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It's Debatable

Reminder-- Presidential Debate Begins at 9pm Tonight (ET)

One of the most memorable moments in debate history occurred in the second 1984 presidential debate on October 21, 1984, in Kansas City, Missouri. Henry Trehwitt, a diplomatic correspondent for The Baltimore Sun, asked President Ronald Reagan about his age. Noting that President Reagan, then age 73, who was already the oldest president in American history, was running for reelection, Trehwitt asked, "Is there any doubt in your mind that you would be able to function in such circumstances [referring to the Cuban missile crisis]?" Reagan in response said, "Not at all, Mr. Trehwitt, and I want you to know that also I will not make age an issue in the campaign. I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent's youth and inexperience[Mondale was age 56 in 1984]". The auditorium filled with laughter. Even Democratic candidate Walter Mondale and journalist Henry Trehwitt laughed too.

At the first presidential debate this evening, President Trump will have a chance to defend his record responding to and managing the coronavirus pandemic, while former Vice President Joe Biden will highlight the high death toll, ongoing struggles, and his plan to address the health and economic effects of the pandemic. The vaccine approval process will also likely receive heavy lip service, with Trump promoting the idea that a vaccine will arrive shortly while Biden addresses safety, science, and public trust.

With Covid-19 set as one of the six segments in today's first presidential debate between President Trump and former Vice President Joe Biden, Trump's record of handling the coronavirus and the present state of the pandemic will be on the line. Many expect Biden to fact check Trump on the floor and emphasize the hardships Americans are still struggling with as a result of the pandemic as well as the ongoing health risks, while Trump will likely point to his administration's Operation Warp Speed vaccine program as an indicator of progress and success in managing the pandemic. Any comments on vaccines at the debates will come as the vaccine development and approval process remains highly politicized, which is evidenced in recent statements from public officials and continued low public trust.

A recent Pew Research Study poll shows the divide, finding that only half of US adults responded that they would "definitely or probably get a vaccine to prevent Covid-19 if it were available today" and the other 49 percent "would probably not get vaccinated at this time." Further illustrating the rising hesitancy is that the number of people who would get a vaccine has declined over 20 points from May, when 72 percent reported that they would intend to get a vaccine. Adding to the politicization is an unprecedented statement from Governor Andrew Cuomo (D-NY), who announced that the state of New York will conduct its own review into any approved vaccine's safety and effectiveness and that "frankly" he is "not going to trust the federal government's opinion." Typically, states defer to a panel that advises the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) about vaccine safety and do not conduct their own reviews. Cuomo's comments echoed previous statements made by Biden, who said this month, "Let me be clear: I trust vaccines. I trust scientists. But I don't trust Donald Trump, and at this moment, the American people can't either." The statement from Cuomo came after Trump last week said that he might reject new Food and Drug Administration (FDA) guidelines that would set stricter requirements for approving a coronavirus vaccine via an emergency use authorization (EUA), which is a mechanism

that allows the FDA to approve a vaccine or therapeutic before it has completed the typical vetting process.

At the debate, the candidates may also discuss plans for distribution and access as approving a vaccine is only one of the first hurdles. Some vaccines require storage at extremely low temperatures that can be difficult to replicate throughout transport and storage and some coronavirus vaccine candidates would require two doses to be effective, though recent welcome news came from Johnson & Johnson (JNJ) that its vaccine candidate, which only requires one dose and is more easy to logistically manage since it can be stored in liquid forms at refrigerator temperatures, has shown a strong immune response.

Most analysts expect tonight's debate to be the most watched in presidential debate history.