

HOW KAMALA HARRIS DODGED THE TWO TRUTHS PROBLEM

One reason fact checking doesn't work with Donald Trump is that he has trained his followers to so distrust the press that even if Daniel Dale lays out 33 lies in one debate, Trump's followers will simply write that off to press bias. Donald Trump has created a system in which there are two truths in the United States: one, the reality that sane people live in, and another, an all-encompassing system of false claims that Trump has spun with the help of Fox News.

So every time you try to fact check Trump, you simply *reinforce* the polarization in the US. You simply reinforce the belief of Trump's supporters that the other half of society simply hates Trump's truth. And so, counterintuitively, fact checking has the opposite effect you might want it to have: it reinforces the loyalty of Trump's rubes, rather than leads them to doubt him.

Kamala Harris appears to understand that. One of the most fascinating aspects of last week's debate is how, with one major and two lesser exceptions, rather than directly disputing Trump's truth, Harris instead rebutted his false claims by making Trump look weak.

The one exception – over an hour into the debate – came when Linsey Davis invited Harris to respond to Trump's accusation that she hates Israel.

LINSEY DAVIS: Vice President Harris, he says you hate Israel.

VICE PRESIDENT KAMALA HARRIS: That's absolutely not true. I have my entire career and life supported Israel and the Israeli people.

But aside from Harris saying, “that’s not true,” or, “that’s a lie,” Harris usually doesn’t directly dispute any of the lies Trump tells. Often, she instead says things that suggest his incompetence.

For example, in response to Trump’s first answer in which he makes a claim about the economy under his term, instead of directly disputing it, Harris mocks what a mess he left her and President Biden.

Let’s talk about what Donald Trump left us. Let’s talk about what Donald Trump left us.

[snip]

And what we have done is clean up Donald Trump’s mess.

Trump claims that all the jobs created under the Biden Administration were just “bounceback” jobs as the economy reopened after the pandemic. Rather than disputing that, Harris describes how Trump is just trying to help rich people (and then notes that even Wharton assess his economic plans would bankrupt the country).

So, Donald Trump has no plan for you. And when you look at his economic plan, it’s all about tax breaks for the richest people.

[snip]

What the Wharton School has said is Donald Trump’s plan would actually explode the deficit.

Trump complains about inflation and brags that up to 90% of people think he’ll be better on the economy. Harris could have corrected the polling claim or – more importantly – talked about how the Biden Administration had tamed inflation. She didn’t (there are reports that some Biden insiders are hurt she didn’t defend him more, and this may be an example). Instead, she hit

Trump for sending chips to China.

[Y]ou wanna talk about his deal with China what he ended up doing is under Donald Trump's presidency he ended up selling American chips to China to help them improve and modernize their military basically sold us out when a policy about China should be in making sure the United States of America wins the competition for the 21st century.

Donald Trump tells his normal lie, claiming that everyone wanted abortion to be returned to the states, and Harris simply calls him a liar, before explaining how his hand-picked Justices did what Trump wanted.

Well, as I said, you're going to hear a bunch of lies. And that's not actually a surprising fact.

Trump's claim that people are engaged in infanticide is one of three lies that ABC, in this case Linsey Davis, fact-checked in real time. So Harris starts her reply by first addressing Davis' question about whether Harris would put any limits on abortion access by using Roe as a stand-in, she then translates Trump's infanticide claim into what it would really mean, then describes even claiming it is an insult to women.

I absolutely support reinstating the protections of Roe v. Wade. And as you rightly mentioned, nowhere in America is a woman carrying a pregnancy to term and asking for an abortion. That is not happening. It's insulting to the women of America. And understand what has been happening under Donald Trump's abortion bans.

Trump interrupts and tries to refloat his infanticide claim and Harris successfully interjects – come on! But her first response to

the infanticide is to emphasize that Trump hasn't denied he would veto an abortion ban.

VICE PRESIDENT KAMALA HARRIS: Come on.

FORMER PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: Would you do that? Why don't you ask her that question –

VICE PRESIDENT KAMALA HARRIS: Why don't you answer the question would you veto –

FORMER PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: That's the problem. Because under Roe v. Wade.

