

Six Highlights From the Pence-Harris Debate

During the vice presidential debate Wednesday night, Sen. Kamala Harris, D-Calif., and Vice President Mike Pence sparred over a variety of policies, revealing significant differences on several issues.

The debate, which was moderated by *USA Today* Washington bureau chief Susan Page, featured the two contenders discussing issues ranging from climate change and COVID-19 to abortion and the Supreme Court.

Here are six highlights from the debate:

1) COVID-19

Harris aggressively attacked the Trump administration's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. After the opening question, she laid out what could be called a prosecutor's case.

"The American people have witnessed what is the greatest failure of any presidential administration in the history of our country," the California senator said. "And here are the facts: 210,000 dead people in our country in just the last several months, over 7 million people who have contracted this disease, 1 in 5 businesses closed. We are looking at frontline workers treated like sacrificial workers. We are looking at 30 million people who in the last several months had to file for unemployment."

That was in response to a question from Page about what the Biden administration would have done differently than Trump to address the COVID-19 pandemic. Harris then went on to summarize the Biden-Harris plan.

"Our plan is about what we need to do around a national

strategy, for contact tracing, for testing, for administration of a vaccine, and make sure it's free," Harris said.

Pence, who headed the White House coronavirus task force, defended the administration's record.

"I want the American people to know that from the very first day, President Donald Trump has put the health of America first," the vice president said. "Before there were more than five cases in the United States—all people who had returned from China—President Donald Trump did what no other American had ever done. That was, he suspended all travel from China, the second-largest economy in the world."

Pence added: "Joe Biden opposed that decision."

"He said it was xenophobic and hysterical. I can tell you, having led the White House coronavirus task force that decision alone by President Trump gave us invaluable time to set up the greatest mobilization since World War II," Pence said. "I believe it saved hundreds of thousands of American lives."

As for the Biden plan, Pence said, the Trump administration was already doing much of what it recommends. He also took a shot at a [Biden scandal](#) that effectively ended his 1988 presidential bid.

"The reality is, when you look at the Biden plan, it looks an awful lot like what President Trump and I and our task force have been doing every step of the way," he said. " ... It looks a little bit like plagiarism, something Joe Biden knows a little bit about."

In September 1987, Biden came in for withering criticism for borrowing lines from a speech by then-British Labor Party leader Neil Kinnock without attribution, knocking him out of the race when it was subsequently revealed to be part of a larger pattern of borrowing lines from other politicians

without credit.

Asked about the race to develop a vaccine, Harris said she wouldn't trust a Trump-endorsed vaccine, but would take one approved by Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institutes of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

"If the public health professionals, if Dr. Fauci, if the doctors tell us that we should take it, I'll be the first in line to take it. Absolutely," Harris said. "But if Donald Trump tells us that we should take it, I'm not taking it."

Pence fired back that the California senator was politicizing the vaccine.

"The fact that you continue to undermine public confidence in a vaccine, if a vaccine emerges during the Trump administration, I think, is unconscionable," the vice president said. "Senator, I just ask you, stop playing politics with people's lives. The reality is, we will have a vaccine by the end of this year, and it will continue to save countless American lives."

2) Taxes and the Economy

Harris and Pence sparred over the tax cuts passed by Congress in 2017 and debated Biden's tax plan.

Harris said that the Biden administration would repeal the 2017 tax cuts "on Day One," and that they were passed to benefit the "rich."

"Joe Biden believes you measure the health and strength of America's economy based on the health and strength of the American worker and the American family," Harris said. "On the other hand, you have Donald Trump, who measures the strength of the economy based on how rich people are doing."

Pence defended the tax cuts and said: "Joe Biden said twice in

the debate last week that he's going to repeal the Trump tax cuts," Pence said. "That was tax cuts that gave the average working family \$2,000 with a tax break."

In 2017, Congress passed the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, which reduced federal income taxes and made various other changes to the U.S. tax code.

Following the tax cut, the American economy experienced record low unemployment, wage growth, and an overall increase in business investment, [according](#) to Adam Michel, a specialist on tax policy and the federal budget as a policy analyst in the Thomas A. Roe Institute for Economic Policy Studies at The Heritage Foundation.

Harris said that Biden's tax plan would end tax breaks for the wealthy but wouldn't raise taxes on American making under \$400,000.

"He has been very clear about that," Harris said, adding, "Joe Biden is the one who, during the Great Recession, was responsible for the Recovery Act that brought America back, and now the Trump and Pence administration wants to take credit for Joe Biden's success for the economy that they had at the beginning of their term."

According to [The Washington Post](#), "most Americans received a tax" cut in 2017, not just the rich.

Biden's tax proposal would raise taxes about \$3 trillion over the next decade, according to the nonpartisan Tax Foundation.

"... The Biden tax plan would reduce [gross domestic product] by 1.47 percent over the long term," [according](#) to the Tax Foundation's General Equilibrium Model. "On a conventional basis, the Biden tax plan by 2030 would lead to about 6.5 percent less after-tax income for the top 1 percent of taxpayers and about a 1.7 percent decline in after-tax income for all taxpayers on average."

According to the [left-leaning Tax Policy Center](#), Biden's proposal "would increase taxes on average on all income groups, but the highest-income households would see substantially larger increases, both in dollar amounts and as a share of their incomes."

3) Climate Change and Fracking

Harris said a Biden administration would grow the economy through green energy, but she also denied past support for banning fracking.

"Joe Biden will not ban fracking. That is a fact. I will repeat that Joe Biden has been very clear that he thinks about growing jobs," Harris said, adding, "Part of those jobs that will be created by Joe Biden are going to be about clean energy and renewable energy, because Joe understands that the West Coast of our country is burning, including my home state of California."

