LESSON 3

The Debates

Objectives: Students will develop criteria for evaluating the candidates, observe media coverage, and compare candidates' qualifications for office.

Handouts: (10) Debate Backgrounder; (11) No Props, Charts or Risers; (12) The Debates; (13) Debate Checklist

A. Daily warm-up and current events alert!

Elicit student reaction: What should an informed voter know today? Or, since we last met, what have you heard (read or seen) about the election?

Ask, "what is the debate about?" It is a demonstration of one's knowledge NOT showing what others do not know; a marketplace of ideas NOT one idea; expressing opinions NOT putting others down.

B. The Debates

Teachers may tape the debates and use selected excerpts or assign watching them for homework. The Debate Backgrounder, #9, may be a teacher resource or shared with students.

Show of hands: has anyone watched a presidential debate? What is one thing you remember about it? No Props, #10, provides an interesting and amusing behind the scenes look at the rules of the game.

Using The Debates, #11, prepare students for debate watching. The "Before the Debate" considerations on the handout are particularly useful. Debate watchers are urged not to look for the winner but rather who will make a better president, as well as other helpful watching hints.

Students should be asked to look for different things during the debate. See Debate Checklist Handout 12, for ideas. For example, some students may be asked to focus upon issues (how much did the candidates seem to know?), others on style (how well did the candidates communicate?), and others consistency (how well did the candidates match their ads?), and so on. As a class, students should develop a topic-specific checklist before watching.

After watching, students should reflect individually before engaging in small group discussion on their respective topic areas. Finally, the small groups should present their views with the whole class. As a class, discuss "After the Debate" questions on The Debate handout.

C. Extended Activities

Homework / Journal Entry

As a result of watching the debate, I think that Bush/Kerry would be the best choice for president because ________ .

Something that surprised me about the debates was _____ because __________ .

An informed voter should be a debate watcher -- why or why not?
If I were the moderator of the debates (or if I were George Bush or John Kerry; Dick Cheney or John Edwards), I would have _______. 
Debate Backgrounder

Understanding Debates: A Viewer's Guide

This resource may be useful for teachers using DebateWatch in their classrooms.

Voters typically identify candidate debates as the most influential source of information received during a campaign. Because of their importance, this guide describes commonly used debate formats, questioning techniques, and guidelines for viewing a debate. It is designed to be useful in viewing state and local debates as well as presidential.

The Structure of Debates

Debates use a variety of formats. Primary debates, featuring candidates from the same party, and local debates traditionally are more freewheeling and incorporate a wide range of formats because of multiple candidates. Since 1992, the general election presidential debates have also featured multiple formats including a town hall meeting with citizen questioners.

Most debates impose time limits on answers to ensure that all candidates have equal opportunity to respond. Topics may focus on a wide range of issues or may be on a particular theme such as education or the economy. General election presidential debates usually divide the time between foreign and domestic topics.

Candidates may have an opening statement, or a moderator may introduce each candidate and begin questioning immediately. In most debates candidates have closing statements.

Questions guide the content of debates. There are three types of questions: initial; follow-up; and cross-examination. Initial questions get the debate started by asking candidates to explain or defend a position or compare it to an opponent's. Many initial questions are hypotheticals in the form of, "What would you do if?" Follow-up questions are directed at a candidate after an answer is given. Their purpose is to probe the original response by asking for elaboration or clarification. Some follow-up questions are on an unrelated topic. Follow-up questions may be asked immediately after an initial response is given or after all candidates have answered the initial question. Cross-examination questions are questions that one candidate addresses to another. A separate time can be set aside for cross-examination questions or they may be included as follow-ups.

Questions may be posed to candidates from a variety of sources. A single moderator, usually from the media, or a panel of media representatives or subject experts are the most common questioners. Many debates, especially at the local level, allow for questions from the audience at some point in the debate. The Richmond town hall meeting in 1992 was the first general election presidential debate to involve citizen questioners.

The Politics of Debates -- No Props, Charts or Risers

(CNN) -- Sep. 21, 2004 -- Here are highlights of some of the rules laid out in the 32-page agreement on the three presidential debates ahead of the November election.

* No television camera shots from behind the candidates and no cutaway shots of candidates who are not answering questions.

* Other than a handshake at the start of the debates, the candidates are not to approach each other.

* No props, notes, charts, diagrams or other writings can be used by the candidates; however, they can take notes on the type of paper of their choosing.

* The candidates cannot ask each other direct questions, but can ask rhetorical questions.

* The candidates cannot address each other with proposed pledges.

* Each candidate can use his own makeup artist.

* No candidate is allowed to use risers or any other device to make them look taller.