VICE PRESIDENT KAMALA HARRIS: Answer the question, would you veto–

FORMER PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: You could do abortions in the seventh month, the eighth month, the ninth month –

VICE PRESIDENT KAMALA HARRIS: That's not true.

David Muir invites Harris to respond after Trump's cat screech. She starts by labeling him as extreme and pivots to talking about her Republican endorsers.

Talk about extreme. Um, you know, this is I think one of the reasons why in this election I actually have the endorsement of 200 Republicans who have formally worked with President Bush, Mitt Romney, and John McCain including the endorsement of former Vice President Dick Cheney and Congressman Liz Cheney.

That leads to a long exchange between Muir and Trump in which Trump falsely blames crime on immigrants. Muir corrects Trump's claim that crime is going up. But there's still a false claim that Harris could have corrected: that immigrants are more likely to commit crimes than American citizens. Instead of doing that, she raises Trump's own crimes.

Well, I think this is so rich. Coming from someone who has been prosecuted for national security crimes, economic crimes, election interference, has been found liable for sexual assault and his next big court appearance is in November at his own criminal sentencing. And let's be clear where each person stands on the issue of what is important about respect for the rule of law and respect for law enforcement.

Trump responds with his tired lies about the legal cases against him being political. Again, Harris could fact check those lies (at least the ones that wouldn't amount to command influence from a sitting Vice President). Instead, she doubles down on the "extreme" comment, then lays out the way SCOTUS' immunity decision would immunize Trump for misconduct.

Well let's talk about extreme. And understand the context in which this election in 2024 is taking place. The United States Supreme Court recently ruled that the former president would essentially be immune from any misconduct if he were to enter the white house again. Understand, this is someone who has openly said he would terminate, I'm quoting, terminate the constitution of the United States.

After Trump responds to Harris answer to a Davis question about fracking, he spurts out some of the other things that Trump claims she has flip-flopped on. Don't lie, Harris answers after first saying that his claims were not true.

Uh, defund the police. She's been against that forever. She gave all that stuff up, very wrongly, very horribly. And everybody's laughing at it, okay? They're all laughing at it. She gave up at least 12 and probably 14 or 15 different policies. Like, she was big on

defund the police.

VICE PRESIDENT KAMALA HARRIS: That's not true. [mouthed, not audible]

FORMER PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: In Minnesota, she went out – wait a minute. I'm talking now. If you don't mind. Please. Does that sound familiar?

VICE PRESIDENT KAMALA HARRIS: Don't lie. [lie is audible]

Then Trump responds to a Muir question about whether he regretted his actions on January 6 by blaming Nancy Pelosi. Again, Harris *could* fact check Trump's claim that it was Pelosi's role, and not his own, to keep the country safe. Instead, she states clearly that he incited a violent mob and coddled right wingers on other occasions.

I was at the Capitol on January 6th. I was the Vice President-Elect. I was also an acting senator. I was there. And on that day, the president of the United States incited a violent mob to attack our nation's Capitol, to desecrate our nation's Capitol. On that day, 140 law enforcement officers were injured. And some died. And understand, the former president has been indicted and impeached for exactly that reason. But this is not an isolated situation. Let's remember Charlottesville, where there was a mob of people carrying tiki torches, spewing antisemitic hate, and what did the president then at the time say? There were fine people on each side. Let's remember that when it came to the Proud Boys, a militia, the president said, the former president said, "Stand back and stand by."

Harris says, "we're not going back" to this – a clear sign that when she uses the term, it's not about incumbency, it's about Trump's fascism.

After the Israel exchange – the clearest moment, I argue, when Harris directly disputed a claim Trump made – and the commercial break, the discussion turns to Ukraine, to Trump’s unwillingness to answer whether he wants them to win. After Trump babbles a bunch about Biden before claiming he would end the Ukraine war before he took office, Harris accuses Trump of planning to just give up.

Well, first of all, it’s important to remind the former president you’re not running against Joe Biden, you’re running against me. I believe the reason that Donald Trump says that this war would be over within 24 hours is because he would just give it up. And that’s not who we are as Americans.

