

Topic: V. The Media

What the Students Do: Prepare for and watch a political debate. Use a variety of criteria to “rate the debate” and participate in follow-up discussion and activities.

[CA History-Social Science Standards](#): 12.6

[CMS Promising Approaches](#): 1, 2, and potentially 3, 4, 5

Thanks to: [The League of Women Voters of New Jersey Education Fund](#) and [The League of Women Voters Cincinnati Area](#)

Additional Resource: [Commission on Presidential Debates](#)

How to Watch a Debate

To Teachers and Students:

The purpose of this guide is to help you learn how to watch political candidate debates. The "Rate the Debate" questions can be used for class discussion and as guidelines as you watch a debate. The suggested activities at the end are provided for class assignments by the teacher. Teachers should consider using [How to Judge a Candidate](#) (in Section III: Candidates, Parties, and Ballot Measures) as an additional resource.

In 1984, an estimated 85 million Americans watched the televised debates between presidential candidates Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale. Nine out of every ten American voters say they have watched a candidate debate some time in the past. These include debates among candidates for all levels of public office, from city council to the US Senate to the presidency. No other political events – in fact, few other television programs – produce such large audiences. Why do people watch debates?

Clearly, there is a horse-race quality to a candidate debate; people want to know who will "win" when the stakes are so high and the political atmosphere so intense. But there is more. Before voters go to the polls, they want to know where candidates stand on the issues, what leadership qualities the candidates possess, how they react under pressure, even what they look like. Voters want to comparison shop and to see the candidates meet head-on and face-to-face.

Think of other ways we learn about candidates. The 60-second spot on TV is produced by a media advisor, the letter seeking contributions is written by a professional fundraiser, and news reports are filtered through the eyes of reporters. Compared to these, the candidate debate provides a direct opportunity to hear candidates speak for themselves, unrehearsed, without a prepared speech. Still, viewers need to watch debates with a careful eye. Television can emphasize image over substance. Good debaters are not necessarily better leaders. This guide provides background information and poses questions to help you as you watch candidate debates--information you need to make an intelligent choice at the polls.

Candidate Debates: A *behind the scenes* look

At first glance, the purpose of a debate seems obvious - to provide voters with the information they need to make an intelligent choice at the polls. Debates also help to get the public interested in an election and to educate voters about the issues.

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But those directly involved in debates may have other goals. For candidates, it is to get elected. Candidates weigh every debate decision whether to debate, what format is best, even what curtain colors and camera angles they want – with one question: "Will it help me win?" Television broadcasters who air the debate want to attract an audience with a lively show and a hot race. The debate that gets on the air is the result of delicate juggling of all these goals.

The juggling takes place in negotiating sessions between the debate sponsor, the candidates, and, in some cases, the broadcaster. Negotiations focus on such issues as the number, date, site and format for the debate. These negotiations often are long and difficult, and they may involve what seem to be small details. The negotiations for the presidential and vice-presidential debates in 1984, for example, went on for an intense three-week period before the debate schedule finally was set. Weeks later, conflict arose over such issues as the color of the backdrop curtain and the placement of furniture on stage. Though minor, each dispute could have led one candidate or the other to back out of the debate at the last minute,

Format

The negotiations about format - the actual structure of the debate - are usually the most intense. A candidate debate can use any format that puts candidates face-to-face stating their views and responding to their opponents. Using this definition, what methods can you think of to structure debates?

Candidates tend to prefer safe formats that protect them from direct confrontation. The "modified press conference", used in the 1984 Reagan-Mondale debates, is an example of this format in which a journalist poses a question, a candidate has several minutes to respond, the journalist poses a follow-up question, and the same candidate responds. The next candidate goes through the same questioning process and then each has a chance to rebut, or refute, the opponent. This format guarantees each candidate equal time and takes advantage of the knowledge of a number of journalists. However, it provides little opportunity to challenge a candidate who is dodging a question and often allows the press to set the agenda for the debate; sometimes issues of most concern to the public and to the candidates are missed in the process.

Contrast the above format with the much less structured "single moderator format" used in the 1984 Democratic primary debates. A single moderator posed questions to the candidates and was free to follow up immediately if a candidate ducked the question or responded with an answer that was too general. Candidates were given time to ask questions of each other. This format usually results in a much livelier interaction between candidates and tends to highlight differences in the candidates' stands on the issues. However, it requires a skilled, well-informed moderator who is able to make sure all candidates get equal opportunity to present their views.

