

Five Things to Expect From Saturday Night's Debate

A lot has changed in the Republican presidential race since the last time the candidates gathered for the FOX News Channel debate in Des Moines.

For starters, the field has been winnowed down from 11 candidates—12 if you count the nearly invisible campaign of former Virginia Gov. Jim Gilmore—down to eight. So, there won't be an “undercard” debate followed by a “prime time” debate.

This time around, it's just *the* debate.

The debate will begin at 8 p.m. Eastern Time Saturday evening on ABC, making it the first GOP debate to be televised on regular broadcast television. It will be moderated by *World News Tonight* anchor David Muir and *This Week with George Stephanopolous* co-anchor Martha Raddatz, with additional questions from WMUR-TV political director Josh McElveen and conservative journalist Mary Katharine Ham.

Here are five things you can expect from Saturday night's debate:

1. No Carly

ABC and the Republican National Committee made it clear what the criteria would be to get into the debate: placing among the top three finishers in the Iowa Caucuses, placing among the top six in an average of national polls, or placing among the top six in an average of New Hampshire polls. Carly Fiorina, despite having more cash on hand, and having beat out several of those who did qualify for the debate, didn't make the cut.

Her response: “I’ve been telling you the game is rigged. And here’s even more proof: The people of Iowa voted in an election this week, and I beat the establishment’s guys. Tens of thousands of you stood with us yesterday to demand a fair debate. But Disney’s ABC and the RNC have decided to keep me off the debate stage this weekend, caving to pressure from the same establishment candidates we beat who are afraid to debate me.

“This isn’t about me. It’s about you. It’s about the people of New Hampshire who are about to vote. This is emblematic of the power that is being taken away from you every day – by the political class, the media establishment, and the bureaucracy. They don’t want your votes to count. They don’t want your voice to be heard. The network of George Stephanopoulos wants to tell you to sit down and shut up and elect Hillary Clinton.

“Well, guess what? ABC and the RNC and other candidates may keep me off that stage. But I will not be silenced. Our government is broken, and we know the establishment isn’t going to fix it. It’s time to stand together and say we won’t back down.”

Someone is bound to mention it—probably one of the other candidates (Carson or Cruz, most likely)—and turn it into an opportunity to bludgeon the media for its bias. It might score them some points with a few Fiorina supporters, but it’s unlikely to have a huge impact on Tuesday’s primary vote.

2. Ghosts of Iowa

The other white elephant in the room will be the rift between Ben Carson and Ted Cruz that emerged following the Iowa Caucus. Fueled by mainstream media reporting, it has yet to die down with a little more than 24 hours to go before the debate.

Expect one of the moderators to bring it up, but don’t expect it to create the fireworks everyone has been looking for. Both

camps would love for the whole thing to disappear, even if the issue isn't fully resolved between the two men.

The candidates jockeying for second place, and clawing for the front spot in the "establishment lane" have little to gain from bringing it up. Neither Carson nor Cruz supporters are likely to line up with them, anyway. Trump could throw in a dig or two, but it wouldn't help him to do so, either.

3. Establishment Fistfight

It's been a very long time since there was a battle within the establishment of the Republican Party, and for several candidates within that group, Saturday night will be a make-or-break, do-or-die moment for their campaigns. So, expect a lot of back-and-forth between Marco Rubio, Jeb Bush, John Kasich, and Chris Christie.

There already exists a lot of animosity between Rubio and Bush, and to a lesser extent Christie and Rubio. But, the 11th Commandment will have to go away if any one of them is going to put distance between himself and the other three.

If there is no clear establishment winner in New Hampshire, the three-ring circus will continue into South Carolina. The RNC certainly doesn't want that to happen, and many experts agree the discussion would be better served with a smaller field.

4. Protecting Clinton

Anyone who watches just a little bit of Stephanopoulos' coverage of the presidential election process knows he's protective of his former boss' wife. And while he won't be involved directly with the debate Saturday night, you can be sure he's had some hand in the questions that have been prepared.

So, you can expect the moderators—particularly Raddatz—to go

after the Republican candidates on issues that the Clinton camp thinks will help their candidate. Expect issues like gender inequality, homosexuality, Muslim persecution, and pay disparities to make up a much bigger portion of the debate than they have in previous debates.

As Christians, this may seem like a turnoff, but it does offer an excellent opportunity to weigh the biblical merits of the candidates' responses. While the debate will be tailored to New Hampshire, one of the least Christian states in the U.S., it can still be useful to Christian voters in other states.

5. Trump vs. Cruz

The top two candidates nationally have little to gain in New Hampshire by attacking one another. In fact, they have much more to lose by doing so. So, don't expect it to happen, even if the moderators try to drag them into one.

There might be a shot here or there, but nothing like what we saw before the Iowa Caucus.