



Questions in Context:

The Fox News (8/23) Republican Presidential
Primary Debate

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Overview

In past presidential elections, the Winston Group has analyzed the primary and general election debates to build a picture of how the topics covered interact with what voters have said — through surveys and exit polls — are their greatest concerns and the issues that are the most important for them in choosing for whom they will vote.

The following report continues our analysis for the Republican primary debates in anticipation of the general election next fall. This report covers the first Republican Primary Debate, hosted by Fox News on August 23, 2023. Topics covered include the distribution of issue topics in the debate questions, the number of questions asked of specific candidates, and candidate speaking times.

Qualified candidates for the Fox News August 23 debate were Governor Doug Burgum of North Dakota, former Governor of New Jersey Chris Christie, Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida, former South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley, former Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson, former Vice President Mike Pence, businessman Vivek Ramaswamy, and Senator Tim Scott.

Debate Topics

The chart on the next page shows the distribution of questions by topic area. For the purposes of comparability, we re-use the same topic categories from our debate reports for the 2016 Republican primary and general election debates and the 2020 Democratic primary and general election debates. The exception is the “Presidential Fitness” category, which is a new category that covers questions such as whether presidents should be required to pass mental or physical acuity tests in order to serve.

Most of the topics are self explanatory, but for a few, definitions may be helpful. The “electability” topic area includes questions addressed directly to a candidate about his/her ability to attract a large portion of the electorate (for example, asking a candidate about his/her standing in the polls or statements he/she made that have raised questions), while the “other candidates” topic area refers to questions that directly ask one candidate about another candidate’s past, policies, or prospects. If however the lead-in to a question refers to another candidate’s policies but the substance of the question is that candidate’s own positions, the question would be categorized according to the issue area. The “For Fun” topic area includes unusual topics or lighthearted questions aimed at letting viewers see more of a candidate’s personality. “Social Security/Retirement” consists of questions that address that topic as a separate individual retirement benefit issue — other entitlements questions fall under “Spending/National Debt.” “Energy/Environment”

has been expanded to “Energy/Environment/Climate Change.” “Social Issues” has been renamed to “Social/Cultural Issues.” Given the breadth of the Social/Cultural issues category, we break this out by sub-category to get a better sense of the specific content of questions that may drive the debates.

Questions asked multiple times of different candidates are not counted more than once.

Fox News August 23

General Topic Area	Number of Questions	Percentage of Questions
Covid	1	3.0%
Economy	3	9.1%
Education	3	9.1%
Electability	3	9.1%
Energy/Environment/Climate Change	2	6.1%
For Fun	1	3.0%
Foreign Policy/National Security	4	12.1%
Health care	0	0.0%
Immigration	3	9.1%
Judicial System	0	0.0%
Other Candidates	2	6.1%
Presidential Fitness	1	3.0%
Presidential Priorities	0	0.0%
Social/Cultural Issues	8	24.2%
Social Security/Retirement	0	0.0%
Spending/National Debt	2	6.1%
Total	33	

Topic Subcategories

Because of the potentially broad nature of some of the question categories, some additional clarification may be helpful.

Social/Cultural Issues

“Social issues,” about a quarter of all questions asked in the Fox News August 23 debate, includes a variety of subcategories, such as abortion, crime/guns, or LGBTQ+ issues.

Social Issues Subtopics	Number of Questions	Percentage of Questions Within Social/Cultural Issues	Percentage of Questions Overall
Abortion	3	37.5%	9.1%
Crime/Guns	2	25.0%	6.1%
LGBTQ+ Issues	1	12.5%	3.0%
Other	2	25.0%	6.1%
Total	8		

To Whom Were Questions Directed?

“Number of Questions” refers to questions directed by a moderator at a particular candidate and includes questions that were asked of all candidates - so totals may differ from the charts above.

