

Lesson 12

Election Debates



GUIDING QUESTIONS

- 1 What makes an effective debater?
- 2 Why are leaders' debates helpful during elections?

PURPOSE

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

In this lesson, students learn about effective debating skills, before analyzing the leaders' performances in the federal election debate. In the *Consolidation* activity, students reflect on the importance of leadership debates.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of the lesson, students can:

- explain the role of debates in elections;
- summarize effective debating skills and techniques;
- compare and contrast the performance of party leaders in the leaders' debate.

Tips For Teachers

- Please use the activities and combine them in a way that is appropriate for your class.
- Consider watching segments of the debate in different ways to help with the analysis (muted video, audio only and regular video).
- Supplies/Needs: videos from past debates, clips of the debate (www.debates-debats.ca), copies of 12.1 and 12.2.
- Any videos, slide decks, handouts and activity sheets in Word can be found at: studentvote.ca/canada.

Starter

1. Break students into pairs or groups of four and ask them to debate one of the statements/opinions below.
 - Cats are better than dogs
 - School should be year-round with more breaks
 - Basketball is better than hockey

SUGGESTED FORMAT

- A** Within each pair or group, have students choose to agree or disagree with the statement. 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 challenge the arguments made by their opponent (rebuttal).
- E** Have each side provide a closing statement.

Students can write down notes on Activity 12.1 before and during the process.

2. Debrief on the activity:
 - Did your opinion on the topic change after the debate? Why or why not?
 - Which arguments were persuasive and why?
 - 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 ideas and respond to questions.
 - 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 a clip or highlights video of a past leaders' debate:
 - 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, explain 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 weak arguments or personal attacks, and acting unprofessional.

4. Have students watch the leaders' debate at home or clips of the event in the classroom and complete Activity 12.2. To prepare for the viewing, review the party leaders that will be participating in the debate. You can use the Student Vote Party Leader Q&A videos or the leader profiles on the *Pollenize Canada 2019* tool.

TEACHER NOTES

- Leaders' debates tend to be 90-120 min, so watching portions or highlight clips may be a more reasonable activity.
- Consider watching the same segment in three ways to help with the analysis – first show the video without sound, then audio only and then all together.

5. 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 important 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.

Extensions

News media will report on the leadership debate, offering accounts of what occurred. There are two main categories of media reports (see Lesson 8 for details about fact-based vs. opinion journalism).

- 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 use, 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 12.3 to record responses.

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 also 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.

Recently, the government created a new 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 that 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 the 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.