

# The first debate: no knockout blows means that both campaigns still have their work cut out.

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*Last night's first presidential debate between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump was widely anticipated as one of the most important set pieces of the campaign so far. US Centre Director, [Peter Trubowitz](#) gives his takeaways from the debate, writing that while neither candidate landed any heavy blows, Clinton won on points by controlling the tone of the debate and by putting Trump on the defensive. Both candidates' performances will likely reinforce support from their bases, but may have done little to convince undecided voters and those on either side who remain sceptical of their party's candidate.*



## **What's the big takeaway from last night? Did anyone score a knockout?**

If this was a prize fight, then Clinton won on points. No knockout blow, but she was strong and on the offensive from the start, calling Trump out on his refusal to release his taxes, his lies about Obama's birthplace, and his doubts about America's allies. He was left largely playing defense, reacting to her rather than the other way around. He likely scored points playing the anti-Washington card, which he did repeatedly during the debate, reminding voters that Clinton has been a Washington political figure for decades. Still, she controlled the tempo and tone. Trump was weakest and Clinton was strongest in the national security segment — no surprise there.

## **How will the debate impact the campaign going forward? Did Clinton help herself? How about Trump?**

I will be surprised if this really moves the needle in the polls. Clinton's supporters will rightly take comfort from her performance; she was good, fully in command of her brief and displaying at moments a lighter side. Trump's supporters might think he was too defensive, but I don't think they will see reason to abandon him. The big question is how undecided voters reacted and especially, those nominally Republican and Democratic voters who have misgivings about their party's nominee. Did college educated white voters who normally vote Republican but are skittish about Trump find enough reassurance in his performance? Did young millennial voters who backed Bernie Sanders see enough last night to convince them that Clinton is the only choice? My suspicion is that both campaigns still have their work cut out for them.

## **What do you think were some of the biggest moments?**

I think the media will focus on the exchanges over Trump's taxes, his position on Iraq (that he really supported the war before he was against it), and his attacks on Obama's birthplace. In Clinton's case, the media is likely to replay her apology for using a private server for her email while Secretary of State. However, I thought the most telling and arguably most important moment came towards the very end when Lester Holt, the moderator, pressed Trump in front of 100-plus million viewers on whether he would support Hillary Clinton if she were elected president. He responded by saying he would 'absolutely support' her if she won. Given all of Trump's talk about how the election is 'rigged,' that was the biggest surprise of the night, and for anyone who cares about democracy, an important step in the right direction.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor the London School of Economics.*

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Peter Trubowitz is Professor and Head of International Relations, and Director of the LSE's US Centre. His main research interests are in the fields of international security and comparative foreign policy, with special focus on American grand strategy and foreign policy. He also writes and comments frequently on U.S. party politics and elections and how they shape and are shaped by America's changing place in the world.



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