“Number of Rebuttals” includes any times the moderator addressed a follow-up or rebuttal opportunity to a candidate, or a candidate broke in and gave a rebuttal to another candidate's answer on their own initiative. Given the difficulty of quantifying rebuttals and counter-rebuttals in high-tempo debate discussions, the “Rebuttals” column should be viewed as a reasonable estimate of what occurred in a given debate. While direct questions are somewhat easy to count, rebuttals and counter-rebuttals are somewhat more difficult to quantify, given the nature of the cross-talk that can occur when multiple candidates are on stage. Generally speaking, complete sentences or thoughts were counted as rebuttals, while, for example, single-word attempts to jump into the conversation were not.

“Percentage of Direct Questions” a candidate received comes from only questions directly addressed to a candidate or those addressed to all candidates, while “Percentage of Answers” includes all opportunities a candidate had to speak, including rebuttals, as described above. The “Percentage of Answers” comes out of the total of all answers given — not the total questions asked — so once again, the totals differ.

Candidate	Fox News August 23				
	Direct Qs	Rebuttals	Total Answers	% of Qs	% of Answers
Doug Burgum	9	3	12	11.4%	9.8%
Chris Christie	9	9	18	11.4%	14.8%
Ron DeSantis	12	7	19	15.2%	15.6%
Nikki Haley	11	3	14	13.9%	11.5%
Asa Hutchinson	9	2	11	11.4%	9.0%
Mike Pence	10	6	16	12.7%	13.1%
Vivek Ramaswamy	9	10	19	11.4%	15.6%
Tim Scott	10	3	13	12.7%	10.7%
Total	79	43	122		

Questions Asked Of All Candidates

The following table highlights the questions that the moderators asked of every single candidate as well as the topic area of the question.

Question	Topic
Polls consistently show that young people's number one issue is climate change. How will you, as both president of the United States and leader of the Republican Party, calm their fears that the Republican Party doesn't care about climate change?	Environment/Climate Change
So we want to start on this with a show of hands. Do you believe in human behavior is causing climate change? Raise your hand if you do.	Environment/Climate Change
Former President Trump has been indicted in four different states on 91 counts. He will be processed tomorrow in Georgia at the Fulton County Jail for charges relating to the 2020 election loss. You all signed a pledge to support the eventual Republican nominee. If former President Trump is convicted in a court of law, would you still support him as your party's choice? Please raise your hand if you would.	Other Candidates
The US has committed nearly \$77 billion in aid to the Ukraine war. The administration is now asking Congress for \$24 billion more. Regardless of that, the specific specifics of that plan. Is there anyone on stage who would not support the increase of more funding to Ukraine?	Foreign Policy/National Security
In your closing statement tonight, please tell American voters why you are the person who can inspire this nation to a better day.	Electability

Speaking Time

The speaking times listed for the Fox News August 23 Debate are taken from CNN: <https://www.cnn.com/2023/08/23/politics/speaking-times-candidate-republican-debate-dg/index.html>

Candidate	Fox News August 23
Mike Pence	12:26
Vivek Ramaswamy	11:38
Chris Christie	11:37
Ron DeSantis	10:01
Nikki Haley	8:20
Tim Scott	7:57
Doug Burgum	7:50
Asa Hutchinson	7:24

Conclusion

In terms of question topics for this first debate, the topics covered were diffuse and varied. Certain major categories had no questions asked, such as health care, social security, and the judicial system.

The most frequently asked-about topic was Social/Cultural Issues, at nearly a quarter (24%) of all questions asked. But given the breadth of this topic, it is perhaps more informative to consider it in terms of its subcategories, including but not limited to abortion, crime/guns, and LGBTQ+ issues.

Foreign Policy/National Security, which accounted for about 12% of all the questions the moderators asked. This was followed by a five-way tie of abortion, the economy, education, immigration, and electability, which each accounted for 9% of the questions asked. The third tier was occupied by another five-way tie that included crime/guns, other candidates, the environment/climate change, and spending/the national debt.

As far as questions that were asked of all candidates, some asking candidates to raise their hands, or on which all candidates potentially had the opportunity to speak, the topics represented in this subgroup of questions were also diffuse: other candidates, foreign policy, and electability. There were two questions posed to all the candidates about the environment and climate change.

