



Questions in Context:

The 2020 Presidential Election Debates - through
9/29



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Overview

In past presidential elections, the Winston Group has analyzed the primary and general election debates to build a picture of how the topics covered interact with what voters have said — through surveys and exit polls — are their greatest concerns and the issues that are the most important for them in choosing for whom they will vote.

The following report begins a similar analysis for the Presidential debates. At the end of the Democratic primary earlier this year, social issues was the topic most prominently featured, primarily encompassing questions about race/racism and guns but also including other subcategories like abortion, opioids, partisan gridlock, and gender issues. As a broad question topic, “social issues” was followed by foreign policy, electability and other candidates, although, in the final match-up between Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders, the coronavirus was the dominant concern. Nevertheless, across the full schedule of primary debates, key issues like health care and the economy fell into a tier below the categories already mentioned, each comprising less than 10% of questions asked across all the primary debates. In the 2016 Presidential debates, key question topics included electability and foreign policy,

This report will continue our analysis, with information on the first Presidential debate between President Donald Trump and Vice President Joe Biden. The debate, held September 29, was sponsored by the Commission on Presidential Debates and moderated by Chris Wallace of Fox News. Here, we seek to answer a similar set of questions as in the primary debates: How well are the debates addressing the concerns and questions of voters? How much have question priorities shifted from the primary to the general election debates? And, how prominently will the recent passing of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and nomination of Amy Coney Barrett feature in the debate questions?

Debate Topics

The chart on the next page shows the distribution of questions by topic area for the September 29 Presidential debate as well as across all of the 2019-2020 Democratic primary debates and the 2016 Presidential debates. For the purposes of comparability, we re-use the same topic categories from our past debate reports. The exceptions are the “Impeachment” category, which was added during the Democratic primaries, and “Coronavirus”. We have also expanded the “Energy/Environment” category to include questions on climate change.

Most of the topics are self explanatory, but for a few, definitions may be helpful. The “electability” topic area includes questions addressed directly to a candidate about his/her ability to attract a large portion of the electorate (for example, asking a candidate about his/her standing in the polls or statements he/she made that have raised questions, such as whether the candidate will accept the outcome of the election and/or encourage his/her supporters to do so as well). The “other candidates” topic area refers to questions that directly ask one candidate about another candidate’s past, policies, or prospects. The “For Fun” topic area includes lighthearted questions aimed at letting viewers see more of a candidate’s personality. “Social Security/Retirement” consists of questions that address that topic as a separate individual retirement benefit issue — other entitlements questions fall under “Spending/National Debt.”

Questions asked multiple times of different candidates are not counted more than once.

Question Totals - 2016 Presidential, 2020 Democratic Primaries, and September 29, 2020 Presidential

General Topic Area	2016 Presidential		2020 Democratic Primaries		September 29 Presidential	
	# of Questions	% of Questions	# of Questions	% of Questions	# of Questions	% of Questions
Coronavirus	-	-	10	2.2%	6	21.4%
Economy	8	10.4%	37	8.3%	3	10.7%
Education	-	-	14	3.1%	-	-
Electability	22	28.8%	51	11.4%	4	14.3%
Energy/ Environment/ Climate Change	1	1.3%	37	8.3%	2	7.1%
For Fun	-	-	3	0.7%	-	-
Foreign Policy/ National Security	21	27.3%	61	13.6%	-	-
Health care	2	2.6%	38	8.5%	2	7.1%
Immigration	3	3.9%	29	6.5%	-	-
Impeachment	-	-	19	4.2%	-	-
Judicial System	2	2.6%	6	1.3%	4	14.3%
Other Candidates	3	3.9%	46	10.3%	-	-
Presidential Priorities	-	-	10	2.2%	-	-
Social Issues	11	14.3%	83	18.5%	7	25.0%
Social Security/ Retirement	2	2.6%	-	-	-	-
Spending/ National Debt	2	2.6%	4	0.9%	-	-
Total	77		448		28	

To Whom Were Questions Directed?

“Number of Questions” refers to questions directed by a moderator at a particular candidate and includes questions that were asked of all candidates - so totals may differ from the charts above.

“Number of Rebuttals” includes any times the moderator addressed a follow-up or rebuttal opportunity to a candidate, or a candidate broke in and gave a rebuttal to another candidate's answer on their own initiative.

