

# WITH POLLS STEADY, DEBATES WILL BE KEY FOR TRUMP AND BIDEN

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Joe Biden's seven point national average lead over President Trump is holding fairly steady. But with his margins in several key battleground states – Florida, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan – shrinking, it's increasingly clear the defining moments in the campaign will be the three presidential debates.

The ninety-minute face offs on Sept. 29, Oct. 15 and 22, are shaping up as make or break, pressure filled tests, potential turning points for the election outcome.

Make no mistake: Biden goes into the debates holding a lead and the White House is his to lose. But predictions of a landslide – double digit percentage edge and in excess of 400 Electoral votes – are somewhat premature, a product of wishful thinking and an intense dislike for Trump.

By campaigning largely from his basement, appearing at carefully scripted and controlled events and limiting interaction with the media, Biden has protected and nurtured his edge in numerous polls. Standing behind a podium six feet or more away from Trump, though, will be a drastically different environment, a mano a mano where the stakes couldn't be greater.

Trump is arguably the most undisciplined political figure in history, a wild rhetorical swinger who doesn't care about context or accuracy. Nuance and subtlety have never been a part of his persona, privately or publicly.

Biden's supporters portray him as a skilled, adept debater. They point to his experience in the Senate and as vice president as proof of his ability to present his vision for the country, react quickly, think on his feet and respond forcefully to criticism. But that was not the Biden many Americans saw during the Democratic primary season debates, where he often appeared rattled and unsure of himself when under assault from his competition.

Trump will continue his relentless, scathing onslaught against Biden for remaining quiet while violence, looting, arson and attacks on law enforcement swept a number of American cities. Biden has chosen to describe the unrest as largely peaceful demonstrations to focus attention on police misconduct and racially-motivated enforcement.

The president's law and order campaign and Biden's protracted silence in the face of the unrest has, according to some, been impactful and responsible in some measure for the erosion of Biden's lead in the swing states.

Biden eventually condemned the violence and called for the arrest and prosecution of those responsible, but his response came after months of nightly rioting and wanton destruction. His belated reaction proved costly and, not surprisingly, was attributed to his concern that a more vigorous response would draw the wrath of the activist progressive wing of his party that viewed the demonstrations as legitimate civic exercises, blaming police for escalating tensions until riots boiled over.

Nightly newscasts of buildings aflame, rioters dancing gleefully in the streets with looted merchandise, heaving rocks, bottles and Molotov cocktails at police and menacing bystanders took a toll.

Pressure grew on Biden to take a stand, warning that Trump benefitted from the uprisings, that voters were weary and fearful of the mob violence they saw on their television screens each evening – a jarring denial of the "peaceful protest" characterizations.

Even Biden-friendly media used their forums to implore him to break his silence.

Even so, the campaign strategy of blaming Trump for the violence smacked of an attempt to thread the needle – avoid a total break with the progressives, allay public fears by condemning the lawless and argue the upheavals are Trump's fault.

It is crucial that Biden be at the top of his game when confronting Trump. Any hint of weakness, uncertainty, or indecision will be exploited by the president in his typical bulldozer fashion.

Defending against a Trump take-no-prisoners assault can be exhausting, requiring Biden to focus on the president's frequent dissembling, weird conspiracy theories, self-praise, outlandish predictions, bizarre historical allusions and overheated language directed at protesters.

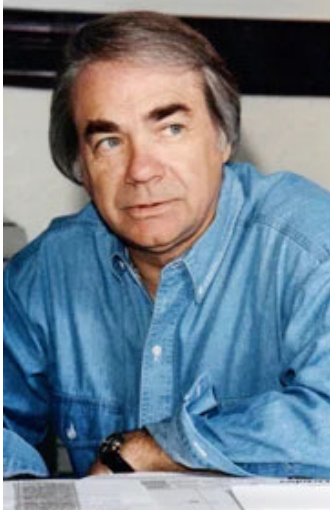
While the tightening of the contest as election day draws closer was anticipated, it is crucial for Biden to understand and appreciate fully the potential for solid debate performances to determine the outcome.

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Carl Golden is a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University in New Jersey. You can reach him at [cgolden1937@gmail.com](mailto:cgolden1937@gmail.com).

## CARL GOLDEN

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Carl Golden is a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Richard Stockton College of New Jersey. He served as press secretary for New Jersey Gov. Thomas H. Kean (1982-1990) and as communications director for New Jersey Gov. Christie Whitman (1994-1997). His commentary appears on editorial pages of newspapers in New Jersey and Philadelphia as well as on news websites.



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