



September 30, 2020

First Presidential Debate: Key Political and Policy Takeaways

Summary of Key Topics

The Supreme Court

Key Takeaway: Both Trump and Biden reiterated the party line on this issue. Trump defended his decision to announce Judge Amy Coney Barrett’s nomination on the grounds that Republicans control both the Senate and the presidency. Biden chose not to criticize Barrett’s qualifications, in fact noting that “he is not opposed to the justice, as she seems like a very fine person.” He also did not criticize Republicans’ 2016 blocking of Merrick Garland, instead pivoting to key voter issues. With the election underway, Biden said voters deserve a say in the Supreme Court nomination.

Former Vice President Joe Biden	President Donald Trump
Biden argued that the country is already in the middle of an election, with millions having cast their ballots—nominating a Supreme Court justice at this stage does not allow the American people to have their voices heard. He urged President Trump to hold off on the nomination until after the election.	Trump emphasized that the American people elected him president, which gives him the constitutional right to nominate Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court.
Biden warned that both the Affordable Care Act and <u>Roe v. Wade</u> are likely to be overturned if Amy Coney Barrett is confirmed.	Trump praised Amy Coney Barrett as a phenomenal nominee and noted that some prominent liberals have endorsed her nomination. Trump refuted Biden’s statement about <u>Roe v. Wade</u> , saying, “there is nothing happening there.”
Biden did not directly address whether he would support either ending the filibuster or packing the court, instead noting that the issue at hand is whether or not the president should confirm a nominee so close to the election.	Trump said that Republicans’ refusal to consider Merrick Garland in 2016 was a different situation and that if Democrats controlled the Senate at the time, they would have pushed his nomination through. Biden did not address the issue.

COVID-19

Key Takeaway: Biden was critical of Trump’s response to the virus, stating that the president’s decision to underplay the deadliness of the COVID-19, inaction on masks, and lack of a health response plan, have all exacerbated the situation, including economic recovery. Biden also attempted to use the pandemic to cast doubt on Trump’s trustworthiness, particularly with regards to conflicting information about the timing of a vaccine. The president pushed back, citing his decision to close the borders and plans for efficient vaccine distribution, arguing that Biden would never have been able to do the same.

Biden	Trump
<p>Biden accused President Trump of having no plan to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic and held him responsible for the 200,000 deaths in the United States, which account for 20% of worldwide COVID-19-related deaths. Biden also criticized President Trump for not following mask and social distancing guidelines and holding rallies of over 30,000 people, largely unmasked. Biden emphasized the importance of masks and noted that the CDC director said that if everyone wore a mask and social distanced between now and January, we would save 100,000 lives.</p>	<p>President Trump rejected Biden’s assertion that the COVID-19 crisis is his fault, casting the blame on the Chinese instead. President Trump said he saved lives by closing the borders early. President Trump defended his large rallies, saying that they are outside, and therefore COVID-19 cannot spread amongst individuals easily. Trump also claimed that Dr. Fauci has made opposite statements about the efficacy of masks.</p>
<p>Biden criticized the lack of transparency in President Trump’s COVID-19 response. He asserted that President Trump knew how deadly the disease was in February, but did not share this information with the American people. Biden also said that President Trump refused to send the people we had on the ground in China to Wuhan to determine how dangerous the virus was and instead praised Xi for his work in fighting the virus.</p>	<p>President Trump highlighted his “phenomenal” work with governors to respond to the COVID-19 crisis, including distributing masks, making ventilators, and doing therapeutics that have led to fewer deaths when people get sick.</p>
<p>Biden pointed to the conflicting information from President Trump versus his CDC director about the timing of a vaccine, with scientists in the administration noting that it would be summer 2021 before a vaccine is available. Biden said that “serious” pharmaceutical companies estimate having a vaccine by the end of this year that will become widely available by the middle of next year.</p>	<p>President Trump brushed off claims that he was contradicting his CDC director and said that he has spoken with pharmaceutical companies that say they can have a vaccine ready a lot sooner, suggesting it could be done before November 1. He responded to Wallace’s skepticism about a vaccine being widely available by informing him that he is going to deliver the vaccine right away and already has the military set up to deliver 200,000 a day.</p>

Health Care

Key Takeaway: President Trump criticized the ACA and argued against Wallace’s claim that he does not have a comprehensive proposal to replace the law, citing his repeal of the individual mandate and his attempts to lower drug prices. In contrast, Biden courted voters by promising to build on positive aspects of ACA and improve affordability, while preserving private insurance. He also pushed to distance himself from the left wing of the Democratic party, refuting Trump’s claims that he has endorsed “Medicare for All.”

