

What to look for in tonight's presidential debate

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Tonight sees Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump meet for the first presidential debate at Hofstra University in New York. US Centre Director [Peter Trubowitz](#) comments on what to look for tonight, writing that while much of it will be theatre, what the candidates say and how they comport themselves will matter to voters.

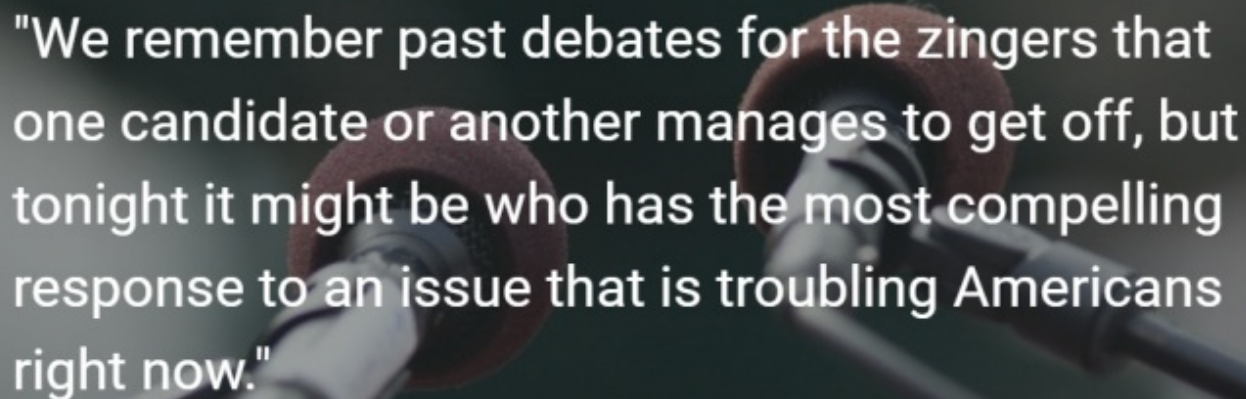


What are you looking for in tonight's debate?

I'll be looking for two things: first, the extent to which Donald Trump tries to reassure white college educated voters that he has what it takes to be president and second, how much Hillary Clinton tailors her responses to the concerns of younger voters. These are the voters that Trump and Clinton need, respectively, to win on November 8, and right now, that support is soft. While Trump is polling strongly among non-college educated whites, when it comes to college educated whites he's lagging behind where Mitt Romney was four years ago. It's hard to see how he wins if he doesn't increase his share of this vote. Meanwhile, Clinton has yet to fully connect with younger voters and especially, those who cast their votes for Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primaries. She needs these millennial voters to win the presidency. In short, the first job for both Clinton and Trump is to shore up their political base. Tonight's debate can help up to a point.

How much impact do you think the debate will have on the race?

Historically, presidential debates do not move the needle very much, but in a tight race like this one is shaping up to be, it could make all the difference. For both candidates the key is connecting to those voters who are nominally Democratic or Republican, but are not yet fully behind their party's nominee. In Clinton's case, again, that means younger Democratic voters who are looking for a positive, affirming reason to vote for her. For Trump, it is college educated Republicans who are not yet convinced that he is made of presidential timber. These are the voters that right now fall into the 'undecided' category. These are the ones who are in play tonight. Bottom line: what Clinton and Trump say and how they comport themselves tonight matters, if only at the margins.

A close-up photograph of several microphones on a stage, likely during a debate. The microphones are black with red foam covers. The background is dark and out of focus.

"We remember past debates for the zingers that one candidate or another manages to get off, but tonight it might be who has the most compelling response to an issue that is troubling Americans right now."

US Centre Director, Professor Peter Trubowitz previews the first presidential election debate

Do you think the debate will be more about substance or style?

Usually, these things are as much theatre as they are substantive and I don't see any reason to think tonight's debate will be different. Indeed, with Donald Trump on the platform, there is likely to be a lot of theatrics. That said, I won't be surprised if Lester Holt, tonight's moderator, presses the candidates on questions around jobs, gender, and race, especially in light of the recent police shootings in Charlotte, North Carolina and Tulsa, Oklahoma. And this is precisely the kind of substantive issue that will draw out the differences between Clinton and Trump: Clinton focusing on problems of bias and exclusion, Trump stressing the need for law and order. We remember past debates for the zingers that one candidate or another manages to get off, but tonight it might be who has the most compelling response to an issue that is troubling Americans right now.

What are the chances that one of the candidates makes a gaffe?

This is always possible. Much depends on whether Lester Holt decides to play the role of fact-checker to draw voters' attention to the mistakes through follow up questioning. Donald Trump tends to play fast and loose with the facts and rarely gets called on it. Holt may not be willing to play that game. There is also the question of Trump's temper — he could lash out in a way that makes him look petty and small minded. Hillary Clinton is less likely to get her facts wrong or lose her temper. The danger for her is not so much in a specific mistake than how she comes across to viewers who have questions less about her competence than her vision and why they should give the Democrats a third consecutive term in the White House.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor the London School of Economics.

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Peter Trubowitz is Professor of International Relations, and Director of the LSE's US Centre. His main research interests are in the fields of international security and comparative foreign policy, with special focus on American grand strategy and foreign policy. He also writes and comments frequently on U.S. party politics and elections and how they shape and are shaped by America's changing place in the world.



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