

YEP, JONATHAN CHAIT WAS WRONG

A number of weeks ago, I disputed Jonathan Chait's claim that Obama would have a poorer chance in the last three debates.

The VP Debate: the Angry Old Man

Chait argues, first of all, that Joe Biden will try to refute Paul Ryan's budget kabuki, which will end up making the Vice President look like an angry old man.

[snip]

And when Biden delivers lines like the one from his DNC (after 9:00 in the video)...

My dad never failed to remind us that a job is a about a lot more than a paycheck. It's about your dignity. It's about respect. It's about your place in the community. It's about being able to look your child in the eye and saying 'honey, it's going to be okay.'

... He credibly addresses men and women who otherwise aren't being spoken to in this election.

If Joe Biden is an angry old man, he's a lot like the angry old men who will swing this election.

The Town Hall where the questions voters want answered finally get asked

Then there's the Town Hall debate, where real people rather than a crusty old PBS host get to ask the questions. Chait thinks Obama will fail here because he'll spend time filleting Mitt rather than answering questions.

[snip]

But one of the problems with the last debate was precisely in the stupid choice of questions Jim Lehrer asked.

[snip]

I would expect that the questions from real people will be far more favorable to Obama because the things voters care about provide Obama to describe where he has been successful and where the guy who brags about creating \$9/hour jobs he admits don't pay the bills tends to fail.

Plus, some of Mitt's biggest campaign gaffes have come when he responded to regular questions with douchbag answers—the "corporations are people" problem. Obama may be standoffish, but Mitt is standoffish and tone deaf when speaking with real people. And that, too, should serve Obama.

Debating RomneyShambles

Then there's the foreign policy debate, an area where even Republicans recognize Mitt's weaknesses. Chait thinks this will go badly because it won't provide Obama an opportunity to talk about domestic issues.

And then the final debate centers on foreign policy. Obama can try to use some of the questions to turn to domestic policy, but that risks a scolding from host Bob Schieffer.

But unless Mitt pulls another total Etch-a-Sketch—even from the content of his speech today—he's going to say really stupid things, such as playing up Russia as our worst enemy.

More importantly, just about every foreign policy—except torture—that Mitt aggressively embraces is unpopular with voters. Mitt almost certainly will call for starting a new war, while Obama will claim (not entirely credibly) to have ended two wars. Even on trade, where Obama's championing of three new trade deals, Mitt could tack left of Obama, he has chosen instead to accuse Obama of not supporting free trade.

I was right on the money on some points—Biden did use that same line from the debate. The questions from real people were better than the questions from moderators. Mitt looked pathetic when arguing that Iran has no access to the sea.

I was wrong about others: I apparently underestimated Mitt's willingness to etch-a-sketch on foreign policy. I underestimated how much both candidate would insist on discussing domestic issues in the last debate. I underestimated how pathetic Mitt's efforts to pander to his binders full of women would be.

But it's quite clear that every one of these debates was better than Obama's performance in the first one. By most measures, Biden and Obama won all three. And it's clear that that was partly because of the format. (And Raddatz, Crowley, and Schieffer were better than Lehrer.)

I make this point not to say I told Chait so. Rather, because the entire lefty twittersphere read Chait's essay and adopted it as convention wisdom. Why?

There was good reason after the first debate to observe that Obama tanked it, badly. But to suggest that Obama wouldn't be better in responding to real voters? In discussing foreign policy?

There were complaints after the first debate that Democrats didn't have as many hacks willing to lie about Obama's performance as the GOP has on their side. That has borne out.

But another part of the problem is Democrats' willingness to worry about poor analysis.