Opinion
News
President Donald Trump holds a campaign rally at Ocala International Airport in Ocala, Florida

President Donald Trump holds a campaign rally at Ocala International Airport in Ocala, Florida, Oct. 16. (CNS/Reuters/Carlos Barria)



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Trump needs to shake up the race, but tomorrow night's debate will likely confirm his own shocking inadequacies.

The Oct. 21 debate is the last scheduled event with the potential to shake up the race. Or not. As I write, almost 30 million Americans have already voted by mail or in-person early voting. That is more than six times the number who had voted at this stage in 2016. Seventy percent of the early voters are older than 50, people for whom COVID-19 is not a remote danger.

In the first debate, late last month, the president did himself no favors, repeatedly interrupting former Vice President Joe Biden, uttering enough lies to keep several fact-checkers busy, and reminding many centrist Americans how tired they are of his antics. On the day of the first debate, FiveThirtyEight.com had Trump winning 22 out of 100 election scenarios to Biden's 78. In the days that followed, Trump's polling

collapsed further. As of yesterday, he only comes out on top in 12 out of 100 scenarios.

Last week's scheduled debate was scrubbed when President Donald Trump refused the presidential debate commission's requirement for a virtual debate given the president's COVID-19 diagnosis.

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When Biden agreed to do a televised town hall instead, Trump did the same and the latter was something of a train wreck. The most frequent clip featured Trump's refusing to take responsibility for retweeting conspiracy theorists.

"That was a retweet, that was an opinion of somebody, and that was a retweet," Trump said. "I'll put it out there, people can decide for themselves, I don't take a position."

Savannah Guthrie countered: "I don't get that. You're the president — you're not like someone's crazy uncle who can just retweet whatever." I found myself, recalling Leo Amery's famous remark, * shouting at the television, "Savannah, speak for America!"

Biden, conversely, is at his best in a town hall format, and he easily engaged both the questions from the audience and the people asking the questions. As is usual for Biden, his speech is not fluid, it is filled with half-sentences and abrupt changes, but he makes himself understood and he connects emotionally with voters. George Stephanopoulos pushed him hard on the subject of court packing, and after some back-and-forth, Biden said he would make his position known after the Senate confirmation vote on Amy Coney Barrett and before Election Day.

Neither appearance seemed sufficiently consequential to alter the dynamic of the race. Over the weekend, the president resumed large rallies, at which few people wear masks and no one practices social distancing. His talking points and his demeanor have not changed in his stump speech, except that he now spends almost no time discussing policies. He talks a lot about Biden's son, Hunter, littering his speeches with wild accusation unsupported by any evidence. The father of Don Jr. and Ivanka will have a hard time making the case that Biden's son is a grifter of the highest order.

Will the president use the debate to achieve a course correction? I doubt it. Watching Fox News, from which Trump often takes his cues, you would likely forget there was a pandemic in the land. When they do discuss it, they feature Dr. Scott Atlas, who is not an epidemiologist, continuing to advocate for a discredited policy aimed at achieving "herd immunity." The president on Monday attacked Dr. Anthony Fauci, which strikes me as the height of folly: Fauci is held in almost universally high esteem. At a time when the public does not trust politicians or clergy or media, Fauci still inspires trust the way Walter Cronkite once inspired trust.

Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden speaks to members of a plumbers' union in Erie,

Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden speaks to members of a plumbers' union in Erie, Pennsylvania, Oct. 10. (CNS/Reuters/Kevin Lamarque)

Attacking Fauci is a mark of desperation, and I suspect we will see a desperate president come on the stage tomorrow night. Desperate people flail, and flailing is not how the president wins back those voters who once supported him but have since decided to support Biden. They have not forgotten about the pandemic, they know the president's approach is not working, and the president's own fear of looking weak makes the necessary changes impossible.

Biden has to be cogent, authoritative, decent. He does not need to be brilliant. He does not need to deliver a knock-out blow. In the first debate, he managed to parry the president's attacks well, balancing the need to appear less erratic and rude than Trump, but punching back enough to make sure he did not look like a patsy. It does not take much these days to appear calm, cool and collected when you are sharing the stage with Donald Trump.

Biden also needs to look ahead a bit. What are the three or four things he really needs to accomplish in his first 100 days in office? Expanding health care, raising taxes on the rich and corporations, a program of apprenticeships for young people who do not go to college, student loan forgiveness for those who did, and adopting an aggressive program for converting to sustainable energy would be at the top of my list. He needs to mention them, and mention them so explicitly that if he wins, he can claim a mandate to accomplish these tasks.

Democrats should not be overconfident. The enthusiasm for Trump is different from what I have ever seen in my life. On the road to the town dump, one fellow citizen

has four handmade signs in a row: "Trump 2020" then "Trump 2024" then "Trump 2028" and, finally, "Trump 4Ever." No one I recall had a "Romney 4Ever" sign on their lawn. On the weekends, groups of Trump supporters gather at prominent intersections with flags and signs, encouraging people to honk their horns in support of the president. His supporters, many of whom have never voted before, never cared about politics, will be sure to vote on Election Day and they may be undercounted by pollsters as they were in 2016. Almost every poll of every swing state is within the margin of error.

Still, the dynamic of the race is clear, and it is Biden's to lose. That means tomorrow night may be Trump's last chance to shake things up and snatch the lead back. My hunch is he will fail because he will flail. The master at branding his own name has failed to understand the responsibilities of his office, and he is ruining his own brand.

* On Sept. 2, 1939, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain seemed to waver on his previous commitment to declare war on Nazi Germany should it invade Poland, which it had done the day before. The leader of the Labour Party, Clemente Atlee, was not in the chamber, and so his deputy Arthur Greenwood rose to speak, prefacing his remarks by saying he was speaking for the Labour Party. Leo Amery, a Conservative MP who had opposed Chamberlain's appeasement strategy all along, shouted across the floor, "Speak for England." It was a devastating moment for Chamberlain.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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