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DEBATES

What Happened at the First Presidential Debate

By Michael Scherer and Adam Sorensen @adamsorensen | Oct. 04, 2012 | 787 Comments

–8 minutes. The first 2012 presidential debate is minutes away, so the threats have begun. The head of the debate commission, Frank Fahrenkopf, tells audience members that if they violate the no-clapping, no-applause rules, “a button will be pushed and you’ll be swimming with the fishes.” Then the moderator, Jim Lehrer, comes out and warns that he might stop the debate if anyone speaks. “Start having silent thoughts,” he says. It’s a tense moment that just got more tense.

0 minutes. Lehrer welcomes the candidates — Romney in a red tie, Obama in blue — who walk to the middle of the stage to shake hands and exchange smiles. After another warning for the audience, Lehrer asks a broad question about the differences in the candidates’ jobs plans. Obama answers by thanking his wife for 20 years of marriage. “I just want to wish, Sweetie, you a happy anniversary and let you know that a year from now, we will not be celebrating it in front of 40 million people,” he says. The crowd laughs. The beginnings of applause. No one follows the rules. Some swim with the fishes as Obama finishes a restatement of his stump speech.

6 minutes. Romney starts by trying to show that he has a heart. He doesn’t just talk about jobs. He talks about the woman he met in Dayton, Ohio, etc. Then he lists his five-point plan, which would be more compelling if he had a PowerPoint slideshow. He ends by saying Obama believes in “trickle-down government,” nifty wordplay on trickle-down economics, or the idea that what is good for the wealthy is good for all. **It doesn’t exactly make sense.** But it’s nifty.

(POLL: Which Candidate Is More Truthful?)

8 minutes. “Mr. President, please respond directly to what the governor just said about trickle-down,” says Lehrer. **Obama doesn’t. Instead he talks about schools and energy and jobs getting shipped overseas.** He says Romney’s economic plan calls for a \$5 trillion tax cut, a \$1 trillion extension of the high-end Bush tax cuts and \$2 trillion in additional military spending. “How we pay for that,” he says, “is one of the central questions of this campaign.” **It’s a nifty line, but it’s also misleading.** Romney has said his \$5 trillion in tax cuts would be revenue-neutral, offset by tax increases that come from closing loopholes in the tax code.



Christopher Morris / VII for TIME

Presidential candidates Mitt Romney and President Barack Obama during their first debate at the University of Denver on Oct. 3, 2012.

10 minutes. Lehrer asks Romney if he has a question he would like to ask Obama. Romney doesn't. Instead he says, "I don't have a \$5 trillion tax cut," and "I'm not going to reduce the share of taxes paid by high-income people." Then he returns to his PowerPoint presentation without the PowerPoint. Another numbered list: 1. Education. 2. Taxation. 3. Energy. 4. More about taxation. The PowerPoint is a bit scrambled.

14 minutes. Lehrer is staying out of this. Obama jumps in to point out that he has cut taxes on the middle class. Then he says, accurately, that Romney's plan doesn't really add up in traditional economic analysis. You can't cut all income taxes by 20%, stay revenue-neutral and preserve the progressivity of the tax code, since there are not enough loopholes to eliminate. "Now, that's not my analysis," Obama says. "That's the analysis of economists who have looked at this."

(PHOTOS: Political Photos of the Week, Sept. 20-27)

16 minutes. "Virtually everything he just said about my tax plan is inaccurate," Romney shoots back. He's got memorized lines for moments like this: "Look, I've got five boys. I'm used to people saying something that's not always true." Then Romney seems to suggest that you can't trust economists. "Now you cite a study. There are six other studies that looked at the study you describe and say it's completely wrong," he says. That's not exactly true. Some of the studies Romney cites are blog posts. And the big difference is that the Romney studies use nontraditional accounting. They assume that tax cuts will unleash new economic growth. The official congressional number crunchers don't use this accounting, since it is speculative and involves projections that have not been accurate in the past.

18 minutes. It has become clear that the candidates have different body language. Romney is more animated, more dominating, more excited. Obama is in professor mode, with less eye contact, as if he hasn't had his Honest Tea. There are strategic reasons for this. Obama is winning in the polls. He doesn't need to dominate. But when he delivers lines like, "It's math. It's arithmetic," they don't exactly shake the room.

21 minutes. Lehrer had hoped to divide the debate into 15-minute segments. But the jobs section, which is mostly about taxes, is well over time. "It's fun, isn't it?" says Romney. And the thing is, Romney looks like he is having fun.

(VIDEO: Swing States: Could Obama and Romney Tie?)

23 minutes. The debate continues apace. Tax rates. Five trillion dollars. Obama accuses Romney of using the same sales pitch that George W. Bush did in 2001 and 2003. "Bill Clinton tried the approach that I'm talking about," he says. "We created 23 million new jobs." In two sentences, he takes credit for Clinton.

26 minutes. Finally a new topic, the deficit, which is not really different from the old topic. This allows Romney to go back to his invisible PowerPoint with another list. One of his targeted cuts is the subsidy for PBS, which is awkward because Lehrer is a PBS guy. Romney knows this. "I love Big Bird," Romney says. Then, speaking to Lehrer: "I actually like you too ... But I'm not going to keep on spending money on things to borrow money from China to pay for."

31 minutes. "Governor," asks Lehrer, about to head into the bipartisan deficit-reduction plan, "what about Simpson-Bowles? Do you support Simpson-Bowles?" Romney doesn't answer. "Simpson-Bowles? The President should have grabbed that," he says. "I have my own plan."

