

# The Republicans' 19th Nervous Breakdown

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There is a not very fine line between issues that should concern a president and issues on which a Fox News commentator should spend his or her time. This was made very evident last week. On Tuesday night President Obama gave his State of the Union address. State of the Union addresses are a rarely compelling form of political theater, but they are significant because they allow the president to present his agenda and goals to the American people. On Thursday night, by contrast, the remaining four Republican presidential candidates engaged in what seemed like their 400th debate. Actually it was only their 19th.

The Republican debate included several strangely long digressions about space travel and moon colonies, widespread agreement that Ron Paul is in fine health for a man his age and a contest to see who could take the strongest anti-Castro position. Paul, of course, did not participate in this contest instead replying, not un-wisely, that if Raul Castro called him, he (Paul) would ask why Castro was calling. The contrast between the Republican candidates and President Obama could not have been more stark, or more favorable to the president. Obama talked about jobs and the economy, while the Republicans rabbited on about moon colonies. It is no surprise that the president's [poll numbers improved](#) last week as well.

The Republican debates have been fun to watch and have given a great deal of exposure to the Republican candidates. However, on balance they have highlighted the weakness of the field and, like the debate last week in Jacksonville, forced the candidates to spend time talking about minor, even quirky, issues or on personal, and silly, questions such as whose wife would be the best first lady, or the role their religious faith would play in their presidencies.

The major issue in this election is, of course, the economy, but while the state of the economy may hurt President Obama in November, the Republican candidates gain little by talking about the economy now. This is because Republican proposals for addressing the economy such as lowering taxes on wealthy Americans, deregulating business more and cutting government programs are the precise ideas which have been so damaging to the [ratings of Republicans in Congress](#). Moreover, there is little disagreement among the major candidates regarding these solutions. The differences are primarily of degree, not of kind. Accordingly, while most of the Republican presidential candidates are happy to criticize the economy and what President Obama has done to try to fix the economy, they are considerably more reluctant to spend a lot of time on their own uninspiring proposals. The debates are therefore taken up with other issues that, at best, make the Republican candidates look unpresidential and, in most cases, make the candidates seem less appealing to voters.

Successful candidates for president must evolve from being just another politician, to a plausible candidate for president to somebody who most Americans could envision sitting in the Oval

Office. For challengers, the earlier in the process this happens the better. In 2008, John McCain, despite being a poor candidate in some respects was, due to his long service in the U.S. Senate and his extraordinary personal history, easily viewed as a potential president relatively early in the primary process. Barack Obama did not achieve this status until later in the process in 2008, but through his political skills and wave of well known early endorsers was still able to be viewed as a plausible president relatively early in the primary season.

There are many ways to persuade the American people that one is qualified to sit in the Oval Office, but discussing moon colonies with Newt Gingrich or speculating on Ron Paul's fine physical health for a septuagenarian are not among them. This is the crux of the problems the debates raise for Mitt Romney, the likely Republican nominee. Even when he is winning them, as he did last Thursday, they are not moving him closer to convincing the American people he should be president. The debates create bigger problems for Romney because while he is trying to become president, his opponents are not. Ron Paul is trying to make a point, while Newt Gingrich is trying to rejuvenate his media career and have one last opportunity to lecture the American people.

It is only a slight overstatement to say that the Republican presidential candidates have debated 19 times and the winner of almost all of those debates has been Barack Obama. The extremist, and often poorly informed, views of most of the candidates, the emphasis on explaining minor differences and the time spent talking about issues which are of little importance to most voters have not helped any Republican seem like a strong threat to President Obama. With fewer debates in the next months, Romney may be able to focus more on Obama, but first he needs to make up for lost time and pass the presidential plausibility test.