

September 11, 2020

SPECTATOR.US

## What Will Happen in the Debates?

By Matt A. Mayer

From late September through to mid-October, Americans will get to watch Donald Trump and Joe Biden debate three times. Mike Pence and Kamala Harris will face off once. The debates may not matter, but if one candidate is going to commit a significant gaffe, it likely would occur in one of televisual spectacles. Brace yourselves.

Both parties already are trying to shape expectations before the debates begin. On that front, Trump and his allies have made a major mistake. For months Americans have been inundated with claims from Trump, his son and countless media allies that Biden suffers from some type of mental deficiency such as dementia. Biden's countless gaffes and resistance to doing unscripted interviews have fed into this belief.

An unintended consequence of this dementia drumbeat is that Team Trump has set expectations so low for Biden that if he shows up without his dentures fall out, it will be spun by most the media as a total victory. Voters are expecting to see a disaster; when they don't, whatever gets said will take a backseat to Biden merely meeting that low expectation. If I were advising Team Trump, I'd stop the dementia talk and focus on Biden's dangerously weak response to the rioting.

In a perverse way, beyond Trump's law and order appeal, the rioting and violence in Democratically-controlled cities helps Trump going into the debates in another way. He might be wise not to repeat his brag that he has done more than any president since Abraham Lincoln to help black people, but the protests and rioting are meant to be about racial inequality in America. Trump can tout the work he did to pass landmark criminal justice reform as well as the fact that, pre-pandemic, the Trump economy lifted minorities in America to new employment and wage highs.

Trump can also attack Biden for his support of the 1994 crime bill that resulted in millions of black men being incarcerated for low-level drug and other non-violent offenses. He can hit Biden for the lack of economic progress during the eight years he served as vice president under Barack Obama, as well as the lack of police reforms following the deaths of Michael Brown, Tamir Rice and Eric Garner (the first black man to give notoriety to the phrase 'I can't breathe').

Biden will attack Trump for fanning racial fires with his rhetoric. He may well repeat the, in fact, erroneous claim that Trump said white supremacists in Charlottesville were 'fine people'. But so far that line hasn't hurt Trump. In the latest [Rasmussen poll](#) in Pennsylvania, Trump is getting 26 percent of the black vote and winning among other minority groups. If

Trump gets anywhere close to 15 percent or more of the black vote in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, Ohio, Florida, North Carolina, Georgia and Minnesota, Biden simply can't win those states.

Another Trump advantage going into the debates is that, unlike in 2016, he now has a record and details he can brag about. Those accomplishments include the pre-pandemic economy; tax cuts; regulatory reforms; securing new trade deals with Mexico, Canada and China; filling the judiciary with conservative judges and justices; bringing our troops home; defeating Isis and killing Iran's top terrorist Qasem Soleimani and Isis leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi; brokering a historic peace deal between Israel and the United Arab Emirates; and getting our Nato partners to pay their fair share of its burden.

Biden can attempt to take credit for the recovery following the 2008 financial recession, but most Americans already know that was tepid at best. Though the Obama administration did kill Osama bin Laden, Biden opposed the operation so really can't take credit. Moreover, the Obama administration dismissed Isis as a threat, which looked ridiculous once Isis took control of huge swaths of Iraq and Syria and launched multiple terrorist attacks in Europe and America. Biden also has to contend with what he did and failed to do as US senator for 36 years.

Trump is vulnerable on the federal government's response to the global pandemic. Biden will criticize Trump over the number of Americans who have died and the perceived slowness of the response around testing. That said, Trump does have enough accomplishments that he can use to lessen the impact of Biden's attacks. For instance, Trump shut down travel from China early, a move that Biden called xenophobic; he marshaled the private sector to ramp up production of testing, masks and ventilators; and he pushed for a shorter shutdown and quicker reopening to get America's economy back off the floor. Trump can also rightly compare America's numbers per capita to other western countries to show the response in the US was better than in many European countries.

Over the next few weeks, the polls will fluctuate up and down within a small range. Depending on what happens at the first debate, we will likely see a large swing towards Trump or Biden. Given how Trump handled the impressive group of Republican candidates in the primaries and the quick-witted Hillary Clinton in 2016, it really would be surprising if Biden bested Trump at the debates, especially

given Biden's mediocre primary debate performances.

Nonetheless, a draw would be a Biden victory, which could quell voter unease over his mental state and put him in the driver's seat headed into election day. Team Trump will be hoping that Biden — formerly known as 'the gaffe machine from Delaware' — has his biggest meltdown yet.

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