

Subject: Civics and Government

Grade Level: 9–12

Standards:

Indiana DOE

Academic (3)

LH.3.1 Structural Elements and Organization (Reading):

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text.

USG.3.15 Purposes, Principles, and Institutions of the Government of the United States

Examine the progression of political parties and their ideologies and the broad political spectrum in the American governmental system and analyze their functions in elections and government at national, state, and local levels of the federal system.

USG.5.7 Roles of Citizens in the United States

Explain how citizens in the United States participate in public elections as voters and supporters of candidates for public office.

Nationwide

National Standards for Civics and Government (5)

III.E.2.3 Students should be able to evaluate, take, and defend positions about the role of public opinion in American politics.

To achieve this standard, students should be able to evaluate ways that government and the media influence public opinion.

III.E.3 Students should be able to evaluate, take, and defend positions on the influence of the media on American political life.

III.E.4 How does the American political system provide for choice and opportunities for participation?

Students should be able to evaluate, take, and defend positions about the roles of political parties, campaigns, and elections in American politics.

III.E.4.8

To achieve this standard, students should be able to evaluate the significance of campaigns and elections in the American political system.

III.E.4.9

To achieve this standard, students should be able to evaluate current criticisms of campaigns and proposals for their reform.

Materials Needed:

Students will need access to:

A computer or laptop or a way to show video in class

Students may need headphones

Access to PBS Learning Media

Access to the internet

Learning Objectives:

- Understand how campaign debates have grown in importance with mass communications technology.
- Understand the impact of the Dewey/Stassen and Kennedy/Nixon presidential debates.
- Understand that candidates need to master communications media as well as public policy.

Introduction/Anticipatory Set:

We live in an information age, when citizens expect to have ready access to the information they need to make critical decisions such as the choice of a President. Televised debates are an important source of this information. They give us not only a concise summary of each candidate's position, but also an opportunity to see the candidate respond to questions and criticism. As a result, a candidate's poll numbers

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can rise or fall dramatically after a debate. A debate performance can swing the election itself in some cases.

Body of Lesson:

1. Debates were not used in early presidential elections.
 - a. Travel and communications media were limited in colonial America.
 - b. Candidates relied on colonial leaders to promote their candidacy.
 - c. Learning Activity:
 - i. Read the article, “John Adams: Campaigns and Elections,” by C. James Taylor (<https://millercenter.org/president/adams/campaigns-and-elections>).
 - ii. Note that both of Adams’ presidential campaigns were waged by his surrogates, especially the Federalist newspapers, rather than by Adams himself.
 - iii. Ask students to discuss whether these campaigns focused on policy issues or on the character of the candidates. Do students think this emphasis gave voters greater confidence in their decision, or less?
2. In the mid-nineteenth century, debates focused attention on candidates who otherwise would have remained regional figures.
 - a. Abraham Lincoln became nationally known through the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858.
 - b. Learning Activity:
 - i. Read the History Channel’s article, “Lincoln-Douglas Debates” (<https://www.history.com/topics/19th-century/lincoln-douglas-debates>).
 - ii. Have each student write a one-page paper (about 250 words) comparing the positions of Lincoln and Douglas on slavery.
 - iii. Note that many newspapers printed full transcripts of the debates. (This is why they sent stenographers to cover each event.) Ask students how this coverage enhanced Lincoln’s reputation as a national leader. Do they think his homespun appearance and folk humor were assets or liabilities for him? How would newspaper coverage maximize or minimize these factors?
3. New communications media (radio and television) gave debates a more important role in elections of the twentieth century.
 - a. Thomas Dewey and Harold Stassen were the first to debate one another by radio in Oregon’s Republican primary of 1948 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dewey%E2%80%93Stassen_debate). Historians believe that Dewey’s performance helped him capture the Republican nomination that year.

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- b. Pundits favored Dewey to win the 1948 election over incumbent Harry S Truman, due to several of Truman’s unpopular decisions.
 - i. However, Truman was a more effective public speaker, so Dewey did not appear in a debate with him.
 - ii. Truman made a whistle-stop tour of the country to deliver over two hundred speeches. He won the election, largely as a result of this.
- c. Richard M. Nixon and John F. Kennedy appeared in two televised debates for the 1960 presidential election.
 - i. People who heard the first debate by radio believed that Nixon won because of his articulate statement of Republican policies.
 - ii. People who viewed the first debate by television believed that Kennedy won because he appeared more relaxed and confident. Historians believe that his debate appearance gave Kennedy the edge to win the election.
 - iii. Learning Activity:
 1. View a portion of the YouTube videos of the first Kennedy-Nixon debate (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AYP8-oxq8iq>) and the fourth debate (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-9cdRpE4KKc>).
 2. Ask students to write a one-page paper (about 250 words) to compare the performance of each candidate in each of these debates.

Summary/Closure

Debates are now a vital part of presidential elections. They help voters narrow the field of candidates during primaries, as in the 2020 election, when two dozen Democratic contenders fought for their party’s nomination. They also help voters differentiate between candidates in the general election, as in the 1960 Nixon-Kennedy contest. This suggests that future candidates will need to understand mass media as well as national policy.

Extension Activities

Viewers can be swayed by the emotional appeals of a debate, but with a bit of planning you can evaluate debate arguments on their objective merits. If a political campaign is currently underway, even if it’s not a presidential campaign, you may have an opportunity to view a campaign debate. Plan a debate viewing party for your students and use the “Rate the Debate” article to prepare for that event.

PBS Learning Media

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Rate the Debate

You should enjoy watching a televised debate because you are so well prepared to understand the questions and answers and to evaluate the candidates' performance. Before the event, get some background on the debate sponsor and follow any conflicts over the debate itself.

Rate the Debate Format

A good format should be interesting and fair, should provide information about the candidates and issues and should help you judge the candidates' leadership abilities.

- Does it hold your interest?
- Does it allow the differences between the candidates to surface?
- Does it make it easy for the candidates to discuss the issues and respond to opponents?

Rate the Moderator/Panelists

- Is the moderator in control of the debate? Does the moderator or any of the panelists talk too much?
- Are the questions fair and equally tough on all the candidates?
- Are the questions clear? Is there enough information so that viewers understand the meaning of the answers? Are follow-up questions used to pin down the candidates?
- Do the questions cover all the important issues?

Rate the Candidates

As you watch, be aware of your reactions both to the substance of the candidates' remarks and the visual images that are conveyed. They can be powerful. Clearly, the power of images can cause voters to overlook what is being said. Are you influenced by the age, sex, clothes or physical characteristics of the candidates? Who appeared more relaxed, more sincere, more confident? Who uses television better by looking directly at you, for example? In judging substance, decide who answers or evades the questions. Do the candidates tell you their stands on the issues, or do they respond with emotional appeals or slogans? If anyone attacks his or her opponent, is it personal or directed at the other candidate's policies? Do the candidates seem well informed and give answers consistent with previous positions? Are their answers realistic or are they just campaign promises?

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Source: “How to Pick a Candidate,” League of Women Voters Newton,
<https://lwvnewton.org/voters-service/how-to-pick-a-candidate/>