[What to Watch in the Second Republican Presidential Debate](#)

Seven candidates will be on stage, but front-runner Donald Trump will snub the debate to meet auto workers in Detroit

By Alex Leary and Eliza Collins
The Wall Street Journal

Republican presidential candidates are running out of time—and big stages—to take down former President [Donald Trump](#).

They get another chance to make an impression Wednesday night during the second debate for the 2024 GOP field at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in California, a forum the front-runner is snubbing.

[Trump's absence](#) from the first debate last month provided [space for rivals](#), and Vivek Ramaswamy and Nikki Haley made the most of it. But nothing altered Trump's dominance in [polls of the nomination contest](#). Now his rivals are locked in on an increasingly competitive fight for second place, hoping to solidify enough support to narrow the field.

Seven candidates will take the stage—one less than before because former Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson failed to qualify—and all will be watched for how aggressively they go after Trump. They barely touched him during the first debate.

The former president, who will appear Wednesday with [union workers in the Detroit area](#) instead, recently gave [mixed signals on abortion](#) and several candidates have sought to capitalize on that with social conservatives. Other topics to look for are the potential [government shutdown](#), [funding for Ukraine](#), the [United Auto Workers strike](#) and [the economy](#).

The two-hour debate will start at 9 p.m. Eastern time, hosted by Fox Business Network and Univision. It will also [stream online](#) on [Rumble](#). Here is what each of the seven debate contenders hopes to accomplish:

Ron DeSantis

The Florida governor entered the first debate [already weakened](#) from his once clear second-place spot and the ensuing weeks have been no better. Some state polls, including [one in New Hampshire](#), have him falling behind rivals such as Haley. DeSantis is effectively running an Iowa-or-bust strategy with repeated trips to the state that holds the first nominating contest on Jan. 15. A [CBS News poll](#) released

Tuesday showed DeSantis in second place in Iowa, though down 30 percentage points to Trump.

While his team projects confidence that there is ample time left, allies are concerned by a muddled campaign message and a candidate who still displays awkwardness. DeSantis's campaign has recently highlighted Trump's abortion comments, which include calling the six-week ban the governor signed earlier this year a "terrible mistake." DeSantis has also been playing up his immigration stance, including using lethal force against drug traffickers.

DeSantis had a solid first debate, but didn't reverse his decline. He faces the biggest test of any candidate on the stage. Advisers expect him to continue to stick to his message, as he did in the first debate while others squabbled, though the governor will also seek to maximize his speaking time.

Nikki Haley

Haley got the most sustained boost from last month's debate, gaining in early state polls. The former United Nations ambassador and South Carolina governor came out of the debate as a clear alternative to Trump. She made a general election pitch with a focus on the moderate Republicans who have left the party in the era of Trump. An aide to the Haley campaign said she will share her vision, but there's an awareness that the momentum coming out of the last debate could make her a target for the other candidates. She is prepared to respond to those attacks, the aide said.

On abortion, Haley said she opposed the procedure but urged compromise and for candidates not to make women take a stance on a federal ban. She pushed for traditional hawkish Republican views on foreign policy including aiding Ukraine and U.S. allies, a view that some GOP voters have moved away from in recent years.

Still, Haley has a long way to go to have a shot at the nomination and it isn't clear her general election pitch holds much sway with Republican primary voters who are generally far more conservative.

Vivek Ramaswamy

Ramaswamy, the wealthy biotech company founder who has modeled himself as Trump 2.0, was the most-googled candidate coming out of the first debate. He clashed with most of his opponents and has continued to be a top target for the field during subsequent campaign stops, particularly for his views on foreign policy. He has, among other things, said the U.S. shouldn't aid Ukraine in its defense against

Russia, and that the U.S. should urge China not to attack Taiwan only until the U.S. can achieve semiconductor independence from Taiwan.

Ramaswamy didn't do any traditional debate prep before the first event, telling The Wall Street Journal at the time he wanted to use the debate to introduce himself to the country. Tricia McLaughlin, a spokeswoman for Ramaswamy, said he would be prepared for attacks from other candidates but his focus is still on getting people to know him.

Tim Scott

The senator from South Carolina went into the first debate as the candidate seen as most likely to take the mantle from DeSantis as the Trump alternative, but he failed to make much of an impression or gain momentum from the event. Polling shows he has dropped behind Haley and Ramaswamy in Iowa, where he had previously been ticking up.

A Scott campaign memo sent to donors last week sought to reassure them by emphasizing his high favorables with voters and cash on hand. "I'd encourage you to remember that these nights are merely a single moment in time. Any candidate who hopes to truly capitalize on it must be disciplined and built for the long haul," campaign manager Jennifer DeCasper wrote.

Expectation management aside, Scott needs a more assertive performance Wednesday.

Chris Christie

Christie got into a few memorable exchanges in the first debate, jabbing at Ramaswamy as unseasoned and overly rehearsed. He also drew audience boos for hitting Trump over his legal problems. The former New Jersey governor remains a long shot and unpopular with many GOP primary voters but has demonstrated some appeal in New Hampshire, which goes second after Iowa. Christie will look to argue Trump can't win a general election and say he failed on completing a border wall, among other promises, while driving up government spending. "He broke his promises to the voters and we're making a case on that much more than we're making it on electability," Christie said Sunday on NBC News.

Mike Pence

Trump's former vice president has long seemed out of step in the contest, pitching the most conventional Republican ideas in his mild-mannered style. But Pence

stands out on abortion, supporting a national ban, and he could try to contrast that position with Trump and others reluctant to go that far. Pence is likely to criticize Trump's economic policies, including a plan for a universal baseline tariff on U.S. imports. "Trump's plan would raise inflation at a time when high prices are the number one issue facing Americans," a campaign memo reads.

Pence styles himself after Reagan and watch for him to make the connection at the presidential library. The only problem: Trumpism has supplanted Reaganism within the GOP.

Doug Burgum

Doug who? Despite millions of his own money poured into TV ads to raise his profile, the North Dakota governor still barely registers in polls and just made the cut for the debate. "I would rather have spent that money in Iowa and New Hampshire and spent that money actually getting out here and talking to real voters," Burgum told reporters recently, complaining about the polling requirements for the debate. It isn't clear what Burgum can do to break out.