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Fact-checking the dueling town halls of Trump and Biden

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The town halls Thursday night — President Trump on NBC and Joe Biden, the Democratic nominee, on ABC — were a study in contrasts. Trump spun a web of falsehoods like a whirling dervish, while Biden talked in depth and at length on a range of policy issues, leaving us with a handful of claims to check.

Here's a quick summary of eight Trump claims and four Biden claims that caught our attention. Many of Trump's other claims were repeats we had fact-checked in the first presidential debate or his Republican convention speech.

Trump: "Just the other day, they [the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] came out with a statement that 85 percent of people who wear masks catch it."

Savannah Guthrie: "They didn't say that. I know that study."

Trump: "That's what I heard and that's what I saw."

Trump falsely described a study published by the CDC on Sept. 11 and then ignored Guthrie, the NBC moderator, when she tried to correct him.

Published in the CDC's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, the study compared 154 people who tested positive for the novel coronavirus with 160 people who tested negative.

The top finding was that "close contact with a person with known COVID-19 was more commonly reported among" the positive cases (42 percent) than the negatives (14 percent).

Coronavirus-positive patients were more likely to have reported dining at a restaurant (any area designated by the restaurant, including indoor, patio and outdoor seating) "in the 2 weeks preceding illness onset" than those who tested negative, the study says.

The study says that in the 14 days before illness onset, 71 percent of the positive cases and 74 percent of those who didn't catch the virus "reported always using cloth face coverings or other mask types when in public."

The rate of mask-wearing is almost the same, so the takeaway from this study is that the positive cases had more contacts with a person known to be infected with the virus and dined out more.

"Exposures and activities where mask use and social distancing are difficult to maintain, including going to places that offer on-site eating or drinking, might be important risk factors for acquiring COVID-19. As communities reopen, efforts to reduce possible exposures at locations that offer on-site eating and drinking options should be considered to protect customers, employees, and communities," the study says.

“We were expected to lose 2,200,000 people and maybe more than that. We’re at 210,000 people.”

— Trump

Trump loves to use the statistic. But it’s incredibly misleading.

Trump is citing a possible death figure that was a worst-case scenario produced by Imperial College London, which assumed that 81 percent of the population became infected — 268 million people — and that 0.9 percent of them would die. It did so by also assuming people took no actions against the coronavirus — nobody avoided crowded elevators, wore masks, washed their hands more often, or bought gloves or hand sanitizer — which the study acknowledged was unrealistic: “It is highly likely that there would be significant spontaneous change in population behavior even in the absence of government-mandated interventions.”

Moreover, even the 1918 flu pandemic is believed to have infected no more than 28 percent of the population, making the 81 percent figure suspect, noted Alan Reynolds of the Cato Institute. Trump routinely mentions this figure to suggest he saved that many people from death, even as the actual death toll rises far above many of his earlier predictions. On March 29, he even said that a “very good job” would be if the death toll was between 100,000 and 200,000 dead. That assessment appears no longer operative.

“We’ve done an amazing job, and it’s rounding the corner.”

— Trump

False. The United States has recorded 7.9 million cases of people infected with the coronavirus, and 216,000 deaths. When measuring the 20 hardest-hit countries, the United States is sixth in the key metric of deaths per 100,000 people.

The rate of new U.S. cases has been trending upward in recent weeks, according to data from Johns Hopkins University, as several states begin to reopen their economies amid what epidemiologists say could be a second wave of the virus.

“We’re a winner on the excess mortality.”

— Trump

It’s too early to say, and the available data does not support Trump’s claim.

Definitive estimates of the excess mortality rate — that is, the rate of deaths caused indirectly by the novel coronavirus’s disease, covid-19, among people who had other ailments — will not be available for some time.

For now, the United States has one of the highest rates of covid-19 deaths per 100,000 people in the world and one of the highest rates of excess all-cause mortality, according to a study published online this week by the Journal of the American Medical Association.

The authors, Alyssa Bilinski and Ezekiel J. Emanuel, compared the United States with 18 countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development that have populations above 5 million and more than \$25,000 per capita gross domestic product.

