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# State of the Race: Early Signs of a Post-Debate Bounce for Harris

By Nate Cohn

It's still too soon to judge the fallout from the presidential debate, but the polls already suggest that Kamala Harris might be poised to gain.

The initial surveys of people who watched the debate found that most viewers thought she won, and the candidate deemed the winner in the post-debate surveys usually tends to gain in the polls.

The first few polls taken entirely since Tuesday's debate show her faring better than polls taken beforehand. If history is any guide, it will still be a few more days — perhaps another week — until the full scope of any post-debate bounce becomes evident.

This time around, there's another unpredictable element: what the authorities have described as a second attempted assassination of Donald J. Trump. There's no way of knowing yet how voters might react, but if it refocuses the conversation away from the debate, it could put an early dent in Ms. Harris's bounce.

## State of the race

Overall, Vice President Harris leads Mr. Trump by three percentage points nationwide, according to [The New York Times's polling average](#). Already, that's about a point better for Ms. Harris than our average Wednesday.

The contest is even tighter in the critical battleground states, where no candidate leads by even a single percentage point in enough states to win the 270 electoral votes needed to win the presidency.

The current leader in the poll average in five of the seven swing states — Michigan, Pennsylvania, Georgia, North Carolina and Arizona — is ahead by just one point or less.

There have been very few post-debate polls in any of the seven states. In fact, many of the changes in our state averages are attributable to polls fielded *before* the debate, but released after.

## **What changed: pre-debate**

It's worth divvying up what's changed into two groups: the polls fielded before the debate, and the polls since.

First, the pre-debate polls released this past week: They might sound like old news, but it's not so simple. In many states, there haven't been many recent surveys, as the Labor Day holiday put a pause on many polls.

A string of high-quality state polls found Ms. Harris faring well, at least in relative terms, in [Wisconsin](#), [Iowa](#), [Virginia](#), [North Carolina](#) and even [Alaska](#). Mr. Trump, on the other hand, earned solid results in [Georgia](#) and [Michigan](#).

These results didn't shift our state polling averages too much, but they were still good news for Ms. Harris — and arguably a bit of a surprise. After all, the polls we'd seen before the debate showed a close and tightening race, with several high-quality outlets — [Times/Siena](#), [YouGov/Economist](#), [Marist](#), [Pew Research](#) and [KFF](#) — finding the race within one point or so. A close race nationwide might have been expected to yield a clear Trump lead in the battleground states.

But that's not what happened. Instead, Ms. Harris inched ahead in [our average](#) in North Carolina, after [Quinnipiac](#) and [SurveyUSA](#) polls found her up three points, while Mr. Trump now has the edge [in Georgia](#). And Ms. Harris firmed up her modest lead [in Wisconsin](#), where the venerable [Marquette Law School poll](#) found her up four points.

## **What changed: post-debate**

The relatively few post-debate polls show signs of a Harris bounce.

According to our average, she has already gained about one point nationwide, rising from a 1.7-point lead on Wednesday morning to a 2.7-point lead as of Monday morning. That one-point shift has been reasonably consistent across the six national polls that took surveys before and after the debate.

In the days ahead, Ms. Harris may gain even more ground. For one, most of the post-debate polls have come from online panels. They tend to shift less than other polls, as they're often composed of highly engaged voters and weighted more heavily than the typically more volatile phone surveys, which will probably arrive this week.

There's another reason: Many people don't watch debates, but they do hear the post-debate coverage — like the continuing discussion of Mr. Trump's [false claim](#) that Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio, have been eating pets. Extended coverage of a debate can help the perceived winner just as much as the debate itself, and yield additional polling gains in the days or even weeks thereafter.

## **Will a polling bump last?**

The time after a debate is fraught for pollsters.

On the one hand, debates can change the race in a lasting way — just ask President Biden. Even setting aside that recent example, the polls routinely shift after the first debate without ever reverting to their previous levels. That's what happened in 2000, 2004, 2008 and 2012.

On the other hand, debates can create shifts in the political environment that simply don't last. Just ask Hillary Clinton, who built a big lead after the debates in 2016, only to see it fade in the final week. Something similar happened to Mr. Biden in 2020.

