

TRUMP-BIDEN DEBATE FACT CHECK

AFP, Washington DC

US President Joe Biden and Republican challenger Donald Trump traded barbs Thursday in the first debate of the 2024 election campaign.

AFP fact-checked what the candidates said on key issues.

'MIGRANT CRIME'

Trump falsely claimed that under Biden, "we don't have borders anymore."

"Because of his ridiculous, insane and very stupid policies, people are coming in and they're killing our citizens at a level that we've never seen. We call it 'migrant crime.' I call it 'Biden migrant crime.'"

Following criticism over record border crossings and a bipartisan immigration bill that faltered in Congress, Biden signed an executive order early this month to temporarily shut down the border to asylum seekers after certain daily limits are hit.

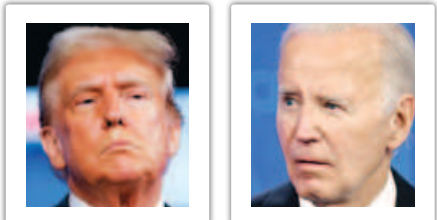
Violent and property crimes are near the lowest levels in decades, according to FBI data from 2022, the most recent year for which figures are available.

Other research has also found migrants commit fewer violent crimes than US citizens, including a Cato Institute report published this week that found migrants are less likely to be convicted of murder in the state of Texas.

INFLATION BLAME

Both Trump and Biden sought to defer blame for rising prices by criticizing each other's economic policies.

"He causes inflation. I gave him a country with essentially no inflation," Trump said after reciting his favorite, but false, line about ushering in the greatest



economy in US history.

Biden countered by saying Trump "decimated the economy" and there were "no jobs" when he took office.

When Trump left office, inflation was around 1.4 percent.

Unemployment was about 6.4 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, down from its peak of 14.8 percent in April 2020.

Inflation started to climb in April 2021. It continued to balloon under Biden's presidency, hitting a peak of around nine percent in June 2022 before falling to its current level of about three percent.

REWRITING JANUARY 6

Trump attempted to deflect blame for the January 6, 2021 attack on the US Capitol, over which he was impeached, by pointing to former House speaker Nancy Pelosi.

"I offered her 10,000 soldiers, or National Guard, and she turned them down," he falsely claimed.

The House committee that investigated the January 6 attack wrote in its final report that Trump "never gave any order to deploy the National Guard."

Trump also insisted again that "the fraud and everything else was ridiculous" in the 2020 election he lost to Biden, claims officials from both parties have refuted.

Dozens of lawsuits aimed at overturning the election failed, while audits and recounts in battleground states reaffirmed Biden's win.

Flop show rocks Biden campaign

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immediate future, he told reporters he had done "well" as he stepped off at an Atlanta Waffle House with First Lady Jill Biden after coming off stage.

He added that he was croaking because of a "sore throat" and that, in any case, it is "hard to debate a liar."

Although Biden managed to pin down Trump on abortion rights and his role in the violence that marred the 2021 handover, he waited bafflingly long — almost 45 minutes — to bring up Trump's felony convictions and other legal woes in any detail.

He spoke under his breath and appeared at times to lose focus, pausing for several seconds after stumbling in the opening stages.

Trump's performance was far from accomplished — his verbal fusillades were littered with falsehoods and he dodged several times when asked what he would do about the opioid crisis ravaging middle-class families.

He also refused to clearly commit to accepting the results of November's election, playing into the narrative that he has little respect for democracy or the rule of law.

CNN reported that while Biden made nine false or misleading statements, Trump made a staggering

Democrats — "including members of his own administration — traded frenzied phone calls and text messages within minutes of the start of the debate as it became clear that Mr. Biden was not at his sharpest," the New York Times reported.

30, including "egregious" falsehoods on abortion, the US Capitol insurrection, health care and NATO.

But the Republican — who is countering Biden's rally with an appearance of his own in Virginia on Friday — largely avoided the

rhetorical landmines that exploded under Biden.

At one point, the president bizarrely declared that "we finally beat Medicare," as the discussion turned to funding the health insurance program for seniors.

