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Inside the Beltway: Biden, Ryan to mix it up at the debate

By Jennifer Harper - Wednesday, October 10, 2012

America is intrigued with the latest clash of political titans, suggesting that the vice presidential debate could draw as much interest as the presidential version. And why not? This is debate as reality TV, pitting a pair of unlikely combatants against each other, with excruciating stakes and a big audience. When Vice President Joseph R. Biden and Rep. Paul Ryan face off at Kentucky's Centre College Thursday night, will they draw as much attention as their bosses? Quite possibly. A new Pew Research poll reveals that 77 percent of voters plan to watch the debate and more Republicans likely will tune in than Democrats; see details in the Poll du Jour at column's end.

There's already much buzz around the fact that both men are Irish Catholics, separated by an enormous age gap. Indeed. Consider that when Mr. Biden first entered the U.S. Senate, Mr. Ryan was 2 years old. It is wily old uncle against wonky young upstart, each bristling with personal brand and credentials — Mr. Biden rules foreign-policy chatter, while Mr. Ryan has utter command of the economy.

Consider, too, that a respectable 67 million viewers tuned in to watch President Obama and Mitt Romney hold fort last week. But when Mr. Biden and then-Republican nominee Sarah Palin debated four years ago, the audience was 70 million. The pairing of the two proved plain irresistible. And the phenomenon could very well repeat itself this time around.

SCREEN GEMS

There is no shortage of broadcast coverage for the vice presidential derby, and it's tweaked with melodrama. Though he once was vice president, Al Gore will not emerge to anchor coverage of the debate for Current TV, the network he founded six years ago. There was much fanfare when Mr. Gore led a team of talking heads for both recent political conventions and the first presidential debate. But he's missing this time.

Fox News, meanwhile, rolls out the big names for 11 hours of coverage from Kentucky beginning at 1 p.m. Anchors and correspondents on hand for the

stately squabble include Bret Baier, Megyn Kelly, Shepard Smith, Chris Wallace, Sean Hannity, Brit Hume, Joe Trippi, Charles Krauthammer, Ed Henry and Carl Cameron. Fox Business Network anchor Neil Cavuto also will provide special prime-time coverage.

CNN, MSNBC, CBS, NBC and ABC all will broadcast live from the Bluegrass State; ABC's Martha Raddatz, in fact, will moderate the debate, though The Daily Caller complains with some merit that President Obama is a personal acquaintance of Ms. Raddatz's, while her former husband, Julius Genachowski, is an Obama administration appointee. So much for political neutrality, though a spokesman for Mr. Ryan says his boss has "no concerns."

CNN, incidentally, is laying claim to credibility. The network has sent 18 anchors and correspondents to the debate, including a designated "reality check" team to pore over claims made by Mr. Biden and Mr. Ryan. CNN also says it's "the only cable news network that has not chosen sides during this election."

AND IN KENTUCKY

Discourse may be plenty serious inside the debate hall at Centre College, but outside, it's a full-blown debate festival, officially dubbed the Thrill in the 'Ville by students, who will gather at high noon for 11 hours of entertainment sponsored by, ironically enough, AARP. After collectively viewing the debate on a Jumbotron on the campus green, the young and restless will enjoy a late-night concert by the Marshall Tucker Band. The students were curious enough about the aforementioned Ms. Raddatz to ask questions about her personal life on Wednesday.

Among other things, the moderator revealed she favors arugula salad with grilled fish, abhors "rudeness" and would dine with Abraham Lincoln, former Minnesota Vikings quarterback Brett Favre, comedian Ali Wentworth and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, given a choice of dream dinner companions.

"What fictional character in whose shoes you'd love to spend a day?" the students asked.

"Today, I would be happy to be Winnie the Pooh, just to be outside instead of [in] the office," Ms. Raddatz replied.

YOU BETCHA

Ireland-based Paddy Power, Europe's largest betting company, reports that close to three times more money has been staked on President Obama than on Mitt Romney to win the White House. About 74 percent staked their money on the president, about 25 percent on his rival.

“Romney has seen his odds of winning the presidential race improve significantly from 9/2 to 2/1 since his powerful display in the first debate, but he still trails Obama, who remains the favorite to win the election at 4/11,” reports spokesman Feilim MacAniomaire. “Obama looked to be home and dry in our customers’ eyes about two weeks ago. However, there’s been a recent surge in support for Romney, which would suggest that Obama might be in trouble.”

TEA PARTY=LIBERTARIAN?

A research coalition says it has “surprising” and provocative new findings about the libertarian roots of the tea party. Controversy is guaranteed, say FreedomWorks Vice President David Kirby and a quartet of analysts from the Cato Institute, New York University and the Brookings Institution.

“Many people identify the tea party with the religious right and social conservatism. A new study of public opinion suggests this common view is misguided. The tea party is united on economic issues, but split on the social issues it avoids,” the group says. “Roughly half the tea party is socially conservative, half is libertarian or fiscally conservative, but socially moderate to liberal. The tea party is upending the conventional wisdom that Republican candidates must placate socially conservative voters to win primaries.”

Uh-oh. The group reveals all on Monday.

POLL DU JOUR

- 77 percent of U.S. voters say they will watch the vice presidential debate Thursday night.
- 84 percent of Republicans, 82 percent of Democrats and 68 percent of independents agree.
- 51 percent give Vice President Joseph R. Biden an unfavorable rating; 39 percent give him a favorable rating.
- 40 percent give Rep. Paul Ryan an unfavorable rating; 44 percent give him a favorable rating.
- 40 percent say Mr. Ryan will do a “better job” in the debate; 34 percent say Mr. Biden will do a better job.
- 23 percent “don’t know”; 3 percent say neither will do a better job.

Source: A Pew Research Center Poll of 1,511 U.S. adults conducted Oct. 4-7.