In other words, there was no one topic or topic focus that drove the first Fox News debate, and questions came from across the issue spectrum. This is somewhat at odds with what voters have consistently said is their top issue in deciding their vote for Congress: the economy. For example, in a recent Fox News survey, 48% of Republicans thought the economy was the most important issue facing the country, with immigration coming in second at 22%. Even if questions related to spending were combined with the economic questions asked, this new category would still only account for about 15% of all the debate questions, still far behind the broad topic of Social/Cultural issues.

Appendix - Republican Primary Debate Questions

Debate Number — Location — Date — Sponsors	Question	Asker	To Whom (or to whom it was directed by moderator)	Question Topic
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	As we sit here tonight. The number one song on the Billboard chart is called Rich Men North of Richmond. It is by a singer from Farmville, Virginia, named Oliver Anthony. His lyrics speak of alienation, of deep frustration with the state of government and of this country. Washington, D.C. is about 100 miles north of Richmond... So, Governor DeSantis, why is this song striking such a nerve in this country right now? What do you think it means?	Martha MacCallum	Ron DeSantis	Social/ Cultural Issues (Other)
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	Governor Christie, do you agree with what Governor DeSantis just said there? And why would you be better on the economy than him? ... New Jersey, when you were governor, had the second lowest credit rating in the nation after Illinois and it was downgraded 11 times.	Bret Bair	Chris Christie	Economy
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	Senator Scott, the song also goes after welfare programs as a senator. Now, President Biden argued for freezing federal spending. This was back in the 80s and dealing with sacred cows. He does not talk about that anymore. You have been a senator, though, for ten years. So what have you done to rein in the increasing size of government? ... During the Trump administration, you approved \$4.4 trillion, \$4.1 trillion, \$1.7 trillion over the course of that administration. That's a lot of money.	Martha MacCallum	Tim Scott	Spending/ National Debt
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	Mr. Ramaswamy, listening to all of this, why should voters choose you over more experienced politicians on this stage? You're basically a blank slate for people. You're 38 years old. You've said that you only voted in two presidential elections before this moment, this political race.	Bret Bair	Vivek Ramaswamy	Electability
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	Why are you better positioned to turn around this economy that we've heard all of these voters talking about tonight, than Mr. Ramaswamy, who is a successful entrepreneur. Nationally right now, he's beating you in the polls.	Martha MacCallum	Nikki Haley	Economy
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	The nation's report card was the weakest ever for American schoolchildren, exposing chronic absenteeism, deep declines for reading and math for 15 year olds and 13 year olds. Governor DeSantis, you would eliminate, you said, the Department of Education, but as president, would you still have a responsibility to fix this crisis as we see it?	Bret Bair	Ron DeSantis	Education
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	Vice President Pence. You were mentioned there. 54% of voters say the cost of groceries is a, quote, major problem for them. You blamed the Biden administration spending for that increase. But as vice president, your administration spent more than any prior \$7.8 trillion added to the national debt, 3.5 trillion of that before Covid. So does that mean that you're part of the spending problem?	Bret Bair	Mike Pence	Spending/ National Debt
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	There are two people who we have not heard from yet. So let's hear from Governor Burgum and then from Governor Hutchinson on the economy, sir.	Martha MacCallum	Doug Burgum, Asa Hutchinson	Economy
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	Polls consistently show that young people's number one issue is climate change. How will you, as both president of the United States and leader of the Republican Party, calm their fears that the Republican Party doesn't care about climate change?	Voter	All Candidates	Environment /Climate Change

