

# WHATEVER HAPPENS WITH THE DEBATE, KAMALA HARRIS' CAMPAIGN IS NOT YET HALF DONE

As you watch the torrent of news obsessing about the debate tonight, remember this stat:

Trump's campaign is 92% done (665 of 721 days).

Kamala Harris' campaign is not quite half done (48%, or 51 of 107 days).

Lots can and likely will still happen in this race, but Trump is almost done and the Vice President is only halfway there.

The debate coverage is almost entirely focused on what Kamala Harris can do with it (though Peter Baker finally wrote a story – one published above the fold in the dead tree version – that Trump might look old). Polls show that almost a third of voters will look to the debate to learn more about what Harris stands for – which likely is code for “feels.” But pundits are focused on whether Harris can define her policy agenda, or whether Trump can succeed in branding her with policy failures on immigration, inflation, and the Afghan withdrawal.

There has been far less focus – or just as often, outright misunderstanding – on Harris' efforts to make a Trump meltdown more likely. I've argued that was one purpose of Brian Fallon's very public effort to get ABC to allow live mics. Even though the effort failed, it sets up a focus on the worries from Trump's own handlers that he'll lose his cool.

And yesterday and today, Harris has taken steps to make that more likely. Today, she released an ad based on President Obama's mockery of Trump's obsession with [cough] crowd sizes.

I'm not a fan of the ad. The glimpse of Trump's very small hand is over the top.

I'm also not the audience for this ad.

Trump is.

Seeing a Black former President mocking his masculinity is the kind of thing that Trump is often unable to shake without a *lot* of babysitting.

I'm more fond of yesterday's ad, which makes a far more substantial point: That none of the "best people" who used to work for Trump support him this time.

It, too, is designed to get under Trump's skin. Anything involving Mark Milley gets under Trump's skin! And Harris released it with enough lead time that ABC might even ask Trump about the ad, one of those stupid questions about the campaign that horserace journalists can't resist. Perhaps the ad will lead ABC to ask a far more substantive question about why Trump is the first former president in history whose former VP refuses to back him.

So Harris is doing what she can to raise the chances that a man with no impulse control will act like a whiny baby in front of the whole country today. He'll probably avoid saying the N-word (though I don't rule it out). But there's a decent chance he'll say or do something that will display his insecurities about facing a very smart Black woman for all the world to see.

My point about the timing, though, is that the most likely outcome is that this won't matter. The most likely outcome of tonight's debate is that whatever happens, pundits will review the debate and decide, 60-40, that one of these candidates won the debate. Focus groups will tell pollsters, 40-60, that the other candidate won the debate.

If that's the outcome, if Kamala can't immediately win over a chunk of new supporters, if Trump can't brand the Vice President as a communist, then it is unlikely to significantly affect the race.

Tomorrow morning, we're most likely to be where we are today: with a tie race, only with 55 days left instead of 56. Trump will still be 92% done and Harris will be 49% done.

The reason I keep harping on that timing, though, is that most campaign journalists are not accounting for the fact that Harris did in the last 51 days what Trump did (or was supposed to do, but the Guardian reports he has not) in the last twenty months: lay a foundation for the rest of the campaign: Set up offices, recruit volunteers, identify likely voters, prepare a voter persuasion and mobilization plan.

While pundits were focused on crowd sizes, Harris used those huge rallies for a very specific purpose: to very quickly recruit a ton of volunteers who would find and turn out every possible vote. Tim and Gwen Walz and Doug Emhoff are swooping into campaign offices and randomly getting on phone calls that volunteers are already placing to identify and persuade voters, something that wows the voters, but also inspires volunteers that their efforts are not isolated from the larger whole.

But Harris has done something else in the last 51 days that has largely been measured only in terms of enthusiasm, if at all. She has:

- Provided a permission structure (most recently with the Liz and Dick Cheney endorsements) for Republicans to support her
- Elevated reproductive rights from one of many issues to the most important issue for many voters

- Gotten a whole lot of younger voters of color, especially women, to register to vote

All three of those things are a foundation. Only the first one – a permission structure via which self-identified Republicans first consider and then, maybe, vote for Harris – will play a very important role tonight. If she succeeds in presenting herself as the better national security candidate (which should be child's play) and if she succeeds in allaying concerns about her liberal record, it may advance that permission structure, little by little. Even that won't immediately show up in the polls.

But the rest of that foundation – the new voters, the newly central reproductive rights as campaign issue – may not show up in polls at all. It's not even clear which pollsters are using up-to-date registration lists to do their polling. It's definitely unclear what the likely voter model will look like.

No one knows.

No one knows, in part, because Kamala Harris is only halfway through her campaign.

It's certainly possible that one or the other campaign will do something that dramatically alters the shape of this race tonight. Though for all the bluster about Trump's gish galloping debate prowess, if he looks old or melts down, the flood of lies may not be enough, this time.

But if that doesn't happen – if neither candidate manages to disrupt the tied race with their debate performance – than that other detail becomes important again.

Donald Trump is more than nine-tenths of the way through this race.

Kamala Harris still has half the race to build on the foundation she has laid in the last 51 days.