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GOP Debate Winners: Trump, Cruz, Huckabee, Christie



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First, the Donald.

He showed his style and his charisma. He took punches and showed that he can shake them off without effect. He showed that he is a totally different kind of candidate and that he squarely addresses the need for competence, strength, and leadership. He was hit on his quotes and he came back saying we had more important things to do than play political correctness. His business activities? He made money and followed the laws. Very, very strong performance.

But — and it's a big but. His refusal to rule out a third party candidacy could prove to be the mistake that unravels him. Republicans do not want to encourage another Ross Perot. They feel Perot cost them the 1992 race and Trump set up an issue his opponents can use to beat him over the head.

On the other hand, voters might find it refreshing to see a candidate who tells the truth even if it might hurt him. The point is: he's not going away.

Then Bush.

He did well, but Christie did better and Kasich did OK and they are competing for the same basket of votes. He certainly didn't stand out in the crowd. Bush handled economy well, established his conservative credentials. But he was hurt on immigration and probably dropped in the polls as everybody else became better known.

And among conservatives, Cruz stood out. His answers were crisp, sharp and relevant. On immigration, he scored big points. He showed a degree of information and specificity that others didn't have.

By contrast, Walker was badly hurt by his support of amnesty. His answer was weak. He was great on foreign policy and good on showing his record in Wisconsin, but he may not recover on immigration. Just like Perry didn't on granting in-state tuition to illegals. That beat Perry and amnesty could hurt Walker.

Rubio underwhelmed. He seemed to make a good number two. A VP — not a president. His answers had no punch. He was good on the economy and his replies were ideologically OK, but he did not come across as a leader.

But even as Cruz will benefit from Walker's immigration gaffe and Rubio's weakness, he will be threatened by Huckabee's strong performance. Huck did as well in this debate as he did in 2008 when the debates propelled him into the top tier. His religious answers were moving but so was his defense of Social Security, his advocacy of the fair tax, and his castigation of Wall Street.

Rand Paul made himself a side show. Good answers on the First and Fourth Amendment and the NSA but marginalized himself on Israel.

Ben Carson was just weak and understated. Well informed. Good answers on race and on strengthening the military but he's not ready to break in with this fast a crowd.

To summarize:

- The winners were Trump, Cruz, Huckabee, and Christie.
- The losers were Bush, Walker and Rubio.
- No change in Paul or Carson.
- Kasich did well because he showed up.

The other big loser was FoxNews.

Their anti-Trump bias was obvious. The questions were way too negative and often too personal. The network, which is built on being fair to conservatives, was manifestly unfair to them tonight.

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