Nonverbal cues in debates can speak volumes to voters

By Akilah Johnson
GLOBE STAFF


The presidential candidates showed the subtle signs of nervousness at Monday evening’s GOP forum — and anxiety levels may well increase at Thursday night’s first presidential primary debate in Cleveland.

In a field of 17 Republican candidates — 10 of whom will gather on the Fox News stage at 9 p.m. — it’s hard for any one contender to pull away from the pack. But if history is any guide for presidential debates, many times candidates stand out for all the wrong reasons — and without saying a word.

Sighs, sweat, a glance at a watch: They’ve become prime material for late-night lampooning on talk shows.

They’re also what voters remember most often from the candidates’ precious time on stage when, as on Thursday night, they’ll have less than 12 minutes each to speak. But the candidates all have equal opportunity for screen time during the debate, knowing the camera could flash to them at any moment.

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‘The twitchiness is seen unconsciously by the viewer/voter as reflecting on the personality [of the candidate].’

JOSEPH TECCE, psychology professor at BC who studies nonverbal communication

Democratic primary debate, Barack Obama deadpanned to Hillary Clinton, “You’re likable enough, Hillary.” He memorably smirked from the corner of his mouth.

In 1992, President George H.W. Bush checked his watch during a voter question, making him appear unsympathetic to her personalized inquiry about the national debt. In 2000, his son, George W. Bush, benefited from his foe’s foibles in a debate, where voters took Vice President Al Gore’s loud sighs as a sign of arrogance and impatience.

On Thursday, a third member of the Bush family, former governor Jeb Bush of Florida, will face his own challenge: controlling his reaction to the man next to him on stage, Donald Trump, a boisterous and blunt businessman. Bush will be joined in this challenge by eight other contenders.

Trump did not attend Monday night’s Voters First Presidential Forum at Saint Anselm College. The evening came to a close with no game-changing gaffes — no gross exaggerations, horrendous misstatements, or annoying tics that kill a presidential campaign. But there were moments when some of the 14 candidates had noticeable tells.

The candidates — save three senators who joined the night via satellite from Washington, D.C. — sat together in the front row of the auditorium, where it resembled something like a high school assembly as they listened to their opponents.

Candidates fidgeted and squirmed. Rick Perry, former governor of Texas, occasionally would lean over and whisper into the ear of Governor Bobby Jindal of Louisiana. Camera pans of the audience showed Bush sitting somewhat slumped, awkwardly grabbing the handrail, and Governor Chris Christie of New Jersey and Carly Fiorina, former CEO of Hewlett-Packard, looking drowsy at points.

Governor John Kasich of Ohio slouched on stage. Former New York governor George Pataki drank lots of water while sitting off stage, pulling out what looked like a crib sheet at one point. South Carolina Senator
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Lindsey Graham, who spoke with one hand curled tightly into a fist for most of the night, whispered to his colleagues sitting next to him.

In the final minutes of the forum, Jeb Bush flubbed. He told the audience that his dad, President George H.W. Bush, was “probably the most perfect man alive,” eliciting laughter. Then he started stammering as he talked about a T-shirt at a “Jeb swag store” that says, “My dad’s the greatest man alive. If you don’t like it, I’ll take you outside.” He fidgeted with his tie while he searched for words. Nonverbal cues will come into sharper focus — and be easier to absorb — as the field narrows, Tecce said. It’s hard to count how many times a minute a candidate blinks or averts a gaze — tells of stress and dishonesty — when you’re looking at 10 sets of eyes, he said.

But voters Monday night said they saw a camaraderie among the candidates, who avoided directly insulting each other and displayed a respectable kinship.

“It’s just a real shame for the country not to see what we saw here tonight,” Shawn Jasper, speaker of the New Hampshire House of Representatives, said as he left Monday night’s fo-

rum. “This idea that ‘we don’t have enough time; we can’t be patient enough.’ It’s just ridiculous. We’re choosing the president of the United States. This isn’t a TV show that has to be done within an hour.”

Jasper’s wife, Laurie, said she saw a camaraderie among the candidates that was well appreciated. From their seats inside the auditorium, they could see the candidates as they walked back to their seats.

“They were actually shaking hands and saying ‘good job,’ patting each other. That was really nice to see,” she said. “And, there was no bashing tonight.”

The question becomes: How long does that last?

Akilah Johnson can be reached at akilah.johnson@globe.com. Follow her on Twitter @akjohnson1922.