ABIDENREPLACEMENT? As the disappointment of Biden's showing registered with Democrats, there was even talk of finding a new candidate before the party's convention in August.

Democrats — "including members of his own administration — traded frenzied phone calls and text messages within minutes of the start of the debate as it became clear that Mr. Biden was not at his sharpest," the New York Times reported.

Some also "privately discussed among themselves whether it was too late to persuade the president to step aside in favor of a younger candidate," the paper added.

Even a German official coordinating cooperation

with the United States told a German newspaper that Democrats should consider replacing Biden as their candidate.

"There's been a lot of chatter in our circles about Newsom," one party strategist told political outlet The Hill — although California governor Gavin Newsom quickly shut down suggestions that he could take Biden's place.

In the Trump corner, pundits reveled at how the night turned out.

Keith Nahigian, a Republican veteran of six campaigns who helped prepare multiple election candidates including John McCain for debates, told AFP that Biden's performance was "the worst I've ever seen."

"Biden called for this debate a few months ago. He pushed for this debate. I think he just sunk his presidency," he added.

Ralph Reed, chairman of the conservative Faith and Freedom Coalition, compared the debate to a prize fight "that should have been stopped in the early rounds."



An injured girl is comforted by her relatives at the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in Deir el-Balah yesterday, following Israeli bombardments in the central Gaza Strip.

PHOTO: AFP

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Limited choices as Iranians vote

Vote unlikely to alter policies, may shape Khamenei succession

REUTERS, Dubai

Iranians yesterday voted for a new president following the death of Ebrahim Raisi in a helicopter crash, choosing from a tightly controlled group of four candidates loyal to the supreme leader at a time of growing public frustration and Western pressure.

The election coincides with escalating regional tension due to war between Israel and Iran's allies Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon, as well as increased Western pressure on Iran over its fast-advancing nuclear programme.

While the election is unlikely to bring a major shift in the Islamic Republic's policies, its outcome could influence the succession to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's 85-year-old supreme leader, in power since 1989.

Khamenei called for a high turnout to offset a legitimacy crisis fuelled by public discontent over economic hardship and curbs on political and social freedom.

"The durability, strength, dignity and reputation of the Islamic Republic depend on people's presence," Khamenei told state television after casting his vote. "High turnout is a definite necessity."

The next president is not expected to usher in any major policy shift on Iran's nuclear programme or support for militia groups across the Middle East, since Khamenei calls all the shots on top state matters.

However, the president runs the government day-to-day and can influence the tone of Iran's foreign and domestic policy.

A hardline watchdog body made up of six clerics and six jurists aligned with



Khamenei vets candidates and approved only six from an initial pool of 80. Two headline candidates subsequently dropped out.

Three candidates are hardliners and one is a low-profile comparative moderate, backed by the reformist faction that has largely been sidelined in Iran in recent years.

Critics of Iran's clerical rule say that low and declining turnouts in recent years show the system's legitimacy has eroded. Just 48% of voters participated in the 2021 presidential election and turnout plumbed a record low of 41% in a parliamentary election in March.

State television showed queues inside polling stations in several cities. Polls were due to close at 6:00pm. (1430 GMT), but are usually extended as late

as midnight. Authorities said the result would be announced today.

If no candidate wins at least 50% plus one vote from all ballots cast, including blank votes, a run-off between the top two candidates is held on the first Friday after the result is declared.

Prominent among the remaining hardliners are Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, parliament speaker and former commander of the powerful Revolutionary Guards, and Saeed Jalili, a former nuclear negotiator who served for four years in Khamenei's office.

All four candidates have vowed to revive the flagging economy, beset by mismanagement, state corruption and sanctions re-imposed since 2018, after the United States ditched Tehran's 2015 nuclear pact with six world powers.

POST-COUP MYANMAR CRISIS

Rebels battle junta in ruby mining hub

MSF to halt work in northern Rakhine

AFP, Yangon

A Myanmar ethnic minority armed group was battling junta troops in a ruby and gem-mining hub yesterday, the group and residents told AFP, with reports of civilian casualties in shelling and air strikes.

The Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) launched attacks on junta troops earlier this week in Mandalay region and neighbouring Shan state, shattering a ceasefire brokered by China in January.

