**Post-Debate Analysis: ‘The Game Is On’?**

We asked political veterans for their reactions to the Obama-Romney debate, and here they provide their analysis of who did best on which points, who had a stronger overall performance — and, most important, whether the debate could change votes.  The contributors are  **Mark S. Mellman**, Democratic pollster and Mellman Group president**; Frank J. Donatelli,**former Reagan political director and current GOPAC chairman; **David Winston**, GOP strategist and president of the Winston Group; and **John Podesta**, chairman of the Center for American Progress and former Clinton White House chief of staff.

**David Winston: Romney Builds Momentum**

**Mitt  Romney** came into this debate with defining the choice of his vision for the country and **Barack Obama**’s. He had to change the political equilibrium of the race and prove he was capable of governing. That was his challenge.

In the course of the debate, Gov. Romney laid out his positions, and vigorously contradicted President Obama’s assertions, as the president struggled to get the debate back to his terms. That ranged  from tax policy to heath care. It was a surprising outcome as the president was remarkably unable to effectively engage Gov. Romney at a policy level.

The president’s frustration was seen as he consistently gave either disparaging looks at Gov. Romney or looked down in what seemed frustration over how things were developing.

Ultimately, the president was on the defensive about the last four years, and was unable to define the next four years. Gov. Romney, after posing the question prior to this debate about whether voters  were better off than four years ago, focused on the future and took the initiative in this debate – and that clearly worked.

The president focused on the past rather than looking forward – and that hurt him. Gov. Romney began to propose a future and took steps toward defining that – and it was a positive contrast.

As a result, Gov. Romney succeeded, and listening to the immediate media coverage, that seemed to be a universal consensus. At a broader level, Gov. Romney’s performance as a center-right candidate has the potential to build the natural center-right coalition in the country. The question is what does he do with this momentum?

The one thing this does show is that thorough debate preparation does matter. Republicans should be appreciate of Sen. Rob Portman’s effort to help prepare Gov. Romney. As Sherlock Holmes would say, “the game is on.”

**John Podesta: Obama Played It Safe**

Debates don’t usually move elections. That’s especially true when most of the electorate has already decided who they’re casting their ballots for. With that in mind, President **Barack Obama** played it safe.

Mr. Obama was expecting to debate the tax and health-care proposals that **Mitt Romney** has publicly supported throughout his campaign. But the Mitt Romney who was on stage Wednesday flatly denied nearly every policy offered by Mitt 1.0.

On taxes, for instance, Gov. Romney successfully threw President Obama for a loop by simply denying that his proposals were, in fact, his proposals. Though he has called for specific tax cuts that would slash government revenue dramatically, Romney stuck to the baffling position that his plan would not actually cut taxes. And Mr. Obama was, indeed, baffled. Mr. Obama’s best moment was when he took Mr. Romney to task for failing to offer any specifics for how his tax plan adds up. But overall, Mr. Romney’s strategy of running from his own proposals appeared to work.

On health care, and particularly Medicare, the president’s argument was stronger. There are ways to control the growth of health-care costs without creating a Medicare voucher system that eventually shifts the burden of payment to seniors. Mr. Romney created a problem for himself in selecting **Paul Ryan** as his running mate and he didn’t offer any reassurance to today’s—or particularly tomorrow’s—seniors that Medicare would be strengthened and preserved on his watch.

Mr. Romney probably had the best zinger of the night, decrying what he called “trickle-down government”—though voters surely found a Republican candidate arguing against trickle-down a curious sight. But he didn’t deliver anything close to the knock-out punch his campaign sorely hoped for.

Mr. Romney’s hurdle was higher than the president’s because he’s been consistently behind in national polls—and the gap is even wider in crucial swing states. Arguably, Romney may have won the debate on points, but he didn’t change the trajectory of the election.

**Mark S. Mellman: Romney Runs From Himself**

The civility lobby was likely thrilled with tonight’s debate, but undecided, swing voters may not have gotten too much out of it. The welter of competing numbers, clashing studies and contending economists, may have been illuminating to policy wonks, but ordinary voters likely found it difficult to sort through it all. Precious few swing voters know what **Arne Duncan**’s programs are, which parts of **Dodd Frank** should be repealed, or whether **Simpson Bowles** is a good idea.

Revealing differences between the candidates was difficult, in important measure, because **Mitt Romney** tried to shed yet another identity, repudiating many of the principles and policies he has advocated throughout the campaign. Having been criticized for years for lacking a philosophical core, Mr. Romney tonight sought to transform himself yet again, this time from a “severe conservative” into a moderate.

