

GOP hopefuls slug it out in 'first in South' debate; In South Carolina, candidates' records on abortion, spending come under fire

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Body

COLUMBIA, **S.C.** -- The gloves **came** off at Tuesday night's Republican presidential **debate** as the 10 **candidates** attacked one another's positions on **abortion**, taxes, immigration and campaign **spending**.

The sharpest exchange **came** between former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney and John McCain. Romney said he feared McCain would do for immigration what the Arizona senator's campaign-finance law has done for politics and money -- "and that's bad."

McCain shot back that he has favored limits on money in politics and opposed **abortion** consistently throughout his career: "I haven't changed my position in even-numbered years because of the position that I may be running for."

It was a reference to Romney's recent shift from supporting to opposing **abortion** rights. **Abortion** posed a particular challenge for former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani, who in recent days has made no bones about his support for legal **abortion** in a party dominated by **abortion** opponents. "I ultimately do believe in a woman's right of choice," he said, after noting that **abortions** fell and adoptions rose during his tenure.

The **debate** at the University of **South Carolina** **came** after a May 3 meeting at the Reagan Presidential Library in California. It was, as advertised, the "first in the **South**" **debate**, in the state that holds the first nominating contest in the **South**. The **South Carolina** primary is scheduled for Feb. 2.

Broadcast by the Fox News Channel, the **debate** featured Fox reporters asking tough questions that pitted the 10 **candidates** against one another and their own **records**. Among the exchanges:

*Former Virginia governor Jim Gilmore repeated his critique of "Rudy McRomney," contending that Giuliani, McCain and Romney were not true conservatives. Gilmore said Giuliani has waffled on public funding of **abortion**, and Romney and former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee had raised taxes. Later, questioner Chris Wallace noted McCain had voted against tax cuts in 2001 and 2003.

*Colorado Rep. Tom Tancredo expressed disbelief after hearing several fellow contenders lament the **GOP**'s lost reputation for fiscal discipline. Did they vote for the expensive Medicare prescription-drug program or the No Child Left Behind education law? "If they did, how in the world can they **come** back here and say we've got to be careful about **spending** and get it **under** control?" he asked.

The **debate** also included Kansas Sen. Sam Brownback; California Rep. Duncan Hunter; Texas Rep. Ron Paul and former Wisconsin governor Tommy Thompson.

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The field could expand as early as next month to include former Tennessee senator Fred Thompson. He now plays district attorney Arthur Branch on Law & Order, but NBC executive Kevin Reilly said Monday that it is "highly unlikely" Thompson will be back on the show next year.

Like the first debate, this one allowed 90 minutes to question the 10 contenders. Not surprisingly, the competition beforehand was to deflate expectations.

Commentators gave Romney good reviews last time, which led spokesman Kevin Madden to joke that in his office, "I was worrying that somebody would trip over the limbo stick, I was setting the bar so low."

The hours up to start time were dominated by reaction to the death of Jerry Falwell, who turned Christian conservatives into a political force and pushed social issues to the top of the GOP agenda.

Giuliani, the only Republican candidate who supports abortion rights, consistently leads national polls for the nomination. After a confusing answer on abortion in the first debate, he has been outlining his views more clearly.

Rasmussen automated polls this week and last week found slippage in Giuliani's national support, from a 16-percentage-point lead over McCain to a 7-point lead. He still tops the field at 25%. McCain is at 18%, followed by non-candidate Fred Thompson at 15% and Romney at 12%.

McCain's challenge in the debates and in the race overall is his high-profile support for using more U.S. troops in Iraq and, for as long as success is possible, staying there with no timetable for departure.

VoteVets.org, a military veterans group critical of President Bush's handling of the Iraq war, spent \$25,000 to run an ad targeting McCain on Fox News following the debate.

The ad features retired major general John Batiste, a Republican who was commanding general of the 1st Infantry Division in Iraq from August 2002 to June 2005. Bush is shown telling reporters in December 2004 that "I have always said that I will listen to the requests of our commanders on the ground."

Batiste retorts: "You did not listen, Mr. President. You continue to pursue the failed strategy that is breaking our great Army and Marine Corps." He urges McCain to "protect America, not George Bush."

Graphic

PHOTO, B/W, Pablo Martinez Monsviais, AP

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