

Making Deals and Making Policy

Donald Trump had one thing that he repeated nearly two dozen times at last night's debate, and it was the word "deal." America's leaders have been making "bad deals" with foreigners, he repeatedly claimed – bad trade agreements primarily, but also bad diplomatic arrangements – and he would make great ones. As throughout his campaign, he reminds voters that the deals he has made as a businessman have made him a billionaire (his inheritance, his bankruptcies, his abuse of litigation and sub-contractors aside) and they, he implies, are what will make the voters economically successful again. He has argued or assumed that these skills qualify him to be President over Hillary Clinton, despite his complete lack of governing experience and her wealth of it.

In this respect, the debate was evidence of a struggle between two visions of what it means to be an elected official in the United States. On the one hand, there is the traditional view that government and its officials, including the President, should serve the public and that they should do so by formulating evidence-based policy initiatives that serve the greater good. The newer view is that the job of elected officials is to turn a profit for the American public in part by minimizing governance while still providing prosperity and services. This latter view has emerged with the rise of neoliberal and libertarian thinking, themselves both a result and a cause of the sharp strengthening of corporate influence over government (something that Hillary Clinton, with her own compromised relationship with corporate power in the form of Wall Street speaking fees and corporate donations, did not adequately address last night, either). It has opened the door wide for celebrities/entertainers to make governing a matter of soundbites and a question, at best, of a contest of temperaments.

Hillary Clinton earned some undecided votes last night among those still holding out hope for that first vision of government because she was the only candidate who talked detailed policy. Donald Trump may have earned some votes from those already convinced of the second vision. If he wins, the long years of American political campaign operatives and politicians arguing for it will have come home to roost.

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