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Campaign 2008 | Final presidential debate

Obama and McCain take off the gloves

By BETH FOUHY
Associated Press

HEMPSTEAD, N.Y. — John McCain assailed Barack Obama's character and campaign positions on taxes, abortion and more Wednesday night, hoping to transform their final presidential debate into a launching pad for a political comeback. "You didn't tell the American people the truth," he charged.

Unruffled, and ahead in the polls, Obama parried each charge, and leveled a few of his own.

"One hundred percent, John, of

your ads, 100 percent of them have been negative," Obama shot back in an uncommonly personal debate less than three weeks from Election Day.

"It's not true," McCain retorted. "It absolutely is true," said Obama, seeking the last word.

McCain is currently running all negative ads, according to a study by the University of Wisconsin-Madison. But he has run a number of positive ads during the campaign.

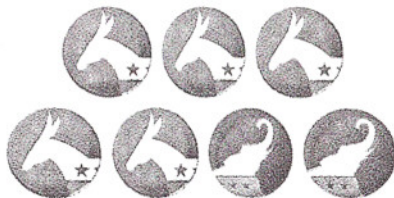
The 90-minute encounter, at a

See Debate, A4

Obama 'scored a shutout,' says panel of local voters

Press readers panel grades debate

Five members of a Press of Atlantic City panel of seven readers said Democratic Sen. Barack Obama won Wednesday's debate. Two gave the win to Republican Sen. John McCain.



By DEREK HARPER and ERIC SCOTT CAMPBELL
Staff Writers, 609-272-7273

PLEASANTVILLE — Democratic candidate Barack Obama won the final presidential debate, according to a panel of local voters who evaluated it for The Press of Atlantic City.

Of the seven panelists, five said Obama won, while two scored it for Republican John McCain.

Obama also won on points in a separate tally of the candidates' debate performance, beating McCain by a 57 percent to 43 percent margin, the widest of the candidates three meetings.

Furthermore, four of the people who came into the panel undecided said they would vote for Obama, while two said

See Panel, A4

Inside: How did 'Joe the Plumber' become part of presidential politics? A4

Panel

(Continued from A1)

McCain was their man. One remained undecided.

This year, The Press has invited readers to watch and score the presidential and vice presidential debates at the newspaper's Pleasantville headquarters.

From the initial pool of interested readers, editors tried to select people who represented a balance of genders, political affiliation and other demographics.

Wednesday's debate panel included three Democrats, two Republicans and two unaffiliated voters, among them five men and two women. Three other panelists canceled Wednesday night.

After the debate, Sharon Schulman, director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, gave each panelist a two-page questionnaire that sought to rate the candidates' knowledge, style and performance.

The final presidential debate came with less than three weeks to go before the November election.

Linwood resident Dan Dopko, a lifelong Republican, said it wasn't even close.

"I think Obama scored a shutout," Dopko said. He said the Illinois senator was organized and had a "very executive" presence, whereas McCain "is really desperate, trying to fire all his bullets whenever he could."

Dopko did commend McCain for his passion and experience. Nonetheless, compared with the performance margin in previous debates, "it was definitely farther apart this time."

Patricia Piacentine thought Obama did better because "he was looking more towards the future. He had different ideas. He wasn't sappy. He wasn't argumentative."

Piacentine, an unaffiliated Cape May voter, agreed with



Staff photo by Edward Lea

A panel of Press readers watches the third and final presidential debate Wednesday between Republican candidate John McCain and Democratic candidate Barack Obama at The Press of Atlantic City office in Pleasantville.



MARTIRONE



ACCARDI



PIACENTINE



MATTHEWS



DOPKO



DELLER

Obama that McCain seemed to repeat President Bush's policies.

Michael Martirone said he thought Obama won because "not only did he explain why we should vote for him, but he gave reasons why."

Martirone, an unaffiliated voter from Egg Harbor Township currently working toward a master's degree in education at Rowan University, liked the education policy discussion the best, in part because it was cordial, but also because candidates specifically detailed their plans.

Robert H. Matthews Jr., a Democrat from Cape May, said it was "a pretty good debate." He has decided to support Obama, who he thought performed better Wednesday night.

"He was more knowledgeable on the issues. He addressed the issues instead of just attacking the other candidate," Matthews said.

McCain was "rude and

unprofessional in some of his remarks," Matthews added. "Every time he thought he had a good attack, Obama came back with the facts."

