

Lesson 6

The Leaders' Debate



GUIDING QUESTIONS

- 1 What skills and techniques are important in debate?
- 2 Why should we analyze the leaders' debate and the arguments made by leaders?
- 3 Why are debates important in elections?

SUMMARY

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. In order to be an informed voter, citizens should pay attention to what politicians are saying and have the tools to evaluate their arguments.

In this lesson, students learn about effective debating skills and common types of faulty arguments. Afterwards, students watch the leaders' debate for the provincial election and analyze the arguments made by the leaders. In the *Consolidation* activity, students discuss the importance of election debates.

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 small groups and ask them to debate one of the propositions below.
 - School should be year-round with more breaks
 - Hockey is better than football
 - The voting age should be lowered to 16

The following format is suggested:

- a) Within each pair or group, have students choose to support or oppose the position. There should be equal numbers for both sides.
 - b) Give students a few minutes to prepare by writing down their thoughts and arguments on Activity 6.1.
 - 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 to see the leaders on the same stage answering questions 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. Ask students to watch excerpts from the 2019 provincial leaders' debate. Students can watch a few different sections.
 - **Leaders' debate** – www.saltwire.com/news/local/newfoundland-and-labrador-leaders-election-debate-tonight-307556/?location=west-coast
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. Watch the “Logical Fallacies” video as a class. 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 6.2).

- 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 2021 provincial leaders’ debate at home and/or watch select video clips of the debate in the days following, and complete Activity 6.3. 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 “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.

6. Afterwards, have students share their responses to Activity 6.3 with the rest of the class. When sharing their analysis of the leaders’ debate, remind students to use evidence to support their arguments and to avoid faulty arguments, such as personal attacks.

Consolidation

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

- Do you think it is valuable for citizens to watch the leaders’ debate prior to voting in an election? Why or why not?
- Why should we analyze the positions and arguments made by party leaders?
- Why is debate important in elections?

EXTENDED LEARNING

News media will report on the leaders’ debate, offering accounts of what occurred. There are two main categories of media reports.

- 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 6.4. to record responses.

ADAPTATIONS AND SUPPORTS

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/arguments.
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?
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 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.

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.