The second presidential debate: USAPP expert reaction and commentary

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On Sunday night, the second 2016 presidential debate was held in St Louis. We asked some of USAPP's regular contributors for their thoughts and analysis. Read reaction to the first debate here.

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Trump did what he needed to do to preserve the support from his base, but he's no more likely to win.

Dan Cassino *– Fairleigh Dickinson University*

Despite the shock with which some of his comments at the debate were received, Republican candidate Donald Trump did what he needed to do on Sunday night, but that doesn't mean that he's any more likely to win next month's Presidential election.

In the second Presidential debate, Trump was widely criticized in the media for, among other things, saying that as President, he would order the Justice Department to investigate his Democratic rival, Hillary Clinton, and said that if he were in office, she "would be in jail." This was a slightly subtler version of his rally chant of "lock her up," but commentators were shocked to see him express it so explicitly: jailing political opponents is a practice more common to autocracies than the world's oldest Republic.

Trump also attempted to move past the controversy over the newly-released 2005 recording in which he brags about sexual assault and his attempts to seduce married women, saying that he can get away with such things because of his celebrity and wealth. He apologized for having made the comments, claimed that he had never actually engaged in the behaviors discussed, claimed that Bill Clinton had done much worse, and said that the issue was a distraction from the real issues, like the fight with ISIS.

To put it mildly, these comments, and more like them, were not well received in the media: but they did likely appeal to his Republican base. Prior to the debate, Trump was hemorrhaging support among Republican office-holders, and losing ground among traditional Republican constituencies. His base thinks Hillary Clinton belongs in jail; they have a deep revulsion to Bill Clinton's sexual misconduct while he was President. His positions during the debate didn't seem to do anything to expand his support, but by relying on positions that work at his rallies, he was giving his base a reason to keep supporting him. All of the evidence suggests that such support isn't enough to win the Presidency, but his performance may ensure that he at least preserves the support he has.

Gender issues occupy center stage at the second presidential debate

Newly Paul – *Appalachian State University*

The second presidential debate in St. Louis, Missouri, occurred against a backdrop where gender issues and rhetoric were prominent. Over the weekend, the Washington Post broke a story about Donald Trump making lewd statements about women and condoning sexual assault in a 2005 conversation with television host Billy Bush. The tape generated a firestorm of controversy. Though Trump has made several demeaning comments about women and other groups such as immigrants, Latinos, Muslims, and prisoners of wars earlier in the campaign, the tape earned him widespread scorn from his own family and party members, particularly white Republican women.

Trump's strategy of countering the fallout from the tapes was to attack Clinton for supporting her husband and denouncing women who had accused him of sexual misconduct. About an hour before the debate, Trump hosted a panel with four such women, and even brought them to participate as audience members in the debate. Some media commenters saw such tactics as an example of sexism where men and women are held to different political standards. They argued that Hillary Clinton should not have to pay a greater price for her husband's affairs than he did, and that she should be evaluated independently of her husband's records.

On stage, Trump's gendered rhetoric and body language gathered a lot of attention. To moderator Anderson Cooper's question about whether he had sexually assaulted women, he repeatedly insisted that he had not, and that the conversation was just "locker room talk." During the debate, he interrupted Clinton and the moderators several times, went over his allotted time limit, and used nonverbal expressions—such as pacing around the stage, scowling, pointing at Clinton as he attacked her, and positioning himself directly behind her as she spoke—to draw attention away from Clinton, portray her as smaller (and weaker), and assert his dominance on the stage.

Following this performance, some media commentators have advised Clinton to assert her dominance through body language and tone of voice in the next debate. That might be useful advice, given that recent research on gender and politics indicates that voters do not rely on gender stereotypes to cast their votes. Instead, they use partisanship cues. Thus, by asserting her toughness and adopting an attack approach toward Trump—both examples of gender-bending behavior—Clinton would not be at a risk of alienating voters.

Trump attempts to restore his image

Jenny Tatsak – *Walsh College*

Amidst a salacious backdrop more akin to the absurdity of soap operas than even the dirtiest of political campaigns, Sunday's highly-anticipated presidential debate was must-see television. Only 48 hours before, a 12 year old tape of a boastful Donald Trump surfaced. He described, in graphic detail, groping women as a benefit of celebrity. The media firestorm was intense. Many staunch supporters denounced Trump's candidacy. Others suggested his running mate, Mike Pence, should take his place on the ticket. William Benoit, organizational communication scholar, identifies several strategies for image restoration, including the three most evident in Donald Trump's debate performance: attacking, differentiation and minimization.

Trump's attacks began before the debate. A few short hours before start time, Donald Trump hosted a press conference for five women accusing Bill and Hillary Clinton of wrongdoing involving various types of sexual misdeeds. These same accusers attended the debate as Donald Trump's guests. By attacking Hillary Clinton's credibility, Trump attempted to reduce the perceived severity of his wrongdoing. Trump continued the attacks of Clinton's deletion of classified emails as deceptive, evidence of poor judgment and worthy of investigation by a special prosecutor Trump would appoint if elected. Trump's attacks persisted in describing Clinton as "the devil."

