

Dewhurst, Cruz debate on early voting's opening day

Contributed by Will Lutz
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Republican Senate candidates Ted Cruz and David Dewhurst squared off July 23 in a televised debate held in Houston on the opening day of early voting for the July 31 Republican runoff. The runoff winner is widely believed to be the overwhelming favorite heading into the general election. The King Street Patriots and KRIV Fox 26 in Houston co-sponsored the debate. Dewhurst did a better job promoting his record than he had in past debates. It was perhaps the best performance from Dewhurst connecting his Texas record with the federal issues in play in the U.S. Senate. As Dewhurst himself admitted -- Cruz is a first-class experienced debater. As in past debates, both candidates staked out similar ideological positions, but their style and record differ dramatically. The debate also featured several pointed exchanges between the two candidates over the tone of the race.

The format in this debate differs markedly from past debates. Candidates got to make an opening and closing statements, fielded questions from two panelists and those submitted by social media and from the audience. No rebuttals or follow-up questions were allowed. That allowed the candidates to plan more in advance than in past debates, resulting in more sound bites and fewer surprises. That format probably helped Dewhurst, who by his own admission is not as seasoned at debating as Cruz, a career attorney who has years of experience arguing before state and federal courts. In his opening statement, Cruz emphasized the grassroots nature of his campaign and how he went from barely registering in the polls to leading the race. Cruz spent the better part of the last two years speaking to just about any conservative group that would have him, and should he be successful July 31, how he did it will be a major story. Dewhurst opened by blasting President Barack Obama and his health care reform bill, promising to repeal every word of it. Dewhurst also discussed his record as lieutenant governor and how he wants to take the pro-business policy climate he helped build here in Texas to the U.S. Capitol. Dewhurst discussed some of the signature achievements of the Republican legislature under his watch, including medical malpractice tort reform and his ideas for reforming the Medicaid health program for the poor. Dewhurst also highlighted his extensive pro-life record, something he neglected to do in previous appearances. (Under his watch, the Texas Legislature passed several major pro-life bills, which is a large reason most of the pro-life groups are with Dewhurst, even though Cruz is also pro-life.) Throughout the debate, Dewhurst referred to himself as a "do-er" rather than a talker. On health care, Cruz argued there is a big difference. Cruz said that he believes it's not the government's job to provide health care. He referenced previous Dewhurst comments that Europeans get better health care outcomes. Cruz said those studies are biased in favor of socialized medicine. Both candidates blasted illegal immigration and said they do not support amnesty for illegal immigrants, though Cruz brought up a 1997 speech in South Texas where Dewhurst endorsed a guest worker program, which Cruz said is broader than even what Obama supports -- a charge Dewhurst denies. Neither candidate talked about increasing sanctions on employers who hire illegal immigrants nor did they talk about requiring the e-Verify program on new hires. Both candidates also named budget reform as the bill they'd most like to pass (other than repeal of Obama's health care law). Both want to see a federal balanced budget amendment and a cap on federal spending. The debate featured a lot of pointed exchanges about the tone of the campaign. Cruz said he tried to keep the campaign, including the attacks, focused on his record and that of Dewhurst. Cruz blasted a Dewhurst mailer attacking Cruz for representing a client that Dewhurst tried to tie to communist China. (Cruz's father is a Cuban immigrant). Cruz requested an apology. He didn't get one. There were a few less-than-enlightening questions from the audience and blogosphere. For example, one question asked if either of the two candidates supported gun control. Are you kidding?? This is Texas, and a Republican primary, no less. (Obviously, both candidates said they support the Second Amendment, and Dewhurst highlighted his efforts to pass the "Castle Doctrine" bill, which shifts the burden of proof when a homeowner discharges a weapon in self-defense to the prosecution to show that the defense was unreasonable. Traditionally, under the law, self-defense is an affirmative defense which the defense has to justify.) In closing, Cruz blamed both parties for the deficit mess in Washington DC and promised to bring a fresh approach -- cutting spending. The theme that both parties have failed America and have discarded conservative principles is a key one for TEA Party voters. Dewhurst closed by mentioning his Texas record and encouraged the audience to look to that to see what he can do in the United States Senate. The debate moderator was Melinda Spaulding of Fox 26 Houston. The panelists were Sally MacDonald of Fox 26 Houston and Catherine Engelbrecht of the King Street Patriots. Incumbent U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison is not seeking re-election in 2012.