

Lesson 5

The Leaders' Debate



GUIDING QUESTIONS

- 1 What skills and techniques are important in debate?
- 2 Why are leaders' debates helpful during elections?

OVERVIEW

Debates play an essential role in democracy, particularly during elections. They offer us the chance to measure the character and temperament of the candidates and hear about their ideas and positions on important issues. Debates also 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 provincial election debate. In the *Consolidation* activity, students reflect on the importance of watching debates and listening to different viewpoints.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of the lesson, students can:

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

Teacher Tips

- 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 2021 leaders' debate, digital access to or copies of 5.1 and 5.2.
- Online templates for all activities and any videos and slide decks are available on the project website.

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
 - Hockey is better than football

The following format is suggested:

- a) Within each pair or group, have students choose to support or oppose 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 respond to the arguments made by their opponent (rebuttal).
- e) Have each side provide a closing statement.

Students can write down notes on Activity 5.1 before and during the process.

2. Debrief on the activity:
 - Did any of your opponents' arguments make you reconsider your position? Why or why not?
 - Which arguments were persuasive and why?
 - What skills and techniques make an effective debater?

Fundamentals

1. Introduce the concept of a leaders' debate.
 - A leaders' debate is a chance to see the leaders on the same stage answering questions about their plans and challenging each other's ideas and positions.
 - Debates allow citizens to be exposed to different political views that may be different from their own or those around them.
 - Debates have produced great moments of political history and have sometimes acted as major turning points in election campaigns.
 - Viewers often watch to see if any of the leaders' make any "zingers" (a striking or amusing remark) or "gaffes" (a mistake/error causing embarrassment).
2. Watch excerpts from the leaders' debate from the previous provincial election:
 - <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/leader-debate-1.5117286>
 - <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/election-debate-2019-federation-of-labour-1.5117885>
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 2021 leaders' debate at home and/or clips of the debate in the classroom and complete Activity 5.2. To prepare for the viewing, review the party leaders that will be participating in the debate. You can use the "Party Leader Q&A" videos or the "Party Profiles" on the project website.

TEACHER NOTE

- The entire debate may be close to 60 minutes. Some news media may offer segments or highlights the following day.
- 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.

ALTERNATIVE ACTIVITY

News media will report on the leaders' 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 or evidence to produce a stronger argument.

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 5.3 to record responses.

Consolidation

Have a brief closing discussion about the role of debates in elections.

- Do you feel more informed about the leaders and election issues? Why or why not?
- Did your views change of the leaders or parties after watching the debate? Explain.
- Why is debate important in elections?

ASSESSMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Starter	<p>Can students prepare persuasive arguments to support their position?</p> <p>Are students being respectful of each other's opinions?</p> <p>Can students generate counterarguments?</p>
Fundamentals	<p>Can students identify the skills and techniques that are important in debate?</p> <p>Can students extract key messages from each leader's responses during the debate?</p> <p>Do student responses demonstrate critical thinking and evaluation of the leaders' performances? Do they include evidence to support their thinking?</p>
Consolidation	<p>Can students articulate the value of debates and/or becoming informed about the leaders and parties?</p> <p>Can students understand why it is important to hear from different leaders and/or listen to different views?</p>

ADAPTATIONS AND SUPPORTS

Individual Education Plans	<p>Modifications</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider abilities when organizing pairs or groups during the <i>Starter</i> activity. • Provide additional time for preparing arguments and rebuttals. <p>Enrichment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have students analyze the leaders' positions and policies during the debate. Are they too simplistic? Are they achievable? Do they back up their positions with evidence?
English Language Learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch the segments of the debate in different ways to help with the analysis (muted video, audio only). • Use an application or word cloud generator to simplify some of the leaders' responses.
Culturally Responsive Pedagogy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you are selecting segments of the debate to watch, select questions or issues that are of interest to your students and/or the local community. • Analyze the diversity of the questions asked during the debate. Did the leaders address the concerns of different communities in the province? What other questions could have been asked to the leaders?
Accessibility & Accommodations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some students may not have the ability to watch the debate at home. Consider providing time in class to watch the debate so that all students have an opportunity. • Consider conducting the <i>Starter</i> activity outside or using an online learning tool, such as Google Docs.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS

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

During a provincial election, 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.

The media companies broadcasting the debate are typically responsible for deciding which party leaders are invited to participate. Usually, only the parties that have members elected to the House of Assembly at the time the election is called, or are running candidates in most or all electoral districts in the current election and have a legitimate chance to win seats are included.