

## HARVEY KRONBERG'S QUORUM REPORT

TEXAS POLITICS REPORTING SINCE 1981

PO BOX 8 AUSTIN, TEXAS 78767

VOICE: 512.292.8191

FAX: 512.292.0099

EMAIL: HKRONBERG@QUORUMREPORT.COM

[Close this Page](#)

[Print this Page](#)

October 3, 2022 3:41 PM

### HK: In debate, Abbott implicitly confirms opposition to abortion exceptions and highly popular gun laws, but almost no one saw it

**With Nexstar acquiescence, Carney succeeds in making debate non-event, insists on no audience and no re-broadcast even for CSPAN**

Okay, let's get right to it.

The winner in Friday's debate between Governor **Greg Abbott** and challenger **Beto O'Rourke** was not even on the stage. Republican consultant **Dave Carney** was the clear winner.

That is not intended as criticism.

Carney had a clear mission to protect his candidate from serious and legitimate questions about his incumbency and future policies. Carney's longtime debate strategies kept three major headlines off the front pages by structuring the debate as little more than a battle of bumper sticker slogans with a virtual guarantee of no audience. Here are the pitfalls Abbott's campaign avoided:

*--In what he refused to say despite multiple opportunities, Abbott confirmed that he would not support an abortion bill that included exceptions for rape and incest.*

*--In a classic punt, Abbott said the **Legislature** was already working on school safety for next session but refused to put any political capital behind background checks, restoring permitting requirements, and red flag laws. He even shamelessly again invoked an appeals court ruling prohibiting age limits in gun purchase. It was and is a silly claim from a governor that signed an abortion ban despite **Roe v Wade** being "settled law" at the time he signed it (obviously some court nominees lied during confirmation).*

*--At the governor's (Carney's) insistence no audience was permitted including Uvalde shooting survivors and family leading one post-debate focus group member to say he had gone from undecided to pro-O'Rourke since Abbott was afraid to "face his constituents."*

There was much shock and surprise on social media that a studio audience was prohibited but frankly it is nothing new.

Carney has not permitted a studio audience in debates since 2006 when his client, **Rick Perry** faced off against **Kinky Friedman**, **Carole Strayhorn** and **Chris Bell**. Perry was leading in the polls at a bare 39% and Carney worried that the comedian with an audience would capture all the subsequent headlines and TV clips.

Carney was brilliant. A comedian without an audience is hapless and Kinky soon lost his way when his best lines produced no laughs.

We don't often criticize other media but it is widely assumed that whereas debates were once broadcast on all Texas stations including **PBS** and **CSPAN**, **Nextstar**'s price to be the exclusive broadcaster is permitting farcical debates structured as little more than a chance to exchange slogans.

The questions were good, but the brevity of the answers and the lack of time for rebuttal for clearly false claims made the debate a caricature and for that, Nextstar owns responsibility.

Of course, the debate was scheduled at the worst possible viewing time, a Friday night. Nexstar corporate apparently believes an uninformed voter is the right kind of voter.

Corporate squishiness aside, Nexstar stations employ many great journalists and **Josh Hinkle**'s Sunday morning "**State of Texas**" program is consistently excellent.

A cursory check reveals that even CSPAN appears to be prohibited from re-broadcasting the debate.

For all practical purposes, the debate never happened.

So, in the words of another Texas Governor then President, **George W, Bush**: "Mission Accomplished".

O'Rourke had one of his best performances even given how often he was interrupted by the hosts while Abbott spoke on. It was a stark contrast with O'Rourke's unprepared and somewhat sad confrontation with **Ted Cruz** four years ago.

Would O'Rourke have "won"? It was hard to find people who actually saw the debate. In my contrived focus group, many who did not like O'Rourke before remained opposed. But on the margins and in some surprising places, he seemed to connect for the first time.

Abbott's performance was weak but not so weak that he'd lose significant support.

It would have been worthwhile to have a large enough audience to find out.

Most press said neither candidate delivered a knockout punch, which is sort of correct.

Critics can argue whether O'Rourke's responses on the border and guns were sufficient to move the few undecided independents left.

But it does not matter how good or bad either candidate was.

It does not matter that Abbott confirmed no exceptions for rape or incest, no raising the age for assault weapons purchase, and no red flag laws all – all of which is seriously significant given that, as of today, it looks as if he will return to office.

Carney did his fundamental job of not allowing the debate to change the campaign narrative.

And with the willing collaboration of Nexstar, the voters of Texas were denied their opportunity to see a legitimate discussion between two people competing to lead one of the ten largest economies in the world.

The election was always going to be played out on TV, social media, and elsewhere in the media ecosystem. O'Rourke's allies, *Mothers Against Greg Abbott* and *It Could Have Been Worse, LLC* are delivering punches to incumbents. If his most recent ad featuring the mother from Uvalde is any indication, he has learned to throw a real punch.

By Harvey Kronberg

*IID 31251*

© Copyright October 03, 2022, Harvey Kronberg, [www.quorumreport.com](http://www.quorumreport.com), All rights are reserved