

The first presidential debate: USAPP expert reaction and commentary

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On Monday night, over 80 million watched the first presidential debate between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. We asked some of USAPP's regular contributors for their thoughts and analysis.

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Don't forget the importance of the debate format

Newly Paul – *Appalachian State University*

Presidential debates are important events in the election cycle because of the number of viewers they draw and the volume of media coverage they generate for days after the event. The first debate between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump drew over 80 million viewers by [some estimates](#), and [ranked](#) among the most watched debates in history.



[Research indicates](#) that debates help undecided voters make up their minds, reinforce the vote choice of people who have already made their decision, and help narrow the knowledge gap for low information voters. [Studies](#), however, show that debates do not have measurable persuasive effects in terms of influencing people to change their minds.

The media coverage of debates, on the other hand, often [impacts voters' perception](#) of candidates and [shapes](#) their understanding of the event. The media, however, are often criticized for providing “[game frame](#)” coverage that focuses on the winners and losers of the debate, campaign strategies and tactics, and the performance of the candidates. In the process, policy details such as candidates' stances on issues get omitted, leading to [widespread cynicism](#) and negativity among the public.

Studies indicate that debate formats impact the tone and type of questions that are asked of candidates. In Town Hall formats, undecided members of the public are allowed to pose questions of candidates, and these events are more likely to feature questions focused on issues such as jobs, healthcare and economy that immediately impact the public. Single-moderator events on the other hand, feature questions that are designed to [incite conflict](#) and are largely unreflective of the public agenda. The difference in substance and tone is largely produced by various [economic and newsroom factors](#) that cause media outlets to cater their programming to fit the tastes of a wide variety of audiences.

In recent elections, the discussion on the role of the press as fact checker in debates has also assumed importance. At the crux of [this debate](#) is the question whether moderators should act as neutral bystanders and simply ask questions, or whether they should fact check candidates' statements.

The moderator for the first presidential debate, NBC's Lester Holt, drew both praise and criticism for being [largely invisible](#), and letting the candidates spar with each other. He occasionally [fact checked](#) Trump's claims (for example, he rebutted the claim that Trump did not support the Iraq War in 2003, and reiterated Clinton's point that New York's stop and frisk policy had been ruled unconstitutional on grounds of racism), and made sure the candidates answered

his questions, but otherwise kept the spotlight firmly on them. He allowed the candidates enough time to actually debate with each other, and posed questions on topics of race and sexism, which often do not feature in foreign policy debates.

Predictably, the post-debate media coverage on Holt's performance was split along partisan lines. Trump and his surrogates [blamed Holt](#) for being soft on Clinton, not pressing her enough on the Benghazi issue or the email scandal, and asking tough and "hostile" follow-up questions of Trump. Conversely, Clinton's supporters praised Holt for showing [restraint](#) and adopting a [moderate tone](#). In future debates, Trump has expressed his desire to adopt a more [hardline approach](#) toward Clinton. He hasn't yet mentioned his approach toward the next moderator. Considering that the next presidential debate moderators are CNN's Anderson Cooper and ABC's Martha Raddatz—both tough reporters—and the debate will be held in a Town Hall format that allows for questions from the public, it will be interesting to see how the candidates' reactions differ from the first debate.

Coverage matters more than the debate itself

Dan Cassino – *Fairleigh Dickinson University*

The first Presidential debate is over, and while there has been predictably hyperbolic accounts of who won, and by what margins, the most important thing to recognize is that the debate itself will have absolutely no direct effect on the vote choice of Americans. If this debate is anything like those in the past, there could be significant indirect effects, and it looks as though these will work against Republican candidate Donald Trump. Such effects are due to media coverage and the way polls work, rather than anything that actually happened on the night.



Less than 12 hours after the debate, with the first snap polls in, the media consensus seems set that Trump was beaten soundly by Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton. But despite the fact that interest in the debate was enormous, most of the people watching it are people who are already engaged in politics. A debate is a big event, but politics is still a lot like baseball: if you're not rooting for a team, there's no reason to watch the game. Motivated reasoning is a powerful drug, despite the media consensus that he lost, Trump supporters, by and large, will believe that he won, just as Clinton supporters will believe that she won. The committed partisans are the individuals most engaged in the process, those most likely to watch, and those that are the least likely to change their minds based on what they see.

So why does the debate matter at all? Because of how information about the debate reaches the voters who are not engaged in the process. The morning after the debate, all over America, voters who didn't watch the debates turned on their televisions to morning news programs to get a celebrity interview and a recipe, and were told, in no uncertain terms, that Trump performed badly at the debate, and were shown a few clips to reinforce that narrative. It's those voters that the debate has the potential to sway: not because of the debate itself, but because of how it's covered in the media. This is more than a theory: it's borne out by the data from 2008 and 2012. In 2012, President Obama had what was perceived to be a disastrous first debate against Republican candidate Mitt Romney. The debate itself had no impact on the polls, but the shift in media coverage afterwards, which went from slightly positive towards Obama to strongly negative against him, pushed his numbers in the weeks that followed. It was not, and never is, the debate that matters – it's the version of the debate presented in the media.

That said, we can expect Trump's poll numbers to dip in the coming weeks, partially because of the way the debate is presented in the press, and partially because of the vagaries of modern polling. In the aftermath of Obama's first debate against Romney in 2012, his poll numbers dropped: not because he'd lost much support, but rather because Democrats supporting him became more reticent to pick up the phone and talk to pollsters. They simply didn't want to talk about politics when their candidate was being pounded by the press, and it looked like they might lose. After a few weeks, and a reasonable performance by Joe Biden in the vice-presidential debate, the effects faded, and the polls went right back to where they had been before.

So, does the debate matter? The coverage of it might sway some voters who are somehow still undecided, but those voters are less likely to cast a ballot anyway. It will likely lead to declines in Trump's poll numbers as it becomes harder to get Trump supporters to answer surveys, an effect that will likely fade. But it will certainly make everyone who did watch it feel much more certain about their choice, whoever that happens to be.

A bad night for Trump with more challenges ahead

Brian Klaas – *LSE Government*

Monday's debate was a blow to Donald Trump. Undecided voters that are tempted by a Trump presidency wanted to see whether he could appear presidential and even-tempered. Instead, they saw 90 minutes that echoed the bare truth of the last 18 months: Donald Trump is not only dangerously unqualified but also deliberately unprepared for the most difficult job on the planet. His supporters chalked it up as a win, loving his maverick style. But substance matters too, and the next two debates will be a major challenge for him to re-write the narrative that he is simply not ready to be the 45th President of the United States.



On the other hand, Clinton had stratospheric expectations to meet, and she met them. She was poised, prepared, and presidential. Her attacks landed, particularly when she highlighted Trump's refusal to release his tax returns and got him to seemingly admit that he does not pay federal taxes. That issue will dog Trump until Election Day, and threatens to undermine his campaign narrative that he's a populist friend to the working class — who pay their fair share of taxes.

The big unknown now is how much Clinton's debate win will translate into a rise in the polls or more votes in November. In reading the tea leaves, one of the key numbers to watch closely is how the debates affect third party support levels in polls. Two candidates were on stage on Monday, and two candidates will meet head-to-head twice more. That means that it is possible that third party support could wane as people get closer to actually casting their ballots. If Gary Johnson's or Jill Stein's support begins to fall, then the debates could be the crucial factor in determining where their voters go instead. And that could most certainly prove the difference in what is shaping up to be a nail-biter of an election

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