

Tonight's election debate may be Trump's last chance to close the polling gap with Biden.



Tonight President Donald Trump and former Vice President, Joe Biden, will meet for the final election debate at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee. In this Q&A, LSE US Centre Director [Professor Peter Trubowitz](#) writes that the debate is an important moment for Trump. Facing a large polling gap as the election nears, the president now needs to convince undecided voters that his combative performance at the first debate was an outlier.

Who has more at stake tonight — Trump or Biden?

Trump, I think. The president needs to close the gap in the polls with Joe Biden and he's running out of time with only 12 days to Election Day. The debate gives him the last "set piece" moment to convince the remaining [undecided voters](#) to break his way. This means convincing those voters that his performance in the first debate, which was widely panned for being too combative and unpresidential, was a "one off." And it is worth remembering that Presidents have come back after losing the first debate before. Obama did so against [Mitt Romney](#) back in 2012. That's what Trump needs to do tonight.

What does Trump need to do to turn things around?

Let me count the ways: be less combative than he was in the first debate, let Joe Biden talk more in the hope that he makes an epic blunder, or offer some new policies as a sweetener and a sign of independence — for example, announce that he plans to push the stimulus package through whether GOP Senate Majority leader Mitch McConnell is for or against it. The first and second require self-discipline, not exactly the President's strong suit. The third requires finding common ground with Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Now that would certainly be news!

What does Biden need to do tonight to go home a winner?

I think Biden has the easier job tonight. He basically needs to keep the focus on Trump's mismanagement of the pandemic and avoid making unforced errors. The more he forces Trump to play defense on the pandemic, the better it is for Joe Biden: it's simply a losing issue for Trump. The main thing Biden has to avoid is losing his cool over Trump attacking his son Hunter, which is sure to happen, or saying something that plays into Trump's narrative that Biden is "sleepy" and challenged cognitively. Not a particularly high bar for Biden, but important that he gets over it, I think.

Any issues we should be on the lookout for tonight?

I wouldn't be surprised if there is a dustup over China, and I wouldn't be surprised if Biden moves first on this. He's basically been handed a gift with the [revelation](#) earlier this week that Trump has a bank account based there. If I were Biden, I'd go on the offensive with this and not wait for the inevitable Trump attack that Biden has been "played" by Beijing and is "weak" on China. It would force Trump to explain his hypocrisy on China while reminding voters that Trump has not been paying his fair share of taxes in the US.

- Featured image credit: [Belmont University/Smugmug](#).
- This article is based on interview comments Professor Trubowitz gave to Bloomberg on 22 October 2020.

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