The third presidential debate: USAPP expert reaction and commentary

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Last night, the third and final 2016 presidential debate was held in Las Vegas. We asked some of USAPP's regular contributors for their thoughts and analysis. Read reaction to the first and second debate here *and* here.

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If Trump did well in the first 30 minutes, and no one sees it, did it really happen?

Dan Cassino – *Fairleigh Dickinson University*

Going into the third Presidential debate of 2016, Republican nominee Donald Trump faced the steep challenge of trying to push the issues that had brought him within striking distance of Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton earlier in the election cycle. A discussion of child care proposals, tax cuts, and Congressional term limits could make Trump appear closer to traditional Republican candidates, and, if not close his polling gap against Clinton, at least make the election closer, and limit the damage to downballot Republicans. Trump's recent strategy, doubling down on claims of a rigged election and callbacks to Clinton sex scandals of the 1990s, has shown little appeal outside of his core constituencies.

For the first thirty minutes or so of the debate, Trump seemed to be meeting the challenge, avoiding Clinton's interruptions, and sticking to the issues. However, that focus on the issues was quickly overshadowed by Trump's insistence, in the face of direct questioning, that the election could be rigged, and that he would not necessarily accept the results. Any gains that Trump might have made with moderate voters through his relatively conventional Republican stance on abortion rights and gun control were likely lost by this unprecedented refusal to endorse a peaceful transition of power.

While Trump lost himself the debate, the real winner was not Clinton, but the moderator, Chris Wallace. Wallace was the first Fox News host to be invited to moderate a presidential debate, and went into the night with a reputation as a tough but fair interviewer that stood out among his colleagues at Fox. Unlike previous moderators, Wallace made use of highly targeted questions to try and tie down the candidates on policy specifics, which required Trump and Clinton to move away from their stump speeches. It worked, in a feat that the other moderators had been unable to manage.

As always, the real impact of the debate comes not from the views of the people who watched it, but from the clips that show up on the news the next morning. Those clips are likely to be Trump's refusal to commit to accepting the results of the election, and his late interruption calling Clinton "such a nasty woman." If Trump did well in the first 30 minutes, and no one sees it, did it really happen?

Fear and anger loom large as Trump's rigged election rhetoric has clear racial overtones

Newly Paul –*Appalachian State University*

In the second presidential debate, Donald Trump made headlines for suggesting that were he elected President, he would order the Justice Department to investigate Hillary Clinton, and make sure she was imprisoned. Critics denounced this statement as dictatorial and irresponsible. In the third and last debate held in Las Vegas last night, Trump continued with his controversial statements, suggesting that he might not accept the election results in November if he loses. "I will tell you at the time," Trump said after moderator Chris Wallace asked whether he would accept the election results. "I will keep you in suspense."

Over the past few weeks, Trump has roused his support base by suggesting that the elections are rigged, and that voter fraud is rampant. Various media outlets have debunked both claims. In fact, polls and a recent study show that Trump's rhetoric of mistrust about the electoral process is harmful for democracy, and could backfire, causing low turnout among voters, particularly Trump supporters.

What is more alarming is that the rhetoric surrounding the rigged election theory has clear racial overtones. According to the New York Times, Trump's "warnings have been cast in increasingly urgent and racially suggestive language," and he has continually demanded stricter voter identification laws, which are proven to disproportionately affect minority voters. In addition to including the suggestion of rigged elections in his campaign ads, Trump has called for election watchers to monitor the polls in areas with majority black and Hispanic populations, a step experts say comes close to voter intimidation.

In addition to bringing up charges of the elections being rigged, Trump also attacked the media for being part of the corrupt system and "poisoning" minds against him. Though Trump has criticized the media from the very beginning of his campaign, in the wake of the sexual harassment allegations against him, Trump's anti-media rhetoric has become more vitriolic. During the debate, he singled out the New York Times for attack and called their recent report about two women who accused Trump of sexual harassment, complete fabrication and lies. Just as the rigged election rhetoric is beginning to take root among his supporters, his media bashing tactics too are becoming popular —not just among his support group, but the general American public, whose trust in the media is on a steep decline. As the New York Times reported, Trump supporters are increasingly heckling and booing media persons at his rallies.

The press and a free election process are the foundations of democratic society. By attacking these institutions, Trump is injecting more fear, anger, and uncertainty into an election year that is among the most contentious ever.

When candidates attack

Jenny Tatsak – *Walsh College*
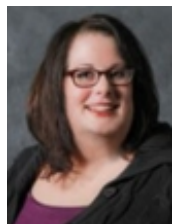
Despite a more reasoned and reserved start, Wednesday's third and final presidential debate, quickly evolved into the slugfest we have come to expect from these rivals. Like their previous matchups, low-blows and sound-bite worthy answers marred this last debate of the general election cycle. Both candidates relied on attacks to draw stark contrasts from their opponent.

True to form, Donald Trump's bombastic language took center stage. This same extreme language may have been negatively by the female and minority voters critical of Trump's candidacy. During Clinton's answer defending her health care plan, Trump shook his head and called her a "nasty woman." Trump's use of "bad hombres" garnered wide-spread criticism by pundits and social media, as trivializing the plight of undocumented immigrants. While the characterization followed a line of question, during which Clinton called Trump a

"misogynist," Trump's word choice is unlikely to convince the electorate of his earlier declaration "no one has more respect for women than I do."

Trump offered the most newsworthy-answer when he refused to say he would accept the election results. This answer was met with an audible gasp from the bi-partisan audience. He went on to justify his answer because of voter fraud and assertions that Clinton should not have been allowed to run for president.

Trump was not the only attacker. Clinton's jabs were subtle, but more pronounced than previous debate performances. She most frequently cited Trump's wealthy upbringing as evidence he will protect the upper class at the expense of the middle and lower classes. She repeatedly questioned his "facts" and noted inconsistencies in statements. She called to question his taxes in most attacks centering on his inability to relate and represent the electorate.

As early voting continues, with less than 20 days until Election Day, the tone and tenor of the last debate did not defy expectations. The candidates relied on the same attacks to highlight vulnerabilities and emphasize strengths. It is the frequency and depth of the attacks that will distinguish this campaign from others and persist in our collective consciousness long after votes are cast.

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