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President Trump and Former Vice President Biden Face Off in a Chaotic First Presidential Debate

With the presidential election just over 30 days away, President Trump and former Vice President Biden took part in the first presidential debate this week. Trump continues to trail Biden in the polls, and his campaign was relying on strong performances in the debates to erode Biden's lead. However, observers noted that Trump's demeanor was disorderly and overly confrontational, setting the tone for a chaotic debate, with both candidates frequently talking over each other and thus leaving the event difficult to follow at times. Some of the topics that moderator Chris Wallace asked the candidates questions on included health care, racial injustice, climate change, the Supreme Court, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Each candidate was allotted two minutes to respond to Wallace's questions, and their time was supposed to be uninterrupted, as agreed upon by both campaigns prior to the debate. Despite this, both Trump and Biden began cutting across each other. President Trump was guilty of being more aggressive in interrupting Biden, and indeed he cut off the former vice president far more frequently than vice versa. At multiple times throughout the debate, the president's behavior earned him a sharp rebuke from Wallace, who was forced at times to engage in a shouting match with Trump to allow Biden to finish his point. Two of President Trump's own allies, former Senator Rick Santorum and former Governor Chris Christie, both criticized the president's performance after the debate, saying that he had come out "too hot" and behaved in a manner unbecoming of the presidency.

In one particularly striking moment, Chris Wallace raised the issue of the racial tension that has been ongoing in cities across the country, and asked President Trump to denounce white supremacists who support his candidacy. The president failed to do so, instead asking the Proud Boys, a white supremacist and neo-fascist organization, to "stand back and stand by." Following the debate, online forums with members of the group rejoiced, viewing the president's refusal to reject them as an implicit tolerance.

Another tense moment during the debate occurred when Biden was asked for his opinion on eliminating the filibuster in the Senate and expanding the number of Supreme Court justices. Both ideas have been championed by the progressive left, but moderate Democrats have voiced their opposition to it, which has led to a split in the party. Biden refused to answer the question, saying that whatever he said would be twisted and thus play into President Trump's hands. However, his refusal to provide a clear position on this topic has elicited criticism from both the right and the left. This was Biden's weakest moment during the debate, in what was otherwise a capable performance.

Despite wavering on the issue of packing the court, Biden was able to distance himself from the progressive wing of the Democratic Party that tends to frighten moderates. He reiterated that he was the face of the party, and rejected outright the Green New Deal, which has been championed by progressives. However, Biden was also able to appeal to the so-called Bernie Sanders wing of the Democratic Party through providing a comprehensive answer to pressing issues such as health care and climate change.

Contrasting this, President Trump failed to appeal to people outside of his base, which is already strong. His repeated bulldozing of both Wallace and Biden was churlish and reinforced the stance of his opponents that he's a bully unbecoming of the office of the president. In opinion polls taken in the immediate aftermath of the debate, the majority of Americans said Biden had the stronger performance. In one CNN poll, the numbers were striking – only 28% of people said Trump had won the debate. Considering the president's current deficit in the polls, he was relying on a strong performance to help boost his support. However, the first debate did nothing to improve his standing and time is beginning to run out for the president's re-election campaign.