

Five Takeaways From the Republican Debate

An ascendant Nikki Haley endured a barrage from Ron DeSantis and Vivek Ramaswamy. Chris Christie delivered a strong showing. And with time ticking down, there were few direct attacks on Donald Trump.

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Nikki Haley clashed repeatedly with Ron DeSantis on Wednesday night in the fourth Republican presidential debate, facing her most sustained scrutiny of the race as the two leading candidates for second place tussled in Tuscaloosa, Ala.

Tensions ran high as Chris Christie called Vivek Ramaswamy “obnoxious,” Mr. Ramaswamy held up “Nikki = Corrupt” on a notepad, and Mr. DeSantis repeatedly lashed Ms. Haley’s record.

“I love all the attention, fellas,” she said.

All four face the reality of Donald J. Trump’s durable polling lead and dwindling time until voting begins, and it was unclear if anything anyone said could upend the race. But the moderators, led by Megyn Kelly, did more than their predecessors to bring the absent Mr. Trump into the conversation.

Here are five takeaways from what may prove to be [the final official Republican National Committee debate](#):

The ‘fellas’ hit Nikki Haley hard.

Ms. Haley knew there would be a target on her back. The onstage crowd of candidates had thinned out, and her star had risen high enough that her rivals — especially Mr. DeSantis — needed to block her from moving higher.

“Nikki Haley, she caves every time the left comes after her,” Mr. DeSantis said in response to a question about why his campaign has struggled. Mr. Ramaswamy took turns, too, suggesting she had engaged in unsavory moneymaking when she left the Trump administration. “Now you’re a multimillionaire,” he said. “That math does not add up. It adds up to the fact you’re corrupt,” he said.

Mr. DeSantis also accused her of being against a bill banning some medical treatments for transgender children, which she denied, but the question may have an audience with evangelical voters in Iowa. Mr. Ramaswamy attacked her for her connection to major

donors, including [a contribution to her super PAC](#) from a major Democratic donor, jabs that could hurt her with the Republican base.

At one point, Mr. Christie stepped into defend Ms. Haley after Mr. Ramaswamy mocked her as being unable to name three eastern Ukrainian provinces where she would send troops, despite her support for Ukraine against Russia.

“This is a smart, accomplished woman,” Mr. Christie said. “You should stop insulting her.”

Ms. Haley appeared grateful, but also said nothing to defend herself in that moment. It was emblematic of a night where she receded for long stretches after three debates of asserting herself. Her restraint was cutting at moments. After another long Ramaswamy attack, she declined to respond altogether. “It’s not,” she said, “worth my time.”

Ron DeSantis kept pulling his punches on Trump.

Mr. DeSantis’s diminished standing in the race was clear from the bruising opening question from Ms. Kelly. She listed his early advantages, including money and how he had seemed the best positioned to consolidate the anti-Trump vote. “You haven’t managed to do it,” she said.

“I’m sick of hearing about these polls,” he responded. And surely he is.

But Mr. DeSantis stuck with his risk-averse strategy toward Mr. Trump. He carefully and selectively offered criticism of the front-runner, who has mercilessly bludgeoned him for months.

Instead, Mr. DeSantis saved his sharpest words for slicing attacks on Ms. Haley. He more than once invoked her ties to donors. “Nikki will cave to those big donors when it counts,” he said. (She had a ready-made retort: “He’s mad because those Wall Street donors used to support him and now they support me.”)

But as for Mr. Trump?

Mr. DeSantis took some pokes. But more often he demurred. When Ms. Haley criticized Mr. Trump for adding to the national debt, Mr. DeSantis chose a more vague denunciation of “both parties in Washington, D.C.”

His reluctance was clearest in an exchange with Mr. Christie, who pressed him through cross-talk: “Is he fit to be president or isn’t he?” Mr. DeSantis never directly answered, returning to the safe haven of a talking point that “Father Time is undefeated.”

