Who Won the Debate? A Sharp Harris Rattled Trump

Commentators, even Republicans, concluded that Kamala Harris had succeeded in provoking Donald Trump into veering off message.

By Alan Rappeport

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In the first, and perhaps only, presidential debate between Vice President Kamala Harris and former President Donald J. Trump, the two candidates verbally sparred in often deeply personal terms, with policy arguments largely being overshadowed by fiery exchanges over character and crowd size.

Political pundits, analysts and commentators noted that Mr. Trump had often found himself on the defensive on issues such as abortion while allowing himself to be baited by Ms. Harris and veering off message. The vice president belittled the attendance at Mr. Trump's rallies and suggested that American military leaders view him as a "disgrace," while Mr. Trump often responded angrily, declaring that she had no policies of her own and was the "worst vice president in the history of our country."

After the debate, many Democratic strategists and officials cheered Ms. Harris's performance, while Republicans complained about the tenor of the questions from the moderators and acknowledged Mr. Trump's missed opportunities to unleash focused attack lines.

Here is a sampling of the reaction.

"She was exquisitely well prepared, she laid traps, and he chased every rabbit down every hole instead of talking about the things that he should have been talking about. This is the difference between someone who is well prepared and

someone who is unprepared," **former Gov. Chris Christie of New Jersey, a Republican who led Mr. Trump's 2016 transition team, said on ABC.**

"Harris repeatedly baited him into going off topic or doubling down on his most unpopular positions. She cleared the bar in terms of telling her personal story, going deep enough on policy, but also showing she has the chops to go toe to toe with anyone," said **Caitlin Legacki, a Democratic strategist and a former adviser to Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo.**

"I think that Kamala Harris exceeded the very low expectations that were purposely set for her," **Vivek Ramaswamy, the entrepreneur and former 2024 Republican presidential candidate, said on Fox News.**

"When the debate focused on the border and economy, Trump had the upper hand, but too often he took the bait from the V.P., giving her a pass. While the vice president clearly got under President Trump's skin, she offered little beyond platitudes," said **Lance Trover, a Republican strategist who served as press secretary to Gov. Doug Burgum of North Dakota.**

"Perhaps men are too emotional to be President," said **Justin Wolfers, a professor of public policy and economics at the University of Michigan.**

"Harris started somewhat hesitantly, perhaps because Trump's attacking style and factless presentation are quite different from the courtroom or the Senate floor. However, she rounded into form starting with her answer on reproductive rights," said **John Cameron Turner, the Kenneth M. Strange director of debate at Dartmouth College.**

"Trump did not win the debate but I think he won the election with an assist to ABC because it was so in the tank for Harris that it was repulsive. Voters did see Harris dodge every question that was even slightly difficult and tried to erase her record and Biden's," said **Hugh Hewitt, the conservative radio host.**

"Trump was poorly prepared and unfocused, left many points on the field, and missed numerous opportunities to press a case against her (which ABC was clearly not clamoring to highlight). He took a lot of bait. He got a few good shots and

points in, but whiffed on a lot of chances," said **Guy Benson, political editor of the conservative website Townhall.com.**

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"Trump continues to highlight tariffs as the solution to a range of problems, failing to recognize that it would worsen inflation and not generate revenues from China. Harris was effective in turning the discussion about China against Trump by arguing that he had not been tough on the broader issues, including protecting U.S. manufacturing from Chinese competition in high-tech industries," said **Eswar Prasad, the former head of the International Monetary Fund's China division.**

"Harris played the long game in tonight's debate, letting former President Trump reference his relationships with Viktor Orban, Kim Jong-un and Vladimir Putin and present internet-meme conspiracies around Haitian immigrants 'eating dogs and

cats' in Springfield, Ohio, for a full 56 minutes before asserting that Trump doesn't have the 'temperament' to be president," said **Henrietta Treyz, managing partner and director of economic policy research at the consulting firm Veda Partners.**

"I think the former president has had better debates. I think there were a number of missed opportunities there in which he could have put her campaign away, such as on the economy. All he had to do was lay out the increases in prices for gas, groceries and mortgages. I think this gives her life," said **Sam DeMarco III, a councilman at large in Allegheny County, Pa., and the county's Republican Party chairman.**

"A lot of Trump's supporters are tuning in tonight to see the mask fall off. The man who marketed himself as strong and in command is flailing, getting rattled, and looks small when challenged. There will be some genuinely surprised & disappointed Trump supporters after tonight's performance," said **Alyssa Farah Griffin, who served as White House communications director during the Trump administration.**

"Wasn't even close. VP Harris proved she's the best choice to lead our nation forward," said **President Biden.**

Alan Rappeport is an economic policy reporter, based in Washington. He covers the Treasury Department and writes about taxes, trade and fiscal matters. More about Alan Rappeport