Debate Number— Location— Date— Sponsors	Question	Asker	To Whom (or to whom it was directed by moderator)	Question Topic
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	So we want to start on this with a show of hands. Do you believe in human behavior is causing climate change? Raise your hand if you do.	Martha MacCallum	All Candidates	Environment /Climate Change
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	Governor Haley, would you like to respond? Are you being paid for? ... Senator Scott, are you bought and paid for?	Bret Bair	Nikki Haley, Tim Scott	Electability
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	Abortion has been a losing issue for Republicans since the Dobbs decision. In six state referendums, all have upheld abortion rights in this country and even in red states, there are more swing state referendums that are coming up as we head into the elections as well on this. So, Governor Haley, what do you say to your party and to your state, which today confirmed a six week abortion law as well, especially the impact on women suburban voters across this country?	Martha MacCallum	Nikki Haley	Social/ Cultural Issues (Abortion)
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	Governor DeSantis, you signed a six week abortion ban in Florida. One of your biggest financial backers said that you need to, quote, shift to get moderates or you will lose. What do you say to him and others who say politically that is a tough thing to sell nationally? ... But just to be clear, Governor, would you sign a six week ban federally?	Bret Bair	Ron DeSantis	Social/ Cultural Issues (Abortion)
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	The Supreme Court did overturn Roe v Wade. And the result of that decision was that it went back to the states. So that's where it is right now. So as I understand it, you are not in favor of a federal ban. What do you say about the states? There's about five of them, including New Jersey, I think a few others, that allow abortion up until the time of birth, though, if you were president, would you be able to abide that? ... Governor Burgum, you signed a six-week ban. So you're saying federally it's all going to go to the States?	Martha MacCallum Bret Bair	Doug Burgum	Social/ Cultural Issues (Abortion)
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	Another issue is America and the crime crisis, the homelessness crisis. American cities are in decline. People are moving out as homelessness, drugs, crime move in. There are problems accelerated. They did accelerate during the pandemic and are still rising, actually. Murders in Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, all up 30% between 2019 and 2022. Homelessness is up 11%, the largest jump in recorded history. Vice President Pence. A lot of this began in the Covid era. How much of what we're seeing happening around this country is a result of those Covid lockdowns? And is your administration in part to blame for how we got here?	Bret Bair, Martha MacCallum	Mike Pence	Covid
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	Christie, another issue this weekend here in Milwaukee. Reports say there were 30 shootings and a number of them including kids. Add that to the big increase in school shootings around the country. Democrats blame this crisis on easy access to guns. They also blame Republicans for blocking gun control legislation. What would President Christie do? ... What about a President Ramaswamy? What does the president Ramaswamy do about guns?	Bret Bair	Chris Christie, Vivek Ramaswamy	Social/ Cultural Issues (Crime/ Guns)
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	Crime has been on the rise in Florida. Governor DeSantis, how do you stop crime?	Bret Bair	Ron DeSantis	Social/ Cultural Issues (Crime/ Guns)

