

Subject: History of Political Debates

Grade Level: 6-8

Standards:

C.6.11 Describe the primary and general election process for local, state, and national offices, including those used to select congressional and presidential office holders.

C.6.12 Identify and explain the duties of and selection process for local and state government officials who make, implement, and enforce laws

C.6.16 Explain the role citizens have in making decisions and rules within the community, state, and nation. •Examples: Participating in local and regional activities, voting in elections, running for office, and voicing opinions in a positive way.

C.6.19 Examine ways by which citizens may effectively voice opinions, monitor government, and bring about change in government including voting and participation in the election process.

C.6.23 Explain ways that citizens can participate in the election process (political parties, campaigns, and elections) at the national, state, and local levels.

Materials Needed:

Students will need access to:
Computer, laptop or tablet
Paper and pen/pencil

Learning Objectives:

- Students will be able to state the purpose of debates.
- Students will be able to identify two ways debates have changed over the years.
- Students will be able to discuss how television has impacted debates.

Introduction/Anticipatory Set:

Political Debates

What are they?

Why do we have them?

Debates give the candidates the opportunity to discuss their platforms and answer questions in front of the voters. They have been around for more than 150 years. Initially the debates were in person, so only small groups of citizens could listen. Then radio and television came along which allowed for larger audiences.

Body of Lesson:

Simple Civics Video – History of Presidential Debates

[Simple Civics | History of Political Debates | WFYI](#)

Before the 1800's, presidential candidates did not participate in debates. In 1858, Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas were running for president. They both participated in seven debates. In these debates, one candidate would speak for an hour stating his position. Then the other candidate would speak for 90 minutes with his rebuttal. After that rebuttal, the first candidate would then have 30 minutes to speak again. These were VERY LONG debates.

Radio and TV brought many changes to the debates. In 1940, Wendall Willkie asked for radio debates with President Franklin D. Roosevelt. President Roosevelt declined to participate in the debates.

1960 was the year of the first televised presidential debate. Richard M. Nixon and John F. Kennedy were the participants. TV was a new medium for candidates. Nixon did not seem to be comfortable with TV. Kennedy seemed much more comfortable. Kennedy used makeup to enhance his TV appearance.

Television debates are now commonplace. Debates are often held with multiple participants. Guidelines are developed prior to the debate. Candidates are given shorter time limits to speak.

The rules of the debates may change each time. What does not change is the need for the candidate to be comfortable with the camera and present a positive image, as well as being knowledgeable and well-spoken about the topics.

Vice presidential debates are also held. Usually there are more presidential debates than vice presidential debates in a given election year.

C-Span Presidential debates 2020

[WATCH: 2020 Presidential Debates | live coverage, schedule, and video on demand \(c-span.org\)](#)

Class Activity

Watch the first 10 minutes of the 2020 presidential debate. Hold class discussion on the following questions:

1. Do you think a debate is a good way for the candidates to share their platforms?
2. What are things you would like to change about the way debates are held?
3. Do you think debates influence voters?
4. If you were voting in a presidential election, would you find it helpful to watch a debate?

Class Activity

LESSON PLAN – History of Political Debates

Hold a presidential debate with students acting as the candidates.

An example: students could debate a topic such as *should schools provide free lunches for everyone*.

Select or seek a volunteer for a candidate who is in favor and one who is opposed.

Set guidelines for the debate prior to starting.

Possible guidelines:

Each candidate will have 2 minutes to present their position.

The other candidate will then have 1 minute for rebuttal.

Questions from the audience could be allowed.

Each candidate will then have 1 minute for a closing statement.

Then the students could “vote” for a candidate.

Discussion could be held on whether the candidate’s arguments influenced the vote or whether the students had already determined if they were voting for or against the proposal.

Summary/Closure

Debates have long provided a way for voters to learn more about candidates. A debate allows the feeling of a more personal connection with a candidate than simply reading about his or her policies.

The styles and guidelines of debates have changed greatly over the years and continue to change. Do debates influence a voter’s choice in an election?

Extension Activities

Read about the Kennedy – Nixon debates.

[The Kennedy-Nixon Debates - 1960, Analysis & TV vs. Radio - HISTORY](#)

View the video showing Kennedy vs. Nixon – 1960 Debate

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QazmVHA00os>

Class Activity

Discuss how the televised debate impacted Richard Nixon’s campaign and John Kennedy’s campaign.

Discuss whether the television appearance of the two candidates influenced whether or not you would vote for either one.

Discuss the impact of appearance on how you felt about the candidates answers to questions.

PBS Learning Media

New to PBS Learning Media? Click here to learn more and sign up today:

<https://indiana.pbslearningmedia.org/signup/>

LESSON PLAN – History of Political Debates