

THE REPUBLICAN DEBATE: MUST SEE REALITY TV

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Normally, the first few presidential primary debates are not widely watched, let alone discussed before they occur. They're typically "industry events" reserved for the politically preoccupied or for those trying to discern how slogans, if transmuted into policy, could impact global financial markets. But this year is different. In case you're just tuning in, Donald Trump, who currently leads in many polls, has pushed the Republican primary season to the edge of must-see TV. In Thursday's episode, nine bewildered contestants confront Mr. Trump after learning they've been cast in bit roles. Candidates who fail to make a favorable impression could, like others before them, lose the privilege of debating again in prime time. Thursday could well be the largest reality TV-induced firing since Mr. Trump personally terminated four trembling millennials *simultaneously* in his boardroom several years ago. What explains America's newfound fascination with this emerging political drama? To answer the question requires turning the dial to an even more subversive channel within American popular culture: professional wrestling. In pro wrestling, before the biggest names ever enter the ring, they must first perform a "taunt"—they must win over the crowd by trash-talking, threatening or provoking their opponent. Hulk Hogan did so before wrestling King Kong Bundy inside a steel cage. The late performance artist Andy Kaufman did so before wrestling Jerry "The King" Lawler in Memphis, Tennessee. Donald Trump has performed similar rituals. Back in 2007, Mr. Trump actually climbed inside a wrestling ring, withstood a stare-down and tongue-lashing from Stone Cold Steve Austin and traded taunts with World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) chairman and CEO Vince McMahon—all to promote a wrestling match billed as "the Battle of the Billionaires."¹ (A few quick highlights from that match: Trump tackles McMahon to the ground, unfurls a flurry of simulated noogies and then celebrates victory by shaving the hair off the rival CEO's scalp.) This is one of the reasons millions will tune in to Thursday's Royal Rumble. Many will be rooting for Mr. Trump to deliver the rhetorical equivalent of a face rake, head butt and pile driver to the country's career politicians. For the angry, alienated and ignored, Mr. Trump is this year's vessel through which the full wrath of primary voters can be unleashed on the nation's political and media elites. So far, Mr. Trump has not disappointed. Since announcing his candidacy in June, he has successfully adapted "the taunt" into a new form of political performance art. Over the last few weeks, he's directed his attacks toward immediate rivals unlucky enough to stumble into his crosshairs. Before being allowed to debate, Rick Perry, the former governor of Texas, should be "forced to take an IQ test," Trump tweeted. After former New York governor George Pataki challenged Trump to debate him on immigration, the real estate mogul tweeted that Pataki "couldn't be elected dog catcher." After learning that Senator Lindsey Graham had called him a "jackass," Trump branded the South Carolina senator a "stiff" and an "idiot" before sharing Graham's personal phone number with millions of viewers on live TV. Even those who have yet to win political office are not immune. Trump doesn't believe former CEO Carly Fiorina is qualified to run for president—not just because she was fired by her former company, Hewlett-Packard, but because she was "viciously fired" in a way we can only infer goes beyond what could air on *Celebrity Apprentice*. To be fair, the insults have flown both ways. Senator Graham has also called Trump a "wrecking ball." Governor Perry labeled him a "cancer on conservatism." And Fiorina, a gifted phrasemaker, called Trump a "heat-seeking missile for publicity." By changing the discourse, and getting his opponents to return the taunt, Trump has successfully raised his profile, which so far, has been correlated to his rise in the polls. Speaking on the stump in front of enthusiastic crowds, Trump does more than just taunt his opponents or recount how smart he is (very), or how rich he is (really) or how successful he's been (hugely). His basic message is that incompetent political leaders are destroying the country and that the nation needs him to "make America rich again." In a recent speech, it took Trump only nine words (including two personal pronouns) to distill why he is the perfect messenger: "The beauty of me is I couldn't care less." Right now, that message appeals to a sizable portion of Republican primary voters. They want someone who isn't afraid to say what he thinks and speaks directly to the issues that divide the Republican base from its leadership in Washington, including illegal immigration, foreign trade agreements and "Obamacare." That Trump doesn't care what the media say about him makes him irresistibly appealing to grassroots voters. And by being rich enough to finance his own run, Trump has the luxury of telling lobbyists, special interests and large donors that he doesn't need them

—while drawing contrasts with opponents who do. Eventually, voters may ask Mr. Trump what he would do if elected, and how he intends to do it. Until then, don't expect to see any position papers on his website. In 2015, it's not enough to have political skills and the ability to govern. Today's presidential candidates must also entertain us. Ronald Reagan's edict—that a Republican should never speak ill of another Republican—has been replaced by a new political commandment: "Thou shalt not bore thy voter." Trump knows this. In an age when everyone is free to broadcast his or her own life, Mr. Trump, armed with an open mike, gives us reason to pause and listen. A strange brew of celebrity, incivility and social media has mixed with a polarized and angry electorate to make the political ascension of Donald Trump possible. In a few months, voters in Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina—and the delegates who represent them—will determine if a path to the Republican Party's nomination for Mr. Trump is indeed plausible. ¹"Mr. McMahon and Donald Trump's Battle of the Billionaires Contract Signing," [YouTube](#).

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