

Debate not expected to winnow out any of the 17 GOP presidential contenders

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Political analysts say it's unlikely that Thursday night's debate will be a make it or break it event for any of the 17 declared Republican presidential candidates.

Many viewers will tune into the Fox News-hosted debate in Cleveland just for the entertainment of what current front-runner Donald Trump will have to say, said Peter Woolley, Fairleigh Dickinson political science professor.

The 10 candidates leading in the polls -- Jeb Bush, Ben Carson, Chris Christie, Ted Cruz, Mike Huckabee and, from bottom left, John Kasich, Rand Paul, Marco Rubio, Donald Trump and Scott Walker -- will take the main stage at 9 p.m. The seven others -- Carly Fiorina, Jim Gilmore, Lindsey Graham, Bobby Jindal, George Pataki, Rick Perry and Rick Santorum -- have been invited to debate at 5 p.m.

But, no matter what their debate performance, 17 GOP contenders will remain come Friday morning, Woolley said.

"It's too early for somebody to get punched out of the race -- even if he or she makes a big gaffe -- because most of them have some significant financial backing," he said. "It's only when your financial backers desert you that you need to leave the race."

But while all are expected to be assured of continued candidacy for the time being, the debate probably won't help any of the candidates stand out from the crowd and make a positive impression, said Weingart, associate director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers.

"Gov. Chris Christie is among the most adept, maybe the most adept, in that group in speaking in public, communicating," Weingart said. "He's got as good a shot as anybody and better than some to come out of it ahead."

However, Christie will need to come across as a successful government official, he said, "so that people get the impression of him as someone who can be a serious policy executive and stay away from the catchy conversation quotes that have gotten him so much attention up until now."

At the same time, Christie and the other candidates will have to be prepared to take on front-runner Trump without alienating the many voters who support the unscripted and outrageous billionaire.

"They all have to decide how critical to be of Trump," Weingart said. "And that's a delicate issue since he obviously has some appeal to voters that the ultimate Republican nominee is going to want to have in his corner."