“Compared with other countries, the US experienced high COVID-19-associated mortality and excess all-cause mortality into September 2020. After the first peak in early spring, US death rates from COVID-19 and from all causes remained higher than even countries with high COVID-19 mortality. This may have been a result of several factors, including weak public health infrastructure and a decentralized, inconsistent US response to the pandemic,” the authors wrote. “Limitations of this analysis include differences in mortality risk: the US population is younger but has more comorbidities compared with the other countries. In addition, since late August death rates have increased in several countries, and how mortality will compare with the US throughout fall remains unknown.”

“The Boilermakers overwhelmingly endorsed me, okay, so the Boilermakers Union has endorsed me because I sat down with them and went into great detail earlier to show their leadership exactly what I would do.”

— **Biden**

Biden made this comment after ABC moderator George Stephanopoulos noted that a member of Boilermakers Local 154, an important union in Pennsylvania, had expressed skepticism about Biden’s pledge to not end fracking, saying it was incompatible with his proposal to reduce use of fossil fuels. In fact, Trump won the coveted endorsement of the local union.

But Biden is wrong. The International Brotherhood of Boilermakers has not endorsed him. “The International Brotherhood of Boilermakers has not endorsed any candidate for the 2020 U.S. Presidential election,” the union’s website says. The union had endorsed Barack Obama in 2012 and 2008.

“Thousands of ballots dumped in a garbage can, and they happen to have my name on it.”

— **Trump**

This is a hallucination. Remember: Trump has spent much of 2020 peddling absurd falsehoods about voting by mail, and he has been claiming without any basis that rampant election fraud is afoot.

The case Trump is referring to, from Pennsylvania, involves nine ballots, seven of which were for Trump, not “thousands.” The president has been aided in his efforts by the Justice Department’s irregular disclosures and its violation of ballot secrecy in this case.

Luzerne County, Pa., officials said in a statement that a “temporary seasonal independent contractor ... incorrectly discarded [nine ballots] into the office trash” during that person’s three-day period of employment. The county’s top election official caught wind, fired the employee and launched an investigation. In other words, at the moment, this could just as well be described as a success story about Pennsylvania’s election controls.

The Justice Department at first said all nine ballots were for Trump, violating ballot secrecy, before issuing an unusual correction to note that, actually, seven were for Trump. The department also seems to have tipped off Trump to developments in this case before making a public announcement about an ongoing investigation, which is rare.

“What I was against was giving states more money for prison systems that they could build, state prison systems.”

— Biden

Biden was a key senator working on the passage of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, better known as the 1994 crime bill. Biden has taken to calling it the “1994 Biden Crime Bill,” so he’s obviously paternal about it. But the crime bill has become controversial, with some saying it helped lead to higher and higher rates of incarceration. In fact, the bill encouraged states to build more prisons — with more money coming to them if they increased penalties. In the town hall, Biden even said parts of the law were a mistake; here, he suggested the additional money for state prison systems was something he opposed.

That’s not entirely correct. Biden had proposed spending \$6 billion in prisons. But the Biden campaign provided quotes from Biden in 1994 complaining that Republicans had upped the amount to \$10 billion. “I don’t agree with the prisons, but we’re stuck,” said Biden in May 1994. And in an August 1994 news conference, Biden said the bill had “too much money on prisons.” He said, “I don’t want that money. And I like the figure that I wrote in my bills: \$6 billion.”

“They eliminated the funding for community policing.”

— Biden

This is false. Community policing, especially a push to add 100,000 police officers, was a big part of the 1994 crime bill. The program, known as Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS), still exists. Trump in his 2019 budget plan proposed to cut the funding in half, but that’s not the same as zero.

In 2019, the COPS program received \$304 million, up from \$276 million in 2018, but that’s a steep drop from the \$1.6 billion it received in 1998, according to the Congressional Research Service.

“We’re always protecting people with preexisting conditions, and I can’t say that more strongly.”

— Trump

Both statements are whoppers. But Trump keeps repeating this Bottomless Pinocchio claim.

