Trump, Harris Spar Over Abortion Rights and Obamacare in Their First Face-Off

The two presidential candidates covered a wide range of issues — from job and inflation numbers to abortion and immigration — in exchanges marked by personal attacks.

September 11, 2024 By KFF Health News and PolitiFact

When Vice President Kamala Harris walked across the debate stage Tuesday night to shake the hand of former President Donald Trump, it was the first time the two had met in person. But that was the rare collegial moment in a face-off otherwise marked by false and sometimes bizarre statements by the former president.

The debate was hosted by ABC with moderators David Muir and Linsey Davis, who occasionally fact-checked Trump. He complained on the Fox News show “Fox & Friends” on Wednesday morning that it was a “three-to-one” contest.

The two presidential candidates covered a wide range of issues — from job and inflation numbers to abortion and immigration — in exchanges marked by personal attacks. As our PolitiFact partners noted, Harris often directly addressed Trump while answering the moderators’ questions. Trump mostly stared straight ahead. In response to Trump’s claims about the Biden administration’s record on crime, Harris cited Trump’s criminal conviction in New York and other indictments.

The moderators questioned Trump about whether he would attempt to dismantle the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare — the health insurance program he pledged and failed to repeal and replace during his previous administration.

He said, if president, he would “only change it if we come up with something that’s better and less expensive.” He went on to say, “There are concepts and options we have to do that, and you’ll be hearing about it in the not-too-distant future.”

Trump has promised an Obamacare replacement since he was on the campaign trail in 2015. He claimed during the debate that he “saved” the ACA by issuing regulations aimed at lowering insurance premiums.

Harris' previous support for "Medicare for All," a proposal to replace private health insurance with a government-run health system, drew questions from the moderators and attacks by Trump.

Abortion was a clear flash point. Harris called state restrictions on the procedure enacted since 2022 "Trump abortion bans" and said it was immoral to take away a woman's ability to make decisions about her own body. She also pledged to sign any bill that would reinstate the protections outlined in Roe v. Wade, which the Supreme Court overturned in 2022.

Trump said that as president he would never face the question of signing a national abortion ban because the issue is now being settled in states. "I'm not signing a ban," he said. "There's no reason to sign a ban."

Trump also resurfaced claims — repeatedly judged false by PolitiFact and other fact-checking organizations — that Democrats support abortions up to the moment of birth and the "execution" of babies after birth. ABC's Davis flagged Trump's statement, saying that willfully terminating a newborn's life is illegal in every state. In addition, the majority of Democrats support abortion access up to fetal viability, when the fetus is able to survive outside the womb, typically around 24 weeks of pregnancy.

Harris brought up Project 2025, a policy blueprint created by the conservative Heritage Foundation from which Trump has sought to distance himself.

Moments after the debate ended, pop superstar Taylor Swift posted on Instagram that she would be voting for Harris "because she fights for the rights and causes I believe need a warrior to champion them." Swift's post featured a photo of her with her cat and was signed "Childless Cat Lady" — a reference to comments made by JD Vance, the Republican vice presidential candidate.

Our PolitiFact partners fact-checked the debate in real time on a live blog, with more coverage here, as Harris and Trump clashed on the economy, immigration, and abortion.

Excerpts detailing specific health-related claims follow.

Trump: "But the governor before, he said, 'The baby will be born, and we will decide what to do with the baby.'"

False.

Trump initially referenced a West Virginia governor. He meant Virginia, and corrected himself later in the debate.

Former Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam, a Democrat and a physician, never said he would sanction the execution of newborns. What he did say during a 2019 radio interview is that in rare, late-pregnancy cases when fetuses are nonviable, doctors deliver the baby, keep it comfortable, resuscitate it if the family wishes, and then have a "discussion" with the mother.

The issue is that Northam declined to say what that discussion would entail. Trump puts words in the then-governor's mouth, saying doctors would urge the mother to let them forcibly kill the newborn, which is a felony in Virginia (and all other states) punishable by a long prison sentence or death.

Trump: "Every legal scholar, every Democrat, every Republican, liberal, conservative, they all wanted [abortion] to be brought back to the states where the people could vote."

False.

The 1973 Roe v. Wade decision inspired legions of supporters and opponents. Before the U.S. Supreme Court overturned it in 2022, numerous legal scholars wrote briefs urging the court to uphold the ruling.

Some legal scholars who favor abortion rights have criticized the 1973 ruling's legal underpinnings, saying that different constitutional arguments, based on equal protection, would have provided a stronger case. But legal experts, including some who held this view, said those scholars would not have advocated for overturning Roe on this basis.

Trump: On the Affordable Care Act, "I saved it."

False.
During 2016, Trump campaigned on repealing and replacing the Affordable Care Act. While president, he sought to repeal the measure — and failed.

But his administration pursued various policies that hindered its reach and effectiveness, including cutting millions of dollars in advertising and outreach funding. He cut subsidies to insurance companies that offered coverage on the exchanges. He also took regulatory steps to permit less expensive and less comprehensive health coverage — for example, short-term health plans that didn't comply with the ACA.

During the Trump administration, ACA enrollment declined, and the number of uninsured Americans rose by 2.3 million from 2016 to 2019, including 726,000 children, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Trump: Harris "wants everybody to be on government insurance" for health care.

This is misleading.

Harris once co-sponsored a bill to expand Medicare to Americans of all ages, but she does not currently support this proposal.

In April 2019, Harris became one of 14 original co-sponsors of the Medicare for All Act of 2019 sponsored by Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.). The legislation would have established a national health insurance program administered by the federal Department of Health and Human Services.

The bill would have created an automatic, federally run health insurance program for all Americans, which would mirror the socialized medicine systems in such countries as the United Kingdom.

Harris backed the bill when she was preparing to run in the 2020 presidential primaries and many candidates believed that Democratic base voters wanted the most liberal positions possible.

However, Medicare for All failed to advance to a vote in the Senate. After her 2020 candidacy ended, Harris focused instead on bolstering the ACA as opposed to pushing for Medicare for All.

This story was published by KFF Health News on September 11, 2024. It is republished with permission.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/trump-harris-spar-abortion-rights-obamacare-first-faceoff