“Percentage of Direct Questions” a candidate received comes from only questions directly addressed to a candidate or those addressed to all candidates, while “Percentage of Answers” includes all opportunities a candidate had to speak, including rebuttals, as described above. The “Percentage of Answers” comes out of the total of all answers given — not the total questions asked — so once again, the totals differ.

Candidate	September 29 Debate				
	Direct Qs	Rebuttals	Total Answers	% of Qs	% of Answers
Donald Trump	18	21	39	50.00%	52.70%
Joe Biden	18	17	35	50.00%	47.30%
Total	36	38	74		

Candidate Speaking Times

The speaking times for the debates listed in the chart below are taken from CNN: September 29 - https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/presidential-debate-coverage-fact-check-09-29-20/h_9157f17840971e050e3d006f5b60f6f2.

Candidate	September 29	Total
Donald Trump	39:06	39:06
Joe Biden	37:56	37:56

Conclusion

In the first debate between candidates Donald Trump and Joe Biden, social issues was narrowly the topic asked about most frequently, accounting for 7 of 28 total questions (or 25%) asked. These questions primarily touched on issues of race and racism, also touching on the related issue of police reform, as well as civil unrest and the appropriate responses to violent and extremist groups. “Coronavirus” came next, at 6 questions (about 21% of all questions asked), followed by questions of electability and the judicial system, each comprising 4 of 28 questions (or about 14% each). The “electability” category includes questions about each candidate’s ability to attract voters, as well as their own willingness to accept the outcome of the election and to encourage their supporters to do so as well. “Judicial system” also includes those questions related to election integrity that directly involved the Supreme Court.

Returning to the topic rankings, the economy came next with three questions (about 11%), followed by questions pertaining to the environment/climate change and health care (each accounting for 2 questions or about 7% each of all questions asked).

As always, the next question to answer is how well these topic rankings reflect what the electorate itself says is the most important in determining their vote. From the latest survey for Winning the Issues (September 26-30, 1,000 registered voters), the top issues for voters overall are the economy/jobs (29%), followed by health care and prescription drugs (20%). These tend to be key issues for voters, and they reflect voters’ related priorities for the country: defeating the coronavirus and getting the country back to work. Among key swing groups like independents and suburban women, these issue priorities are shared.

Appendix - 2020 Presidential Debate Questions

Debate Number — Location — Date — Sponsors	Question	Asker	To Whom The Question was Directed	Question Topic
1 — Cleveland, OH — September 29, 2020 — Commission on Presidential Debates	Gentlemen, a lot of people been waiting for this night, so let's get going. Our first subject is the Supreme Court. President Trump, you nominated Amy Coney Barrett over the weekend to succeed the late Ruth Bader Ginsburg on the Court. You say the Constitution is clear about your obligation and the Senate's to consider a nominee to the Court. Vice President Biden, you say that this is an effort by the President and Republicans to jam through on an appointment in what you call an abuse of power. My first question to both of you tonight, why are you right in the argument you make and your opponent wrong? And where do you think a Justice Barrett would take the court? President Trump, in this first segment, you go first. Two minutes.	Chris Wallace	Donald Trump, Joe Biden	Judicial system
1 — Cleveland, OH — September 29, 2020 — Commission on Presidential Debates	Mr. President, the Supreme Court will hear a case a week after the election in which the Trump Administration, along with 18 state Attorney Generals are seeking to overturn Obamacare, to end Obamacare. ... You, in the course of these four years, have never come up with a comprehensive plan to replace Obamacare, and just this last Thursday you signed a largely symbolic Executive Order to protect people with pre-existing conditions five days before this debate. So my question, sir, is what is the Trump healthcare plan? ... What about pre-existing conditions?	Chris Wallace	Donald Trump	Health care
1 — Cleveland, OH — September 29, 2020 — Commission on Presidential Debates	Sir, you'll be happy. I'm about to pick up on one of your points to ask the Vice President, which is, he points out that you would like to add a public option to Obamacare. ... And the argument that he makes and other Republicans make is that that is going to end private insurance. ... And it will end private insurance and create a government takeover of health.	Chris Wallace	Joe Biden	Health care
1 — Cleveland, OH — September 29, 2020 — Commission on Presidential Debates	Mr. Vice President, if Senate Republicans, we were talking originally about the Supreme Court here, if Senate Republicans go ahead and confirm Justice Barrett there has been talk about ending the filibuster or even packing the court, adding to the nine justices there. You call this a distraction by the President. But, in fact, it wasn't brought up by the President. It was brought up by some of your Democratic colleagues in the Congress. So my question to you is, you have refused in the past to talk about it, are you willing to tell the American tonight whether or not you will support either ending the filibuster or packing the court?	Chris Wallace	Joe Biden	Judicial system
1 — Cleveland, OH — September 29, 2020 — Commission on Presidential Debates	All right, the second subject is COVID-19, which is an awfully serious subject. So let's try to be serious about it. We have had more than seven million cases of coronavirus in the United States and more than 200,000 people have died. Even after we produce a vaccine, experts say that it could be months or even years before we come back to anything approaching normal. My question for both of you is, based on what you have said and done so far, and what you have said you would do starting in 2021, why should the American people trust you more than your opponent to deal with this public health crisis going forward? In this case, the question goes to you first, sir. Two minutes, uninterrupted.	Chris Wallace	Donald Trump, Joe Biden	Coronavirus