Debate Number— Location— Date— Sponsors	Question	Asker	To Whom (or to whom it was directed by moderator)	Question Topic
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	Former President Trump has been indicted in four different states on 91 counts. He will be processed tomorrow in Georgia at the Fulton County Jail for charges relating to the 2020 election loss. You all signed a pledge to support the eventual Republican nominee. If former President Trump is convicted in a court of law, would you still support him as your party's choice? Please raise your hand if you would.	Martha MacCallum Bret Bair	All Candidates	Other Candidates
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	President Trump's former vice president is on this stage tonight. He has faced hecklers on the campaign trail over his actions on January the 6th. On that day, the vice president moved forward with the certification of the election. So do you believe that Mike Pence did the right thing? ... Governor DeSantis, do you believe he did the right thing? ... Governor DeSantis, do you believe that Mike Pence did the right thing on January 7th? ... Vice President Pence, what do you think? ... Governor Hutchinson, you did not raise your hand. ... Governor, you agree that Vice President Pence did the right thing that day or not?	Martha MacCallum	Tim Scott, Ron DeSantis, Mike Pence, Asa Hutchinson, Nikki Haley	Other Candidates
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	The US has committed nearly \$77 billion in aid to the Ukraine war. The administration is now asking Congress for \$24 billion more. Regardless of that, the specific specifics of that plan. Is there anyone on stage who would not support the increase of more funding to Ukraine?	Bret Bair	All Candidates	Foreign Policy/ National Security
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	Governor Haley, you did not raise your hand, meaning that you would support more funding for the Ukraine war. You have said of Governor DeSantis that you didn't appreciate it when he initially called it a territorial dispute. Why?	Martha MacCallum	Nikki Haley	Foreign Policy/ National Security
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	Governor Burgum, China has the biggest navy in the world, the biggest army in the world. Now they have warships, warships off the coast of Alaska. They are threatening Taiwan. In coming years, China will have 1500 nuclear warheads. It's believed the US just arrested two sailors accused of spying for China within our military. So the question is, how would you deter China as a president? ... Senator Scott, on China, that same question.	Bret Bair	Doug Burgum	Foreign Policy/ National Security
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	Governor Hutchinson ... earlier this month, images showed suspected cartel members crossing into Texas with rifles. Do you consider this an invasion? Would you authorize lethal force along that border? ... Let's go to Governor DeSantis. So as president, would you support sending us special forces over the border into Mexico to take out fentanyl labs, to take out drug cartel operations? Would you support that kind of American military use?	Bret Bair	Asa Hutchinson, Ron DeSantis	Immigration
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	Vice President Pence. Why would you be better at this issue than Governor DeSantis? Governor DeSantis on the campaign trail refers to your administration as not finishing the wall, right?	Bret Bair	Mike Pence	Immigration
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	Another issue that is related to this is that almost 7 million migrants have crossed this border, our southern border, during the Biden administration. So, Governor Christie, what would you do about the 7 million who are here? How would you handle them? What would you do? ... I want to clarify, would you send those people back?	Martha MacCallum	Chris Christie	Immigration
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	Mr. Ramaswamy, you've said that the Department of Education, the FBI, the ATF, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the IRS, the Department of Commerce, many of these should not exist. So to the education question, how would you deal with the crisis?	Bret Bair	Vivek Ramaswamy	Education

Debate Number— Location— Date— Sponsors	Question	Asker	To Whom (or to whom it was directed by moderator)	Question Topic
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	Governor Burgum. Governor Haley has said Governor. Haley has said that biological boys playing in girls sports is the women's issue of our time. You said that even though you signed a ban on this in North Dakota, that there hadn't been one instance where it was actually needed. Are you saying that you think that too much is made of this issue? ... Governor Haley, you said that this is the women's issue of our time?	Martha MacCallum	Doug Burgum, Nikki Haley	Social/ Cultural Issues (LGBTQ+ Issues)
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	President Biden will be 82 years old on Inauguration Day. Nearly 70% of Americans say that he is too old to serve. Should presidents have to pass a mental and physical test in order to serve, Vice President Pence? ... Mr. Ramaswamy, I think you were mentioned there. You're 38. You're the youngest on the stage. You've said and you just said you want a civics test or public service for those under 25 to be able to vote. So the question is, do you want a mental acuity test for presidents over 75?	Martha MacCallum Bret Bair	Mike Pence, Vivek Ramaswamy	Presidential Fitness
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	Governor Hutchinson, you have 30s on the same question on education.	Bret Bair	Asa Hutchinson	Education
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	Senator Scott, faith is on decline in this country. You talked about it a little bit before tonight. So is there a role for a president of the United States in changing that? What would you do to change that?	Martha MacCallum	Tim Scott	Social/ Cultural Issues (Other)
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	Governor DeSantis, would you support some mandatory military service for all Americans?	Bret Bair	Ron DeSantis	Foreign Policy/ National Security
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	Now for something a little out of this world. And this is for you, Governor Christie. Do you believe that the recent spike in UFO encounters. ... We've been hearing a lot of testimony in Congress, and people are taking this a lot more seriously. And we're hearing that there are things going on. So if you were president, Governor Christie, would you level with the American people about what the government knows about these possible encounters?	Martha MacCallum	Chris Christie	For Fun
1 — Milwaukee, WI — August 23, 2023 — Fox News	In your closing statement tonight, please tell American voters why you are the person who can inspire this nation to a better day.	Martha MacCallum	All Candidates	Electability