Biden	Trump
Biden highlighted the risks of repealing the ACA, including stripping 20 million people of their health insurance, removing protections for preexisting conditions, and consequent changes to women’s health issues since pregnancy was previously a preexisting condition.	Trump rejected Wallace’s claim that he has not proposed a comprehensive plan to replace the ACA during his term. President Trump pointed to the repeal of the individual mandate and noted that his administration will protect individuals with preexisting conditions.
Biden laid out parts of his health care plan, which aims to expand the ACA. He said that the plan would allow people to keep their private insurance and also create a public option for low-income individuals that qualify for Medicaid.	Trump claimed that he is cutting drug prices by 80-90% by ensuring the most-favored nation price, providing cheap access to insulin and allowing governors to buy drugs from other countries at low prices.
Biden rejected President Trump’s assertion that his party’s platform is socialist medicine and accused President Trump of having no health care plan.	Trump emphasized that no matter how well you run the ACA, it is a disaster because it is too expensive and premiums are too high. He said Biden’s claim that his expanded ACA plan will allow people to keep their private insurance is a lie.

The Economy

Key Takeaway: Biden connected the current economic downturn to the president’s failure to properly handle the pandemic. He also courted blue-collar voters in battleground states, highlighting his “Made in America” policy proposals, his plans to boost the manufacturing industry and his success in bringing back the automobile industry during the Obama Administration. He also noted plans to increase the corporate tax rate, a major talking point for his base. Trump pinned the current economic situation on Democrats’ refusal to reopen the economy, but quickly pivoted to the economic successes of his first term, such as a record low pre-pandemic unemployment rate. Economic issues are where voters continue to rank Trump the highest.

COVID-19 Economic Reopening

Biden	Trump
Biden pinned his reservations about reopening the economy on Trump’s lack of a reopening plan. He noted that businesses must be given the funds to reopen, pointing to the high costs of procuring personal protective	Trump cautioned that people are being harmed by states’ refusal to reopen, citing increased rates of divorce, drug abuse and alcoholism.

equipment, among other supplies. He encouraged Trump and Senate Republicans to negotiate an additional COVID-relief deal with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY).

He disagreed with Trump’s assertion that Democrats are conspiring to keep states closed in an effort to harm Republicans running in the November elections. Biden turned the conversation back to the pandemic, saying “You can’t fix the economy until you fix the COVID crisis.”

He said many states and cities in lockdown are led by Democratic governors and mayors and said their refusal to reopen is part of a strategy to help Biden win the November election.

Trump touted the fact that 10.4 million people have returned to work in the past four months. He warned that Biden will “destroy” the economy and progress that has been made so far, if elected.

Tax and Trade Policy

Biden briefly touched on tax policy, saying the corporate tax rate should be increased to 28% from 21% and promising to roll back “Trump tax cuts.” He also cited analysis that his plan would create seven million more jobs than President Trump’s.

Biden criticized Trump’s manufacturing policies and called himself “the guy who brought back the automobile industry,” touting success in states like Ohio and Michigan.

He also emphasized that buying American-made products is a cornerstone of his economic plan. Biden said his administration would spend \$600 billion of federal money on only American-made products, including ships and steel.

Turning briefly to trade, Biden said President Trump claims to broker excellent trade deals despite the presence of significant trade deficits with China and Mexico.

Trump said increasing taxes will drive companies out of the United States.

Trump accused Biden of abandoning the US manufacturing sector, highlighting how his own policies led to the creation of 700,000 jobs.

While defending his handling of the economy amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Trump repeatedly said the recovery from the 2008 financial crisis, which was led by the Obama-Biden administration, was the slowest since the Great Depression.

Discussion surrounding President Trump’s income taxes is covered below.

President Trump’s Tax Returns

Key Takeaway: Heading into last night, some anticipated a substantial portion of the debate would be dominated by reports that President Trump paid only \$750 in federal income taxes in recent years. However, the topic was covered only briefly. Both President Trump and Biden returned to familiar arguments, with President Trump touting his navigation of the tax code and Biden using the opportunity to highlight the tax code’s disparate treatment of wealthy individuals versus working Americans. Biden also promised to reverse portions of Trump’s signature legislative achievement, the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017.

