

University of Missouri

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# MIZZOU

## Presidential Town Hall Debate Gets Aggressive

MU experts weigh in on the candidates' performances.



Communications students packed a classroom in Switzler Hall Tuesday to watch the presidential debate. All completed pre- and post-debate surveys on the candidates as part of a study to measure their knowledge, engagement and degree of political polarization.

*Story by Erik Potter. Photos by Rob Hill.*

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**A**fter two weeks of media drubbing for a lackluster performance in the first debate, President Barack Obama on Tuesday night

gave a performance that showed heart and his fighting spirit.

Former Gov. Mitt Romney, coming off a strong outing that proved to doubters he belonged in the race, kept his energy high to try to preserve the momentum he'd gained in fundraising and the polls.



Half of the students were required to file 10 tweets during Tuesday's debate and the other half didn't as part of the study conducted by Mitchell McKinney, associate professor of communication, and Ben Warner, assistant professor of communication.

The result was an edgy second presidential debate where both men were eager to attack the other's policy plans and past record, often talking over each other and over the moderator.

“It was a very aggressive debate on both sides,” says Ben Warner, assistant professor of communication at Mizzou. “At some points it was even uncomfortable, the aggressiveness.”

MIZZOU asked a panel of experts to critique the candidates' performances. The panel is headed by Mitchell McKinney, who served as a consultant to the U.S. Commission on Presidential Debates on how to structure debates to better educate voters.

**Associate Professor of Communication  
Mitchell McKinney, William T. Kemper Fellow  
for Excellence in Teaching**

Q: How did the different debate format affect Obama and Romney's performances?

A: "As always, the citizens and their concerns tempered the candidates in the town hall debate. For the most part, this was a somber exchange of ideas, with intermittent bickering between the two candidates. Obama seemed to enjoy this debate much more than his first and seemed to enjoy engaging with the citizen questioners. Although Romney was still on task to attack Obama, Romney was far less aggressive than he was in his first debate. Still, at times, Romney appeared a bit petty in his bid to have the last word. Obama came with more specifics tonight and a greater willingness to both attack Romney and respond to Romney's attacks."

Q: Who won?

A: "Both sides will claim victory. The real 'victory' of this debate — who won or who lost — will be played out by the post-debate spinners and campaign operatives trying to convince journalists and others that momentum is on their side. Obama did what he needed to do to shore up his doubters — mostly from within his own party. Romney's debate performance was strong enough for him to go forward with confidence in what seems to be a tied election."

Q: Will Obama's performance be viewed more favorably than it should because of how

[@ksullivan0623](#):  
How are we

poor the first one was in comparison?

A: “The first performance was important in setting expectations. The bar of expectations was higher for Obama in the second debate because he had to do more than he did in the first. When you meet or exceed expectations, it does give you a more positive reaction. The opposite is also true. If you don’t meet or exceed expectations, it can hurt you. Coming out of the that first debate, Obama was raising expectations, saying, ‘I’ve got to do more and be better prepared and take it to him.’ I think for the most part he did and is being rewarded.”

supposed to know who is telling the truth when each candidate says the other one is lying.  
*#frustrating*  
*#mizdeb*

Q: Will the public’s memory of the first debate still hurt Obama, or does Tuesday night wipe the slate clean?

A: “We don’t reset because it happened. And it becomes a moment in the campaign, an important moment. That first debate is somewhat like first impressions. It was the first time [viewers] were hearing Romney or Obama. But what we find in our research is they remember the first debate more; they talk about it more. It has more of an impression. There’s not a reset, but this [second debate] is now worked into the mix of the ongoing

campaign. It gives us another reference point for these two people. It gives us an evolving impression.”

### **Professor Chris Otrok, Sam B. Cook Chair in Economics**

Q: If you were critiquing this debate as an econ class assignment, what would you say were the high and low points?

A: “With Romney I think where he did a good job was when he talked about the unemployment rate being deceptive. The rate is low because some people quit looking for work because they were discouraged. His weak point was when he was talking about letting the auto companies go bankrupt. Whether that’s a good thing or bad thing depends on who you are. If you’re a firm owner, it can be a good thing: You get rid of bad debts, renegotiate contracts. And that’s the perspective he was taking. And from a public policy standpoint ... [that] can hurt blue-collar workers.

For Obama, the economic inequalities with gender issues — he had a better grasp on that than Romney did. On the negative, he focused too much on rebuilding the old U.S. economy rather than looking forward to a new U.S. economy. I think there’s too much emphasis on going back to a manufacturing economy. We’ve moved on from that, and we’re not going to go back to it. And we need policies that will help us move forward.”

