Wednesday, Sept. 11, 2024 / Who took debait?

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

NOEL KING (host): Kamala met Donald for the first time last night.

*<CLIP> VICE PRESIDENT KAMALA HARRIS: Kamala Harris. Let's have a good debate.  
FORMER PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: Nice to see you. Have fun.*

SCORING <Heavyweight hip hop - BMC>

NOEL: In a debate that many Americans said they wanted to be about policy and substance, it was frequently not that.

*<CLIP> HARRIS: People start leaving his rallies early out of exhaustion and boredom.*

*<CLIP> TRUMP: People don't go to her rallies. There's no reason to go.*

*<CLIP> TRUMP: Abdul is the head of the Taliban. He is still the head of the Taliban. And I told Abdul don't do it anymore, you do it anymore you're going to have problems.*

*<CLIP> HARRIS: There was a woman who helped raise us. We call her our second mother. She was a small business owner. I love our small businesses.*

*<CLIP> TRUMP: In Springfield, they're eating the dogs.*

NOEL: Early on, VP Harris got under ex-prez Trump’s skin. And he appeared to have a hard time refocusing...

*<CLIP> TRUMP: I have concepts of a plan.*

NOEL: …leading many analysts to say: she won. Coming up on *Today, Explained*: concepts of a plan. A Democratic and a Republican strategist on what these candidates need to do for the next 54 days.

[THEME]

*<CLIP> BUMPER: This is Today, Explained*

TRICIA MCLAUGHLIN (Republican strategist): My name’s Tricia McLaughlin. I’m a Republican strategist. I head up Insurgent Strategies and formerly have worked for Vivek Ramaswamy, his 2024 presidential campaign as a senior advisor, communications director. And also Mike DeWine, the Ohio governor.

FAIZ SHAKIR (Democratic strategist): My name is Faiz Shakir. I was Bernie Sanders campaign manager in 2020, still remain his chief political advisor to this day. I also run an advocacy journalism institution called More Perfect Union.

NOEL:Is it fair to say that neither of these candidates for president is necessarily your preferred choice?

FAIZ: Well, at least <laughs> at least in my case. I ran a primary campaign against both Biden and Harris, so initially certainly wasn't my first choice.

NOEL: Okay. Tricia, how about you?

TRICIA: Donald Trump wasn't my primary choice. Same as Faiz, Vivek ran in a primary against Donald Trump.

NOEL: When this debate began. We know what Americans were telling polls about Kamala Harris, that they needed to know, that they needed to know more about who she is, what she stands for, and what she wants to do. Faiz, how do you think she did on that score?

FAIZ: On the tactics of a presidential debate, which is in part theater, in some part substance…

NOEL: Hm.

FAIZ: …but a fair amount of theater, she performed excellently, right. From the outset, she comes on and puts herself in the posture of compelling a handshake, being on the offense and stating the terms of the debate, what she wanted you to know about Donald Trump, having themes about him, the chaos of a presidency…

*<CLIP> HARRIS: Donald Trump left us the worst public health epidemic in a century. Donald Trump left us the worst attack on our democracy since the Civil War…*

FAIZ: Those were kind of themes that she can, continued to hit back on. And as we heard moments of whatever it might be, immigrants eating pets, it was a, for her an opportunity to affirm: this is not the kind of leadership we want. So I think in that way, you get across in her mind, I think had a persuasion audience which was critical to her, even as you saw how, as she talked about abortion. She was thinking about it as, I want to address people of faith with this answer.

NOEL: Hm.

FAIZ: And throughout the course of the debate, I think was really trying. You know, on guns…

*<CLIP> HARRIS: Tim Walz and I are both gun owners. We’re not taking anybody’s guns away. So stop with the continuous lying about this stuff.*

FAIZ: I thought her ability to continue to think about that persuasion audience throughout the course of the debate, the few people who haven’t made up their choice was particularly strong on her end.

NOEL: Tricia, you told Politico that you were praying that Donald Trump could stay disciplined in this debate last night. A lot of people felt the same. A lot of people have felt the same about Donald Trump for a lot of years now. Do you think you saw discipline last night?