When Muir invites Harris to respond to Trump’s false claim that she met with Putin, Harris first notes she has predicted he would lie, then describes, again, meeting with Volodymyr Zelenskyy (I’ve seen Trump supporters complain that she didn’t deny meeting Putin).

Yet again, I said it at the beginning of this debate, you’re going to hear a bunch of lies coming from this fella. And that is another one. When I went to meet with President Zelenskyy, I’ve now met with him over five times. The reality is, it has been about standing as America always should, as a leader upholding international rules and norms.

Some questions later, Trump interrupts to respond to Harris’ observation that Trump uses race to divide America, making a rubber-glue argument. I’m not the most divisive presidency, you are.

Knowing that regardless of people’s color or the language their grandmother speaks we all have the same dreams and aspirations and want a president who

invests in those, not in hate and division.

DAVID MUIR: Vice President Harris thank you. Linsey?

LINSEY DAVIS: President Trump, this is now your third time –

FORMER PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: This is the most divisive presidency in the history of our country.

Trump is trying to revert to that two truths position, on which he usually operates. Rubber, glue. In such a world, you don't have to decide who really has had a divisive presidency, you have only to decide who you trust, and your answer will come from there.

He somehow goes from there to inflation. Once again, Harris does not respond by pointing out that inflation has been tamed, but instead with her generational comment, which she uses as a way to list all the plans she has, in contrast to Trump.

I want to respond to that, though. I want to just respond briefly. Clearly, I am not Joe Biden, and I am certainly not Donald Trump. And what I do offer is a new generation of leadership for our country. One who believes in what is possible, one who brings a sense of optimism about what we can do instead of always disparaging the American people. I believe in what we can do to strengthen our small businesses, which is why I have a plan. Let's talk about our plans.

After Trump sets off on a rant, it appears that Harris tries to interrupt to correct Trump's claim that she wants to take everyone's guns, which Davis cuts off.

She has a plan to confiscate everybody's gun. She has a plan to not allow

fracking in Pennsylvania or anywhere else. That's what her plan is until just recently.

LINSEY DAVIS: President Trump, President Trump.

VICE PRESIDENT HARRIS: The former president has said something twice and I need to respond too. I just need to respond one time to what he has said multiple times.

She returns to both fracking (which as she notes, she answered in response to a question from Davis) and guns during a later response on healthcare.

I just need to respond to a previous point that the former president has made. I've made very clear my position on fracking. And then this business about taking everyone's guns away. 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.

But that's it—the next most direct responses to a claim from Trump, after the Israel claim.

Some of these are admittedly closer to direct responses to Trump, but except where Trump makes claims *about* Harris, she does not directly dispute him.

The effectiveness of this approach is clear: Rather than saying Trump's manufactured version of truth was false – again, setting up a clear dispute and inviting Trump's supporters to simply dismiss her as someone opposing him because she hates him – she instead demonstrated, over and over, Trump's weakness.

That recognizes an important fact about the cult-like following Trump has created: So long as his followers believe his strength, they will believe *what he says* as an article of faith.

They believe *in him*, and so believe what he says.

But they believe *in him* because they believe his pose of being strong.

With some exceptions (such as a segment of the Jan6ers prosecuted because they believed him, and left with a lot of time to reconsider the actions they took in response), Trump's people won't start to rethink what he tells them to believe until they first doubt who he is, until they first begin to see through his con of being strong and successful.

And you demonstrate that not by telling them facts that might directly contest the belief system they've adopted from Trump, but by pointing not just to evidence that he's weak – he is laughed at, he is insecure about his crowd size, his daddy gave him millions that he squandered in six bankruptcies.

It's only after they step out of a belief system based on a false belief that Trump is strong will people listen to you.

There was a great deal that Kamala Harris did to succeed in the debate. The most important thing was to rattle the old man, so his own narcissism led him to meltdown of his own accord.

But even as that was happening, the Vice President didn't stoop to a contest of two truths, a contest over which truth voters might pick. She instead made it clear that the basis of the "truth" Trump offers, is a base of weakness and fear. She didn't refute individual aspects of Trump's truth. She instead kicked at its foundations, and showed how flimsy it is.