candidates once again took the stage.

Perry was unquestionably the biggest story of the night. He declared that he would eliminate three government agencies upon arriving in Washington, though when

pressed he was only able to name two (Commerce and Education). After the debate, many pundits predicted the imminent demise of Perry's candidacy. Cain was confronted once, despite boos from the crowd, on the array of sexual harassment charges he suddenly faced. He responded by saying that, "the American people deserve better than someone being tried in the court of public opinion based on unfounded accusations." For the most part, the debate revealed the now frozen nature of the race; Romney stood at the head of the pack, with the other candidates jockeying for second place.

Another debate was held a scant three days later on Nov. 12, and was sponsored by CBS News, *National Journal* and the South Carolina Republican Party. Those candidates looking to take the stage needed a one percent polling average for the prior month of October according to *Real Clear Politics*. The same eight names as last time qualified.

The night's proceeding was the first in the cycle to focus solely on foreign policy, allowing all eight candidates to rally around the common cause of attacking President Barack Obama. There was little bickering to be found on stage, and no major gaffes by which to remember the night. Huntsman and Paul denounced waterboarding as torture, whereas Bachmann and Cain supported it as a valid method of interrogation. Perry recovered well enough from his previous performance, and suggested that he would begin all foreign aid budgets at zero upon reaching the White House. Perhaps the most important performance of the evening belonged to Gingrich, who arrived at the debate as the new "top" challenger to Romney for the first time. His performance did nothing to change that dynamic.

Des Moines, Iowa, hosted "The Family Leader Forum" on Nov. 19. Bachman, Cain, Gingrich, Paul, Perry and Santorum sat down together at a Thanksgiving table for a discussion moderated by pollster Frank Luntz. Invited but notably absent were Huntsman and Romney. The event was staged in a church before a crowd of 2,500 social and religious conservatives. C-SPAN reversed its original decision to televise the forum, but it was streamed online and viewed nationally. A *Des Moines Register* poll released just before the forum showed that 37 percent of the likely GOP caucus participants described themselves as born-again Christians, a fact reflected by the character of the Forum's exchanges. The conversation flowed conversationally, and touched on broad themes of liberty and personal responsibility, as well as specific hot-button issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage. Gingrich admitted that he

had sought advice from a recovering alcoholic on how to better deal with the never-ending drive that is his own national ambition; Santorum confessed to struggles at being a better father to his severely disabled daughter.

The GOP primary debates continued in Washington, D.C., on Nov. 22, thanks to the sponsorship of CNN, The Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute. The lineup once again consisted of Bachmann, Cain, Romney, Gingrich, Paul, Santorum, Huntsman and Perry. CNN used the same criteria for entry as their previous debates. Candidates looking to enter the debate needed to demonstrate two percent support in at least three national polls conducted by either ABC, AP, Bloomberg, CBS, CNN, FOX, Gallup, *The Los Angeles Times*, Marist, McClatchy, NBC, *Newsweek*, Pew, Quinnipiac, Reuters, *USA Today* or *Time*.

Gingrich remained ascendant as he took the stage that night. His candidacy was, for the moment, the biggest story in the race. Refusing to play it safe, he stated that he would support allowing some illegal immigrants to remain in the country, specifically those who had been in country for decades, started families and paid their taxes. He warned that the GOP would find it difficult to be a family-friendly party if it advocated for policies that destroy families.

Mike Huckabee and Fox News hosted a forum in New York City on Dec. 3, attended by Bachman, Gingrich, Paul, Perry, Romney and Santorum. Like the other forums in the cycle, this one featured an unconventional format and a more free-wheeling conversational style. The event was moderated by former Gov. Huckabee and three conservative state attorneys general from Florida, Virginia and Oklahoma. Each of the candidates faced the panel solo. The Virginia attorney general quizzed Bachmann on how she would resolve environmental disagreements across state lines if she were to eliminate the EPA (“a lot of these cases can be negotiated,” she offered), while the Oklahoma attorney general asked Paul about his opposition to the Patriot Act (“I don’t think it’s a lack of laws that are our problem,” he responded). The general consensus, however, held that Gingrich experienced the closest scrutiny. He was asked about the feasibility of his plan to abolish certain liberal federal courts that he disagreed with, and was pushed to give reassurance that his less purely conservative positions would not join him in the White House.

The Dec. 10 debate in Des Moines, Iowa, sponsored by ABC News, Yahoo! News, WOI-TV, the *Des Moines Register* and the Republican Party of Iowa, featured only six

of the GOP contenders: Bachmann, Gingrich, Romney, Paul, Perry and Santorum; Huntsman did not meet the required five percent mark in an Iowa or national poll. Much of the evening's focus was on frontrunner Gingrich, but the viral moment of the debate was an unforced error by Romney who offered to bet Perry \$10,000 in a dispute over the Massachusetts governor's support for a health care mandate. Gingrich, Perry and Bachmann had strong nights. The debate was the highest rated of the 2012 campaign season, drawing 7.58 million total viewers and 2.10 million adults, ages 25-54.

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⁴⁹ "RCP Poll Averages," *Real Clear Politics*, Dec. 10, 2011.

http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2012/president/us/republican_presidential_nomination-1452.html

⁵⁰ Patrick O'Connor, "Republicans Buzzing About the 'Herman-ator'," *WSJ: Washington Wire*, May 6, 2011. <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2011/05/06/republicans-buzzing-about-the-herman-ator/>