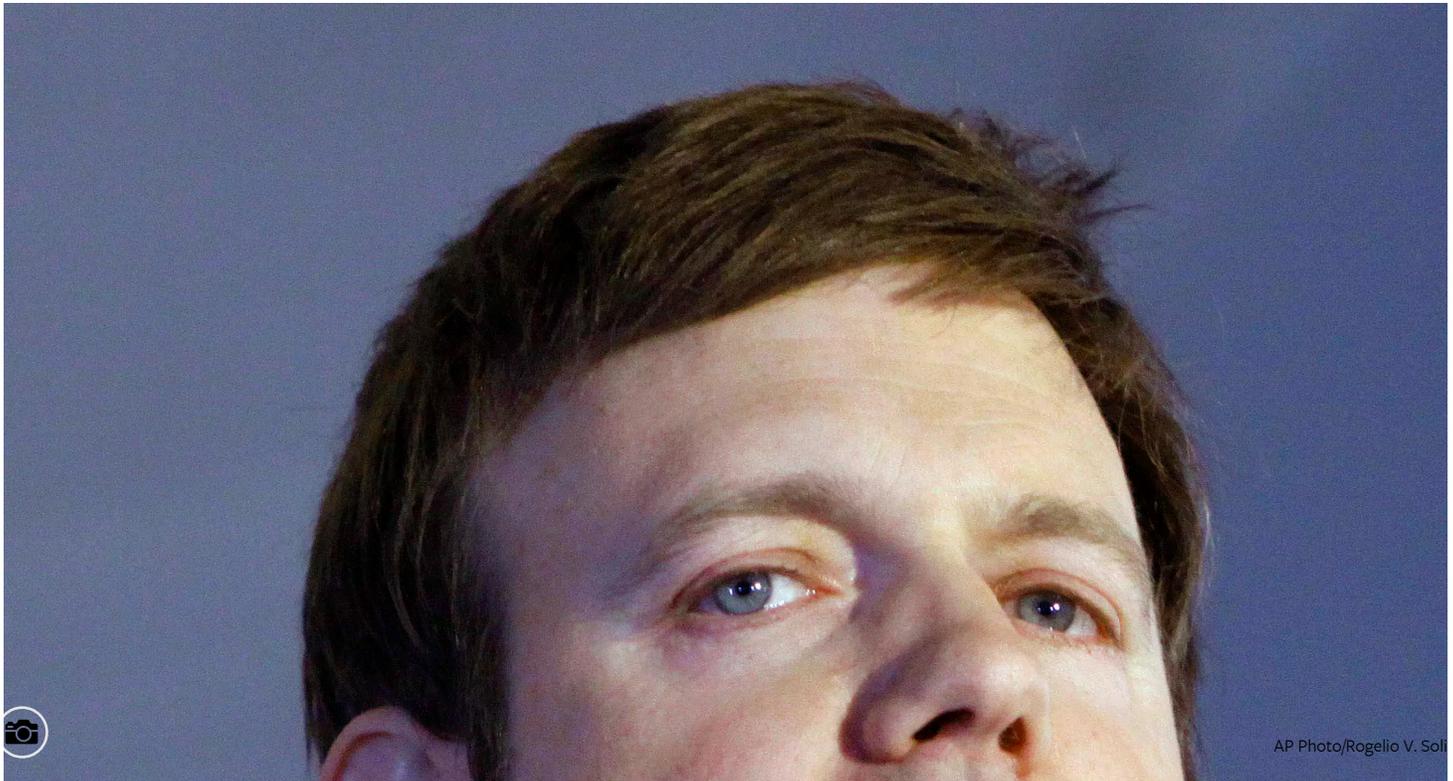


# Frank Luntz Plays Favorites With Marco Rubio

The GOP focus-group leader made big bucks building the candidate’s image in Florida a decade ago



S.V. Dáte @SVDATE

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Political junkies who follow Republican messaging guru Frank Luntz know how he felt that Marco Rubio performed in the most recent GOP presidential debate—his televised focus group, his Twitter stream, and his interviews left no doubt that he’s a Rubio fan.

What they probably don’t know about is Luntz’s close relationship with Rubio over the years, and how Rubio paid Luntz’s firm a third of a million dollars to produce and promote a book that Rubio used to improve his statewide name recognition in Florida a decade ago.

It’s not clear whether Fox News was aware of that history when it broadcast Luntz quizzing focus-group members following the debate, eliciting responses such as “confident,” “eloquent,” “electable,” and “presidential.” (But not following up with one dissident who called Rubio an “attractive

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opportunist.”)

Fox did not respond to a *National Journal* query. Nor did Luntz, a popular consultant in Republican circles whose clients, according to Federal Election Commission records, have included House Speaker Paul Ryan, Rep. Tom Price of Georgia, and the American Crossroads super PAC in recent years.

Between May 2005 and August 2007, when Rubio was first speaker-designate and then speaker of the House, the Republican Party of Florida paid Luntz’s consulting companies a total of \$345,451, according to Florida Division of Elections filings. That was the period when Luntz helped Rubio produce his “100 Innovative Ideas” project, which included a book of policy proposals that Rubio pushed during his two years in charge of the state House.

(Ironically, one of the ideas that Rubio successfully implemented was moving the Florida presidential primary into late January in 2008, which forced Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina to move their contests even earlier. Luntz defended the proposal in a 2006 *St. Petersburg Times* article: “You could potentially have someone who bypasses Iowa and New Hampshire and focuses on Florida.”)

In 2007, Luntz praised Rubio’s 100 Ideas project in a *Washington Post* op-ed, writing that it brought forward “the principles of good government and political accountability.” That article also failed to mention his role in the book’s production and promotion—a project that boosted Rubio’s name around the state, laying the groundwork for his successful U.S. Senate run in 2010.

Mike Fasano, a Republican who served with Rubio in the state legislature, said he was aware that the party had paid for Luntz’s work, but had not known how much. “Oh, my Lord. I’m in the wrong business,” said Fasano, now the elected tax collector of Pasco County. “When you have a guy like Frank who collects a pro-Marco group, of course they’re going to say that Marco won.”

Luntz’s praise began not long after the debate began last Thursday. Just 12 minutes in, Luntz declared in a tweet: “Excellent start for him tonight.” Halfway through, at 9:51 pm, Luntz tweeted: “This is @MarcoRubio’s best debate so far. He’s making people switch over to him.”

Of Luntz’s 29 tweets during the debate, eight complimented Rubio. A ninth offered Rubio some advice: “SLOW DOWN! You’ve got great words, but you’re saying them too fast.”

Luntz’s glowing assessment did not square with many others who watched the debate, including Fox’s own Charles Krauthammer, who in

post-debate analysis said Rubio had “his rockiest night” of all the debates thus far.

In addition to the millions of Fox viewers who saw Luntz and his group immediately after the debate, Rubio’s winning impression with the group was widely reported by other media, including CNN, *Business Insider*, and *The Dallas Morning News*.

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