Biden	Trump
<p>Biden used Trump’s tax returns to illustrate his claim that millionaires and billionaires, like President Trump, have done well during the COVID-19 crisis relative to working-class individuals, particularly if they are paying less in taxes.</p> <p>Biden also called on the president to release his tax returns.</p>	<p>Wallace asked President Trump if it was true he paid only \$750 in federal income taxes. In response, President Trump refuted the accusation and said he paid “millions of dollars” in taxes.</p> <p>President Trump also said he would release them after the conclusion of an IRS audit.</p>
<p>Biden claimed that President Trump has been able to pay fewer taxes than the average school teacher because of his ability to navigate the tax code. In light of this, Biden said he will eliminate the “Trump tax cuts” to prevent wealthy taxpayers from paying fewer taxes than individuals with lower incomes.</p>	<p>President Trump, arguing he simply took advantage of the tax code as written, asked why Biden had not changed the laws while he was in the Senate.</p>

Energy and Climate Change	
<p>Key Takeaway: As expected, Biden and Trump offered vastly different viewpoints on the environment and related issues. Trump maintained that regulatory cutbacks help drive down the cost of energy, while Biden once again distanced himself from the liberals’ Green New Deal, instead pushing for credits and incentives to encourage the development of green energy. On climate change, under pressure from Wallace, President Trump acknowledged that human pollution contributes to global warming. However, he stood by his decision to pull out of the Paris Accord and other decisions impacting climate change.</p>	
Biden	Trump
<p>Biden summarized key points of his energy platform, such as providing tax credits to incentivize the weatherization of over 2 million buildings, constructing 500,000 electric vehicle charging stations and achieving a carbon-free electric sector by 2035.</p>	<p>When Wallace asked directly about the science of climate change and the impact humans have on global warming, President Trump conceded that they are, “to an extent,” related, but also cited to other causes.</p>
<p>Biden vowed to rejoin the Paris Climate Accord, which he said is “falling apart” absent the participation of the United States.</p>	<p>President Trump called the Paris Climate Accord a “disaster,” arguing that many businesses benefited from his decision to withdraw from the agreement.</p>
<p>Prompted by Wallace, Biden said he does not support the Green New Deal.</p>	<p>President Trump said he rolled back the Obama administration’s clean power plan because it drove up the cost of energy.</p>
<p>Biden repeatedly highlighted the potential for job creation he sees in the green energy sector, saying millions of well-paying jobs will be needed to support the development of new green infrastructure.</p>	<p>When asked about fuel economy standards, President Trump explained that he relaxed the standards over concerns that they were making cars more expensive. He subsequently expressed support for electric vehicles.</p>

Race and Violence in our Cities

Key Takeaway: Biden used the discussion on race and recent nationwide protests to contrast himself to the president by promising to address systemic racial injustices. He also courted suburban voters by promising to provide increased support and resources for law enforcement training. Trump stood firmly by his current approach to handling recent nationwide protests, citing support from law enforcement officials, as well as referencing the results of his criminal justice reform law. When given the opportunity, Trump declined to denounce white supremacist organizations.

Biden	Trump
<p>Biden criticized the president for using unwarranted force, such as tear gas, to break up peaceful protests. He repeatedly accused the president of being racist and called out his refusal to disavow white supremacy.</p> <p>Biden also acknowledged systemic racial injustice in education, work places, and law enforcement. He noted that law enforcement is by and large good, but people need to be held accountable for their actions. He claimed that he does not plan to defund law enforcement, unlike Trump, who in his budget, cuts funding by \$400 million for local law enforcement assistance. Biden instead pushed for increased federal support, racial sensitivity training, enhanced transparency, and having trained psychologists or psychiatrists readily available to be dispatched for 911 calls.</p>	<p>Trump noted that many of the protests were violent, with looting and rioting. He reiterated his support for “law and order,” citing support for his approach to handling nationwide protests from law enforcement agencies nationwide.</p> <p>Trump also claimed to have ended systemic racism and defended his decision to end racial sensitivity training for federal workers on the grounds that it taught people to hate America.</p>

The Integrity of our Election

Key Takeaway: Biden and Trump took opposite stances on the use of mail-in ballots for the election, with Biden predictably noting they are secure and Trump stating that voter fraud is rampant. Wallace noted that election results may not be final for weeks, given that there are eight states where election workers are prohibited from even beginning to process ballots until Election Day. He asked both candidates to commit to accepting the eventual outcome of the election and not declaring a premature victory. Biden agreed he would accept the results, while Trump pivoted and instead pushed for “honest ballots.”

Biden	Trump
<p>Biden encouraged every American to vote. He promised that poll watchers would provide a safe environment for in-person voters. He also noted that the FBI director has said there is no suspicion or evidence of national mail</p>	<p>Trump criticized mail-in ballots on the grounds that they are subject to tampering. He stated that voter fraud is rampant, with postal workers selling ballots and dumping them in rivers. The president also noted that the</p>

voting fraud. Biden stated that the Trump administration's attempt to discredit mail-in ballots is motivated by a fear of losing the election. Biden also pushed for all ballots post-marked by Election Day to be counted, regardless of late arrival.

Biden also pledged to accept the outcome of the election.

presidential election is won on slim margins, so proper ballot counting is essential.

When asked whether he will accept the outcome of the election, Trump pivoted and instead pushed for honest ballots.

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