In some debates, audience questions are used, either live or prescreened. Formal opening and/or closing statements by the candidates often are included. Sometimes, several formats are combined in one debate. As you watch debates, consider the strengths and weaknesses of the format, and keep in mind that the format selected probably reflects a compromise reached by the candidates, the debate sponsor and possibly the broadcaster.

Candidate participation

As you watch a debate, note who is and who is not included. Are minor party and/or independent candidates involved? Deciding whom to include in a debate is not always easy or obvious for debate sponsors. Some choose to include only major candidates in order to use the brief time available to give voters an opportunity to compare candidates with a realistic chance of winning. Other sponsors prefer to open the platform to all legally qualified candidates, providing voters with an opportunity to hear all candidates' points of view. Which position do you think is most informative to voters?

Either way poses potential problems. In 1980, for example, the League of Women Voters Education Fund announced it would include in its presidential debates all candidates receiving more than 15 percent support in national nonpartisan public opinion polls. Independent candidate John Anderson met that criterion, and the League invited him to participate in the first presidential debate. The Democratic contender, President Jimmy Carter, promptly pulled out. Later, when Anderson's support dipped below the League-established 15 percent criterion, he was not invited for the second debate. Carter then agreed to take the stage opposite Republican candidate Ronald Reagan.

Impact of debates

Most scholars agree that debates rarely cause a dramatic change in the course of an election. They seldom make a winner out of a long-shot nor can they destroy a candidate who is far ahead in the polls. In fact, studies of the impact of presidential debates show that debates tend to confirm the choices people have already made. According to these studies, even if a candidate makes a major mistake or says something supporters do not like during a debate, most supporters adjust their views in order to remain loyal to the original candidate.

This is not to say that debates do not shape voters' opinions. In fact, they have the greatest impact on undecided voters. Watching a debate helps an uncommitted voter decide how to cast a ballot on election day.

In addition, studies show that debates influence voters in other important ways. Debates stimulate interest in the election and inform the public about the issues involved in the campaign as well as the candidates' positions on those issues. They put candidates on the record, so they can be held accountable once in office. They help rally a candidate's supporters to get involved in the campaign and to vote. And finally, they provide a great deal of information about the personalities of the candidates.

In sum, candidate debates can play a vital role in our democracy. In a country in which only about half of all eligible voters cast their ballots in the 1984 presidential elections, the role that televised debates play in stimulating and educating voters is especially important.

Debates, though, will remain only as good as the public wants them to be. Because many candidates want safe debates – or, all too often, no debates at all – it is up to the public to persuade candidates to debate and to accept better, more challenging formats. And then, it is up to the debate audiences to evaluate the candidates – differentiate between style and substance – and make informed choices at the polls.

Rate the Debate

You will get more out of watching a debate if you are well prepared. Get ready by following press reports on the candidates. Knowing their campaign positions ahead of time and knowing something about the issues that are likely to come up in the debate will help you to understand the questions and answers and to evaluate the candidates' performance. It also is helpful to get some background on the debate sponsor and follow any campaign conflicts over the debate itself.

Rate the debate format

A good format should be interesting and fair, should provide information about the candidates' views on the issues and should help you judge the candidates' leadership qualities. In evaluating the debate format, consider:

1. Does it give all candidates equal opportunity to speak and to respond to opponents?
2. Does it hold your interest? Does it allow the differences between the candidates to surface?
3. Does it make it easy for the candidates to talk about the issues? Does it allow the candidates to state their views clearly? Does it allow the candidates to be pinned down?
4. Does it give you insight into the candidates' personalities and leadership qualities?

Rate the moderator/panelists

1. Is the moderator in control of the debate?
2. Are the questions fair? Are they equally tough on all candidates?
3. Are the questions clear? Is there enough information so that viewers understand the meaning of the answers? Are follow-up questions used to help pin down the candidates?
4. Do the questions cover the important issues? Are there any major issues that are not mentioned?
5. Does the moderator or do any of the panelists talk too much?
6. Does the moderator allow each candidate the same amount of time to talk?

