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Subject: English Leaders Debate – Recap and Analysis

CONTEXT

Immediately following the French Leaders Debate on September 8, the five major party leaders met again last night at the Canadian Museum of History in Gatineau, Quebec for the only televised debate in English in this election. The stakes for this debate for all of the leaders were high given the expected viewership among Canadians, this debate being the only English debate during this election cycle, and the election just over 10 days away.

Replicating the format from the French debate, the leaders debated on five key themes – leadership and accountability, climate change, reconciliation, affordability, and COVID-19 recovery. Included in each of these thematic sections was a live question from a voter, a question from the moderator or journalist to each leader, a face-to-face debate section between groups of two or three leaders, and finally an open debate section among all five leaders.

The debate format has been widely criticized for only allowing the leaders short times to answer questions, leading to often non-substantive answers, and minimal time for leaders to rebut and openly debate among themselves. Overall, the analysis below reflects that there was no clear winner in the debate and that many of the leaders' performances were inhibited by the debate format.

THE ISSUES

Leadership and Accountability

During the first section, the debate questions ranged across a number of larger issues such energy and climate change, Afghanistan, and the detention of detention of Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig in China, all framed within the context of leadership and accountability.

Right off the bat, Green Party leader Annamie Paul came out saying she does not believe that Liberal leader Justin Trudeau is a real feminist due to the strong women that he has pushed out of his party. This led to an exchange between Trudeau and Paul where Trudeau stated, "I won't take lessons in caucus management from you," alluding to the inner turmoil within the Green Party over the past few months.

NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh had a strong moment commenting on the climate leadership of Conservative Party leader Erin O'Toole and Trudeau, stating that one leader doesn't believe there is a crisis and the other doesn't act like there is.

When discussing Afghanistan, O'Toole stated that strong leadership is "helping other people first," to note that Trudeau should've been focused on the situation in Afghanistan rather than calling an election. Singh and Bloc Québécois leader Yves-François Blanchet echoed agreement with O'Toole's statement, making it a strong end to this section for the Conservative leader.

Climate Change

Opening the second theme on climate change, O'Toole again had a good moment where he acknowledged that this is an issue the Conservative Party of Canada had lost some credibility on, which needed to be regained. In doing so, he highlighted this was his reasoning for releasing the party's climate plan in April, which includes a price on carbon among other measures.

This section of the debate was also a strong one for Trudeau. He was able to both highlight some of the work his government has done on climate and note that experts have stated that the Liberal plan is the best of those offered by all the parties.

Reconciliation

The third theme of the debate opened with a question asking how the leaders would restore trust between First Nations and the federal government after over 150 years of lies and abuse to Indigenous peoples.

During this section, Trudeau recounted the work his government has done to end boil water advisories in 109 communities and improving classrooms for Indigenous youth. He also highlighted the need to work in true partnership with Indigenous peoples moving

forward. Erin O'Toole also noted the importance of building partnerships and fulfilling commitments to Indigenous peoples.

Singh stated that taking action on reconciliation includes clean drinking water for every community, a nation-to-nation relationship, and respect. Blanchet and Paul each focused on the importance a nation-to-nation relationship between the federal government and Indigenous peoples in their responses.

Affordability

When discussing affordability in the fourth section, the leaders touched on a number of topics including support for seniors, housing, and childcare. O'Toole highlighted the Conservatives' commitments to double the Canada Workers Benefit, bring cell phone and grocery bills down, and provide a GST holiday in the month of December.

Paul spoke to providing greater support for long-term care, more affordable housing, and a social safety net for all Canadians. Singh also highlighted the challenges of the housing crisis, with Canadians spending more than half of their income on housing. Blanchet spoke to the need to provide more support for seniors with significant increases to monthly cheques.

Trudeau used a portion of this section to draw contrast between the Liberal and Conservative child care plans. He noted his party's commitment to $10 a day childcare and the agreements with the provinces that have already been reached, which the Conservatives would scrap and replace with a tax credit program if elected.

COVID-19 Recovery

During the final theme on COVID-19 recovery the leaders' responses on spanned across various topics including jobs, mental health, pharma care, and vaccines.

O'Toole stated the need for Canada to better prepare for future pandemics and to create one million jobs. Singh highlighted a number of the NDP's large scale commitments to invest in long-term care, pharma care, universal dental care and mental health.

Trudeau focused on the need for Canadians to get vaccinated first in order for Canada to emerge from the pandemic and recover. Blanchet took this opportunity to note how

provincial health care systems need additional support through the Canada Health Transfer.

Trudeau and O'Toole also sparred over how to phase out or eliminate the COVID-19 relief programs that have been in place for Canadians throughout the pandemic, while Paul and Singh stressed the need for a universal basic income in Canada.

ANALYSIS

Despite the challenges and limitations of the debate format, each leader had aspects of their debate performance that they can call a win for their party and supporters. However, this has led to the general consensus that there is no clear debate winner, leaving each leader with their work cut out for themselves in the final stretch of the campaign.

Justin Trudeau

With more of the other leaders now debating more comfortably in English, many more attacks were launched against Trudeau's record than in the previous French debates. This put Trudeau on the defensive at a number of points throughout the debate but he was able to fend off many of these attacks, while launching some of his own towards O'Toole in particular. The debate format did not work well for the Liberal leader, as it often boxed him into a corner rather than providing him the opportunity to speak directly to voters. Overall, Trudeau did have some strong moments and sections throughout the debate, highlighting some of his government's major wins over the past six years and key aspects of his platform.

Erin O'Toole

Erin O'Toole delivered a clean, calm and polished presentation throughout the debate. His honesty on the need for the party to build back some credibility on climate change, coupled with a confident delivery of the benefits of his platform and pointing out some weaknesses in Trudeau's leadership and record, made for a strong performance from the Conservative leader. The format also disadvantaged him, making him feel less present at some long moments in the debate where he had some momentum and could have rebutted Trudeau.

Jagmeet Singh

Jagmeet Singh also delivered a much better performance in this debate than he has in previous French debates during this election. He leveraged his strength in being a relatable leader who connects with the Canadian public well and was able to get his messages across in a genuine and collected manner.

Yves-François Blanchet

Blanchet's presentation was lively, aggressive and in his typical style, quite blunt. On each issue, he was able to turn it back to how that issue impacts Quebec and what can be done to better support the province. He was combative with the moderator both during the debate and during his commentary in the subsequent media scrums, positioning the debate as an attack against Quebec, with he and his party as the only choice to stand up for Quebec interests in Ottawa.

Annamie Paul

For many Canadians who haven't felt like they've had a chance to get to know Annamie Paul yet, her performance at this debate is a first impression she should be pleased with. Paul came out strong from the beginning and each time she spoke delivered a succinct well-presented response. She often appeared as the voice of reason on the stage and brought the conversation back to the topic when it was derailed to another topic. Overall, this was a strong and consistent debate for Paul.