

## The First Harris-Trump Presidential Debate

### Topline

Because of the ramifications a bad showing could have on either candidate's momentum in such a tight race, tomorrow's prime-time debate on ABC between Vice President Kamala Harris and former President Donald Trump will be "must see" TV in the aftermath of President Joe Biden's disastrous performance in June.

The stakes are extremely high for both campaigns. A [recent USA Today poll](#) shows that 90 percent of the electorate already has decided how they are going to vote, so how Harris and Trump present their case to those all-important undecided voters is crucial, especially since this could be the only debate between these two candidates.

Harris has been riding a wave of momentum since taking over the top of the Democratic ticket, erasing Trump polling leads and changing the dynamic of the races in key swing states. This is notable since Biden was trailing Trump in all seven swing states (Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin) when he stepped aside on July 21. In recent weeks, she has unveiled several initiatives to move to the middle and appeal to swing voters. She has come out harder on border security, called for a small business tax cut and reversed her position on fracking, a big issue to voters in battleground Pennsylvania where the natural gas industry means jobs. A strong performance could help Harris maintain momentum and even boost Democrats running in down-ticket races. A poor showing, or a major mistake, could do the reverse.

Trump, meanwhile, has struggled to figure out a line of attack on Harris and hopes to use the debate as a launching pad to take back control of the campaign narrative over the final 55 days to increase his odds of returning to the Oval Office. Despite serving as Biden's vice president for the past three years, most Americans don't know where Harris stands on many of the key issues. She also has been able to position herself as a change candidate while the Trump campaign struggles to saddle her with responsibility for some of Biden's more unpopular policies and actions. If Trump can define her as "severely" out of the mainstream, or more effectively tie her to Biden, that could be a difference maker. So far, his attempts at pejorative nicknames and "nasty" references have failed to stick. Trump's advisors have been begging him for weeks to curtail his personal attacks and focus on her policy positions, as has Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) in a recent [op-ed](#) in *The New York Times*.

### A few things to watch for . . .

#### More populist rhetoric

Both candidates have embraced populism to connect with disaffected voters who feel like they have been left behind.

- Expect both Harris and Trump to tout their plans to help the working class and to tussle over who has the better tax "plan."
- Also look for Trump to criticize Harris for copying his plan to not tax tips, something both candidates have embraced as way to garner support from service and hospitality workers, especially in battleground Nevada where a [recent poll](#) found 71 percent of Nevada voters favor eliminating taxes on tips.

#### A fight over support from big and small business

Both candidates are also desperately trying to win over the business community.

- Trump has pledged to cut the corporate tax rate to 15% from 21% for companies that make their products in the U.S. He also has said he would push to expand tariffs on foreign-made goods and products.
- Harris just last week rolled out a plan aimed at boosting small businesses and helping entrepreneurs.
  - She wants to make it easier for small businesses to expand by cutting the red tape that impedes growth.
  - To help innovators, she is calling for an expansion of the tax deduction for start-up expenses from \$5,000 to \$50,000.
  - And, in a break from Biden, she is calling for a smaller increase than he has proposed on capital gains taxes.
- Expect both Trump and Harris to tout their respective plans to woo the business community but don't count on them to get into the specifics.

### **Big promises but few details**

Don't expect the candidates to provide any details about how they plan to pay for their other lofty campaign pledges, like Harris' plan to provide \$25,000 in down payments assistance for first time home buyers or Trump's desire to end all taxes on Social Security income.

- Voters always want to hear "what's in it for me," but economists on both sides of the political spectrum continue to sound alarm bells about the impact these proposals could have on the economy, not to mention the federal deficit.
- Do expect both campaigns to continue to make loftier – and expensive - campaign promises in the closing weeks of the campaign in hopes of swaying those critically important undecided voters.

### **Harris championing reproductive health and abortion rights**

While the economy remains the top issue for voters, a growing share of voters in swing states now say abortion is central to their decision this fall, according to a recent New York Times/Siena College [poll](#).

- Abortion rights are on the ballot in 10 states in November, including battleground states Arizona and Nevada.
- Expect Harris to hammer home her pledge to sign into law a bill protecting access to abortion if passed by Congress, knowing that abortion rights measures have won in every election since *Roe v. Wade* was overturned.
- Harris also will point out Trump's shifting positions on the topic and continue to tie him to the Supreme Court decision.

### **Finger pointing over border security and immigration**

Expect Trump to aggressively attack Harris over the Biden Administration's border and immigration policies, saying she is responsible for the crisis at the U.S. – Mexico border.

- This has been, and will continue to be, a central theme of the Trump campaign and Republicans down ticket.
- Look for Harris to say that Trump tanked a bipartisan Senate bill earlier this year that would have gone a long way toward addressing the issue.
- Trump is counting on the voters who are just now starting to tune to believe him, not her.

### **Contrasting positions on the environment**

Climate action and historic levels of clean energy investments were a central piece of President Biden's campaign pitch, but poll after poll showed the message failed to motivate voters.

- As a result, watch for the two candidates to focus their environment and energy policy on issues that do resonate with voters: inflation and the economy.
- Expect Harris to tout the economic impact of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and bipartisan infrastructure law boosting domestic manufacturing while Trump will attack the IRA's EV push and recent high energy and gasoline prices.
- Each candidate will attempt to paint the other as extreme.
  - Trump will knock Harris for her since-reversed call to ban fracking and her previous support for the "Green New Deal."
  - Harris may call out Trump's climate change denials and his appeals to the oil industry for campaign donations.

### Opposing world views

Even if foreign policy does not play a dominant role in the candidates' rhetoric, the ABC moderators are likely to ask questions about America's role around the globe.

- The war in Ukraine and future U.S. support will certainly come up, along with who will deal with Russian President Vladimir Putin more effectively.
- The Israel-Hamas conflict most assuredly will be raised, especially given the significant presence of Arab Americans in battleground Michigan and the importance of Israel's security to other key voting blocs.
- Expect a question about the U.S. and its future role in NATO. Harris does not have a lot of experience in dealing with international issues so how she responds to these questions, particularly regarding the situation in Gaza, will be closely watched.
- Trump will continue to push his "America First" approach to national security and global engagement.
- As for NATO, don't expect Trump to back off his long-standing belief that "other countries need to pay their fair share."

### What does a "win" look like?

**For Harris:** Having a plan to address kitchen table issues like the cost of gas and grocery prices, command of international and global security issues and withstanding the fusillade of personal attacks from Trump will show undecided voters Harris is up to the task and a better alternative than either an aging Biden or often chaotic Trump.

**For Trump:** Showing that Harris has vacillated on issues or doesn't have a strong command of certain issues will give Trump ammunition to attack Harris on policy instead of her personality. Trump will likely try to provoke Harris or call her names, but if he can cast her as "out of the mainstream" and too far to the left, or effectively position her as a continuation of a "failed Biden presidency," undecided voters will take note.

### What should my company/organization do to prepare?

Most companies and organizations don't need to prepare a response or plan for any communication with their stakeholders if they do not traditionally weigh in on political issues or policy. In fact, as polling shows, most groups will have stakeholders split between the two parties, so an ad-hoc, reactive response may create new issues for your company or organization.

However, candidates do often use examples to elucidate policy positions during debates. These mentions can sometimes knock executives, customers and employees out of balance, so it is helpful to be prepared for scenarios where one of the candidates makes your company his or her example.

If a response is needed due to a specific policy or brand 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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