

ty economy, investing in small businesses, in new families, in what we can do around protecting seniors, what we can do that is about giving hard-working folks a break in bringing down the cost of living.” (Barack Obama used the same coddling language, and the only starter house it financed was his beachside mansion on Martha’s Vineyard.)

Nor could Harris lower the boom on Trump’s conception of the presidency as yet another Madoff feeder fund, failing even to say: “He pays no income taxes, shakes down diplomatic contacts for backhanders, took \$2 billion from the Saudis, raked in millions by renting rooms at his Washington hotel to foreign governments who then never bothered to check in to the suites, routinely obstructs justices, has sexually abused numerous women, declares bankruptcy to walk away from his many creditors, and now is engaged in an elaborate Ponzi scheme to use a shell company called Trump Media and Technology Group to drain billions (after he put up nothing) from Wall Street into his (overdrawn) bank accounts.” And I thought she was a hard-charging prosecutor.

The ABC News anchors asked thoughtful, probing questions, and occasionally injected a note of reality to the proceedings (Linsey Davies said to Trump, who was droning on about infanticide: “There is no state in this country where it is legal to kill a baby after it’s born...”), but overall, their presence was that of mall cops during a shop-lifting spree, as neither candidate ever got close to answering the posed questions.

Trump showed up in Philadelphia not because he has any interest in the democratic experiment or wanted to review the museum cabinets on The Great Compromise (that which gave states like Wyoming the same number of senators as California), but because he views life as a ratings sweep, and himself as the star of the long-running monologue sitcom, *Trump: Me, Myself, and I*.

Trump did not articulate ideas about governance so much as shout into the mic for 90 minutes, as if a talk radio shock jock. (I was a little surprised his didn’t go off on Aaron Rodgers and the Jets.) Here are some outtakes:

“But if she ever got elected, she’d change it. And it will be the end of our country. She’s a Marxist. Everybody knows she’s a Marxist....Every one of those cases was started by them against their political opponent. And I’m winning most of them and I’ll win the rest on appeal....You talk about the Capitol. Why are we allowing these millions of people to come through on the southern border?...Peacefully and patriotically. And nobody on the other side was killed. Ashli Babbitt was shot by an out-of-control police officer that should have never, ever shot her. It’s a disgrace...” And if that logic gets you close to 50% in many presidential polls, it’s worth the evening out, which, in Trump’s case, included a bizarre cameo (think of a professional wrestling promoter) in the post-debate spin room for more carnival barking.

In the debate, Harris wasn’t a pushover by any means, arguing in complete, often eloquent, sentences about the injustices of a past and fu-



Democratic presidential candidate Vice President Kamala Harris (R) shakes hand with Republican presidential candidate former president Donald Trump after a presidential debate in Philadelphia on September 10, 2024. **ABC**

ture Trump government, but she conceives of the electorate as a jury — and one that holds prosecutors in high esteem. Remember the truism, “Any good prosecutor can get a grand jury to indict a ham sandwich,” but not all Americans love jury duty.

As this debate made clear, Harris is the incumbent, running for truth, justice, and the American way, while Trump is Butch Cassidy, Henry Gondorff (from *The Sting*), Frank Abagnale Jr.

(Catch Me If You Can) or Danny Ocean — looking to stick it to the man or knock off the casino. (And as Danny Ocean liked to say: “Because the house always wins. Play long enough, you never change the stakes, the house takes you. Unless, when that perfect hand comes along, you bet big, and then you take the house.”) In this case, the recidivist Trump is betting big that he can take down the house.

The article first appeared on CounterPunch.

Kamala Harris won debate, but maybe not election



The illustration shows the gestures Democratic presidential candidate Vice President Kamala Harris (R) and Republican presidential candidate former president Donald Trump made during a presidential debate in Philadelphia on September 10, 2024. **billoreilly.com**

So, the obvious debate strategy for Trump would have been to hammer home his advantages on issues, starting with two issues on which voters give dismal grades to the Biden-Harris administration, then going on to the raft of issues on which Harris, in her previous campaign for president, took stands widely unpopular during this one. From time to time, and succinctly in his closing statement, Trump did this. But he also went off on alarms and excursions, which, however entertaining for his rally audiences, seemed distracting or puzzling for the moveable voters whose votes he needs.

