

# What to watch and who is participating in the first Republican debate

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The RNC announced on Monday night that eight candidates have qualified for the debate stage, setting the lineup after the deadline passed for others to make the cut. That means former president Donald Trump — who opted to skip the debate — will not make a last minute appearance for which some rivals had prepared.

Instead, Trump has pre-recorded an interview with former Fox News host Tucker Carlson that is slated to post online on Wednesday night around the time of the debate — though the details are not fully set.

**What to watch:** Trump will be looking to draw as much attention away from the debate and his rivals as possible. Allies note never to underestimate his powers of distraction, alluding to past stunts like those at one of his debates with Hillary Clinton in 2016.

## Ron DeSantis

**What to know about the candidate:** Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis is polling a distant second to Trump after a string of campaign shake-ups, layoffs and struggles to capitalize on high expectations for his candidacy early this year. He's trying to differentiate himself from Trump without alienating the former president's loyal base.

**Keep an eye on this:** The governor’s campaign is preparing for DeSantis to become rivals’ top target on the debate stage in Trump’s absence. Allies have urged him to take some sharp shots of his own, and DeSantis says he’ll hit back — but the campaign has told donors it’s focused on communicating a “vision to beat Joe Biden.”

## Vivek Ramaswamy

**What to know about the candidate:** Vivek Ramaswamy, a wealthy entrepreneur and first-time candidate, is running as a new Trump — a political outsider whose far-out proposals include raising the voting age to 25 and deterring China by handing out guns to Taiwanese people. He has vociferously defended Trump at times.

**Keep an eye on this:** A week out from the debate, Ramaswamy said he hasn’t held formal practice sessions and doesn’t want to be “overly prepared.” But many more-seasoned political hands would say that’s a strategy that could backfire onstage.

## Mike Pence

**What to know about the candidate:** Former vice president Mike Pence is campaigning as a throwback-conservative and trying to convince Republicans he did the right thing on Jan. 6, 2021, when he refused to help Trump try to overturn Joe Biden’s election victory. It’s a tough sell in Trump’s GOP.

**Keep an eye on this:** Pence has strengthened his criticism of Trump in recent months, but he often shows restraint despite the way the former president treated him. Now that voters have been reminded of Trump’s conduct in two recent indictments, he will have a chance in front of an audience of millions to lay out why he thinks his former running mate is no longer fit for the White House.

## Nikki Haley

**What to know about the candidate:** Former South Carolina governor Nikki Haley, who also served as United Nations ambassador under Trump, launched her campaign early and is the first prominent woman of color to seek the GOP nomination. But she’s struggled to break through.

**Keep an eye on this:** Haley has proved to be a skilled and disciplined debater throughout the course of her political career, but can she create a showstopping moment that attracts the attention of the big-monied donors she will need to fund her campaign through the long haul?

# Chris Christie

**What to know about the candidate:** Former New Jersey governor Chris Christie is known for his devastating takedown of Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) during a 2016 presidential debate. Now he's hoping to turn similar fire on Trump, a former ally. The former U.S. Attorney has shown that he's sharp in these settings — the quick retorts and witty asides come easily to him.

**Keep an eye on this:** Trump critics from both parties are eager for Christie to show his hard-charging style and debate skills against the former president. But with Trump absent, it may be harder to land a meaningful blow.

# Tim Scott

**What to know about the candidate:** Sen. Tim Scott of South Carolina is betting that GOP voters will eventually warm to his more hopeful, optimistic message and his argument that a Black conservative with humble roots would be a compelling messenger who could help expand the ranks of the party.

**Keep an eye on this:** Scott has largely steered clear of criticizing his rivals. “Next question,” he recently told a reporter who pressed him on whether he approved of Trump's request that a Georgia election official “find” more votes during the 2020 election — conduct over which Trump had just been indicted. Will that hands-off approach work when so many GOP voters are looking for a strong alternative who can take on Trump?

# Doug Burgum

**What to know about the candidate:** Little-known North Dakota Gov. Doug Burgum made a surprise entrance into the race this June and qualified for the stage with a bold gimmick: He said he'd give \$20 gift cards to people who helped him meet the required number of donations.

**Keep an eye on this:** Burgum is still unknown to many voters, but he hopes that his background as a tech entrepreneur and his executive experience will prove to be a winning combination in the eyes of voters. Can he seize this chance to vault himself from the ranks of the also-ran candidates into contention?

# Asa Hutchinson

**What to know about the candidate:** The former Arkansas governor has been among the toughest critics of Trump within the GOP field and getting to the debate stage was a heavy lift for him, because the RNC required each candidate to have a minimum of 40,000 donors. Hutchinson urged low-dollar donors to help him get on the debate stage by promising he would make the case that Trump has proven that he is unqualified for another term in the White House.

**Keep an eye on this:** Hutchinson and Christie have a warm relationship — both are former U.S. Attorneys who are intent on prosecuting the case against Trump. Expect to see them play off one another on the stage to amplify that case.

## Donald Trump

**What to know about the candidate:** Trump has repeatedly said that he sees no need to join his rivals on the debate stage when he holds such a commanding position in the race for the nomination. Facing four indictments, he is still running well ahead of his closest rival, DeSantis, in recent polls.

**Keep an eye on this:** Trump has said he will surrender to law enforcement Thursday in Atlanta, where he faces charges in connection with his and his associates' efforts to overturn the 2020 election in Georgia. That could help Trump wrest the spotlight back from candidates who shine at Wednesday's debate.