Matthews said even though he is an Army veteran, he believes Obama shows better leadership than McCain, a fellow veteran.

John Deller gave a slight edge to Obama because he said "he seemed to be open to new ideas, and I think we do need change."

Deller said he had been leaning toward McCain for some time, but the lifelong Democrat from Ventnor said McCain showed anger.

"If something happens to change my mind, you know, I might go for John McCain," Deller said. "But right now, I'd have to go for Barack Obama."

Teddy Accardi, an Absegami High School student, thought McCain did better Wednesday because he quickly went on the offensive, while Obama seemed less able to attack.

"I'm going to take away that John McCain still has some fight in him," said Accardi, a Democrat from Galloway. "And it's not over."

Deborah Petricca, a Mays Landing Republican, was impressed with both sides. She gave the edge to McCain.

"He really improved," Petricca said. "I think everybody picked on him about economics. He did a better job, addressed the issues, (and) more directly answered questions than Obama did."

However, by the end of Wednesday's debate, Petricca praised McCain and Obama. Both, she said, were "very articulate" and "very practiced."



PETRICCA

Who was your winner?



Cast your vote online at:
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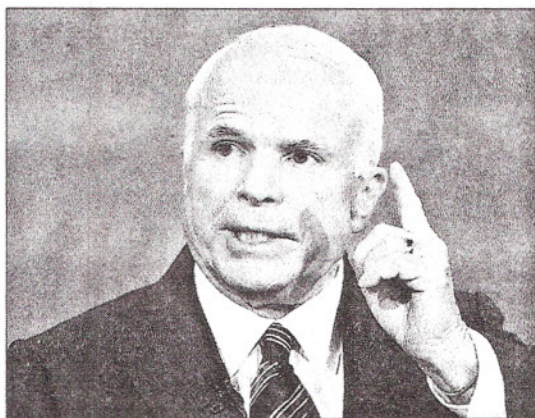
Associated Press photo

Democratic presidential candidate Sen. Barack Obama, center, listens as Republican candidate Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., makes a point Wednesday in their presidential debate, which was held at Hofstra University in Hempstead, N.Y. At left, is moderator Bob Schieffer.



Associated Press photo

Sen. Barack Obama continues to link his opponent with the policies of President Bush.



Associated Press photo

Sen. John McCain plays the aggressor from the opening minutes of the debate.

Debate

(Continued from A1)

round table at Hofstra University, was their third debate, and marked the beginning of a 20-day sprint to Election Day. Obama leads in the national polls and in surveys in many battleground states, an advantage built in the weeks since the nation stumbled into the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression.

With few exceptions, the campaign is being waged in states that voted Republican in 2004—Virginia, Colorado, Iowa—and in many of them, Obama holds a lead in the polls.

McCain played the aggressor from the opening moments of the debate, accusing Obama of

waging class warfare by seeking tax increases that would "spread the wealth around."

The Arizona senator also demanded to know the full extent of Obama's relationship with William Ayers, a 1960s-era terrorist and the Democrat's ties with ACORN, a liberal group accused of violating federal law as it seeks to register voters. And he insisted Obama disavow last week's remarks by Rep. John Lewis, a Democrat, who accused the Republican ticket of playing racial politics along the same lines as segregationists of the past.

Struggling to escape the political drag of an unpopular Republican incumbent, McCain also said, "Sen. Obama, I am not President Bush. ... You wanted to run against President

Bush, you should have run four years ago."

Obama returned each volley, and brushed aside McCain's claim to full political independence.

"If I've occasionally mistaken your policies for George Bush's policies, it's because on the core economic issues that matter to the American people—on tax policy, on energy policy, on spending priorities—you have been a vigorous supporter of President Bush," he said.

McCain's allegation that Obama had not leveled with the public involved the Illinois senator's decision to forgo public financing for his campaign in favor of raising his own funds. As a result, he has far outraised McCain, although the difference has been somewhat neutralized by an

advantage the Republican National Committee holds over the Democratic Party.

"He signed a piece of paper" earlier in the campaign pledging to accept federal financing, McCain said. He added that Obama's campaign has spent more money than any since Watergate, a reference to President Nixon's re-election, a campaign that later became synonymous with scandal.

Obama made no immediate response to McCain's assertion about having signed a pledge to accept federal campaign funds.

Asked about running mates, both presidential candidates said Democrat Joseph Biden was qualified to become president, although McCain added this qualifier: "in many respects."