

Lesson 11

Election Debates



GUIDING QUESTIONS

- 1 What makes an effective debater?
- 2 Why should we analyze the leaders' debate and the statements made by leaders?

PURPOSE

Debates are a cornerstone of a healthy democracy and can contribute to a well-informed and active citizenry. In order to be an informed voter, citizens should pay attention to what politicians are saying and have the tools to evaluate their statements.

In this lesson, students learn about effective debating skills and faulty arguments, before analyzing the leaders' debate for the federal election. In the *Consolidation* activity, students discuss the role of debate in democracy.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of the lesson, students can:

- explain the role of debates in elections;
- summarize effective debating skills and techniques;
- identify different logical fallacies or faulty arguments that people may use;
- compare and contrast the performance of party leaders in the leaders' debate.

Starter

1. Break students into pairs or groups of four and ask them to debate one of the propositions below. Students can make notes on Activity 11.1.
 - Social media is more helpful than harmful to our social lives
 - School should be year-round with more breaks
 - Basketball is better than hockey
 - The Weeknd is a better musician than Drake

SUGGESTED FORMAT

- A** Within each pair or group, have students choose to support or oppose the proposition. There should be equal numbers for both sides.
- B** Give students a few minutes to prepare by writing down their thoughts and arguments.
- C** Allow 2 minutes for each side to present their main points. The other side should take notes while listening.
- D** Afterwards, give each side an opportunity to respond to the arguments made by their opponent (rebuttal).
- E** Have each side provide a closing statement.

2. Debrief on the activity:
 - Did your opinion on the topic change after the debate? Why or why not?
 - What arguments convinced you and why?
 - What arguments were not convincing and why not?
 - What skills and techniques make an effective debater?

Activities

1. Introduce the concept of a leaders' debate.
 - A leaders' debate is an opportunity for party leaders to present their policy ideas to the public, and challenge their opponents' positions.
 - Debates allow citizens to be exposed to different political views.
 - Debates have produced great moments of political history and have acted as major turning points in election campaigns.

KEY TERMS

Zinger a striking or amusing remark.

Gaffe a mistake/error causing embarrassment.

2. Watch one of the highlight videos below about previous leaders' debates.
 - 2011 leaders' debate (highlights) – www.cbc.ca/player/play/2045305469
 - 2008 leaders' debate (highlights) – www.cbc.ca/player/play/1844959231
 - 2006 leaders' debate (highlights) – www.cbc.ca/player/play/1844851254

3. Have a whole class discussion about what makes an effective debater. What did you see in the video that was effective or ineffective? What skills and techniques are important in debate? Which are not? Build on the list generated in the *Starter* activity, and add any of these that might be missing.

Effective debating skills and techniques: The ability to speak clearly and confidently, think quickly, clarify arguments, provide examples, use facts, maintain persuasive speech, appeal to emotions and maintain a professional tone and body language.

Poor debating habits: Losing control and expressing anger, poor listening, using faulty arguments, personal attacks, and acting unprofessional.

4. Explain to students that one way to analyze the debate is to pay attention to how the leaders construct arguments. Sometimes individuals will use faulty reasoning to make a point. Review common types of flawed arguments (logical fallacies) and have students write down their own example for each (Activity 11.2).
 - Authoritative Argument
 - Slippery Slope
 - Appeal to Tradition
 - Personal Attack
 - False Dilemma
 - Strawman Argument

Students may also recall arguments made in the Starter activity or use the proposition debated to create their faulty arguments.

5. Have students watch the 2019 leaders' debate at home or watch select video clips of the event in the days following, and complete Activity 11.3. To prepare for the viewing, review the party leaders that will participate in the debate. You can use the Party Leader Q&A videos or the leader profiles on the *Pollenize* tool.

TEACHER NOTE

In their entirety, each leadership debate may run for 90-120 minutes. The debate will be edited into several smaller segments afterwards, which will make it easier to watch in the classroom.

6. Afterwards, have students share their analysis and examples with their peers.

Consolidation

Have a brief closing discussion about the leadership debates and the role of debate in democracy.

- Why is debate important in democracy?
- Do you think it is valuable for citizens to watch leadership debates prior to voting in an election? Why or why not?
- Did you change your views of the party leaders or their party's positions after watching the debate? Explain.

Extended Learning

OPTION A: News media will report on the leadership debate, offering accounts of what occurred. There are two main categories of media report.

- A news story, or **factual account**, will go over the events of the debate. This type of story will be as neutral as possible, and will include interviews with

experts offering interpretations of what occurred. Interview subjects with contrasting views may appear in the same story to offer different perspectives.

- The second category is an **opinion-based piece**, which usually takes the form of a written column. In this case, the journalist is also the expert. A columnist will advance a first-person argument based on their opinion. This opinion should be backed up with evidence, and existing knowledge of the subject. Some columnists will use more facts than others, or source their arguments better.

In pairs or small groups, have students analyze a pair of news articles — one written by a news reporter, the other by an opinion columnist, or articles from different publications. Students may use Activity 11.4. to record responses.

OPTION B: Organize your own candidates' debate or watch a video of a debate organized in the community. Afterwards, analyze the performances of your local candidates. Guide 11.5 provides a helpful outline and tips for organizing a debate for your school.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS

Debates are a cornerstone of a healthy democracy and can contribute to a well-informed and active citizenry.

During federal elections, leaders' debates act as a platform for certain party leaders to present their ideas and policy positions and challenge their opponents' positions in a respectful and open environment. Debates ensure that citizens are exposed to a variety of political views, including positions that do not always align with their own — which is particularly important in the age of social media.

Leaders' debates provide a chance for citizens to hear directly from the leaders in an unfiltered way, without manipulation from intermediate sources.

Debating is about using persuasive arguments and good oratory that appeal not only to our rational side, but also to our emotions. It involves reducing complex social and economic issues to simplified stories that are easy to understand and relate to. Promises and claims are often based on facts — data, statistics and the like — but disagreements can arise regarding the interpretation of facts, as well as which facts are important at all.

In order to be an informed voter, citizens should pay attention to what politicians are saying and have the tools to evaluate their assertions. A **logical fallacy** is a type of faulty argument. This type of argument may sound convincing in the moment, but if you stop and examine it, it does not stand up to the test of logic. It is very helpful to be able to recognize a logical fallacy and not be persuaded by it.

Recently, the government created an independent commission to organize federal leaders' debates for the 2019 election to avoid partisan influences. There will be one debate in each official language. The English-language debate will occur on October 7 and the French-language debate will happen on October 10.

There are new rules which determine which political parties are eligible to participate in the debates. Political parties must meet two of the following three criteria to be included:

- have a member elected to parliament at the time the election is called;
- intend to run candidates in at least 90 per cent of ridings;
- have either obtained four per cent of the vote in a previous election or have a "legitimate" chance to win seats in the upcoming election.