Rate the candidates

Most of your attention during a debate centers on the candidates' performance, and rightly so. But as you watch, be aware of your reactions both to the substance of the candidates' remarks and to the visual images they convey. Those images can be powerful. For example, two revealing polls were taken after the 1960 debates between John Kennedy, who came across as youthful and energetic, and Richard Nixon, who looked tired and older. A majority of television viewers judged Kennedy the debate winner, but a poll of radio listeners gave the victory to Nixon. Clearly, the power of image can cause voters to overlook the substance of a debate. Therefore, as you evaluate candidates consider:

Image

1. Are you influenced by the age, sex, clothes, posture or other physical characteristics of the candidates? How?
2. What impressions do the candidates convey as the debate progresses? Who appears more relaxed? more sincere? more confident?

3. Who knows how to use television better? Do the candidates look directly at you (into the camera) or elsewhere (at the panelists, live audience, etc.)? Does this affect your overall impression of the candidates?

Substance

1. Do the candidates answer or evade the questions?
2. Do the candidates tell you their stands on issues or do they respond with emotional appeals and campaign slogans?
3. Do the candidates give their own views, or do they mostly attack the opponent? Are the attacks personal or directed at the opponent's policies?
4. Are the answers consistent with the candidates' previous positions?
5. Is the candidate well informed? Do the candidates use facts and figures to help you understand or to confuse you?
6. Are the answers realistic or are they just campaign promises? You may want to read a transcript or view a videotape of the debate to help answer these questions.

Rate the impact of the debate

Political debates are but one event in a long campaign season. How has the debate influenced the campaign? In evaluating the impact of a debate, consider the following:

1. At what stage in the campaign is the debate taking place?
2. What press coverage, if any, is there of the debate? Does it cover important issues or focus on attention-getting details (mistakes, slogans, etc.)?
3. Did the debate change press coverage of the campaign? Are different issues emphasized?
4. Did the candidates' ratings in the polls change after the debate?
5. Has interest in the campaign changed? How?
6. Have the behavior, policy positions or campaign strategy of either candidate changed? How?

Suggested activities

1. The candidates and the Issues

Before the debate: On a piece of paper, along the left margin, write down the issues about which you care most. Make a column next to each issue for each candidate. Then, make a column for your own position on each issue listed. If you do not know or you want to hear the various views before forming an opinion, leave it blank.

During the debate: As candidates talk about the issues you have listed, fill in their positions in the appropriate column. If you do not understand the candidate's answer, write, "Don't understand." If the candidate avoids the question, write "avoids question." If the issue is not discussed, leave it blank.

After the debate: Make a final column listing your positions on the issues after watching the debate. Evaluate what you learned about the issues from the debate. Have you changed any opinions or made up your mind on any issues? Circle the candidate's positions that are the closest to yours. How helpful was the debate in helping you learn the candidates' stands on the issues?

2. The candidates and their leadership qualities

Before the debate: On a piece of paper, along the left margin, list the qualities of a good leader. (Examples: strong, good communicator, good listener, honest, smart, etc.). Next, for each quality, make a column with the name of each candidate in the debate.

During the debate: As you watch the debate, note ways in which each candidate does or does not show the leadership qualities you have listed. Your examples should come both from the candidates' statements and from the images they convey.

After the debate: Evaluate your list. What impressed you the most: content or image? How was the debate helpful in teaching you about the candidates' leadership qualities? How might it be deceptive? How do your impressions compare with those of others - classmates, parents, media commentators?

3. Impact of debates - take your own poll

Before the debate: Design a poll to determine your classmates' views (or, as a class project, a sampling of your neighbors' and relatives' views) of the candidates. Include questions about the leadership qualities of the candidates, the candidates' stands on key issues and whom they would vote for if the election were held that day.

After the debate: Go back to the same group of people and ask the same questions. How did their answers change, if at all? What impact did the debate have on your sample?

4. Impact of debates - Interviews

Before the debate: Design a set of interview questions to solicit various views of the candidates (their leadership qualities, their stands on issues, whom they would vote for, and so on). Select different kinds of people to interview.

After the debate: Interview the same people. Ask who they thought "won" the debate and why. Also ask if they changed their opinion as a result of the debate and what they learned from the debate. Evaluate the responses. What impact did the debate have?

5. Participate in a debate

Attend a debate: Find out if there will be a live audience at a candidate debate. If so, ask if you can attend. If there will be audience questions, prepare the questions you would like the candidates to address.

Stage your own mock debate: Assign all roles to various classmates, including candidates, moderator, etc. You may even want to stage mock negotiating sessions over debate details (format, etc.). Afterwards, be sure to evaluate how your debate went and discuss the different viewpoints of all participants.