TRICIA: I think we saw him on the defense, but I didn't feel like he went into the personal attacks that I think that Harris often tried to goad him into. She even used some of his own language, right, when she was saying that the former generals, former staff were calling him a disgrace.

*<CLIP> HARRIS: His former chief of staff, a four-star general, has said he has contempt for the constitution of the United States. His former national security adviser has said he is dangerous and unfit. His former secretary of defense has said the nation, the republic, would never survive another Trump term.*

TRICIA: Of course, Donald Trump uses that word quite a bit. And I think that she was, she was, of course, very much trying to bait him as far as when it came to the rallies, the rallies, sizes, people leaving early. And it was a little bit of a hook, line and sinker on that end. But I don’t, he didn't attack her personally, or at least not to the extent that we've seen in the past. So I was actually pleased with that. He did no damage there.

NOEL: The consensus is, though, it seems, that he did take the bait. You're right. He didn't go after her personally. In fact, he seemed almost chagrined when the moderators asked him about Kamala Harris's racial identification, something that he's brought up in the past.

*<CLIP> TRUMP: I couldn’t care less. Whatever she wants to be is ok with me.*

NOEL: But at other times I think the consensus is, she got a rise out of him.

TRICIA: Yeah, I think I saw that differently. I felt like compared to what we've seen with Donald Trump, when he gets backed into a corner, he's pretty pugnacious. I didn't think we saw the fighter that we typically do. That being said, yeah, I think that, you know, she got him on the defensive. I think especially, you know, the identity question, he should have been very much ready for. He didn't go for the jugular, as he often does. Actually, we saw more personal attacks from Kamala Harris probably than we did from Donald Trump.

NOEL: Tricia, Donald Trump's winning issues should be the economy and immigration.

TRICIA: Mm hm.

NOEL: Americans have told pollsters they are deeply frustrated about the economy in particular. Did you hear a strong economic message from Donald Trump last night?

TRICIA: The very first question of the debate was, is the economy better off than it was four years ago? Right. That's the number one issue for Americans as well, and I'm sure a determining factor for a lot of these undecided voters. How are we going to get inflation under control? How are we going to stymie the cost of living? And Kamala Harris, she really pivoted out of that answer.

*<CLIP> ABC MODERATOR DAVID MUIR: When it comes to the economy, do you believe Americans are better off than they were four years ago?  
HARRIS: So I was raised as a middle class kid…*

TRICIA: So I would like to see Donald Trump get into more specifics. I think he harkens back a lot to his record in the past, in 2016 to 2020. But I would like him to get into more specifics, specifically with health care, which I think that was a missed opportunity for him.

NOEL: Faiz, Kamala Harris really did pivot out of the answer. What did you make of that?

FAIZ: Yeah, well, I'm not usually one for criticizing moderators, and I thought they actually did a fine job last night. So I don't mean to harp on it, but it was, it was the one question. <laughs> It was, it was the first question of the debate and the only question of the debate that really was the economic conversation, which is not commensurate with where people are. This is their number one issue. This is what should have taken up, you know, I think, a good third of the debate at least. What we know about Kamala Harris right now, she's running, one of her top ads in all the battleground states is one that refers to price gouging of large corporations. And she has addressed this as a serious concern. She's talked about it in a number of cases. She's had policy rollouts about it. Last night obviously didn't get mentioned. We didn't have much of a conversation. And I say that because, to my mind, it is the only real missed opportunity of Kamala Harris. And you know, what we needed to do last night as Democrats is, for the last remaining voters who haven't made up their minds, I tend to believe it is going to be economic issues front and center for them.

NOEL: Tricia. Immigration should be another winning issue for Donald Trump. At least that's what the polls tell us, right? Moderator David Muir had to ding Donald Trump last night for repeating an unsubstantiated story about immigrants eating people's pets.