**@allison\_o23:**  
**Osama is not  
 dead because of  
 you Obama!**  
*#MizDeb*  
*#RightPlace*  
*#RightTime*

**Q:** Who made the more economically cogent argument overall?

**A:** “I would critique them both for not offering enough details. It’s tough when they’re making claims you can’t fully analyze. It’s not at all clear how Romney is going to balance his budget.

Economically, which deductions you use can have

a big impact on the economy. If you eliminate education subsidies, that’s going to have a longer-run impact on growth you’re not going to see right away. If you use the home interest deduction, that’s going to have a big short-run impact on home prices. I think Obama had a better grip on where tax changes can be made to increase tax revenue without harming a lot of people. Raising tax rates on the wealthy is one way to do that.”

**Q:** What is the biggest economic truth neither candidate is telling?

**A:** “Both of them were wrong on their ability to control the price of oil. Both had different plans to affect the price of oil, and from a political standpoint, they both want to tell the voters that. But oil is a global commodity. If you look at prices in different parts of the world, they’re the same, basically, adjusted for exchange rates. Why are oil

prices so high? There's high demand in emerging economies such as India and China."

**Q:** Both men talked tough on China, especially Romney, who promised to label the Chinese as currency manipulators and impose tariffs against them. Is that realistic?

**A:** "I don't view it as a realistic course of action. Only in international trade do we complain about people selling us things cheaply. When you go to the grocery store and buy food for really cheap, you don't complain about it. Getting in a trade war would be very counterproductive; it wouldn't help our economy in any way. What's helped our economy in the past 20 to 30 years has been a reduction in tariffs. It's probably efficient for China to produce certain things while we produce others."

### **Assistant Professor of Communication Ben Warner**

**Q:** Who did a better job appealing to undecided voters?

**A:** "Some of the instant polling seems to give Obama a little bit of an edge on that. That seems right to me. That small slice of undecided voters are going to like Obama's performance more. The things not to like in the debate — the nastiness, talking over the moderator, not directly answering the people's questions — I think more of that is going to be in Romney's column. Romney's

message was that four years ago you wanted more and didn't get what you wanted. Obama's message was we're on the right path, but we're not there yet. Both arguments were made strongly, and for the undecided voter, that's what you have to pick between."

Q: Who won?

A: "I thought it was a real interesting debate. The town hall format is supposed to be more toned down because you're interacting with a group of real people. But after the first debate, I think Obama got the message. I think the strategy before was to stay above the fray. But nobody liked that. They don't want attacks or nastiness, but they want someone sharp and making a case for himself. ... I think both candidates got too aggressive at times, talking over the moderator. Those weren't high points for either candidate.

"Romney needed to keep fighting and keep his momentum alive. I think Romney is a good debater, but when he has a bad debate, it's because he comes across as unlikable. I do think he got into dangerous territory for him, where he came across as rude, arrogant or even pushy.

"Obama needed to be aggressive, to fight and push on the issues more. He needed to initiate more attacks, and he was able to do that."

Q: In a polarized political climate, can either candidate actually peel voters from the other?



A: “I think that’s incredibly rare. One of the reasons Obama went into the first debate with the idea he didn’t need to be very aggressive was because he already had so many voters and he just needed a few more, and in debates you don’t lose voters. One of the questions coming out of that [first debate] was if it was so lopsided that Romney was actually able to peel away voters.

“What debates tend to be good at is educating the electorate and making people comfortable to participate in the process and talking about their opinions with friends and family. But I don’t think people are going to change their minds after this debate, unless there were soft Obama supporters who tentatively put their support for Romney who Obama brought back.”

Q: Do you have to approach debates differently in the age of Twitter feeds and Facebook status updates, and if so, who did a better job of that?

A: “I think the social media landscape does change it, but [the candidates’] strategy doesn’t need to change much. Ever since Ronald Reagan said [to President Jimmy Carter in the 1980 debate],

@TFleck343GS:  
 Obama always  
 has a fallback on  
 doing what he  
 said he’d do;  
 Osama Bin  
 Laden  
 #justsayin  
 #mizdeb

‘There you go again,’ everyone has been looking for their ‘There you go again’ moment.

About 11 percent of people dual-screened [watched the TV and the live Twitter feed on their computer] the first debate. That does help capture and drive the narrative. It does give [average] people more of a say in framing the narrative. As far as candidate strategy goes, they’re still looking for that sound bite that trends nationally. ‘There you go again’ would have trended on Twitter if Twitter had existed back then.

The thing that stood out the most is how easy it is to see the partisan filtering [on Twitter after Obama brought up the killing of Osama Bin Laden]. It was really evident; you could go through and point them out — Republican, Democrat, Republican, Democrat. One was saying ‘You didn’t kill him! The Navy SEALs did.’ While others were saying, ‘Game, set, match.’ ”

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