

Presidential nomination season is here. Children skip merrily along to the pinging sounds of emails flooding inboxes, pamphlets pile high on every doorstep, and the GOP candidates are spreading good cheer all around. 'Tis the season.

In less than one month the presidential hopefuls will stand their first true test of the electoral year—the Iowa Caucus. A win at the Iowa Caucus often proves to be a crucial endorsement for any presidential hopeful. That is why this past Saturday's Debate was so crucial.

The candidates all came out with different strategies, whether it be the avid Obama-bashing of Michelle Bachmann or the cool, witty demeanor of Newt Gingrich. However, they all had one goal in mind, and that was to sway partisan voters in Iowa to endorse their candidacy in next month's caucus.

Newt Gingrich, who has recently surpassed Mitt Romney in the polls, is now the clearly established frontrunner, and he performed with this in mind at the recent debate. Newt was his typical gregarious self, fending off criticism from his peers and deftly navigating the political flak coming his way. He even managed to lay out several straightforward policies that would stimulate the economy.

Even when the candidates were asked whether marital fidelity should play a part in voters' sentiments towards a nominee, clearly an attack aimed at the thrice-married Gingrich, Newt held his ground, and defused the potentially harmful situation by readily admitting his past mistakes, and at the same time emphasizing that he is not the same man he was when he cheated on his first wife.

If coming out of the debate unscathed was Gingrich's goal, he succeeded, and then some. The same cannot be said of all candidates. This was one of the last opportunities for Mitt Romney to truly connect with voters on a personal level, which he has previously proved woefully incapable of.

Even when Romney was asked to name one way in which a fellow candidate on the stage has inspired him, he managed to come off as arrogant and loquacious. His glaring flip-flops on issues were again revealed during this debate, and he did not outline any new policy information, making this simply another debate in a long line of lackluster performances. This was not what Mitt needed from a debate in a state where the first measurement of voter sentiment will be measured in early January.

The other candidates all took back seats to the two frontrunners, with one notable exception, Ron Paul. This elfin man, criticized by many as a radical libertarian, has proved shockingly farsighted, predicting the recession of 2008 far before it occurred. Paul continued on the strength of his impeccable record, especially on economic policy, in this debate. The highlight of his night was an excoriating attack on the government stimulus packages.

Michelle Bachmann and Rick Santorum have both been flirting with sub-5% approval ratings in most polls, and neither offered the stellar performance at the debate that would have been needed to shunt a significant part of the electorate into their camp so late in the process.

Rick Perry, although he did not make any glaring obvious bumbles in this debate, seemed childish in his attacks against Mitt Romney, and again demonstrated that his debating skills leave a lot to be desired.

This debate was not a make-or-break event for any candidate, and indeed the winner of the Iowa caucus is not guaranteed nomination by any means. For example, in 2008, Mike Huckabee won the Iowa caucus due to his rabid support base in the state, but proved to be unsuccessful in many other states.

However, this debate was very revealing for the voters of Iowa, who will now be primed to cast their caucus votes as the new year dawns. Who will be the winner?