*<CLIP> MUIR: ABC News did reach out to the city manager there. He told us there have been no credible reports of specific claims of pets being harmed, injured or abused by individuals within the immigrant community…*

NOEL: And that is actually taking up a lot of the oxygen today with respect to immigration. Do you think Donald Trump had a clear message on immigration last night? And do you think he helped himself with that message?

TRICIA: Yeah, I think that we, it's important for us to address that Springfield, Ohio issue. I'm from Ohio. I live there. Springfield is about 40 minutes from me. So what's going on with that township is that there is about 56,000 people who live there and now there's 20,000 Haitians who have largely been dropped there. That is a huge problem, much less when there's cultural issues. I, did I think he did that particularly articulately? No, but I think it underscores a, you know, a real problem that's that's going on and I think has been left unaddressed. And I do think that he should have gone into a broader topic of the fact that there are 10 to 15 million people who illegally entered this country under Biden and Harris. What is she going to do about that? Because we have not heard what she'll actually do.

FAIZ: Let me just say about that point, I mean Tricia, as somebody who also has friends in Springfield, like, the answer that I'm starting from is we need to make this work. There are people who are coming to this country, Haitians in this case, who are working at that Dole factory, you know well, who are working at the Honda factory, who are doing a good job, who are responsible employees. And yes, because they've arrived as immigrants, they're going to be like immigrants of the past generations, wherever you came from. Yes, there will be cultural mixing and learning from on both sides. That is what makes America great, is that the melting pot, the infusion of different perspectives and bringing that all together into one is positive.

TRICIA: My thing, number one, Faiz, no matter what, you could drive in 20,000 people from California. That is poor policy and that is poor planning. If you drop in 20,000 people for community infrastructure that does not hold that. That doesn't make sense. It's not good, by the way, it is not good for these migrants at all. This is a disservice to them as much as it is a disservice to the people of Springfield.

NOEL: There's more substance here between the two of you than I heard last night.

FAIZ: <laughs>

NOEL: And nobody resorted to, to rumors about pets being eaten. Which, which is interesting to me because, again, when we, when we talk about what each candidate managed to do last night, I think what you're both illustrating maybe a little bit here is they came up short on some of the substance. On, back on on something of, of real substance that, that also caused some sparring last night. Kamala Harris has made abortion one of her signature issues. There was a lot of back and forth last night. Faiz, how do you think Harris did on this issue that she has claimed as something deeply important to her and a potential Harris administration?

FAIZ: Oh, I mean she crushed it. I mean, it may be the issue that helps her win this entire election, quite frankly. And you could sense the high level of passion and the desire to change policy and holding Donald Trump accountable for leading us into really this completely unnecessary, painful experience for too many Americans that could have and should have been avoided. But the Trump abortion bans, the language, the contrast. It all worked. And it is one of her, if not the most powerful issue working to her advantage in this election cycle.

NOEL: Okay. Big picture. Last night, each candidate had an opportunity to present a vision for the country. What vision, Faiz, did you hear Kamala Harris present? And then Tricia, I'm going to throw the same question to you about Donald Trump.

FAIZ: The vision certainly that she is most effective at delivering is that this is a contrast. This is A versus B, and her and Joe Biden before her are very comfortable telling you about Donald Trump's chaos, his inability to be an effective leader and the dangerous and damaging results that would occur if he were back into office. And I think that comes across very plainly. And that way, the negative campaigning about Donald Trump, I think, is one of her most effective areas. I think on the positive side, trying to tell the story about who she is, it's still a work in progress. And I think she's still got work to do, though, on the policy side. As we discussed early on, there are key issues around the economy that, to my mind, will be determinative in this election. And if you were thinking about the one thing she still left out, got left to do in these closing days and weeks is, is to hammer home my economic story and how I want to improve your life.

NOEL: Tricia, Donald Trump and his vision for America. What did you hear? What stood out? What impressed you?