32 minutes. "I did," protests Obama. He didn't really. He proposed a different deficit-reduction plan after not embracing Simpson-Bowles. But the debate rolls on. Soon Obama is hitting some of his points, talking about a balanced approach, the oil industry that gets what he calls "\$4 trillion in corporate welfare" and tax breaks for corporate jets.

37 minutes. Romney has a zinger ready for this one. "First of all, the Department of Energy has said the tax break for oil companies is \$2.8 billion a year," he says. Obama seems to concede the point, saying, "It's time to end it." Then Romney strikes. "And in one year, you provided \$90 billion in tax breaks to the green-energy world," he says. "Now, I like green energy as well, but that's about 50 years'

worth of what oil and gas receives.” Romney’s numbers are wrong. The Recovery Act funded green energy, including clean coal, over several years. But he scores the point.

39 minutes. Time to talk entitlements. Obama tries to personalize it by talking about his late grandmother. But he’s mostly defensive. He says he wants to lower health care costs to help Medicare and that the nation doesn’t need structural changes to Social Security.

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42 minutes. In contrast to Obama, Romney hits his talking points hard and says he is proposing no changes to entitlements for those 60 or older. “You don’t need to listen any further,” he says to seniors. “But for younger people, we need to talk about what changes are going to be occurring.” Then Romney starts in accusing Obama of cutting \$716 billion from Medicare. “I can’t understand how you can cut Medicare,” he says. This is strange, because Obama’s cuts were to programs widely seen as wasteful. In fact, Romney’s running mate, Paul Ryan, supported the cuts. Either the running mates don’t talk to each other, or Romney is feigning confusion to confuse voters.

47 minutes. After more back and forth about all the ways Obamacare strengthened coverage for seniors — AARP supported Obama’s changes, after all — the candidates get philosophical and substantive. The debate over Medicare is a debate over the best way to lower costs and continue to provide service. Obama thinks private insurance is inefficient because of higher administrative costs and the need for profit. Romney thinks government-run Medicare is ineffective because markets create efficiency. It’s about as far from a 30-second ad as you can get.

51 minutes. This philosophical difference — which is key to the whole election — continues into a discussion on regulation. Romney takes a moderate route. “Regulation is essential,” he says. Then he talks in some detail of where Obama went too far. Obama is on defense, which is odd on an issue like this. But that’s how this debate is shaping up. There’s a lot of talk about what Dodd-Frank does or doesn’t do. Dodd-Frank is the name of a financial-reform bill that Congress passed in 2010, but no one stops to explain that. They might as well be saying Simpson-Bowles.

56 minutes. Back to health care. “It’s two minutes each,” Lehrer says. No one believes him. Romney says Obamacare is bad because health care costs too much, even though health care costs were rising before Obama took office. But Romney is on a roll. “It’s expensive. Expensive things hurt families,” says the man with the \$12 million La Jolla, Calif., mansion.

60 minutes. Obama tries to defend his health care law, but just when he’s about to get to the part where he points out that Romney passed a nearly identical law in Massachusetts, Lehrer tells him his time is up. “I had five seconds before you interrupted me,” Obama complains. Lehrer relents.

65 minutes. A debate follows about whether insurance companies should be allowed to set prices on the basis of customers’ health, which Obamacare will outlaw in 2014. “Pre-existing conditions are covered in my plan,” Romney says. Obama says Romney’s plan is vague and seems to allow sick people to keep their coverage only when they change jobs, which is already the law. “Is the reason that Governor Romney is keeping all these plans secret because they’re too good?” All of Obama’s quips are questions.

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67 minutes. There’s a loud noise off-camera, like a pundit falling off a stool. Both candidates look around to see what it was. America may never know.

73 minutes. “Do you believe there’s a fundamental difference between the two of you as to how you view the mission of the federal government?” Lehrer asks. There is. It’s the reason the U.S. has two political parties. It’s also what Obama and Romney have been debating for the preceding 72 minutes. Obama says he would create freedom and opportunity like Abraham Lincoln. Romney says he would create freedom and opportunity like the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

80 minutes. Only 10 minutes left. Time for the lightning round of neglected issues. Education: Romney praises Obama Cabinet member Arne Duncan. Obama criticizes Romney running mate Ryan, whose proposed spending cuts Obama says could mean “cutting the education budget by up to 20%.” This is technically possible but misleading: Ryan’s budget doesn’t specify education cuts, just generic discretionary dollars. And only 10% of the overall education budget is federally funded. Romney deploys another prepackaged zinger: “Mr. President, you’re entitled to your own airplane and your own house, but you’re not entitled to your own facts.”

84 minutes. Lehrer is distressed that they’re taking too much time. “We’ve lost a pod,” he says, “so we only have three minutes left in the debate before we go to your closing statements.” No one knows what he’s talking about, but we’re pretty sure it doesn’t have to do with whales. Romney says he’d break partisan gridlock in Washington by working “on a collaborative basis,” which Obama says he’s tried.

88 minutes. Closing statements. Everybody thanks everybody for being there. Obama says he’ll give Americans a fair shot but mostly avoids looking directly at the camera, as if he is tired or shy. “Four years ago, we were going through a major crisis, and yet my faith and confidence in the American future is undiminished,” he says. Romney fires up the PowerPoint: unemployment, health care and the military will suffer under an Obama second term, he says. He looks directly at the camera, appearing bigger and more confident.

92 minutes. Romney and Obama meet at midstage for a handshake and a backslap. The families come out. The cable spin begins. And the first presidential debate of 2012 is over.

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