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1 — Cleveland, OH — September 29, 2020 — Commission on Presidential Debates	Okay, gentlemen, gentlemen. Let me move on to questions about the future because you both have touched on two of the questions I'm going to ask. Focusing on the future first, President Trump, you have repeatedly either contradicted or been at odds with some of your governments own top scientists. The week before last, the Head of the Centers for Disease Control, Dr. Redfield said it would be summer before the vaccine would become generally available to the public. You said that he was confused and mistaken. Those were your two words. But Dr. Slaoui, the head of your Operation Warp Speed, has said exactly the same thing. Are they both wrong?	Chris Wallace	Donald Trump	Coronavirus
1 — Cleveland, OH — September 29, 2020 — Commission on Presidential Debates	I want to pick up on this question though. You say the public can trust the scientists, but they can't trust President Trump. In fact, you said that again tonight. Your running mate, Senator Harris, goes further, saying that public health experts quote, "Will be muzzled, will be suppressed." Given the fact that polls already show that people are concerned about the vaccine and are reluctant to take it, are you and your running mate, Senator Harris, contributing to that fear? ... She said that public health experts quote, "Will be muzzled, will be suppressed."	Chris Wallace	Joe Biden	Coronavirus
1 — Cleveland, OH — September 29, 2020 — Commission on Presidential Debates	Okay. When it comes to how the virus has been handled so far, the two of you have taken very different approaches, and this is going to affect how the virus is handled going forward by whichever of you ends up becoming the next president. I want to quickly go through several of those. Reopenings. Vice President Biden, you have been much more reluctant than President Trump about reopening the economy and schools. Why, sir?	Chris Wallace	Joe Biden	Coronavirus
1 — Cleveland, OH — September 29, 2020 — Commission on Presidential Debates	President Trump, you have begun to increasingly question the effectiveness of masks as a disease preventer. And in fact, recently you have cited the issue of waiters touching their masks and touching plates. Are you questioning the efficacy of masks?	Chris Wallace	Donald Trump	Coronavirus
1 — Cleveland, OH — September 29, 2020 — Commission on Presidential Debates	I want to ask you both about one last subject because your different approaches has even affected the way that you have campaigned. President Trump, you're holding large rallies with crowds packed together, thousands of people. ... Vice President Biden, you are holding much smaller events with- ... why are you holding the big rallies? Why are you not? You go first, sir.	Chris Wallace	Donald Trump, Joe Biden	Coronavirus

