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Romney, Obama square off in polite debate

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US President Barack Obama (R) and Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney smile after the first presidential debate at the university of Denver on October 3, 2012 in Denver, Colorado.

Denver --

In a lively and unusually civilized debate Wednesday, Democrat Barack Obama and Republican Mitt Romney clashed on who would be the better champion of the middle class - a match that provided high drama but no critical game-changers.

The former Massachusetts governor delivered a confident, often aggressive and energetic performance. It was among the best of his campaign and in clear contrast to the president, whose delivery was more muted, measured and, at times, meandering.

The first of three presidential debates offered Americans their first side-by-side comparison of Obama and Romney and came at a pivotal moment in the 2012 presidential race.

There are 33 days until the election, and early voting has begun in 34 states. Romney, who has slipped in recent swing-state polls, needed a breakout performance in the event, at the University of Denver.

The debate, moderated by PBS newscaster Jim Lehrer, a veteran of the format, was designed to allow the candidates to focus on domestic issues: health care, the economy and the role of government.

Major gaffes were absent, zingers were rare, and without any kind of body slam, the campaign advantage may still lie with the incumbent.

"We've won the day, but one great day isn't going to do it," said Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus moments after the debate, when Romney was widely scored as delivering a technical knockout to Obama. Even Obama strategist David Axelrod,

asked if his candidate has won, demurred.

From the opening bell, Romney sought to portray Obama as a failed president and hyper-partisan backer of "trickle-down government" who has reneged on his promises to work across the aisle and to create jobs.

Obama, by contrast, repeatedly defined Romney as a candidate who has failed to deliver key details of his plans, whether on health care, taxes or deficit reduction.

Middle-class heroes

They both fought to portray themselves as the champion of the middle class. Obama argued that his calls for investment in education, alternative energies and higher taxes for the wealthiest Americans represented "a new economic patriotism" that would balance the budget and boost the middle class and jobs.

Romney bridled at the president's suggestion that the Republican's tax-cut plan would add \$5 trillion to the deficit and insisted that his first focus also was the middle class.

"High-income people are doing just fine in this economy," said Romney, who has fought to counter his image as a multimillionaire who's out of touch with average Americans. "The people who are having a hard time right now are middle-income Americans," he said. "They're just being crushed." He vowed not to raise taxes on middle-income families.

Obama's challenge as an incumbent was to do no harm to his campaign. That meant avoiding missteps that could hand Romney an opportunity to upset the trajectory of the race - the perception is that the president is picking up speed - while portraying himself as the country's leader.

Romney, on the other hand, faced the more complex challenge of appearing unruffled, even presidential, while showing a more approachable side than his often robotic demeanor on the campaign trail. He also needed to show that he had an understanding of how average Americans live.

Calling a winner

On both points, Romney mostly succeeded.

Mac Clouse, professor of finance at the University of Denver, declared Romney the winner.

"He was more aggressive, and he was rebutting a lot of the things that Obama has been

saying in all the ads we've been seeing in Colorado," he said.

Ruth Sherman, an author and nationally known speech expert, said that Romney "seemed much better prepared. He studied hard and practiced harder," and came armed with arguments, while Obama seemed "halting and slow."

Still, his lack of details was evident during the debate. On several occasions Romney failed to flesh out the specifics of his plans, and he repeated several statements that nonpartisan fact-checkers have deemed inaccurate. Among them were his argument that the president would cut \$716 billion from Medicare to pay for the new national health care law, called Obamacare by some. Analysts say the cuts would not come from Medicare but payments made to providers.

Finally, some civility

The 90-minute discussion was mostly civil, a refreshing break from the contentious attack ads that have blanketed the airwaves for months, mostly in swing states.

The two candidates both appeared at ease, but the differences in style were easy to see. Obama more often directed his answers at the audience and the camera rather than at his challenger. Romney, however, repeatedly turned to Obama and often spoke directly to him.

At one point, Romney even apologized to Obama for using the term "Obamacare" to refer to the Affordable Care Act, which he said should be repealed because its cost is "prohibitive" and it damages job creation.

The president appeared unruffled, saying, "I have become fond of the term 'Obamacare.'

He then complimented his opponent, issuing one of the debate's few zingers, saying, "We've seen this model work really well, in Massachusetts, because Gov. Romney did a good thing ... to set up what is essentially an identical model."

The president rubbed it in: "We used the same advisers, and they say it's the same plan."

Obama and Romney will meet next at a town hall debate featuring audience questions at Hofstra University in New York on Oct. 16. They will meet a final time at Lynn University in Boca Raton, Fla., on Oct. 22. That debate will be devoted to foreign policy.