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To: Interested Parties
Subject: Biden's Rough Debate Performance Exacerbates Apathy With His Base
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Summary at a Glance

Topic: Findings from QualBoards measuring instant reactions to the debate.

Audience: Center-Left voters in Michigan and Minnesota, who at the start of the debate 83% of which were voting for Biden if the election were held today. The majority were younger voters who are ideologically liberal.

Summary:

- By the end of the QualBoard, more than half the sample said the DNC should replace the president on the ticket.
- For these voters, Biden had the most to prove last night.
- These voters felt Biden appeared weak in the debate. They used terms like “frail”, “physically unsteady”, “weak and confused”, “elderly and unwell”, “older than I remember”, “feeble”, and “looks out of it” to describe him and his performance.
- They compared him to Trump, who they said “physically looks stronger”, and “more aggressive.”
- Despite spending the bulk of the debate defending Biden, by the time the debate concluded our respondents were throwing in the towel. We asked them point blank if the DNC should replace Biden and a majority of them said yes.
- This debate is shaping up to be the biggest blow to Biden's re-election chances so far.

Overview

Immediately following last night's presidential debate, a chorus of liberal pundits took to [panels on CNN and MSNBC](#) and blasted Joe Biden for a disastrous debate performance, with many of them even openly suggesting that Democrats replace the president as their nominee. As the night wore on, this sentiment quickly reached a crescendo within the party's donor and operative class and the bulk of the stories the Biden campaign woke up to this morning chronicle a [frantic push](#) by high ranking Democrats to find an alternative standard bearer. **But is the meltdown we are seeing from Democrats in the beltway about last night's debate translating to Democrat voters across the country? P2 Insights has already been able to determine that answer.**

Last night, our team conducted a live online focus group with **center-left voters in Michigan and Minnesota** to record their instant reactions as the debate unfolded. These qualitative exercises, known as QualBoards, allowed us to ask questions to voters in real time and have them respond via written message or a video recording. Our target audience was younger voters who are ideologically liberal, but aren't entirely committed to Joe Biden yet. As the [separate battleground surveys](#) we published yesterday showed, these are the types of voters

that matter most to Biden at this stage in the game because the main reason he is trailing is that he continues to struggle with his base. **There is no path to victory for Biden if he doesn't improve his standing with this group, making them far more important than what the media views as "swing voters."**

Our findings showed that the debate was an absolute catastrophe for Biden. Most of our respondents were generally in agreement with Biden on policy issues and expressed a deep dislike for Donald Trump, but Biden's age, appearance, and demeanor continued to concern them at virtually every stage of the night. At the start of the debate, 83% of the voters we sampled said they would vote for Biden if the election were held today. **By the end of the QualBoard, more than half the sample said the DNC should replace the president on the ticket.** While such a scenario is highly unlikely, this finding shows that Biden's decision to debate Trump completely backfired and only exacerbated the apathy his base has for his candidacy.

High Expectations For Biden Ahead of the Debate

We asked our first question to our participants about fifteen minutes before the debate started: "Which topic or issue are you most excited to hear about in tonight's presidential debate?" The wide array of responses we received confirmed the challenge Biden is having trouble cobbling together his 2020 coalition – there's not one single issue Biden can focus on to fix his base problem and he was tasked last night with fighting a multifront war to appeal to our group.

"I am most excited to hear about about future plans to fight inflation and to help reduce the rising costs for the everyday American" - Taylor

"I am most excited to hear about the future of women's rights in the US" - Madelyn

"I'm interest[ed] in their plans for gun policy reform" - Selina

Another question we asked before the debate started was who had the most to prove. A significant portion of our participants said Biden.

"Biden. He promised a lot that he did not do and he has a lot to explain in terms of what has happened in the last four years. Trump is Trump he does not change but Biden really disappointed a lot of us." - Maram

"Biden, I want to have hope that my vote is not just a lesser of two evils." - Alicia

Skepticism of Biden's Answers from the Jump

Jake Tapper immediately began the debate by pressing Joe Biden on the economy and why voters feel that things are worse off during his presidency than Trump's. We asked if our respondents were satisfied with Biden's opening statement.