Debate Number — Location — Date — Sponsors	Question	Asker	To Whom The Question was Directed	Question Topic
1 — Cleveland, OH — September 29, 2020 — Commission on Presidential Debates	The economy is, I think it's fair to say, recovering faster than expected from the shutdown ... in the second quarter. The unemployment rate fell to 8.4% last month. The Federal Reserve says the hit to growth, which is going to be there, is not going to be nearly as big as they had expected. President Trump, you say we are in a V-shaped recovery. Vice President Biden, you say it's more of a K-shape. What difference does that mean to the American people in terms of the economy? President Trump, in this segment you go first. ... All right, your two minutes sir. We're now moved to you. As I said, posing the question the president says it's a V-shape recovery, you say it's a K-shaped recovery. What's the difference?	Chris Wallace	Donald Trump, Joe Biden	Economy
1 — Cleveland, OH — September 29, 2020 — Commission on Presidential Debates	Gentlemen, we're going to get to your economic plans going forward in a moment, but first, Mr. President, as you well know, there's a new report that in 2016, the year you were elected president, and 2017, your first year as president, that you paid \$750 a year in federal income tax each of those years. I know that you pay a lot of other taxes, but I'm asking you this specific question. Is it true that you paid \$750 in federal income taxes each of those two years?	Chris Wallace	Donald Trump	Electability
1 — Cleveland, OH — September 29, 2020 — Commission on Presidential Debates	Mr. President, we're talking about the economy. I'd like to ask you about your plans going forward because Mr. Vice President, your economic plan ... if you were to be elected president focuses a lot on big government, big taxes, big spending. I want to focus first on the taxes. You propose more than \$4 trillion over a decade in new taxes on individuals making more than \$400,000 a year and on corporations. President Trump says that that kind of an increase in taxes is going to hurt the economy as it's just coming out of a recession.	Chris Wallace	Joe Biden	Economy
1 — Cleveland, OH — September 29, 2020 — Commission on Presidential Debates	Mr. President, let me pick up on that. You would continue your free market approach, lower taxes, more deregulation, correct? You talk about the economy booming. It turns out that in Obama's final three years as president more jobs were created, a million and a half more jobs, than in the first three years of your presidency.	Chris Wallace	Donald Trump	Economy
1 — Cleveland, OH — September 29, 2020 — Commission on Presidential Debates	President Trump, you have often said that you believe you will have done more for Black Americans than any president with the possible exception of Abraham Lincoln. ... My question for the two of you, is why should voters trust you rather than your opponent to deal with the race issues facing this country over the next four years? Vice President Biden, you go first.	Chris Wallace	Donald Trump, Joe Biden	Social issues
1 — Cleveland, OH — September 29, 2020 — Commission on Presidential Debates	All right. I want to return to the question of race. Vice President Biden, after the grand jury in the Breonna Taylor case decided not to charge any of the police with homicide, you said it raises the question, "Whether justice could be equally applied in America." Do you believe that there is a separate but unequal system of justice for Blacks in this country?	Chris Wallace	Joe Biden	Social issues

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1 — Cleveland, OH — September 29, 2020 — Commission on Presidential Debates	President Trump, I'd like to continue with the issue of race. I promise we're going to get to the issue of law and order in a moment. This month, your administration directed federal agencies to end racial sensitivity training that addresses white privilege or critical race theory. Why did you decide to do that, to end racial sensitivity training? And do you believe that there is systemic racism in this country, sir?	Chris Wallace	Donald Trump	Social issues
1 — Cleveland, OH — September 29, 2020 — Commission on Presidential Debates	There has been a dramatic increase in homicides in America this summer particularly, and you often blame that on democratic mayors and democratic governors. But in fact, there have been equivalent spikes in Republican led cities, like Tulsa and Fort Worth. So the question is, is this really a party issue?	Chris Wallace	Donald Trump	Social issues
1 — Cleveland, OH — September 29, 2020 — Commission on Presidential Debates	I do want to talk about this issue of law and order though. And, in the joint recommendation that came from the Biden-Bernie Sanders task force, you talked about quote re-imagining policing. First of all, what does re-imagining policing mean and do you support? If I might finish the question, what does re-imagining policing mean and do you support the Black Lives Matter call for community control of policing?	Chris Wallace	Joe Biden	Social issues
1 — Cleveland, OH — September 29, 2020 — Commission on Presidential Debates	And I want to get to another subject, which is the issue of protests in many cities that have turned violent in Portland, Oregon, especially we had more than a 100 straight days of protests, which I think you would agree, you talk about peaceful protests. Many of those turned into riots. Mr. Vice-president you say that people who commit crimes should be held accountable. The question I have though is as the democratic nominee, and earlier tonight, you said that you are the Democratic Party right now, have you ever called the Democratic Mayor of Portland or the Democratic Governor of Oregon and said, "Hey, you got to stop this, bring in the National Guard, do whatever it takes, but you'd stop the days and months of violence in Portland."	Chris Wallace	Joe Biden	Social issues
1 — Cleveland, OH — September 29, 2020 — Commission on Presidential Debates	You have repeatedly criticized the vice president for not specifically calling out Antifa and other left wing extremist groups. But are you willing tonight to condemn white supremacists and militia group and to say that they need to stand down and not add to the violence in a number of these cities as we saw in Kenosha and as we've seen in Portland.	Chris Wallace	Donald Trump	Social issues
1 — Cleveland, OH — September 29, 2020 — Commission on Presidential Debates	When the president seeks a second term, it is generally a referendum on his record but vice president Biden, you'd like to quote one of your dad's sayings, which is don't compare me to the almighty, compare me to the alternative. And in this case sir you are the alternative. Looking at both of your records, I'm going to ask each of you. Why should voters elect you president over your opponent in this segment, President Trump you'll go first, two minutes.	Chris Wallace	Donald Trump, Joe Biden	Electability