Father Time is looming in this primary, too. And if Mr. DeSantis is not ready to take on Mr. Trump now, it is not clear when he will be, or if he will get that chance.

Chris Christie had his strongest debate to date.

Mr. Christie delivered the kind of forceful and inspired performance that his supporters have been waiting for at a now-or-never juncture for his flagging candidacy.

“The truth needs to be told,” he said.

He attacked Mr. Trump (a “dictator” and a “bully”). He bashed Mr. Ramaswamy (“the most obnoxious blowhard in America”). He cornered Mr. DeSantis (“Ron gets a question and he doesn’t answer it”). And he mocked all three foes onstage for avoiding Mr. Trump’s name like “Voldemort.”

But the boos that rang out more than once as he spoke were another reminder that despite his manifest skills as a campaigner, he remains out of the mainstream of the modern Republican Party.

In a sign that his future may be beyond elected office, Mr. Christie dropped a reference to a forthcoming book (early in 2024, he said). Still, he made a specific case against Mr. Trump as “unfit” and unmoored to the public interest.

“He started out the campaign by saying, ‘I’m your retribution,’” Mr. Christie said of Mr. Trump’s current bid. “Eight years ago, he said, ‘I am your voice.’”

Megyn Kelly played hardball.

When Republican debates are moderated by conservative journalists, the questions tend to come from a place of empathy or outright chumminess. There was nothing chummy about Wednesday night.

This was Ms. Kelly’s first time moderating a Republican debate since 2016, when, as a star at Fox News, she upset Mr. Trump by confronting him with examples of his derogatory statements about women. Since then she has quit Fox, moved to NBC, left in a bitter dispute and begun her own podcast.

She came to Tuscaloosa apparently itching for a fight and spared nobody.

“Aren’t you too tight with the banks and the billionaires,” she suggested to Ms. Haley, “to win over the G.O.P.’s working-class base, which mostly wants to break the system, not elect someone beholden to it?”

She confronted Mr. DeSantis with his collapsing poll numbers and faltering campaign; she confronted Mr. Ramaswamy with his apparent inability, from one debate to the next, to decide whether his opponents are corrupt or people of integrity; and she confronted Mr. Christie with the fact that most Republican voters can’t stand him.

Most importantly, she and the other moderators — the Washington Free Beacon’s Eliana Johnson and NewsNation’s Elizabeth Vargas — confronted all of the candidates with a topic that many of them still prefer to avoid: Donald Trump.

Vivek Ramaswamy had his Alex Jones moment.

Mr. Ramaswamy has ratcheted up his incitements with every debate — though his poll numbers seem to be declining the more outrageous he gets.

Mimicking what Mr. Trump did in 2016, Mr. Ramaswamy, a wealthy businessman, has portrayed himself as the lone “outsider” onstage, the only one uncorrupted by big donors and willing to speak the shocking “truth.” He lashes out at his rivals but never has a bad word to say about Mr. Trump, often looking more as if he is auditioning for a spot in Mr. Trump’s cabinet than trying to defeat him.

On Wednesday, Mr. Ramaswamy added some new material to his unusual act. Emulating Alex Jones, he declared that “Jan. 6 now does look like it was an inside job” — a reference to a [far-right conspiracy theory](#) that the attack on the Capitol was orchestrated by the federal government rather than by Trump supporters.

He also said “the climate change agenda is a hoax” and that “[the great replacement theory](#)” — the theory that liberal immigration policies are part of a scheme to dilute the power of white Americans — “is not some grand right-wing conspiracy theory, but a basic statement of the Democratic Party’s platform.”

He was crude and cruel. He mocked Mr. Christie’s weight, suggesting he walk himself off the stage, “have a nice meal and get the hell out of this race.” Mr. Ramaswamy went on to portray Ms. Haley as a “puppet” of corporate America and the military-industrial complex.

The crowd often booed, never more so than when he attacked Ms. Haley as a “fascist.”