

Episode 65: The Presidential Debate

In this episode of "In the Know," we speak with students about last week's presidential debate.

Ava Kian and Ethan Quezada

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MEGAN PALMER: Hey y'all, and welcome back to another week. Before I introduce our story, I have a favor to ask. In The Know reporters Megan and Yoko are hoping to do a story on student mental health in the coming weeks, and they want to know how you are doing in your own words. So grab a recorder, or even just your phone, and send us a brief voice memo. Let us know where you at mentally in the midst of such a historic semester. How are you feeling? What's keeping you up at night? What are you struggling with? When you're done, please email your audio diary to us at intheknow@mndaily.com That's i-n-t-h-e-k-n-o-w AT mndaily.com. And just a heads up, if you choose to record on your phone, hold it up to your ear as if you're making a normal phone call to get the best quality. Thanks!

PALMER: Now let's get back to the story. Last week was the first presidential debate, one that'll go down in history — and students have a lot to say about it. Here's Ava and Ethan with the story.

AVA KIAN: Hi everyone, I'm Ava Kian.

ETHAN QUEZADA: And I'm Ethan Quezada, and you're listening to In the Know, a podcast by the Minnesota Daily.

QUEZADA: Last Tuesday, the long-awaited presidential debate between Donald Trump and Joe Biden was not necessarily what many voters had expected. Young voters expected some level of disagreement and commotion — but not to the extent of what took place. In this episode, we'll be speaking to student viewers to get their take on what went down.

AMBI: CHRIS WALLACE DEBATE INTRODUCTION

KIAN: People watched 90 minutes of back and forth between the two presidential candidates. If you missed it, here are a few highlights...



Trump refused to condemn white supremacy...

CLIP FROM DEBATE: “WHO WOULD YOU LIKE TO ME TO CONDEMN...” “PROUD BOYS.” “PROUD BOYS — STAND BACK AND STAND BY, BUT I’LL TELL YOU WHY...”

KIAN: ... Biden said he opposes the Green New Deal...

CLIP FROM DEBATE: “DO YOU SUPPORT THE GREEN NEW DEAL?” “PARDON ME?” “DO YOU —” “NO, I DON’T SUPPORT THE GREEN NEW DEA.” “OH, YOU DON’T! OH, WELL, THAT’S A BIG STATEMENT.”

KIAN: ... And the two candidates aimed a lot of personal attacks at each other, which meant the moderator Chris Wallace spent about half the time trying to quiet them down.

CLIP FROM DEBATE: “GENTLEMEN! I HATE TO RAISE MY VOICE, BUT IT SEEMS TO BE — WHY SHOULD I BE DIFFERENT THAN THE TWO OF YOU?”

QUEZADA: We spoke to students because the issues at stake impact their futures. In 2018, the University of Minnesota earned the highest voter turnout across large public universities nationwide — with nearly 60 percent of university students voting. Liz Cecka, a junior who had already voted early in this election cycle, tuned in to the debate to stay informed.

LIZ CECKA: I think my expectations, um, were, in some ways met, and in some ways actually exceeded, my initial expectations were definitely that it was going to be chaotic. And I had very low expectations for you know, Trump being able to respect the moderator and kind of respect the, you know, general format.

KIAN: Maeve Finnegan, a psychology major, who plans to vote for Biden, found Trump’s performance predictable.

MAEVE FINNEGAN: I was totally expecting Donald Trump to be like that. I was totally expecting him to like not be able to let Joe Biden get a word in and say some pretty like propaganda infused things

FINNEGAN: Nothing about Donald Trump’s performance surprised me.

QUEZADA: Noah Harstad, a senior studying global studies and German, felt inclined to watch the debate because he knew it would be epic.

NOAH HARSTAD: I was inspired to watch the debate, because I’ve always been, like, fairly politically active. And I knew it was going to be the debate of a lifetime. for lack of better words. And really, it ended up being that.

KIAN: Both Noah and Liz were impressed with Biden’s performance. Neither of them knew about Biden’s speech impediment, finding out about it from social media after the debate.

CECKA: I think Biden held up admirably under pressure so far. I also think that you know, there’s a lot going into this, he’s only human, and as has been discussed widely recently, he does have speech impediments that very well may well like come out at some point.

HARSTAD: One of the most interesting things that I learned after the debate was I didn’t realize Joe Biden had a speech impediment, um, which made his performance to me, I think, a little bit more impressive, because he was fighting through, he’s been fighting through the speech impediment his entire life, but he did such a good job of standing up to Donald Trump.

KIAN: What do you think he [Joe Biden] did well?

HARSTAD: I really enjoyed the fact that he addressed the American people, like looked at the camera and said, You know, like, you people at home. And then he did a really good job of balancing how much he spoke, or tried to speak, I guess, and how much he let Donald Trump speak and make a fool of himself.

FINNEGAN: I think that Joe Biden was reasonable enough to get people to like kind of the undecided voters to kind of get on board with him. And I think he was really smart, he was like talking a lot to the camera because it's kind of impossible to have a conversation with Donald Trump.

QUEZADA: The chaos created several notable television moments and memes.

HARSTAD: "Just shut up man. That was... [laughs]. I like I screamed at the television when he said that.

