

## Analysis of the Harris-Trump Presidential Debate

### Five top takeaways

1. Vice President Kamala Harris and former President Donald Trump sparred at every turn — sometimes on policy but more often than not on personality. Both made sure to play up issues important to their respective bases (abortion rights for Harris; immigration and border security for Trump) and road-tested salient soundbites that will be used in campaign commercials and on the stump in the closing weeks of the campaign.
2. As we predicted, to “win” Harris needed to define her policy positions and withstand Trump’s personal attacks; for Trump to “win” he needed to stay focused and point out where Harris has changed positions on issues. They both did some of this effectively, but not all of it.
3. Harris, whose positions are less well known to voters than Trump’s, demonstrated a command of the key issues while dodging more controversial issues of the current administration and growing in confidence as the debate wore on. She set the tone immediately by walking over to Trump to shake his hand. For the rest of the night, Harris played offense – speaking on the issues she wanted and sharing a new vision for America while also goading Trump. Harris criticized Trump’s economic policies, his relationships with foreign adversaries and tied him to Project 2025, the plan drafted by the Heritage Foundation to overhaul the U.S. government that Democrats have used as rallying cry to attack the GOP.
4. Trump opened the debate with a disciplined approach, saying Americans were better off four years ago than they are today and blamed the Biden-Harris Administration for the crisis on the U.S.-Mexico border. But he often lost focus and had to play much more defense than in his June debate with President Joe Biden. He painted Harris as progressive in some moments, citing her past support for a mandatory gun buyback program and banning fracking, and tied her to Biden’s “failed” presidency, things his advisors and other Republicans have been begging him to do for weeks. He also used his closing statement to question why Harris hasn’t done all the things she is now promising while she and President Biden have been in office for the last 3½ years.
5. It will take a few days for the dust to settle before either campaign knows if the debate moved important undecided voters off the fence, especially in the battleground states of Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

### Some notable moments

- The issues that received the most attention and debated were the economy, abortion, immigration and national security; however, neither candidate broke new ground.
- While Harris ducked an opening question on inflation, she did discuss her policy proposal for small start-ups and touted her plan for an “opportunity economy.” Trump on the other hand, focused his answers regarding the economy on tariffs, repeating lines he made throughout the debate that he would protect the American economy from unfair competition. He also placed an emphasis on a period of sharp inflation that has now eased but has many Americans still reeling. Interestingly, Trump did not mention his desire to cut the corporate tax rate from 21% to 15%.
- As expected, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the war in Ukraine and the Israel-Hamas conflict were raised by the moderators. The two candidates traded blame over Afghanistan. On Ukraine, Trump continued to say, if elected, he would resolve the war before his inauguration but offered no new details on how he would accomplish that. On the situation in Israel, Harris defended her record but reiterated her support of a two-state solution saying, “where we can rebuild Gaza, where Palestinians have security, self-determination and the dignity they so rightly deserve.” Harris also went on offense about her support for Ukraine and highlighted Trump’s unwillingness to fully endorse Ukraine and stand up to Putin.

- Discussions of U.S.-China relations focused on tariffs: Trump wants a 60% tariff on all Chinese goods, something some economists say could lead to a trade war; Harris dodged questions about the Biden administration's current tariffs on China.
- Trump harangued Harris for reversing her position on fracking, a big jobs issue to voters in the battleground state of Pennsylvania. Harris responded that she has been clear on her position on fracking over the past four years and will continue to allow it.
- **Other notable lines:** Trump said he had a "concept of plan" to replace the Affordable Care Act but offered no details. Harris said both she and her running mate, Tim Walz, are gun owners, a move to shut down criticisms by Trump that she wants to "confiscate your guns."
- In contrast to CNN's June debate between Biden and Trump, the ABC moderators inserted real-time fact checks on candidate responses. This drew criticism from the Trump campaign and other conservatives, arguing the moderators did not pursue fact-checks on Harris to the same extent.
- **One of the strangest moments:** Trump talking about people eating pets. This was in reference to a flurry of recent media reports about alleged pet abuse and other crimes by Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio, that local officials have refuted.
- And yes, the two candidates argued about crowd size for their respective rallies as well as how long people stay and how they get there.

### What's next

- There are no additional debates planned for the presidential candidates, although immediately post-debate the Harris campaign called for a second debate, showing their confidence in her performance. That means this may be the last time the two candidates have to respond directly to one another or answer hard-hitting questions from journalists in such a direct format. Each camp will set the terms of their engagements on the campaign trail for the next 54 days.
- In the coming days, there will be fresh polling and scrutiny of fundraising dollars coming in as a response to debate performances. Bumps in both polling and fundraising can imply who performed better, but there is still a long road to November, so these do not guarantee sustained energy.
- Up next is the vice presidential candidate debate with Senator JD Vance and Governor Tim Walz on October 1, 2024. CBS News will host it.
- Post-debate, pundits paused in discussing the sparring to cover Taylor Swift's endorsement of the Harris-Walz ticket following the debate. This could have a big impact on securing more of the youth and women's vote for Harris.

### Is there anything my company/organization should respond to?

- Most companies and organizations don't need to issue any communication with their stakeholders if they do not traditionally weigh in on political issues or policy. In fact, as polling shows, most organizations have stakeholders split between the two parties, so an ad-hoc, reactive response may create new issues for your company or organization.
- If a response is needed due to a specific policy mention during the debate, the APCO team is ready to assist with communications guidance, including message development, opportunity/risk assessment, outreach guidance and scenario planning.

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