

Five Things Christians Can Expect From Saturday's Debate

The ninth Republican presidential debate, to be broadcast on *CBS News* beginning at 9 p.m. EST on Saturday, will be the final chance to compare and contrast the candidates ahead of next weekend's Republican Presidential Primary.

Face the Nation anchor and *CBS News* political director John Dickerson will be the debate's main moderator. He will be joined by *CBS News* White House correspondent Major Garrett and *The Wall Street Journal's* Kimberley Strassel.

While there's always uncertainty involved with any live television event, there are five things Christians can expect from Saturday night's debate.

1. No One's Left Out

For the first time in the 2016 presidential election cycle, no one can make any kind of legitimate claim that they're being "left out" of a debate. Yes, former Virginia Gov. Jim Gilmore is sitting out, but he's combined for less than 300 total votes in Iowa and New Hampshire, and he's sat out six of the previous eight debates.

If balanced out equally (even though we know it won't be), that's about 20 minutes per candidate, which should provide for a better discussion of substantive issues, if the moderators can resist trying to goad the candidates into personal attacks. That could, however, be exactly what we get.

2. Baiting a Fight

The manner in which they set up the debate stage, placing Donald Trump and Ted Cruz front and center with Marco Rubio next to Cruz and Jeb Bush next to Trump, seems to suggest they

want to see more of the political bloodsport Christian voters—who make up nearly two-thirds of likely GOP voters—have said they don't like. In announcing the lineup, *CBS News* effectively said they hoped to see “fireworks” from the candidates.

Ben Carson and John Kasich, often billed as the “nice guys” by the media, are going to have to fight for face time if they hope to get noticed at all during the debate. This will be important, since nearly a third of voters are probably not firmly decided, and the historical data that suggests about two thirds of all undecideds will base their votes on what happens during the debate.

3. The Three G's

Two-thirds of likely South Carolina Republican Primary voters have said they identify as “evangelical” or “born-again Christian.” The long-standing tradition of Palmetto State politics is that it centers on the “Three G's”: God, Guns and Glory. Although CBS telegraphed that it wants to focus on economy and foreign policy, expect the candidates to shift back to one of the Three G's at every opportunity.

There are nearly 1 million southern Baptists in South Carolina, and another 500,000 who identify as nondenominational evangelical Protestants. And AME congregants—African Methodist Episcopalians, many of whom are opposed to the Democrat candidates' social positions—account for another 250,000 South Carolinians.

Second Amendment rights, particularly in the wake of the 2015 Charleston church shooting, a big issue with South Carolinians, as well. There are more than a million military voters, active duty, civilian and veteran, in South Carolina, making them the second-largest voting bloc among likely Republican voters.

4. Renovation Projects

Marco Rubio noted in his post-election speech earlier this week in New Hampshire that his poor performance in last Saturday night's debate had a major impact on the final vote in the Granite State. Exit polling suggested that was true, as well.

Ben Carson, still reeling from the controversy over rumors he was dropping out at the Iowa Caucuses, also lost voters as a result of his previous debate performance. Exit polling suggested voters saw his response to the matter as "weak" and "un-presidential."

Both men have to work on repairing their images with voters, without further alienating them by coming off too harshly, if they want to remain in the race. Based on past performance, Rubio shouldn't have a problem doing that, but Carson could be in serious trouble.

5. Your Chances of Learning Something New?

Unless there is a significant gaffe among the remaining six candidates, and you've already been paying attention to the previous eight debates, you're unlikely to learn anything new from this latest made-for-TV event. Letting all of the candidates answer a question would be a good way to avoid a derailment.

The less the moderators try to incite a mud-flinging contest, the better it will be, but that doesn't necessarily result in solid ratings (which, unfortunately, tend to be the driving force for these events). But the candidates have been campaigning for nearly a year now, and they have their talking points down fairly well.