Debate Number — Location — Date — Sponsors	Question	Asker	To Whom The Question was Directed	Question Topic
1 — Cleveland, OH — September 29, 2020 — Commission on Presidential Debates	The forest fires in the West are raging now. They have burned millions of acres. They have displaced hundreds of thousands of people. When state officials there blamed the fires on climate change. Mr. President, you said, I don't think the science knows. Over your four years, you have pulled the US out of the Paris Climate Accord. You have rolled back a number of Obama Environmental records, what do you believe about the science of climate change and what will you do in the next four years to confront it?	Chris Wallace	Donald Trump	Energy/ Environment/ Climate change
1 — Cleveland, OH — September 29, 2020 — Commission on Presidential Debates	All right, Vice President Biden. I'd like you to respond to the president's climate change record but I also want to ask you about a concern. You propose \$2 trillion in green jobs. You talk about new limits, not abolishing, but new limits on fracking. Ending the use of fossil fuels to generate electricity by 2035 and zero none admission of greenhouse gases by 2050. The president says a lot of these things would tank the economy and cost millions of jobs. ... So, do you support the Green New Deal?	Chris Wallace	Joe Biden	Energy/ Environment/ Climate change
1 — Cleveland, OH — September 29, 2020 — Commission on Presidential Debates	All right, gentlemen, final segment, election integrity. As we meet tonight, millions of Americans are receiving mail-in ballots or going to vote early. How confident should we be that this will be a fair election, and what are you prepared to do over the next five plus weeks? Because it will not only be to election day, but also counting some mail-in ballots after election day. What are you prepared to do to reassure the American people that the next president will be the legitimate winner of this election. In this final segment, Mr. Vice President, you go first.	Chris Wallace	Donald Trump, Joe Biden	Electability
1 — Cleveland, OH — September 29, 2020 — Commission on Presidential Debates	You have been charting for months that mail-in balloting is going to be a disaster. You say it's rigged ... that it's going to lead to fraud. But in 2018, in the last midterm election, 31 million people voted mail-in voting. That was more than a quarter of all the voters that year, cast their ballots by mail. Now that millions of mail-in ballots have gone out, what are you going to do about it? And are you counting on the Supreme Court, including a Justice Barrett, to settle any dispute?	Chris Wallace	Donald Trump	Judicial system
1 — Cleveland, OH — September 29, 2020 — Commission on Presidential Debates	Vice President Biden, the biggest problem, in fact, over the years with mail-in voting has not been fraud, historically. It has been that sizable numbers, sometimes hundreds of thousands of ballots are thrown out because they have not been properly filled out, or there is some other irregularity, or they missed ... the deadline. So the question I have is, are you concerned that the Supreme Court with a Justice Barrett will settle any dispute?	Chris Wallace	Joe Biden	Judicial system
1 — Cleveland, OH — September 29, 2020 — Commission on Presidential Debates	In eight states, ... election workers are prohibited, currently by law, eight states, from even beginning to process ballots, even take them out of the envelopes and flatten them until election day. That means that it's likely, because there's going to be a huge increase in mail-in balloting, that we are not going to know on election night who the winner is, that it could be days. It could be weeks- until we find out who the new president is. First for you, sir. Finally, for the vice president, and I hope neither of you will interrupt the other. Will you urge your supporters to stay calm during this extended period, not to engage in any civil unrest? And will you pledge tonight that you will not declare victory until the election has been independently certified?	Chris Wallace	Donald Trump, Joe Biden	Electability