

First GOP debate airs differences on abortion, evolution: An ideologically diverse field

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Differences on abortion rights, stem cell research and even the veracity of evolution became evident this month among the Republican presidential candidates in their first major debate.

While Democratic hopefuls—who held their first debate earlier—mainly steered clear of these controversial social issues, the GOP candidates dove into the issues most important to their conservative religious base. The May 3 debate at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California, revealed one of the most ideologically diverse Republican fields in years.

Of the 10 candidates, three raised their hands when asked by a moderator if they disagreed with evolutionary theory. They were former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee, a minister and former president of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention; Kansas senator Sam Brownback, a Catholic convert from evangelical Protestantism; and Colorado representative Tom Tancredo, whose congressional biography describes him as an “evangelical Presbyterian.” None of the antievolution candidates is among the party’s front-runners.

Arizona senator John McCain qualified his answer to the evolution question by saying that while he believes that life has evolved on Earth, he also believes that a divine force guided its development.

Only one candidate affirmed abortion rights—though he seemed to modify his position during the debate. Former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani, when asked about his prochoice position, reiterated his personal disapproval of abortion but also his support for a woman’s right to have one.

That position resembles that of a number of Democrats in the presidential campaign and is one that Giuliani has long espoused. However, he recently began staking out new ground on abortion rights, saying that he would appoint “strict constructionist” judges to the federal courts if elected president. The term refers to a school of jurisprudence that many conservatives believe would rule out finding a right to abortion in the Constitution, as the Supreme Court did in its famous 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision.

During the debate, Giuliani said it would be “OK” if the court overturned *Roe*. Such an action would return decisions about the legality of abortion to the states. Giuliani also said it would be fine if a judge upheld *Roe* because it is a long-standing precedent.

The candidates also disagreed on federal funding for embryonic stem cell research. McCain and Giuliani support such research, which many scientists believe could lead to cures for terminal illnesses. But former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney— as well as the second- and third-tier candidates in the field—oppose it.

Romney was asked about his past support for abortion rights, which he now opposes. “I said I was wrong and changed my mind and said I’m pro-life,” Romney said. “I won’t apologize to anybody for becoming pro-life.” –*Associated Baptist Press*