FINNEGAN: Initially, I was like, when he called him a clown and whatever, I was like, "Oh, he's being like he's stooping down to his level." But then I like, after talking about it with some of my friends and my roommates, I was like, "Well, the level that Donald Trump is at, he has not stooped down to that far of a level and saying those things would be inappropriate and a normal debate, but that was not a normal debate."

There was one that was like debate two is going to take place in a Chili's parking lot. That made me laugh pretty loud

KIAN: Do you have any facepalm moments where you were just like, I wish I did not have to watch this right now. Or you just had to stop for a second?

HARSTAD: Probably about the whole debate. But, um, anytime Donald Trump would speak over Joe Biden, he literally sounded like what I would name my anxiety as.

CECKA: The thing that I would describe as more of a facepalm reaction was the fact that you know, the moderator directly point-blank asked him about his taxes in 16 and 17. And he responded with like, "Oh, yeah, I paid millions."

CECKA: And the other thing that, of course, really raised my eyebrows was the fact that he had that whole, like, long debate with the moderator where he's "like, tell me what to denounce" and then refused to denounce white supremacy.

QUEZADA: When Trump told The Proud Boys, a far-right extremist group, to "stand back and stand by," Maeve interpreted it as the president asking the group to "arm the polls."

FINNEGAN: That makes me scared, just for people going to vote in-person on election day. I think there's going to be some, it's going to be a scary environment for sure.

KIAN: To cope with all these emotions, these students took to comedy, alcohol, and friends.

HARSTAD: My three roommates and I all watched it together. It was kind of like a viewing party. It was the closest thing I've ever gotten to like, sport culture. We were all screaming at the TV.

All of my roommates were drinking.

I hate for it to sound like I found the debate comedic. Because I didn't find it comedic. I was super nervous the entire time, but you have to temper that anxiety with, you know, self care.

FINNEGAN: There was a lot of yelling in the first five minutes of us being like, "what's happening?" and like laughing because it was just ridiculous from the start.

CECKA: Something that my roommates that I do is: we just yell the word scream, instead of screaming, mostly to avoid annoying our neighbors. And that was what we all universally did. And we just loudly yelled, "scream!" And that kind of sums it up. I really, you know, I was just kind of shaking my head at the screen and being like, I'm, you know, I'm really sitting here right now. And I'm really watching this. And the only thing I have left to say is "scream."

KIAN: Like if there were voters who were on the line? Do you think it served the purpose of being a debate to educate people?

CECKA: I actually do know a couple of people who like through my roommate who had said previously that they were voting for Trump and then since the debates Maybe not quite convinced yet, but definitely did speak negatively of him in the debate. And so I think it did serve its purpose in, you know, making people watch a lot more of the reality of these two candidates.

HARSTAD: I have a few family members that were super disgusted by how the debate went, some family members that I'm trying to convince to vote for Joe Biden. And I think if the performance remains like it was in the first, it could be a really good tipping point for a lot of like, central to right-leaning people to vote left.

FINNEGAN: I think that it was smart to have them. I think that if we didn't have debates, there wouldn't be as much hearing from the horse's mouth. I guess from what they're actually saying,

And so I think it's important that we have them and that even if they are a complete mess and shit show... I think that it's okay to like, I think that we need to see that.

QUEZADA: Reflecting on the debate, Liz thinks Trump's strategy is different than it was against Hillary Clinton in 2016.

CECKA: What I remember most from those debates was that, yeah, there were still a lot of, you know, weird comments from Trump and things like that, but it was less desperate.

And the fact that you know, for all his flaws, Joe Biden is a functional presidential candidate that, you know, Trump had to face off with, he was just kind of throwing everything out of the bag at him. And it was not necessarily a coordinated attack.

KIAN: How do you feel about how he [Trump] might have treated Biden versus Hillary? Did you notice any differences in the debate from this year to 2016?

CECKA: I think that there were a lot of comments that it was easier for him [Trump] to feel comfortable making because she was a woman, which is its own separate issue, that, you know, are harder to throw at a white man.

QUEZADA: Liz referenced when Biden told Trump to "Shut up,"...

CECKA: I saw some social media posts afterwards that were commenting on the fact that like, Biden kind of got away with that as a white man. And that was something that potentially, like Hillary probably also wanted to do in the 2016 debates and didn't necessarily have the foothold to get away with saying that.

KIAN: For future debates, people think the style and rules need some adjustment.

HARSTAD: I think they should get just a blow horn to, you know, stop the candidates from speaking. But aside from that, I think just really being hard on the two-minute time limit, and like, making sure that the candidates stop speaking.

QUEZADA: Though the debate left much to be desired for these students, they're still ready to vote.

HARSTAD: More than ever, it's imperative that college people vote. Because

We are a very underrepresented age group. And we could really tip the scales in positive ways.

FADE UP & UNDER OUTRO MUSIC

PALMER: Before we go, here's what else is happening on campus: concerns about policing and campus safety marked the first MSA forum of the semester. In Greek life, the Panhellenic Council ended their partnership with the Interfraternity Executive Council, citing a relationship that perpetuates racism, heteronormativity, sexism and sexual violence. And Gopher athletes and athletic staff have been given November 3rd off to participate in the presidential election. We'll see you next week.