

Why Carly Fiorina Is on the Rise

In a 2016 Republican presidential race that has been driven by the appeal of outsider candidates, yet another has shouldered her way into the mix—former Hewlett-Packard CEO Carly Fiorina.

Billionaire Donald Trump and retired neurosurgeon Ben Carson have soared in the polls, in part because their plain-speaking resonates with voters, while more established politicians such as former Florida Governor Jeb Bush and U.S. senators Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz have struggled to gain traction.

Many political pundits had predicted that Bush and other establishment candidates would try to reassert control at Wednesday's second Republican presidential debate. Instead, they found themselves facing a new insurgent—Fiorina, in her first debate with top-tier candidates.

"They all sort of blended in," Fergus Cullen, the former chairman of the New Hampshire Republican Party said of Fiorina's opponents. "That's what candidates can't afford to do right now."

Fiorina's performance won wide praise on social media and from political strategists. She commanded the stage equally with Bush, Trump, and Carson—relegating the rest of the 11 candidates to the background. Fiorina spoke nearly the longest, after Trump and Bush, and some of her comments generated the most chatter on Twitter and Facebook, the social media companies said.

At one point, she got into a fracas with Trump over her record at Hewlett-Packard and also lectured him about the U.S. Constitution.

“Carly won it,” said John Feehery, a Republican strategist in Washington. “She was passionate and tough.”

Throughout the summer, as Trump enjoyed an almost unchallenged run at the top of presidential polls, the Republican establishment waited for a more traditional candidate to cut into the outspoken real estate mogul’s candidate never materialized. Instead, Carson, who has never held public office, began to gain strength, and now Fiorina may see a post-debate surge in her popularity.

If that happens, it remains unclear whether that would come at the expense of Trump or Carson’s support, or whether she would draw from voters who would normally support a candidate such as Bush, Rubio or Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker.

Insurgency

According to the latest Reuters/Ipsos rolling presidential poll, Trump and Carson together have the support of almost half of the Republican primary electorate at 48 percent, a testament to the power of their insurgent messages. Fiorina could swell that number, effectively locking out the Republican establishment for the time being.

But money could be the one limiting factor. While Trump is using his own money to fund his campaign, neither Carson nor Fiorina have been able to leverage their grassroots popularity into large-scale fundraising.

Along with that, some Republican strategists continue to view a Trump fade as inevitable. Trump “showed he has little real grasp of foreign and domestic policy,” in Wednesday’s debate, said Brian Walsh, a Republican strategist in Washington who is not affiliated with any campaign.

Fiorina, who impressed many with her command of policy issues during the debate, could attract voters who like Trump’s outspokenness but have expressed concerns about his ability to

win a general election.

Many in the Republican establishment fervently hope a more traditional candidate would benefit from a Trump slide. Rubio was cited by several Republican strategists as being well positioned to make a run at the top-tier contenders. They lauded him for his answers on national security on Wednesday.

At one point in the debate, frustration with the attention the outsiders were receiving seemed to boil over, with an exasperated New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie complaining about Fiorina and Trump eating up air-time as they tussled over their private-sector achievements.

“The fact is we don’t want to hear about your careers, back and forth and volleying back and forth about who did well and who did poorly. You’re both successful people. Congratulations,” Christie interjected.

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