The Trump administration has been trying for years to dismantle the Affordable Care Act, the law mandating that insurers must sell coverage plans to people with preexisting health conditions.

The entire Affordable Care Act would cease to exist, jeopardizing health care for millions of Americans during a deadly pandemic, if a Republican lawsuit currently before the Supreme Court were to succeed.

The Justice Department filed a brief June 25 in support of the GOP argument that “the entire ACA ... must fall.” About 100 million Americans have a preexisting condition, and if Trump wins in court, millions of them could be denied coverage by insurers or charged prohibitively high prices once more.

Trump has not presented a plan to replace the ACA or its key provisions, such as the coverage guarantee for sick patients. He recently signed a toothless executive order affirming support for

such protections, but health-care experts say what's needed is a law — for instance, the ACA, which he is trying to dismantle.

Republicans have tried to repeal and replace the health-care law for 10 years and have never agreed on how to do it. Before he asked the nation's highest court to strike down the law, Trump consistently sought to weaken some of the ACA provisions at issue, as we found in [this fact check](#).

“[In Trump’s tax plan,] you get a benefit from going overseas, if you have much of it being made overseas.”

— Biden

This is in dispute by economists. It's an incredibly complex topic — [here's our lengthy fact check](#) — but the concerns that Biden raises about the tax law signed by Trump are mostly theoretical and the claim that companies “get a benefit” for offshoring jobs is not confirmed in the available data.

Economists and tax experts are still puzzling out the long-term impact of these provisions. Moreover, the law is believed to have broadly reduced incentives to invest overseas, compared with the previous system. Even if it's possible a new loophole was created, many other loopholes were closed.

“I have done more for the African American community than any president since Abraham Lincoln.”

— Trump

[Prominent historians have dismissed Trump’s claim as fantasy.](#)

The president cited record funding for historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), a bill he signed to overhaul prison sentences, and what he claimed are increased investments in minority communities through “opportunity zone” legislation (that claim by itself is suspect; see this New York Times article, [“How a Trump Tax Break to Help Poor Communities Became a Windfall for the Rich”](#)).

Historians said President Lyndon B. Johnson, who signed into law the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, is clearly the president who had the most lasting impact on the lives of African Americans through hard-fought legislative victories.

“When LBJ signed his landmark Medicare Act in 1965, he secured desegregation of hospitals throughout the South, which had been universal, and anywhere else it existed. That was an enormous accomplishment,” said Max J. Skidmore, a presidential historian at the University of Missouri.

“Presidents who have done the most for Black civil rights since Lincoln would include Ulysses S. Grant (securing creation of Department of Justice and empowering the attorney general to prosecute the Ku Klux Klan and racial violence, etc.), Harry Truman (desegregating the military, using executive order to circumvent a Congress dominated by the South),” Skidmore told us. “Barack Obama should be included for his success in passing the Affordable Care Act, which is one of the greatest anti-poverty measures that this country has ever enacted.”

Many experts faulted Trump for his attacks on voting rights (which mainly benefit minorities) and his record of racist statements. Black unemployment and poverty rates had been declining for years before Trump took office, and HBCU funding was mostly handled by Congress.

“If Biden comes in and raises taxes on everybody, including middle-income taxes which he wants to do, you will blow this thing and you’ll end up with a depression the likes of which you’ve never had.”

— **Trump**

This is false. Biden has repeatedly said he would not raise taxes on anyone making less than \$400,000 a year. Every major think tank study of Biden’s plan agrees that virtually all of that revenue would be gathered from the very wealthy or from corporations, with about half of the money coming from the top 0.1 percent and three-quarters from the top 1 percent of households.

For technical reasons, Biden’s corporate tax increase is deemed to filter through to almost all income groups, giving Trump an opening to misleadingly claim that Biden is raising taxes on most Americans. But overall, Biden’s \$400,000 pledge holds up well, especially when considering the impact on individual taxpayers. In the few instances where The Fact Checker identified a situation in which a taxpayer might inadvertently find themselves snared by a tax change despite not making \$400,000, the Biden campaign said it would craft the tax bill to fix the problem.