



Citizens, Not Spectators

Lesson 3: The Candidates Debate

Lesson Overview

Debates can be exciting, energizing, information-packed events. Students often think of the types of debates they have done in class, perhaps a Lincoln-Douglas debate or a policy debate. This lesson takes students through the presidential debates used in campaigns. Using information gathered in Lesson 2 about the presidential candidates' stances on issues, students will view the debates and determine if the candidates have an identifiable and consistent position. Students will determine if the presidential debates are a useful tool in helping them choose a candidate.

Suggested Grade Level

High school (grades 9–12)

Estimated Time to Complete

One class period (However there will be a need for review after each debate)

Objectives

By the end of the lesson students should be able to

- describe the role of the Commission on Presidential Debates;
- be familiar with the formats used in presidential debates;
- judge the effectiveness of the debate formats in the 2012 Presidential debates; and
- develop a standard by which to evaluate a candidate's performance in a debate.

Materials Needed

Teacher Resources

- Teacher Resource 1

- Teacher Resource 2

Student Handouts

- Student Handout 1

Procedure

1. *Introduce the Lesson.* Begin the lesson by asking students if they have ever participated in or watched a debate.

For those who might have participated, ask them to describe:

- The type of debate
- What was their role?
- How did they prepare?
- What was the experience like?
- How did it go?

For students who have watched a debate, ask them to describe:

- What type of debate did they watch?
- Why were they watching?
- How well did the debaters do?

2. *Debating Candidates.* Ask students if they have ever watched a presidential debate or the debate of any politicians seeking office. How did those compare to the academic debates they have witnessed or participated in? Conduct a short class discussion on campaign debates. The following questions may facilitate the discussion;
 - a. Why do we hold debates?
 - b. Who organizes and sponsors them?
 - c. What can we learn from them?
 - d. What do they expect to see?
 - e. How can debates be helpful to the selection process for citizens?
 - f. How can debates be counterproductive or hurtful to the selection process?
 - g. If they could create their own debate, what would they like to see?
 - h. What issues would they like to discuss?
3. *From the Past.* Share with the class either a video or transcript excerpt of a presidential debate (Teacher Resource 1 provides information and links to past debates). Ask students to react to the excerpt with respect to the discussion they just completed. Share with students

some of the different debate formats that have been used, and how decisions about topics and questions are made.

4. *Student Choice.* Divide the class into small groups of three students each. Instruct one-third of the groups to design a debate format as they believe it should be structured. The next third of the groups should develop criteria for evaluating a debate format. The last third should develop criteria for evaluating candidates in the debate. Allow students 10 minutes to complete the task. After the allotted time, choose one group from each of the three tasks to share their work with the class.
5. *What would you ask?* Review with the class the issues they worked on in *Lesson 2: Where Do They Stand?* (If the charts they developed in that lesson are not still on display, it may be helpful to put them back up). Have students brainstorm questions they might ask either or both candidates if they had the opportunity.
6. *Watching the Debates.* Distribute Student Handout 1 to the class along with the assignment to watch the debates. Reflecting back on their chart of issues, during which of the three scheduled debates might each of their issues be covered? Remind the students to pay close attention and see if their issues are covered and what changes, if any, either of the candidates make in their positions.
7. *Debriefing.* After watching the debate, arrange students into the groups they were in for Part 4 of this lesson. Have them share their responses within their groups. After the allotted time, ask each group to share their responses with the class.
8. *Concluding the lesson.* Conduct a discussion in which students determine:
 - What value, if any, do presidential debates have for voters?
 - What types of information do debates provide?
 - Do they help voters make informed decisions?
 - What insight, if any, does it provide into the candidates?
 - What does the vice presidential debate add to the campaign?
 - How might the events be improved?
 - Are they worth continuing and why?