Edge in the American story

Harris-Trump debate showed the depth of the political divide in the US

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DEMOCRATS ARE BREATHING a sigh of relief after Kamala Harris' performance at the presidential debate in Philadelphia. She exuded confidence, communicated key messages effectively, and skillfully cornered Donald Trump on issues of abortion, the Russia-Ukraine war, and his love for global autocrats. She also managed to distance herself from President Joe Biden, thereby covering herself from the blame for the mismanagement of the economy and immigration.

In contrast, Trump stuck to his characteristic style of speaking in superlatives, cliched one-liners, and disparaging the opponent's character. He frequently repeated his favourite slogans: Democrats are "destroying the country", "Biden was the worst president ever", and that he would "Make America Great Again". The American audience is familiar with Trump's vision and his working style. Therefore, his strategy was to treat Harris as an inheritor of Biden's poor legacy and belittle her as incompetent and unsuitable for the highest office.

However, his strategy did not work in the way it had with Biden. He did needle Harris on a slowing economy, illegal immigration, border issues and failures in Afghanistan and West Asia. But she ducked those googlies by mirroring Trump's poor performance and by disassociating herself from Biden's bad legacy. In a smart move, she prepared the audience with warnings that they would likely witness a "bunch of lies" and a repeated mention of immigration from the other side. Further, she relied on Trumpian language in characterising her rival as a leader who created the "worst unemployment in history", provoked the "worst attack on democracy", recorded the "worst management of the pandemic" and left a terrible trade deficit. Trump, on his part, failed to appear convincing when he was confronted with questions on Obamacare, his love for autocrats, disregard for the rule of law and intolerance for other races. In terms of style and manner, he appeared repetitive, exhausted, angry and upset.

The presidential debate has become a defining feature of the American electoral process. It draws widespread media attention, and the stakes are high for the contestants. Biden's disastrous performance in the last presidential debate in June led to his exit, paving the way for Harris. However, the real impact of the debate on voting behaviour is not precisely known. For instance, Hillary Clinton won the debate against Trump in 2016 but lost the final election. Nonetheless, these play a vital role in building leaders' reputations, boosting their images, and potentially swaying undecided voters. Exciting moments of debates such as gaffes, awkward gestures or humorous retorts resonate for years in media bytes.

The Harris-Trump debate created much buzz because the contestants represent two contrasting narratives of the US political spectrum. Trump represents the conservative, White, rich, macho and cocky America. He has cultivated a hyper-masculine persona, frequently boasting about flouting rules and sexual escapades. Trump supporters believe that American society is degenerating because of the toxic influence of "wokes", liberalism and feminism. Therefore, Trump is on a mission to restore the American pre-eminence of the late 20th century, not realising that the world is now multipolar. His embrace of religious conservatism, racial supremacy and political populism will make things worse for America in the coming years.

In contrast, Harris stands for the ultra-liberal, non-White, working-class, feminine and rule-bound America. As a prosecutor, her inclination is to work within the legal framework and uphold the rule of law. Her modest background influences her worldview, and she has gained popularity among the youth, women, immigrants and educated voters. If not the winner, the debate has established her as a person who can confront a demagogue and navigate a tense and chaotic environment. Whether she defeats him in the elections remains to be seen, but she succeeded in measuring up to Trump in this race.

On the issue of US foreign policy, Harris will continue with the policies of the Biden administration. She will prioritise Europe, support Ukraine through NATO, and follow the policy of cooperation and competition with China. Her views on Palestine, laid out clearly in the debate, are different from those of President Biden's. She favours the two-state solution and is vocal about the protection of Palestinian lives from Israeli assault. Trump, on the other hand, unabashedly inclines towards Israel and blames the Biden administration for the Israel-Hamas war. Similarly, he holds Biden and his team responsible for the Russia-Ukraine war, which, according to him, may escalate into a world war. He pledges to end the Russia-Ukraine conflict within 24 hours of his presidency by withdrawing support for Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Finally, Washington's strong ties with New Delhi will persist irrespective of the new incumbent in the White House. While Trump will remain transactional in his dealings with New Delhi, Harris will prioritise US national interests and her commitment to liberal values over any familial lineage.

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