* The Coin Toss: At least 72 hours before the first debate, there will be a coin toss on the order of questioning and closing arguments. The winner gets to choose whether to take the first or second question, or whether to give the first or second closing statement. The coin-toss loser then chooses his preference of question order or closing statement order not exercised by the winner of the coin toss. For the next debate, the coin-toss loser gets to pick first. There will be a separate coin toss for the final debate.

* Another coin toss will determine stage positions of the candidates.

* There will be at least 16 questions. A candidate gets two minutes to respond to a question; the other candidate gets 1 1/2 minutes to comment on the question or to respond to his rival's answer. A moderator can use his/her discretion on whether to extend the discussion by 60 seconds.

* For the second debate, which has a town-hall forum, the audience members submit questions to the moderator, who then approves which audience members get to participate. If audience members stray from their questions, the moderator is to cut them off.

* Other than Secret Service personnel and the president's doctor and military aide, each candidate is allowed to have only one pre-designated staff member in the wings or the immediate backstage area.

The Debates

Thu., Sept. 30  
1st presidential debate  
Domestic policy  
Fox  
Coral Gables, FL

Tue., Oct. 5  
Vice presidential debate  
Open Forum  
ABC  
Cleveland, OH

Fri., Oct. 8  
2nd presidential debate  
Townhall-Open  
NBC  
St. Louis, MO

Wed., Oct 13  
3rd presidential debate  
Foreign policy  
(tba)  
Tempe, AZ

All debates are 9:00 -10:30p.m. ET, before a live audience

Format

In the first and third presidential debates and in the vice presidential debate the candidates will be seated at a table with the moderator. The second presidential debate will use the town meeting format in which undecided voters, selected by the Gallup Organization, will question the candidates.

Each debate will have a different single moderator to be selected by the Commission on Presidential Debates. The four moderators will be announced no later than Sept. 10.

The moderators' job in the first and third presidential debates and the vice presidential debate will be to introduce and change topics, to ensure that the participants have equal time, and to encourage some direct exchange among the candidates. The moderators will select all topics and questions. The moderators will have discretion to ask follow-up questions in all debates.

In the town meeting debate, the town meeting participants will pose their questions to the candidates. The town meeting participants will review their questions with the moderator before the debate for the sole purpose of avoiding duplicate questions.

Before the Debate

Focus your attention on a few key points. Know what it is you want in a president, then watch and listen for which candidate best fits your ideal. The following suggestions will help you focus:

1. Don't watch a debate to determine a winner or loser. Focus on the question, "Who will make a better president?"
2. Set aside partisan views. Use the debates to learn as much as possible about the candidates and their positions.
3. Pay close attention to the candidates when they talk about how to solve problems. Listen carefully for comparisons made between their programs and their opponent's.
4. Identify the candidate's debate strategy. Does the candidate speak directly to the issues, provide specifics, and present new policies or information? Or does the candidate evasively interpret questions to suit his agenda?
5. Identify the images that candidates try to create for themselves. Most candidates portray themselves as leaders identified with cherished American values while suggesting that their opponents lack these qualities. What in their responses supports their claims?
6. Be aware of the technical limitations of live televised debates. Television works by showing action. To create action and minimize monotony, directors include "reaction shots" to show one candidate's response to the other's statement. This can distract from what is being said.
7. Consider the questions asked by the moderator. The essence of debate is comparison and contrast. Did the moderator's questions encourage alternative viewpoints? Observe and evaluate the questions asked.

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1 The CPD is the non-partisan, non-profit, tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organization that has sponsored all general election presidential debates since 1987. www.debates.org. © 2004 Commission on Presidential Debates. All rights reserved.
Debate Checklist

Before the Debate

Make your own checklist.
- It may focus upon issues (how much did the candidates seem to know?), or on style (how well did the candidates communicate?), or on consistency (how well did the candidates match their ads?), or other topics.
- Consider also things like: vocabulary choice, personal qualities, knowledge of current events/world leaders, etc.
- What was a memorable moment -- or what will be in the headlines tomorrow?

After the Debate

1. Did the debate influence your attitudes about the issues or the candidates?

2. Were there any issues of interest not discussed during the debate?

3. Were there any issues raised that you considered irrelevant or unimportant?

4. What did you learn about the candidates or issues that you did not know prior to the debate?

Possible additional questions for the second, third or vice presidential debates:

1. What did you learn from this debate that you did not learn from the previous debate(s)?

2. How, if at all, did the press coverage of the previous debate(s) influence your attitudes about the candidates or the issues in this debate?

3. What did you learn from the vice presidential debate that was different from the presidential debate?