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Harris: 1, Trump: 0

As the election battle heats up in the aftermath of Harris' strong performance against Trump, might it just shift the dynamics?

Labor Day – the US version of Labour Day, celebrated on the first Monday in September – traditionally marks the start of the crucial phase in the US election campaign. What has been a relatively low-key affair during the summer break suddenly picks up speed: The number of reports and local news stories increases, the *yard signs* in front gardens grow larger, the campaign ads take on a more aggressive tone, and the opinion research institutes' order books begin to fill up. The two major parties, which usually spend the summer raising money and rallying their candidates, are now also entering the home stretch. They no longer have many opportunities to win over voters who are wavering or who are standing between the camps out of principle. Traditionally, one of the few opportunities is the format of the presidential debate.

This election cycle, there were already plenty of them far too early in June, but back then it was still with a different line-up. As you may remember, incumbent Joe Biden put in a disastrous performance in the debate with his predecessor Donald Trump, including a 'mental blackout', and subsequently came under massive pressure. He ultimately had to grit his teeth and announce his decision not to seek a second term. This made Tuesday's second attempt, which was at least indirectly linked to the task of banishing the evil spirits of the summer, all the more important for his replacement candidate Vice President Kamala Harris. The officials at the Democratic headquarters must have been sweating when the soon-to-be-60-year-old took the stage in Philadelphia, the largest city in the hotly contested 'battleground state' of Pennsylvania. Would she be able to withstand the pressure or would she end up making a fool of herself like Biden?

One man's weakness is another woman's strength

In front of almost 70 million Americans, Harris delivered a focused and

combative performance. Although she was still nervous at the beginning, she steadily gained in confidence over the course of an hour and a half, repeatedly stinging Trump, who appeared exhausted and frustrated.

Her comments on abortion law (albeit presented in a very schoolmasterly manner) were particularly well received. Following the restrictive Supreme Court ruling in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* in 2022, abortion law has gained political explosiveness and is increasingly becoming a winning issue for the Democrats. In more than 20 states, there are now abortion bans initiated by Trump, she said, putting pressure on her opponent. 'You don't have to deny your faith or your beliefs to agree that the government – and especially Donald Trump! – should not decide what a woman can do with her body,' said the Californian briskly. Trump, who, as in the debate with Biden, took a federalist position, but at the same time claimed that the Democratic ex-governor of the deeply Republican state of 'West Virginia' (he meant Virginia) wanted to execute babies even after they were born, could do little more than look bewildered. As for the rest, the man who lives in Florida when he's not running for president, offered anything but a brilliant performance at the microphone.

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It is not that Harris has no weaknesses. It is surprising anyway how this seemingly unassuming vice president, who has never won an election or even a primary outside of her home state (and was ultimately only swept to the top of the Democratic 'ticket' by the twists of fate), has quickly become a political superstar who seems to be above all criticism. In fact, there is plenty of material that could be used against the administration, for which she shares responsibility: the continuing high cost of living, the botched Afghanistan withdrawal or the ever-increasing migratory pressure on the southern border. A disciplined candidate would have had little trouble putting the vice president on the defensive here and extracting uncomfortable answers from her. But Trump may be many things, but disciplined is not one of them, and so he prefers to dish up stories about immigrants from Haiti who eat dogs, cats and other pets. Obviously a hoax — but even if it weren't, it's not a topic worth spending too much precious speaking time on.

Elsewhere, Trump's image as a fabricator and fact-twister got in his way. Noisily getting worked up about his opponent wanting to pay for sex-reassignment surgery for illegal immigrants in custody has a certain 'meme-like' character, of course, but it's actually not *that* far from reality: In fact, as recently as 2019, Harris still affirmed a corresponding demand from the American Civil Liberty Union and, in the same breath, advocated far-reaching cuts to border protection and proclaimed the 'end of deportation detention' as a long-term goal. One could argue that in 2019, as a liberal West Coast senator, she had a different need: to satisfy the base and to provide a vivid contrast to the Trump administration's rigid immigration policy. It can also be pointed out that Harris has since openly admitted that she has 'further developed' her position on various issues. And yet: The opportunity was there. That it was largely missed was in this case more a matter of the *who* and *how* than the *what*.

What Trump can still hope for in all of this, however, is that his appearance has once again won over those voters for whom standardised campaign promises are less important than showing the country's political elite the symbolic finger. People who find Harris' professionalism and rhetorical skills offensive simply because they suspect that behind every display of professionalism there is a form of inauthenticity and behind every pleasantly presented argument there is the suspicion of being witness to a rehearsed theatrical performance. After eight years, it should no longer surprise anyone that these people prefer Trump's erratic, ignorant, boastful, but precisely for that reason *unfeigned* behaviour to the robotic, cold precision of his opponents (Harris is very similar to Hillary Clinton in this respect). Especially since it is still true that the ex-president can rely on such loyal support because he says what he says and he says it the way he says it. The more clearly he sets himself apart from the type of professional politician in terms of language and appearance, the more he can apply different standards to himself.

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Against this backdrop, the Democrats would be well advised not to attach too much importance to the debate and, in particular, not to fall into a premature rapture. Easier said than done, because unlike the relatively cold-blooded Republicans, the party has been carrying an affective surplus for years, which not infrequently manifests itself in a jerky self-perception: Today, they are praising Biden as a great and transformative president, whom they would naturally like to see nominated for another term. And tomorrow, they are chasing

him out of the yard after his botched performance in the debate. Today, they are jubilant that Trump was convicted in his hush money scandal (which was of only moderate interest to most voters) and dreaming of a prison sentence of several years. And tomorrow they will take a look at the polls, complain theatrically about the ignorance of their fellow citizens and think – this time for real – about emigrating. They are either sky-high or down to death, predicting a landslide victory or their own downfall. Neither is particularly helpful.

It seems more reasonable to view the debate as a (possible) point win, but not as a veritable 'knockout'. It was a good opportunity for Harris to prove her tenacity and show the US public that she is more than just a 'diversity hire' chosen based on skin colour and gender. And last but not least, it was also an opportunity to generate concise video material for the next series of campaign ads. It may be the only one, because while the Harris camp announced that night that they were ready for a second round, Trump was visibly annoyed. He is not inclined to respond to such a suggestion, after all, he won by a landslide and everything has been said anyway: 'They did very badly and now the first thing they ask for is a debate. They always want a rematch!' If that remains the case, we can still look forward to a clash at the beginning of October, when the vice-presidential candidates of both parties – J. D. Vance and Tim Walz – will face off in New York City. It is possible that their debate will be the last major event of the election year.



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