

“Biden lost the debate, but Trump didn’t win either”

An Ipsos post-debate focus group with undecided voters finds a discouraged electorate.

A post-debate focus group found undecided voters feeling disillusioned with both candidates, citing poor performances that failed to address key issues. Biden’s health was a concern for many, as was Trump’s narcissism. Neither candidate was able to exceed expectations, leading many to express frustration and disappointment, and some respondents indicating they might be less likely to vote at all.

Key Findings:

- Overall, voters found little they liked, felt the performance of both candidates was lacking.
 - “You have Biden, whose son has fought drug addiction, and he can't answer an opioid question. You have Trump, who's asked very specifically about his ability to respect our electoral system and accept the results of the election and he doesn't answer...”
 - “A train wreck in slow motion.”
 - "To be honest, they were equally problematic to me, and I couldn't tell you. They are both problematic, I can't even say one over the other."
- Trump was seen as lacking on substance and avoiding questions which turned some respondents off. Respondents found Biden to be more prepared, surprising some, but his poor delivery overshadowed his wins on substance.
 - “Trump avoided the climate change policy and what he was gonna do with childcare, like he totally did not answer those questions. And I think those are important to me and to a lot of people. The fact that he avoided like 3 important topics kind of made me feel like he doesn't even have a plan. He's just gonna create a whole bunch of chaos. He doesn't have a plan. He just says I'm the greatest.”
 - Some voters liked Biden’s “America is Strong” message saying “I think Biden pointing to that Americans are smart and that we're capable... I think that's a message of unity,” but many found his overall delivery lacking “I was extremely surprised. He seemed almost sick to me.”
- Biden’s performance raised concerns about his health with many respondents.
 - “Biden is not cognitively at all there and so that deteriorates the US reputation around the world.”
 - “I'm real being honest with you, I honestly think if Biden gets reelected, I don't think he's going to make it all 4 years because he doesn't look too healthy.”
- Respondents were concerned about Trump’s lack of empathy and self-centeredness while Biden is seen as caring about people more.
 - “ ...[Trump is] like a shock jock who just try to say anything to get a rise and get attention to himself. But at the end of the day, seriously, even if you don't agree with someone's

- politics per se, you have to at least have confidence in whoever the commander in chief is. You at least have to feel like, OK, on some level, that they care about everyone not just a niche, what's the word, constituents.”
- "I think he [Biden] cares about people. And that's the divide that I'm missing with Trump.”
 - Overall, the debate diminished enthusiasm for some and the poor performances from the candidates could lead to lower voter turnout.
 - "The closing arguments put the nail in the coffin. Yeah. It's like, you guys should have been a lot more prepared. Like, just like when you're in debate or you have speech in college, and you need to go up there and be prepared and say exactly what you're going to say. I thought it was unprofessional that they didn't have a more tied together closing on both sides. It was self-centered. I think I could do better. I think we all could.”
 - "They were unprepared on both sides. I think that was a big moment for me. Like I was really disappointed, especially at the end when you know you have that moment to have the two minutes to sum up what you're going to do. Be really specific. I felt like it was just going back and forth. And that really that really solidified the fact that, OK, I need more information or I'm just not voting. I'm just not going to waste the time to go and spend my time to go out and vote because like you said, it's kind of like a “lose, lose”.”
 - Some of the respondents described abortion as a Supreme Court warning and a “gateway” to losing other rights and freedoms.
 - "I kind of don't like the idea of seeing Trump in office because I don't know what else he would do with the Supreme Court and what other cases he will overturn. It's not just about abortion specifically. It's more about like the bigger picture of the abortion on other cases.”
 - “Roe is just an indicator of where the court is going.”
 - When asked to describe their ideal candidate, a picture emerged that was very different from the current candidates: female mid-40s, relatable, down to earth, physically fit, honest, a good listener, articulate, leads with service, values family: “Because if you value your own family, you value other people's families, ultimately, you're going to value the nation. That's how you become relatable.”

Methodology

Ipsos moderator Elizabeth Jarosz facilitated a 1.5-hour focus group of 6 undecided voters in Chicago, immediately following the debate, to explore their reactions in detail. Elizabeth has moderated for more than 24 years across a broad range of topics and targets. Elizabeth has also worked as a TV reporter and commentator, and was a contestant on season 2 of *The Apprentice*.