



Last Tuesday evening, former President Donald Trump and Vice President Kamala Harris faced off in their first, and most likely last, presidential debate. Like in all of his past debates, the former President spent the evening relying on personal attacks, attempting to bait his opponent, and spreading bigoted and outlandish rhetoric built on baseless lies. However, what differentiated this debate from Trump's past was that his opponent could masterfully counter Trump's tactics while pointing them out to the audience as further evidence of Trump's lack of integrity. Employing her skills as a former prosecutor, Kamala Harris turned practically every one of Trump's insults and lies into opportunities to remind the audience of her overarching message in this debate: Trump's campaign is fueled by hate, whereas hers is fueled with a desire to help the American people. These behaviors and the debate as a whole can best be summarized by when the candidates discussed immigration, the insurrection, and the ongoing conflict in Gaza.

Twenty-six minutes into the broadcast, moderator David Muir finally broaches the topic former President Trump had been itching to discuss, immigration, asking Vice President Harris why the Biden administration waited until six months before the election to do something about the border crisis and if she would have done anything differently (Hoffman, 2024). Harris responded by reminding the audience about the border security bill she supported but that Donald Trump had killed (Hoffman, 2024). The Vice President then attacks and mocks the

former President, openly inviting Americans to attend one of his rallies to witness his nonsensical rants and his supporters leaving early (Hoffman, 2024). While I generally do not agree with answering a question in a presidential debate with an attack on your opponent, I believe Harris's decision to do so was justified because it showcased Trump's hypocrisy regarding immigration issues and left him flustered. When the moderators allow Trump to respond, he ironically insists on spewing lies about Kamala Harris's rallies rather than addressing the issue he has spent the entire debate shoehorning into every conversation (Hoffman, 2024). Upset, Trump makes a series of fear-mongering claims, including, but not limited to, that "we are a failing nation," a Harris presidency would directly cause World War III, and, most bizarrely, that immigrants in Springfield, Ohio, are kidnapping and eating residents' pets (Hoffman, 2024). This claim is as outlandish as it sounds, with moderator Muir and countless reliable sources correcting Trump during and after the broadcast, respectively (NPR Staff, 2024). In response, Harris laughs at the absurdity of Trump's claims, reminds the viewers of the lengths Trump will go to to avoid speaking about actual issues, and utilizes the opportunity to compare Donald Trump with past Republicans who are well respected and have endorsed her candidacy (Hoffman, 2024). Muir then pushes Trump, asking how he imagines he will deport eleven million illegal immigrants as promised (Hoffman, 2024). Instead of answering Muir's question, Trump once again resorts to hurling cheap insults and harmful rhetoric, declaring that the Biden administration has knowingly allowed millions of illegal immigrants into the country and that this wave has caused a drastic increase in crime. (Hoffman, 2024). Even after Muir corrects Trump's statements, sharing that "the FBI says overall violent crime is coming down in this country," Trump doubles down on his lie, claiming that the FBI's statements are fraudulent (Hoffman, 2024). The Vice President cleverly took this opportunity to point out Trump's

hypocrisy in criticizing criminals and remind the audience of the storied criminal record that Trump has collected throughout his career (Hoffman, 2024), simultaneously bringing up Trump's criminal history when it pertained to the conversation at hand and showing that it is immigrants Trump hates, not criminals.

Once the conversation about immigration wrapped up, moderator Muir brought up a topic concerning many Americans as the 2024 election approaches: the peaceful transfer of power, with Muir asking former President Trump if he regrets any of his actions on January 6th, 2021 (Hoffman, 2024). Unsurprisingly, Trump does not even pretend to answer the question. Instead, he sympathizes with his supporters who stormed the capital that day and brings the conversation right back to the border, asking why the country is so willing to prosecute its people rather than the criminals he claims his political opponents are flooding the country with (Hoffman, 2024). In the same sentiment, Trump stated that he had nothing to do with the insurrection and that it is actually Nancy Pelosi who bears the ultimate responsibility for the capital riots (Hoffman, 2024). In her response, Harris reminds the audience that Trump has tried to deny election results before, and if this election's results are not to his liking, he will try to deny them again (Hoffman, 2024). I chose to analyze this talking point because it perfectly encapsulates Trump's strategy in this debate and his message for his supporters: anything the media tells you about him is a lie, and the only person you can believe is him.

The conversation soon pivoted to global affairs, with moderator Lindsey Davis asking Vice President Harris how she plans to facilitate peace negotiations between Palestine and Israel (Hoffman, 2024). In her response, Harris toes the line between condemning the killing of innocent civilians in Palestine and risking upsetting Jewish American voters and supporting Israel's right to defend itself and risking upsetting liberals who feel the current administration has

not done enough to help Palestine (Hoffman, 2024). I analyzed this talking point because it exemplifies the candidates' different approaches to this debate. Whereas Kamala is thoughtful with her responses, validating both sides' positions by looking at them through a nuanced perspective, Trump tries to distract the audience with absurd allegations against his opponent and fear-mongering. Trump begins his response by changing the topic to a different international conflict, bragging about his close relationship with Putin and baselessly alleging that if he were President, neither the conflict in Gaza nor the conflict in Ukraine would have started (Hoffman, 2024). Trump declares that Harris "hates Israel" and that if she is elected, he believes that "Israel will not exist within two years from now." (Hoffman, 2024) Trump then alleges that Harris "hates the Arab population," wrapping up his response by promising the American people that he will end both conflicts before even being inaugurated (Hoffman, 2024). Former President Trump's contributions to this conversation highlight his willingness to make slanderous accusations against his opponents and unrealistic promises he does not intend to fulfill.

As the debate neared its end, the candidates had one final chance to summarize their campaign's priorities and overarching message through their closing statements. Vice President Kamala Harris uses this opportunity to paint a picture of how she believes she and Trump are fundamentally different. Where she is concerned with addressing real problems Americans face, Trump is focused on convincing his supporters that Harris is an evil liberal extremist. In his closing remarks, former President Donald Trump proved Harris right, spending his statement speaking about how he believes the Biden administration has destroyed the country. Trump's final words in this debate were spent calling his opponent "the worst vice president in the history of our country." (Hoffman, 2024) By doing so, Trump exposed the core of what is wrong with

his performance in this debate and his campaign: he is ultimately more concerned with tearing his opponents down than creating change.

References

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Here's what we found. npr.

<https://www.npr.org/2024/09/11/g-s1-21932/fact-check-trump-harris-presidential-debate-2024>