He abandoned a tax plan on which he has campaigned for months, simply denying he had ever advocated it. Having spent a year campaigning to repeal Dodd Frank and criticizing government regulation, tonight Mr. Romney sought to embrace regulation as essential, perhaps for the first time in this campaign. For months, Mr. Romney has talked about the need to cut teachers in our public schools, but tonight denied he would cut education.

Of course, the politically consequential question is did either candidate move votes. The answer is likely “no,” and that is bad for Gov. Romney. The themeless arguments, about facts figures and studies, left persuadable voters with too little grab onto, too little to differentiate the candidates. Few debates change the outcome of presidential elections and this one is unlikely to break the mold.

**Frank J. Donatelli: The Race Is Very Much Up for Grabs**

The candidates Wednesday evening sparred over a variety of economic topics, laying out far different plans to deal with job creation, taxes, and deficit reduction.  **Mitt Romney** focused on growing the economy, empowering the private sector and implementing tax reform.  President **Barack Obama** argued for tax fairness and strategic government investments in energy and education.  Partisans on both sides were probably satisfied with their candidate’s responses.

Both candidates also went into considerable detail discussing their health-care plans.  The problem is that Obamacare is widely unpopular, so most of this discussion probably benefited Mr. Romney.

An interesting aside was the exchange on Medicare where Mr. Obama actually blamed higher costs for private health plans versus Medicare on the private sector’s need to make a “profit.”  Like most big-government advocates, he sees profit as something added to price rather than the residue of lower costs through competition.  Under that view, government  can do anything better than the private sector because it doesn’t have to make a profit.  Hence his consistent preference for government over private solutions.

Mr. Romney was most effective discussing families he has met who have been hurt by the economic downturn.  He also scored when he cited current unemployment and growth statistics which are poor by historic standards.  Mr. Obama filibustered on many answers and seemed annoyed more than once by Romney and even the mild-mannered **Jim Lehrer**.

It was a debate played between the forties, no huge mistakes but plenty of detailed issue discussion. This  race is still very much up for grabs.

As you evaluate the post-game polls remember: Believing a candidate won or lost the evening is not the same thing as changing their vote for the long term, and that’s the criterion that counts.

Yes, it was as bad as it seemed (Yahoo News)

No, it wasn’t Jim Lehrer’s fault for letting Romney expound; Obama got more time (four minutes more) than Romney. Besides, it’s not the moderator’s job to call a debater out on questionable assertions. It’s the opponent’s job.

Yes, it wasn’t the best atmospherics for Obama to look down, purse his lips, appear distracted, while Romney was attentive, engaged, relaxed. But this was much more than atmospherics. This was about one candidate who came with a frame for the evening, and who was prepared to engage on every question; and another who, perhaps because of his documented faith in his own abilities, felt he could wing it with snatches of familiar verbiage.

Most surprising, the whole evening felt as if Obama thought he was back in 2008, needing only to demonstrate a sense of cool, calm collectedness to persuade the voters that they could do what they desperately wanted to do: change course.

There was barely a moment when Obama offered any sense that he was prepared to challenge Romney on his weakest point: who does the Republican presidential nominee speak for? How much (or little) does he understand where the country is, how it got here?

Even on the most basic political points, Obama seemed clueless. When you argue as a Democrat that you and your Republican opponent share wide areas of agreement on Social Security—especially when recipients make up a chunk of Romney’s “47 percent” of indolent spongers—you have thrown in a fistful of high cards.

What remains is one key question that the next 48 to 72 hours will answer: Did this debate change the minds of significant numbers of voters? Assuming that the flash polls are right—that most viewers thought Romney won the debate—did they regard that as a loss for “their” team, or did it persuade some of them to change their minds about whom they are supporting,

One of the enduring myths of campaign analysis is that you can actually count the number of “undecided” voters by asking voters if they are undecided or not. Sometimes, significant numbers of voters actually change their minds. That’s how Reagan turned a small lead into a landslide in 1980. It’s how Gore won the popular vote in 2000, and how Kerry got back into the race in 2004.

If this debate—as one-sided as any I have ever seen—does not change the landscape, if Obama retains a small but measurable lead, it means that the election is more or less over (barring some overwhelmingly consequential event), that voters have decided they are going to stick with the President. That is thin gruel on which the Obama campaign must dine for the next few days; but after this debacle, it’s the only sustenance on the menu.