Its fighters were inside Mogok, a town surrounded by hills rich with rubies, sapphires, spinel, aquamarine and other semi-precious stones, General Tar Bhone Kyaw told AFP, without giving details.

Mogok residents told AFP the town had been hit by artillery shelling and air strikes by military planes since fighting in the area started on Tuesday. Fighting was ongoing in Kyaukme town in neighbouring Shan state, a local rescue worker told AFP yesterday.

At least 10 civilians had been killed and more than 20 wounded there since clashes broke out on Tuesday, he said.

Meanwhile, the charity Doctors Without Borders will halt medical activities in Myanmar's northern Rakhine state due to an "extreme escalation of conflict" between an ethnic armed group and the military, it said.

Clashes have rocked Rakhine state since the Arakan Army (AA) attacked security forces in November, ending a ceasefire that had largely held since a military coup in 2021. AA fighters have seized swathes of territory, piling further pressure on the junta as it battles opponents elsewhere in the country.

MSF was suspending "medical humanitarian activities" in northern Rakhine due to the "extreme escalation of conflict, indiscriminate violence, and severe restrictions on humanitarian access," it said on Thursday.

ELECTION IN FRANCE

Far-right extends lead ahead of polls

REUTERS, Paris

France's far-right National Rally (RN) extended its lead in a poll published on the last day of campaigning before tomorrow's (Sunday) first round of parliamentary elections, with another survey showing it in sight of a slim majority.

Marine Le Pen's anti-immigrant, eurosceptic party has led polling since President Emmanuel Macron called a surprise snap election this month that has plunged France into uncertainty and unnerved European neighbours and financial markets.

A new OpinionWay poll published by Les Echos newspaper on Friday showed the RN could reach as much as 37 percent of the popular vote, up two percentage points on its score a week ago.

Macron's centrist bloc Together party was seen reaching 20 percent, down by two points from the last publication. The New Popular Front leftwing alliance stood at an unchanged 28 percent of the vote.

BFM TV, in a different poll compiled by Elabe, calculated that the RN and allies could end up with 260-295 seats in the new parliament - potentially crossing the 289-seat bar for an absolute majority giving them a clear mandate to govern.

Accurate seat projections are tricky because the outcome depends on results in 577 constituencies across France. Moreover, after Sunday's first round, rivals to the RN may team up and withdraw candidates in tactical moves to defeat far-right candidates in the July 7 second round.



TOP EU COMMISSION POST

EU leaders back Von der Leyen for 2nd term

AFP, Brussels

EU leaders struck a summit deal Thursday to return Ursula von der Leyen as head of the powerful European Commission, while tapping Estonia's prime minister Kaja Kallas as the bloc's top diplomat.

The late-night accord carves up the EU's top institutional jobs for the five years to come, with former Portuguese prime minister Antonio Costa to head the European Council bringing together member states.

All three nominees hail from the centrist alliance that dominates the EU parliament following elections this month, despite gains by the far right including Italy's Giorgia Meloni, who put up public resistance to the top jobs deal.

While Costa, 62, will automatically succeed Council president Charles Michel this year, both von der Leyen, 65, and Kallas, 47, need to lock in majority support in the European Parliament, starting with a July vote on the commission chief that is predicted to be tight.

Von der Leyen expressed her "gratitude" to the leaders gathered in Brussels for backing her for a second term — telling reporters she would soon outline her political priorities with a view to winning the confidence of parliament.

SOUTH AFRICA

Tensions delay unveiling of new gov't

AFP, Johannesburg

South Africa's weakened African National Congress (ANC) and its biggest coalition partner are squabbling over key jobs in the new cabinet, media reports say, nearly a month after elections.

President Cyril Ramaphosa has called for the opening of the new parliament on July 18 to address MPs, the government said yesterday.

But no indication was given on when the announcement of a new cabinet would be made.

The ANC has accused coalition partner Democratic Alliance (DA) of making "outrageous demands" for cabinet positions in documents leaked to the press.

Several other documents detailing disagreements on positions between Ramaphosa and DA leader John Steenhuisen have circulated on social media.