These post-debate swings were fleeting, but they could have reflected real changes in stated preference — that is, driven by people who would have given different answers to a pollster before the debate. You can imagine, for instance, some Nikki Haley voters who were coming around to Mr. Trump, but who might now say they're undecided after watching the debate. Even if these voters eventually come around to Mr. Trump in the end, we'd see him slip in post-debate polls.

It's also possible that these post-debate swings were partly a mirage: They might simply be attributable to changes in who responds to surveys, not any

changes in the preferences of voters.

Either way, it's an excellent reminder of the limitations of polling. If the election were held on Tuesday, would Ms. Harris's bounce really materialize? Would those undecided Haley voters ultimately vote for Mr. Trump, stay home or vote for Ms. Harris? Did Ms. Harris secure new support from voters who hadn't heard enough about her, but saw in the debate someone capable of handling the presidency? We just can't say.

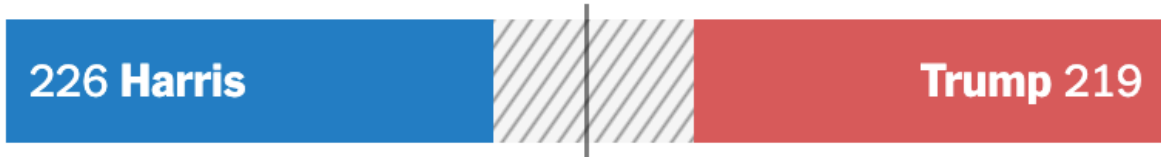
All of these same questions will exist on the morning of the election. We won't know if undecided voters will break in one direction, if the polls have been skewed by varying response rates or if, maybe, the polls are dead-on.

What we do know is that the polls are so close that even an ordinary polling error could give either side a decisive victory. Just look at what would happen if the polls were wrong in the exact same ways they were two or four years ago.

	POLLING LEADER	IF POLLS MISS LIKE THEY DID IN ...	
		2022	2020
<b>U.S.</b>	<b>+3 Harris</b>	+2	+1
Wis.	<b>+3 Harris</b>	+5	+7
Nev.	<b>+2 Harris</b>	+4	+2
Mich.	<b>+1 Harris</b>	+7	+4
Pa.	<b>+1 Harris</b>	+6	+4
N.C.	<b>+1 Harris</b>	+2	+3
Ariz.	Even	+3	+3
Ga.	<b>+1 Trump</b>	+1	+2

If the polls erred as they did in 2020, Mr. Trump would sweep the battlegrounds. Conversely, Ms. Harris would win big if it turned out the polls were wrong as they were in 2022.

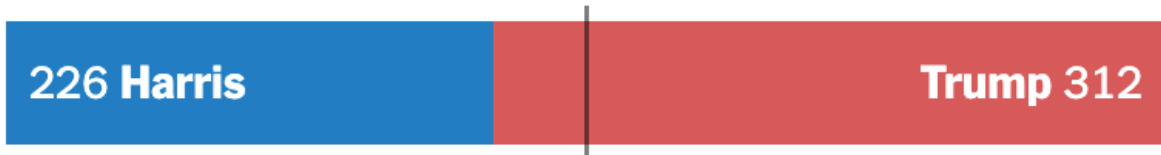
Electoral votes counting only states where a candidate leads by 3 or more:



Electoral votes if current polling translates perfectly to results (it won't):



Electoral votes if state polls miss in the same way they did in 2020:



Electoral votes if state polls miss in the same way they did in 2022:



It's easy to imagine either scenario. It's hard not to see a result like "Harris +4 in Wisconsin" without feeling a sense of foreboding, as Wisconsin was ground zero for polling error the last two presidential elections. On the other hand, there has been a deluge of polls from Republican-leaning firms over the last few weeks, just as there was ahead of the 2022 election, when a promised "red wave" did not materialize.

It's also possible that these two phenomena will mostly cancel out, and the polls will have their best year in a decade. After all, the polls today show a near repeat of the 2020 election, with almost every state polling within a point or two of the result four years ago.

If anything is easy to imagine in today's polarized country, it's a repeat of the last election.