He took up valuable time, for example, trying to insist that no one has been leaving his rallies early. He cited Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, a controversial figure for those who follow these things and unknown to most others, as a supportive leader. He engaged in an extended debate over whether he really lost the 2020 election.

As Fox News’ Brit Hume noted, Harris “baited him successfully, which is the story of the debate in my view”. Such diversions point to character weaknesses: an unwillingness to focus, a preoccupa-

tion with personal slights, and a lack of discipline. In contrast, Harris was clearly well prepared and disciplined in reciting favorably worded phrases. “We’re not going back,” Harris said at one point. “It’s time to turn the page.” That’s absurd from one point of view. Nothing she said indicated that a Harris-Walz administration’s policies would be much different from the Biden-Harris administration’s. But her words do point to what a majority of voters have found troubling about Trump’s character. Harris benefited as well from the ABC moderators’ erroneous fact-checking when they argued that no one favors ninth-month abortions, that the Springfield city manager must be a conclusive source of events there, and that violent crime rates declined sharply in 2021 and 2022.

But media partiality to Democrats is just one of several asymmetrical factors in politics. It’s more enduring than the Republicans’ Electoral College edge in 2016 and 2020, for Democrats had an edge there in 2004 and 2012. But a disciplined Republican candidate should expect media bias and should be prepared with brief and persuasive responses. Trump wasn’t.



By Michael Barone
Political analyst

OPINION

When I was in the polling business many years ago, our reports always started with the mood of the electorate, whether things were moving in the right direction or seriously off on the wrong track, then moved to two sections on character and issues. Usually, those sections were pretty balanced. We advised candidates on which character traits and issue stands worked for them and which did not. We suggested

how they could emphasize their strengths and address or pivot away from their weaknesses. However, there’s not much need for such a balanced approach in this presidential election, or about the candidates’ first and possibly only television debate, the one on ABC News on September 10. With only minor exceptions, character traits work for Vice President Kamala Harris. And with only minor exceptions, issue stands work for former President Donald Trump.

To their credit, the ABC moderators, after raising the Harris-favoring abortion issue early, then asked why she — actually, anonymous campaign staff tweeters — has renounced her 2019 presidential campaign promises to ban fracking, institute mandatory gun buybacks, and decriminalize illegal border crossings.

After perfunctorily repeated, obviously rehearsed lines about how she had sort of supported fracking, she segued into comparing her “middle-class” childhood to Trump’s, citing her underwhelming proposals to increase homeownership, and mentioning a high-school friend assaulted by a stepfather and her work “protecting seniors from scams”. Not just a word salad but a whole buffet, with a dash of Tabasco to provoke her opponent. CNN’s instant poll on who won the debate has Harris ahead 63% to 37%. This is almost the exact opposite of the CNN count on the June 27 debate, which had Trump ahead of President Joe Biden 67% to 33%, and may hearten Harris backers.

But the result is in line with the average of polls taken immediately after the five presidential debates in September and October 2016 and 2020: Fifty-nine percent thought the Democrat won, as against 35% for Trump. So, this debate response looks like those in years when Trump won the elec-

toral vote by 77,736 popular votes in three states in 2016 and lost it by 42,918 popular votes in three states in 2020.

Pre-debate polling showed Harris ahead 48% to 47% in the RealClearPolitics average of recent polls and 49% to 47% in Nate Silver’s Silver Bulletin. Silver was projecting her with a 50% to 49% popular vote edge in November but gave Trump a 61% chance of an Electoral College majority.

But any projections are contingent on events. Nate Cohn, proprietor of the highly rated New York Times/Siena College poll, which showed a pre-debate Trump lead of 48% to 47%, noted that 28% said “they needed to learn more” about Harris, as compared to only 9% about Trump. “More than anything, voters say they want to hear more about where she stands on the issues,” Cohn wrote. “And a majority of voters say she’s a ‘risky’ choice and ‘more of the same’ — hardly an enviable combination.”

Did she resolve those qualms in her favor in the debate? Not in my view, but I’ll give the final word to Silver: “Harris got the debates she wanted. If she isn’t able to move the needle in the polls at least a little bit, maybe that means the country just isn’t buying what she’s selling.”

The article first appeared on RealClearPolitics.



Former US president and Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump walks off the stage after a presidential debate in Philadelphia on September 10, 2024. **BRIAN SNYDER/REUTERS**