

Showdown in Philadelphia

Don't Expect the Debate to Clinch the Deal Either Way

The showdown between the two contenders for the US presidency produced only winners. Campaign staffers on both sides declared their candidate victorious. To gauge who actually came out ahead, it is telling that mere minutes after both debaters had finished their closing arguments, Democratic campaign leader Jen O'Malley Dillon released a statement saying that Kamala Harris is ready for a second debate next month and asking, rhetorically, if Donald Trump would be up for that. He is believed to mull the question.

Also minutes after the end of the show, Mrs Harris received an endorsement of dreams when pop phenomenon Taylor Swift revealed on Instagram that she would be voting for the Democratic candidate: "I'm voting for Kamala Harris because she fights for the rights and causes I believe need a warrior to champion them."

The accompanying picture showed the superstar holding Benjamin Button, her Ragdoll cat in what appeared to be a reference to one of the more hilarious moments during the debate when Mr Trump embarked on a rambling account of the horrors taking place on the streets of Springfield, Ohio. Here, he claimed, Haitian immigrants are hunting down pets for food: "In Springfield, they're eating the dogs, the people that came in, they're eating the cats. They're eating the pets of the people that live there."

Tall Tales

ABC News anchor and debate moderator David Muir reminded the president that the tale had been thoroughly debunked by Springfield administrator Jason Gage who stated that the city had not received a single report or claim of pets being killed for food.

During the debate, Mrs Harris showed how public prosecutors earn a living. During the entire 90-minute event, she repeatedly baited her opponent who, predictably, never failed to bite. By engaging with Mrs Harris' gentle yet firm taunts, Mr Trump exposed the vacuity of his discourse and his immature nature.

During the segment on healthcare, the Republican candidate appeared at a rare loss for words when asked after his plans which, he reluctantly admitted, were non-existent apart from vague concepts. But, Mr Trump roared back and promised, that his healthcare plan would be unveiled at an unspecified later date and turn out to be 'cheaper and better' than the current Affordable Care Act.

Though his minders on the campaign staff had urged him to stay on topic and focus on policy proposals instead of launching personal attacks against Mrs Harris, Mr Trump ignored the advice and frequently wandered off into the realm of falsehoods and absurdities, often descending into the rabbit holes that his opponent had carefully prepared.

In one of his more memorably bizarre comments, Mr Trump claimed that Mrs Harris is in favour allowing imprisoned illegal immigrants to undergo transgender operations at the tax payers' expense.

Mr Trump also seemed very proud of the resounding endorsement he received from Hungarian president Viktor Orbán, the EU's sole authoritarian ruler. Mr Trump then went on to insist that he had won the 2020 presidential election, enabling Mrs Harris to retort that "Donal Trump has been fired by 81 million people." The Democratic candidate followed up by noting that her opponent apparently lacks the 'ability to not be confused by facts'

Post-Birth Abortions

On abortion, one of the most contentious issues in this campaign, Mr Trump doubled down and stated that it had taken 'courage' to end Roe vs Wade and devolve the matter to the states. Mr Trump also falsely stated that prior to the reversal of Roe vs Wade by the supreme court in 2022, abortions were routinely carried out in the eighth or ninth month of pregnancy. He also claimed that Mrs Harris has no objection to post-birth abortions or the execution of newborns.

In her reply, Mrs Harris refused to engage and instead conjured up images of miscarrying women 'bleeding out in parking lots' and promised that her administration would protect "fundamental rights and freedoms, including the right of a woman to make decisions about her own body and not have government tell her what to do."

Having Mr Trump on the ropes and getting under his skin allowed Mrs Harris to deny him the opportunity to exploit the topic of immigration which the Republican campaign has identified as a weak spot in the Democratic candidate's armour.

Apart from wild stories about pets in Springfield and imprisoned transgender immigrants, Mr Trump failed to outline his plans, in any, on securing the border. Perhaps wisely, he didn't mention the border wall he promised to have built during his first term in office with financing provided by Mexico. Later on, Mr Trump flatly refused to answer if he would favour Ukraine in its fight against the Russian invader. He was asked three times to give a straightforward yes/no answer but failed to comply.