"Honestly surprisingly yes. He seemed psychically unsteady, so I was surprised how well he spoke and stayed to the topic" - Sarah

“I wish he would talk more about specifics, other than just “I’m going to keep addressing it” -- I like that he’s mentioned some things, but I want to know HOW” - Noella

“I feel like he is repeating things that he has already said before. I have heard these policies and plans before so I’m not particularly impressed by anything being said” - Selina

These types of responses set the stage for the entire night and the general unease our sample had with Biden’s performance.

Concern over Biden’s Appearance

Not even fifteen minutes into the debate, there was a resounding sense of concern among our voters about Biden’s verbal stumbles. We asked: Are you concerned with Biden's appearance/performance tonight on the debate stage?

“He does not look good like he genuinely sounds and looks out of it” - Maram

“Yes, I am. He seems so elderly and unwell. He just lost his train of thought in the previous question and it was concerning” - Sarah

“Right now, yes. He seems weak and confused, rambling” - Taylor

“Generally yes, He's staying somewhat together but he looks frail especially his opening walk and he's struggling to maintain some continuity of thought so far.” - James

“Yes a little.” - Meadow

Trump Was Seen as Strong While Biden Was Seen as Weak

Despite the ideological makeup of our group, Trump did receive praise among our voters for his strong approach to foreign policy:

“I believe Trump has a stronger system and plan, but I believe Biden has a more human approach to it and wants to help people and be fair.” - Alice

“I guess it depends on what you mean by stronger. I think Trump has a more heavy handed approach which I generally find more favorable” - James

This phenomenon continued when we asked the question of which candidate appeared the strongest through the first forty-five minutes.

“Trump appears stronger in terms of vitality.” - Noella

“Trump simply because he physically looks stronger than Biden right now” - Maram

“Biden seems feeble, Trump seems more aggressive. So I suppose that Trump seems stronger, even though he's only aggressively lying” - Taylor

And when asked if they had learned anything new from this debate, there was only one thing this group pointed out: Joe Biden is in bad shape.

“Biden is looking really, really old. Older than I remembered.” - Noella

“Biden is in worst (sic) condition than I thought.” - Erika

The Push to Replace

Despite spending the bulk of the debate defending Biden as best they could, by the time the debate concluded our respondents were throwing in the towel. We asked them point blank if the DNC should replace Biden and a majority of them said yes.

“Yes, I believe so.” - Erika

“While I think it's a great idea to do that, I am not sure it is something that is feasible if the democrats want to win against Donald Trump.” - Christopher

“Yes, I would hope that the DNC could replace Biden as the Democratic nominee.” - Sarah

“If I could beg them to replace him I would. He is not going to win it is obvious at this point and I have no hope in him so I wish that they would have just pushed someone else from the beginning because even those close to him are losing faith as I can see in the CNN discussion right now.” - Maram

“Yes, I think that they absolutely should replace Joe Biden with another democratic nominee. Someone that is younger and not as frail.” - Ava

“I think they'd be wise to, Donald Trump is a threat to national security and he cannot be reelected. After that debate, if Joe Biden is on the ticket I don't think he gets reelected.” - Taylor

Conclusion

This debate is shaping up to be the biggest blow to Biden's re-election chances so far. Even as our young liberal voters tried to look on the bright side and focus on policy nuances, the weight of Biden's physical demeanor eventually took hold and it turned their view of the President's performance sour. In just two hours, their high hopes crashed to earth and turned to despair.

And while the Biden campaigns spin as of this morning is that the beltway pundits and twitter chattering class don't represent the vast majority of voters, our focus group clearly showed that there wasn't much daylight between Van Jones and David Axelrod and rank and file Democrats in terms of how Biden's performance was viewed. Biden's base problems only got worse last night and the move to push for this debate by Team Biden could go down as one of the major blunders in modern political history.