

Forbes

Did Pence's Debate Performance Shift The Election Odds?

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October 8, 2020

Instead of a virtual format proffered by the Committee on Presidential Debates Thursday morning, maybe President Trump should make a counterproposal. How about having his vice president stand in for him at the next debate, originally scheduled for October 15th in Miami?

While President Trump recovers from a bout of COVID-19 at the White House and trails in most national polls, Vice President Mike Pence presented a dramatic contrast in styles to the WWE-smackdown-esque Trump-Biden shoutfest a week earlier. Pence, a longtime talk radio host before elected office, adroitly countered Sen. Kamala Harris' mainstream news media talking points in the undercard match at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City Wednesday night.

While opinions predictably broke down along partisan lines, legendary Republican pollster Frank Luntz queried his focus group of fifteen undecided voters. "It was clear," Luntz said, "that Pence was the winner of this confrontation."

So it looked to my independent eyes as someone familiar with - and wary - of prosecutor-then-Senator Kamala Harris from my time living in San Francisco. In my opinion, the debate was not even close, despite what I felt was an overtly partisan moderator in *USA Today's* Susan Page. Tim Pool put it this way: "Pence nuked Kamala Harris from orbit." But will it move the betting odds?

Not so far. Bovada's odds are the strongest for Trump at 38%. The Real Clear Politics betting average, as of Tuesday, calls it Biden 64%/Trump 35.1%. In the hours after the debate, Biden's odds jumped from -175 to -190, while Trump's correspondingly got just a bit longer - from -145 to -175.

And you could have made all kinds of prop wagers at the VP debate, from Pence's tie to how many times Harris would say "racist." How did you do?

Trump's signature troll move for the night was having a seat reserved for Tupac Shakur. Sen. Kamala Harris, in one of her softball interviews, was asked to name the "best rapper alive." She named fellow Californian Tupac, who served prison time for violence and sexual abuse convictions, shot dead near the Vegas Strip in 1996. After receiving the bad news 25 years later, Harris could not name another rapper.

Most but not all polls have Biden out front. The Real Clear Politics (RCP) average has Biden up 9 points nationally and 4.6 points in battleground states. The most recent poll from *NBC/Wall Street Journal* has Biden up 14 points, while Trump-bashing CNN has Biden up 16 points. Rasmussen, which had Trump narrowly in the lead three weeks ago, now has Biden up 12 points. Fox News has Biden up 10. Biden landslide? Maybe, maybe not.

Just like everything else in the mainstream media, different polls feed completely different narratives. Three other larger polls have the race as a toss-up. Zogby has Biden up by only 47% to 45% - two points. Investor's Business Daily has Biden up by 2.7% - 48.6% to 45.9%. And the Democracy Institute - which forecast Trump's 2016 upset and Brexit - has Trump up a point, 46% to 45%. The results on all three lay within the margins of error. RCP excluded Zogby and Democracy Institute from their average, skewing it toward Biden.

How much of this is a voter shift, and how much of it is secret Trump voters not showing up in the polls?

The *New York Times*, CNN, and FiveThirtyEight doubt the very existence of secret Trump voters. Like so many other things I've heard from them, I did my own research and found a very different answer.

Google Trends shows searches of "secret Trump voters" and "shy Trump voters" have spiked since this summer. These are people who will vote for Orange Man but aren't likely to tell friends, family, or pollsters because of the risk of being insulted, losing friends or jobs, or being physically attacked by "woke" social justice mobs.

The libertarian Cato Institute found 62% of Americans feel uncomfortable sharing their political views. Cato found "strong liberals" to be the only group where a majority felt comfortable. The difference between "strong liberals" and centrist Democrats, according to Cato, "demonstrates that political expression is an issue that divides the Democratic coalition between centrist Democrats and their left flank."

CloudResearch found Republican voters more than twice as reluctant to share their preference as Democrats, as did Rasmussen. The Democracy Institute found an even stronger trend. While 87% of Biden supporters said they were "comfortable with relatives, friends, coworkers knowing how you vote," only 22% of Trump voters - that's one quarter - felt comfortable. My own conversations with people in Vegas and around the US back this up: Many Trump voters are holding their cards close to the vest.

Trump voters, on average, hold more enthusiasm for their candidate than the Democrats do theirs. A poll from the ABC News/*Washington Post*, both anti-Trump, nonetheless found Trump voters more than twice as enthusiastic about their candidate. Democrats tend to be more anti-Trump than pro-Biden - hence the term Trump Derangement Syndrome. In late September, Gallup found 56% of voters, regardless of preference, expect Trump to win. Only 40% expect Biden to prevail.

If betting odds improve for the Trump campaign in coming days, it's likely because Vice President Pence did a better job articulating the administration's goals and accomplishments than his boss. Not surprisingly, Pence is the GOP favorite for the top job in 2024 - at +600, 6/1, 14.3%.