Harris also spoke about climate-related problems in the Southeast and in the Midwest.

"Joe sees what is happening in the Gulf states, which are being battered by storms. Joe has seen and talked with the farmers in Iowa, whose entire crops have been destroyed because of floods," she said. "So, Joe believes again in science. ... We have seen a pattern with this administration, which is, they don't believe in science. Joe's plan is about saying we are going to deal with it, but we are going to create jobs."

Pence addressed the issue of climate change, but also attacked the Biden campaign's promises for the environment.

"As I said, Susan, the climate is changing. We'll follow the science," he said.

"With regard to banning fracking, I just recommend people look

at the record. You yourself said repeatedly you would ban fracking,” Pence said of Harris. “You were the first Senate co-sponsor of the Green New Deal.

“While Joe Biden denied support for the Green New Deal, Susan, thank you for pointing out the Green New Deal is on [the Biden-Harris] website. As USA Today said, it’s essentially the same plan as you co-sponsored with AOC.”

That was a reference to Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y., the main sponsor of the Green New Deal in the House.

“You just heard the senator say she was going to resubmit America to the Paris Climate Accord. The American people have always cherished our environment, and we’ll continue to cherish it,” Pence said. “We’ve made great progress reducing [carbon dioxide] emissions through American innovation and the development of natural gas through fracking.

“We don’t need a massive \$2 trillion Green New Deal that would impose all new mandates on American businesses and American families. ... It makes no sense. It will cost jobs.”

4) China

Pence and Harris sparred over U.S. relations with China, including its role in the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“China and the World Health Organization did not play straight with the American people,” Pence said. “They did not let our personnel into China ... until the middle of February.”

The vice president defended the administration’s aggressive trade policy with Beijing. “But China has been taking advantage of the United States for decades, in the wake of Biden cheerleading for China,” he said.

Harris said that the Trump administration had “lost” the trade war with China. “What ended up happening because of a so-

called “trade war” with China? America lost 300,000 manufacturing jobs,” she said.

Pence countered that a Biden administration would go soft on the communist country.

“Joe Biden has been a cheerleader for communist China over the last several decades,” he said.

The vice president criticized the record of the administration of Biden’s boss, President Barack Obama, saying that it had dismissed the idea that manufacturing jobs could ever come back to America.

“In our first three years, this administration saw 500,000 manufacturing jobs created, and that’s the type of growth we’re going to see,” Pence said.

5) Supreme Court and Abortion

With the nomination of federal appeals court Judge Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court, Page asked both candidates what they would want their respective states of Indiana and California to do if the high court were to overturn the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision that legalized abortion nationwide and sent the matter back to the states to decide for themselves.

Neither candidate directly addressed the question, but both spoke of the abortion issue in the context of the Supreme Court.

“The issues before us couldn’t be more serious,” Harris said. “There is the issue of choice, and I will always fight for a woman’s right to make a decision about her own body. It should be her decision and not that of Donald Trump and the vice president, Michael Pence.”

Pence reiterated his pro-life stance, and called out the Biden-Harris ticket.

“I couldn’t be more proud to serve as vice president to a president who stands unapologetically for the sanctity of human life. I will not apologize for it,” he said. “This is another one of those cases where there is such a dramatic contrast. Joe Biden and Kamala Harris support taxpayer funding of abortion all the way up to the moment of birth, late-term abortion.”

Pence asked Harris at one point if she would support packing the courts, meaning increasing the number of Supreme Court justices to 10 or more, and then he accused her of not answering the question.

“Once again you gave a non-answer, Joe Biden gave a non-answer,” Pence said. “The American people deserve a straight answer.”

In his remarks, Pence noted the Supreme Court has had nine justices for the past 150 years.

6) Race Relations

The vice presidential candidates also had a heated exchange on race relations amid social unrest in major American cities.

Harris called out Trump for what she claimed was his reluctance to condemn white supremacists, referring to [last week’s presidential debate](#) between Trump and Biden.

“Last week, the president of the United States took a debate stage in front of 70 million Americans and refused to condemn white supremacists,” Harris said. “It wasn’t like he wasn’t given a chance. He didn’t do it, and then he doubled down. Then he said, when pressed, ‘Stand back, stand by.’ This is part of a pattern with Donald Trump.”

She also cited the deadly 2017 Charlottesville, Va., Unite the Right rally.

Pence countered by citing [Trump's comments](#) regarding the Charlottesville violence.

"This is one of the things that makes people dislike the media so much in this country, that you selectively edit so much," Pence said, arguing that the media had distorted what Trump had said about there being "very fine people" on both sides in Charlottesville.

"After President Trump made comments about people on either side of the debate over monuments, he condemned the KKK, neo-Nazis and white supremacists," the vice president said.

"He has done so repeatedly. Your concern that he doesn't condemn neo-Nazis, President Trump has Jewish grandchildren. His daughter and son-in-law are Jewish. This is a president who respects and cherishes all of the American people."

Pence then went on offense about Harris' prosecution record as a district attorney in San Francisco.

"When you were D.A. in San Francisco, African Americans were 19 times more likely to be prosecuted for minor drug offenses than whites and Hispanics," Pence said to Harris. "You increased the disproportionate incarceration. You did nothing on criminal justice reform in California. You didn't lift a finger to pass the [First Step Act](#) on Capitol Hill."

The First Step Act is a bipartisan criminal justice reform bill signed into law by Trump in December 2018.

Harris didn't directly defend her record as district attorney of San Francisco, but pivoted to her record as California attorney general.

"Having served as the attorney general of California, the work I did is a model of what our nation needs to do and what we will be able to do," she said, adding, "I was the first statewide officer to institute a requirement that my agents

would wear body cameras and keep them on full time. We were the first to initiate that there would be training for law enforcement on implicit bias.”

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