TRICIA: I think that he was very much back to the 2016 change agent message. He knows, we have the data that roughly 60% of Americans, they want some sort of change away from Joe Biden's policies. And I think that that's what he was trying to hearken back to. He even said:

*<CLIP> TRUMP: Make America Great Again.*

TRICIA: He said that at least a couple of times. He suggested even giving Kamala Harris a MAGA hat.

*<CLIP> TRUMP: She's going to my philosophy now. In fact, I was going to send her a MAGA hat.*

TRICIA: So, I mean, when he's talking about, you know, getting immigration back under control, reinvigorating the economy, reinvigorating energy, stopping these licensing restrictions when it comes to drilling, I think that those are things that resonate with Americans as well as foreign policy, which I wish we would have dug into more. I thought that was more where Donald Trump shined. He showed strength. And I think that Americans want to see that, especially when there's such major wars and hostility going on across the world.

SCORING <(dorian) And The Moustache Was His Name - BMC>

NOEL: Tricia McLaughlin is a Republican strategist and Faiz Shakir is a Democratic strategist. We're going to take a short break and then we'll be back with them to talk about what the next few weeks for these candidates should look like. This is *Today, Explained*.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

*<CLIP> TRUMP: Wait a minute. I’m talking now. If you don’t mind. Please. Does that sound familiar?*

NOEL: *Today, Explained* is back. I'm Noel King with Republican strategist Tricia McLaughlin. She worked for Vivek Ramaswamy and Democratic strategist Faiz Shakir. He works for Bernie Sanders.

All right. So we have 54 days until the vote. The polls are unusually close. What do Kamala Harris and Donald Trump need to do to win? Faiz, let’s start with you. What is Kamala Harris's first assignment after last night's debate?

FAIZ: <laughs> It’s an easy answer for me at least, but it's obviously a difficult one to execute.

NOEL: <laughs>

FAIZ: She's got to, she's got to convince working-class Americans who are not high-information consumers who have, who have not made a determination in this election – I would say we're talking roughly 5%, maybe less – in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, Arizona, Georgia, North Carolina, Nevada. Make sure that these individuals feel that there is a real economic choice in this election. One in which she is a much more strong champion of their economic growth, their future, their jobs, their desires to have a more free and vibrant economy than one led by Donald Trump. If she can own that and land that, I think on all other scores on abortion, on democracy, on foreign policy, on leadership qualities, on strength. She is well-positioned at this time, and hopefully it stays that way.

NOEL: Tricia: what does Donald Trump need to do today and for the next 53 days?

TRICIA: What Donald Trump needs to continue to do, not only on the airwaves, but in his earned media opportunities, he needs to hammer home those points that she was co-sponsor of the Green New Deal, that she was the tie-breaking vote in that Inflation Reduction Act, which even her boss, Joe Biden, admitted was… The agenda really was not to lower inflation, but for the climate. These are things that the American people, you know, are not comfortable with. About 50% of Americans say she's too far to the left versus Donald Trump. A third of Americans say he's too far to the right. So he needs to continue to start looking like that change agent, but also like that centrist, and hammer home defining Kamala Harris.

NOEL: I want to ask you both about what the shape of a strategy for each candidate looks like in the next month and a bit. Tricia, Donald Trump last night telegraphed a few times that he is doubling down on his strongest supporters:

*<CLIP> TRUMP: Viktor Orban. One of the most respected men. They call him a strong man. He’s a tough person. Smart. Prime minister of Hungary. They said, ‘Why is the whole world blowing up? Three years ago it wasn’t. Why is it blowing up?’ He said, ‘Because you need Donald Trump back as president.’*

NOEL: When he mentioned the support, having the support of having the support of Viktor Orban, I will admit I sat up a little straighter and thought, ‘Well, who, you know, who in the Midwest cares about Viktor Orban?’ But young men online care about Viktor Orban. They’re impressed by him. They’re sort of like the New Right. Do you think Donald Trump should be speaking to a wider audience? Or do you think doubling down on his base is the best move at this point?