The unrelenting attacks attempted to shift blame from Trump and onto Clinton. These attacks differentiated Trump's transgressions from what he depicted as Clinton's more severe offences. This differentiation is intended to minimize consequences for Trump. He further minimized his lewd comments as "locker room talk."

Sunday's debate reflected the dramatics of the campaign with unprecedented negativity. Trump used attacks to differentiate his much publicized vulgarities of late from Hillary Clinton's vulnerabilities. Election Day will be the ultimate indicator of the success of Donald Trump's image restoration.

Trump only slowed the bleeding of support from his now-doomed candidacy

Brian Klaas – *LSE Government*

Donald Trump stopped the bleeding on Sunday night's debate…for about 90 minutes. His performance in the debate surpassed the low bar he set for himself in the first debate, but his collapse in the polls did not end on stage in St. Louis.

Instead, he continues to lose support from the crucial swing demographic of white women, who have abandoned his candidacy en masse as more and more revelations emerge about his record of misogyny. The Trump Tapes, as they are being called, were potentially a knockout blow to his candidacy. On Sunday, he had the opportunity to show true contrition and remorse; instead, he attempted to deflect blame to Bill Clinton (who is not running for president) and spent less than thirty seconds speaking about the tapes before pivoting to discussing ISIS. Consequently, Trump received another big blow on Monday as Speaker of the House Paul Ryan (R-WI) said that he would no longer defend the GOP presidential candidate in public, provoking a major rupture within the Republican Party that is sure to exacerbate the electoral damage for both Trump and the Republican bid to retain control of the House of Representatives.

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Hillary Clinton faced potentially politically damaging fallout from the Wikileaks release of hacked e-mails that show Clinton in a less-than-flattering light, but those revelations have been grossly overshadowed by Trump's isolation by his own party in the wake of boasting about sexual assault of women in 2005.

As it stands, the third debate is currently little more than a Hail Mary attempt to revive what has become an almost certainly doomed candidacy. Polls that took the Trump Tapes into account showed Clinton with a large lead, from

seven percentage points to a stratospheric 14-point lead. While that latter figure may be likely to tighten, it is certainly the case that Trump is in a worse position than at any point in his candidacy. That is a major problem for him, because many people have already begun voting (and 35 percent of American voters are expected to cast ballots before November 8th). Moreover, Clinton's ground game advantage (insider campaign jargon for field operations that identify likely voters and encourage them to vote) is substantial and growing larger as the Republican National Committee redirects money to down-ballot races to protect vulnerable seats in the House and Senate.

All in all, Trump performed much better than his dismal performance in the first debate, but it was only enough to slow the bleeding rather than stop it.

An extraordinary debate in a landmark election

Inderjeet Parmar – *City, University of London*

The second presidential debate reminded us what an extraordinary election cycle this is. Two forces squaring up – the status quo, represented by Democratic Hillary Clinton, who symbolises the political establishment, against the Republican Donald Trump, who argues that he is a change candidate. The race started off with an extraordinary primary season, where Hillary Clinton defeated the 'socialist' Bernie Sanders after he secured over 13 million votes in the Democratic primaries; the debating season is matching that unprecedented character.

Trump's attempt to win back Republican voters turned off by his xenophobia and misogyny failed. Yet, he did hit home with several points that show why this race is as close as it is: Clinton's role as an establishment politician, with powerful links with the past and with Big Money, the disasters of the Iraq war and of the financial meltdown of 2008-09, of the chaos in post-US intervention for regime change in Libya. Trump also scored with criticism of Clinton's private email server as secretary of state and with the Wikileaked transcripts of Clinton's espousal of sympathy with Wall St and on the efficacy of maintaining public and private positions on key political questions, and her sympathy for a policy she has publicly repudiated – the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Hillary Clinton's credibility, level of public trust and disapproval is only slightly lower than the same for Donald Trump.

But Trump's message stands for a reversal of the historic 1960s and 1970s rights revolution, where women and African Americans and many other minorities won rights, and reversion to the 1950s. Barack Obama's election in 2008, and now the prospect of a woman president in 2016, signalled great danger conservative opponents of the rights revolution. The level of vitriol against civil and women's rights has reached a high point, sustaining Trump's core support.

Yet, his popularity still puts him near the lower end of support achieved in previous election campaigns. We could see something similar to Republican contender Barry Goldwater's spectacular defeat in 1964. Goldwater is said to have lost the election but won the future – a victory that resonates with the anti-rights appeals of Donald Trump. But 2016 is not 1964 and the demographic future of America is against the Trump tide.

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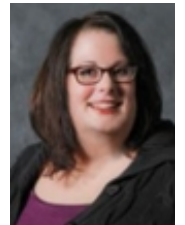
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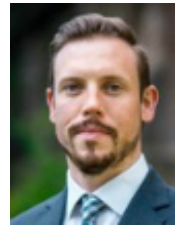
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