In contrast, Mrs Harris outlined the specifics of her plans to support low-income families and first-time homebuyers with grants and tax breaks.

Needling Trump

Though an experienced and successful public prosecutor, and accustomed to delivering her case succinctly and effectively, Mrs Harris went into the showdown without much debating experience, leading to fears that she might buckle under the verbal assaults Mr Trump is known for. However, she did not disappoint and calmly put her opponent on the back foot from the get-go whilst preserving the 'presidential aura' that is lacking in Mr Trump who as a rule prefers bluster to composure.

Mrs Harris visibly irked her opponent when she recounted that over two-hundred of his former top officials have publicly exposed his disdain for the constitution and the armed forces: "I have talked with military leaders, some of whom were with you, and they say you are a disgrace." Mrs Harris also said that many foreign dignitaries find him laughable.

After the debate, Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC), a Trump ally, lamented the 'missed opportunities' and concluded that his preferred candidate had been 'rattled'. Even some pundits at Fox News conceded that Mr Trump had 'a bad night'.

Nothing that the Trump team had hoped and (probably) prayed for materialised. Viewers did not see a constantly laughing creature, a vacuously ambitious woman, or an incoherent one unable to finish a thought or sentence. The 'mad communist' also failed to put in an appearance. None of the traits attributed to the Democratic candidate were on display.

Moving the Needle

With her post-convention boost in popularity petering out, the question now is if Mrs Harris' surprisingly stellar debate performance will sway voters. Pundits were quick to remind their audience of Hillary Clinton's remarkable success against Donald Trump in the three debates of the 2016 campaign which, however, did not stop her from losing the election. Although Mrs Clinton won the popular vote by almost three million votes, she foundered in the electoral college.

Contrary to popular belief, US presidential elections are not decided at the ballot box but by the electoral college, an institution unique in democracies with an executive president. Each of the fifty states is assigned a number of electors equal to their congressional representation - its members of the House of Representatives plus two senators.

Each state has different procedures for the naming of its electors, a fact that creates the loopholes Mr Trump tried to exploit after he lost the 2020 election. All states, except for Maine and Nebraska, assign the total of their electors to the winning ticket.

Since the early nineteenth century, there have been only five instances in which the candidate who won the popular vote was defeated in the electoral college. The most recent occurrences were with Donald Trump in 2016 and George W Bush who in 2000 lost to Al Gore but was granted admittance to the White House by the electoral college.

Mrs Harris has a similarly steep hill to climb. Though an average of recent opinion polls gives her a slim two-percentage-point national lead over Mr Trump, the outcome of the 5 November vote - 55 days hence - hinges on her performance in seven 'swing states', including hotly disputed Georgia, Pennsylvania, and Michigan. Together, the seven states hold 93 out of 538 votes in the electoral college. Polling shows Mrs Harris slightly ahead in four swing states with Mr Trump tenuously holding on to the remaining three.

Angels

Commenters have noted that in a country where 69% of people profess to believe in angels, anything can happen. Mr Trump's checkered record, criminal conviction for fraud, and predilection for tall tales and outright falsehoods do not necessarily put voters off.

Gauging the initial response to the debate indicates that many undecided voters came away with the impression that neither candidate had anything new to say. Whilst most agree that Mrs Harris displayed a more 'presidential' demeanour, others wonder how she will get Congress to agree with her plans and how she will fund the additional spending.

Also, Donald Trump, for all his shortcomings, is a known quantity to voters whilst Kamala Harris is not. As vice president, Mrs Harris kept a low profile which now hurts her chances of convincing voters that she is the right person for the job. The first post-debate polls are expected to be released by early next week.

In 2018, associate professors Vincent Pons and Caroline Le Pennec-Caldichoury of the University of California Berkeley published an academic paper on the effects of televised debates in ten countries since 1952, including the US, and failed to discern a measurable impact on the choice of voters. Similar studies conducted elsewhere also found that debates rarely become defining moments.

With both candidates locked in dead heat, any ripple however small, can determine the outcome of the vote one way or the other.