TRICIA: Yeah, I mean, I don't have the exact internal numbers on that. From what the scuttlebutt is, is that Donald Trump, you know, he didn't do as well with those white male working-class voters in 2020. He lost a lot of those to, to Joe Biden and to really try and run up the score with those men. And I think particularly, as well, younger men, that that's part of the priority, that there is maybe less of a focus on women or trying to, you know, create new voters. It's more running up that score.

NOEL: Yeah, but he can't win without women. Like, I’m wondering how wise you think this is?

TRICIA: Yeah, I mean, of course, this is a numbers game. You want numbers wherever you get them. But I don't know if talking about Viktor Orban really, you know, is going to isolate women. I wouldn't think it would. I just think, you know, how many people are talking about Viktor Orban at their kitchen table? That's a question I'll leave to Donald Trump.

NOEL: <laughs> Faiz, there were a couple of other moments where I sat up straight. Two of them: Kamala Harris talked about getting the endorsement of the Cheney family, and she talked about her economic plan, getting support from Goldman Sachs.

*<CLIP> HARRIS: What Goldman Sachs has said is that Donald Trump’s plan would make the economy worse; mine would strengthen the economy.*

NOEL: And I thought, ‘Woah!’ Is she going a little too wide?

FAIZ: You know, you're right to say, ‘Who's the audience for that?’ And obviously, [s]he has a persuasion audience in her mind. We're talking about maybe, I don’t know, what we'd call these Mitt Romney-style voters. How many of them are there that are out there? Probably not a ton. But again, in a very tight election, you know, we're talking handfuls of votes on the suburbs of, you name your major urban area. She's trying to reach them. I'm hoping it doesn't come at cost. Of course, with a, you know, a core Democratic constituency that doesn't much care for those names. I think she's doing a fine job of building upon it. I would just add on Viktor Orban, obviously, we all know that the reason he mentions him, there's not much strategy going on in Donald Trump's orbit on this one. It's just that here's a guy who said something nice about me, right? That's fundamental. That's his that's again, it's just a reflection of, ‘Somebody is kissing my butt and I like it. So I'll tell you, I'll tell you all about it.’

NOEL: Debates sometimes do matter. The Biden/Trump debate in June mattered a lot. It effectively ended Biden's candidacy. On the other hand, Hillary Clinton, it was widely believed, won the debates against Donald Trump in 2016, and she did not win the election. Did this debate matter and to what degree did it matter?

TRICIA: I think debates do matter. I think, of course, there's consternation over who actually won. It feels a little bit murky, especially on the Republican side. I think we'll see what the undecideds really have to say. The polling that will come out this weekend will be very telling. That all being said, I think Harris missed an opportunity and that opportunity was to really define herself. She took up a lot of the time that she had to attack Donald Trump. Many of these attacks we've already heard before and have been relitigated. So I think that what she's going to really have to do is define herself in these coming weeks in order for this debate to have really meant something in it, given her momentum.

FAIZ: Yeah, it did certainly matter. I think we'll see, you know, in the next day or two what the numbers will hold. I suspect it will be a very, very high viewing number across not only the debate, but also the clips of it and all that, it'll be… For, for Harris, I think there are so many people who just wanted to see her in an unscripted setting, because we haven't seen too many of those. And this was of the highest-profile platform one, maybe, that we get in this cycle. I'm hoping, actually, that there's another one. So I suspect it will have had a major impact. And when we look back at the outcome on November 5th, I think a lot of people will be drawing conclusions from what happened at, at this debate and what, what transpired in the weeks following it in terms of how each candidate seized or didn’t seize on the momentum.

SCORING <Rabbit Hole>

NOEL: Faiz Shakir, he’s a Democratic strategist, and Tricia McLaughlin, Republican strategist.

Earlier in the show, you heard Tricia say that 20-thousand Haitians have been “dropped” in Springfield, Ohio. Springfield says: it estimates the total number of immigrants is 12- to 15,000.

Avishay Artsy and Amanda Lewellyn produced. Amina al-Sadi edited. Laura Bullard led fact-checking. Andrea Kristinsdottir and Patrick Boyd engineered.

I’m Noel King. It’s *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]