

Lesson plan – Debating Our Destiny: Do Presidential Debates Matter?

Subjects

Social studies, U.S. history, U.S. government, civics

Estimated Time

One to three 50-minute classes

Grade Level

Middle and high school

Objective

To understand how televised debates have shaped the presidential campaign process for the last 50 years, which will prepare students to watch the Election 2016 debates.

Overview

The presidential debates have been an important part of the U.S. election process for decades, but how much do they really influence voters? In this lesson, students will watch video clips from PBS NewsHour's "Debating Our Destiny" with Jim Lehrer, which includes famous debate moments and interviews with the candidates. Students will complete a debate scorecard for one of the Election 2016 presidential debates and share their thoughts on the importance of debates in an opinion piece.

Materials

Internet and projector

Handouts:

- “Debating Our Destiny: Presidential Debate Moments that Shaped History”
Chapter One – Do Debates Matter?
- “Debating Our Destiny: Presidential Debate Moments that Shaped History”
Chapter Two – Style vs. Substance
- Excerpt from Jim Lehrer’s Forward – short sports analogy
- Questions to Consider
- Vocabulary
- 2016 General Election Debate Schedule
- Debate Scorecard

Clips:

- George H.W. Bush – “I don’t like ‘em” <https://vimeo.com/182928817/4c396050c9>
- George H.W. Bush – “You can have a good president”
<https://vimeo.com/182928816/3d180926e8>
- Bill Clinton – “If you’re an incumbent” <https://vimeo.com/182928815/7b7cfdd135>
- Geraldine Ferraro’s experiences, fears, expectations based on being the first woman as a major candidate, the “patronizing” incident in 1984 debate
<https://vimeo.com/184868589/d9579186e1>
- Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale on the issue of age in the 1984 debate
<https://vimeo.com/184387026/3c46f938a7>
- George H.W. Bush looks at his watch in 1992 election (2:08)
<https://vimeo.com/183382788/c027da4bf4>
- Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy’s 1960 debate:
<https://vimeo.com/184721864/74b5608ee8>
- Mitt Romney and Barack Obama discuss the size of the military in 2012:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aV1VUS3Q2W0>
- Al Gore’s facial expressions in 2000 <https://vimeo.com/184387028/9a3cdad775>
- George W. Bush’s facial expressions in 2004
<https://vimeo.com/184387027/4482891ad3>

Procedure

Warm up activity

Are presidential debates the equivalent of the Super Bowl?

Ask students: How many of you have seen a presidential debate before? What was your experience like? Did you watch it live on television or on the Internet the next day?

As a class, read the excerpt of Jim Lehrer's forward in the book "Debating Our Destiny: Presidential Debate Moments that Shaped History." Do you agree with Lehrer's sports analogy that there's a lot riding on the debates? Why or why not? What could go wrong in a live televised debate? How could a presidential debate help a candidate?

Main activities

Part 1 "Do Debates Matter?"

Explain to students that they will watch highlights from the PBS NewsHour documentary, "Debating Our Destiny," and will analyze the candidates' reactions to the debates years later.

Start by handing out the 2016 General Election Debate Schedule or have students visit [The Commission on Presidential Debates](#) website.

Show these two intro clips about what the candidates think of the debates:

Read the following quote from President George H.W. Bush and then show students the clip:
"You can have a good president that might not be the best in the top of his game in a staged debate. But maybe he can do it quietly, maybe he can do it without having a hair part and a make-up just right and a smile at the right time." – President George H.W. Bush

Show clip of George H.W. Bush – "I don't like 'em"
<https://vimeo.com/182928817/4c396050c9>

Read the following quote from President Bill Clinton and then show students the clip: "Having to do them and knowing that if you blow it, they will change a lot of votes, forces people who wish to be president to do things that they should do. And I am convinced that the debates that I went through, especially those three in 1992, actually helped me to be a better president." – President Bill Clinton

Show clip of Bill Clinton – "If you're an incumbent"
<https://vimeo.com/182928815/7b7cfdd135>

Check for understanding: Based on the two clips above, students should discuss the following question as a class/small groups/individual: "What role do presidential debates play in the political process?" Write down students' responses on the whiteboard and note any common responses.

Zingers

Ronald Reagan appeared to not be focused in his first 1984 debate with Walter Mondale. This led many voters, given Reagan's age, to question whether or not he was up to the job. Reagan made quite a come back in the second debate, especially with this zinger, which addressed the age issue. A zinger is considered a quick or clever remark that criticizes another person. Show clip: <https://vimeo.com/184387026/3c46f938a7>

Why was Ronald Reagan's reaction to the question of whether or not he was too old to serve as president considered one of the most memorable debate moments? Should zingers be enough to win a debate? The presidency? Why or why not?

Extension: Take a vote in class on whether presidential debates matter or not or even debate the issue.

Part 2 "Style vs. Substance"

Does the way a candidate looks or acts during the debate matter? How much? Why?

Show clip of George H.W. Bush – "You can have a good president"
<https://vimeo.com/182928816/3d180926e8>

Appearance

Check out the "Debating Our Destiny" [teacher resource site](#), which asks the following questions: Could a president like William Howard Taft (over 300 pounds) or Franklin Roosevelt (confined to a wheelchair) be elected in an age of television? Would the public choose Lincoln over Douglas if they could see Lincoln in person? Some of Lincoln's contemporaries ridiculed him for his unattractive looks.

Former Senator Bob Dole said that his analysis of the Kennedy-Nixon radio debate changed considerably when he saw the videotapes later. Nixon's sweaty, shadowy face contrasted poorly with the confident smile of the younger Kennedy. Note what Bill Clinton recalled as a 14-year old watching the debate.

Show clip Nixon-Kennedy debate clip: <https://vimeo.com/184721864/74b5608ee8>

Ask your students if they think physical appearances are a fair judgment of the candidate? Why do appearances seem to matter to voters?

Extension: While the “Debating Our Destiny” video didn’t go up to the 2012 election, this clip is worth a look. Mitt Romney and Barack Obama from the 2012 presidential election discussing the size of the military:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aV1VUS3Q2W0>

What are the debate styles of each candidate? Did they get at the substance of the issue? Explain.

Body Language/Gestures

And it even goes beyond physical appearance – gestures alone can cause a stir.

Show clip of George H.W. Bush looks at his watch (2:08)

<https://vimeo.com/183382788/c027da4bf4>

Gestures that would otherwise go unnoticed can become important. Did President Bush's glance at his watch reveal his impatience with the debate, or was it a meaningless reflex? In his interview, Bush regrets the big deal that was made from a private moment. How do you think this type of incident affects a voter's opinion of a candidate?

Two good examples of how facial expressions played an important role in debates took place by Al Gore in his 2000 debate with George W. Bush and by Bush in his 2004 debate with John Kerry.

- Al Gore became more animated which showed through his facial expressions and sighs after Bush used a popular zinger, the term “fuzzy math,” to criticize Democrats. <https://vimeo.com/184387028/9a3cdad775>
- A few years later in 2004, Bush says he had to learn the same lesson the hard way; Kerry shares his thoughts about Bush’s facial expressions <https://vimeo.com/184387027/4482891ad3>

Gender

How might a candidate’s gender play a role in running for the White House?

- How does the gender of a candidate affect how people judge him/her?
- Think of some characteristics that society uses to describe a female leader. Do they match up with your characteristics for what type of person should be elected president? Explain.
- Do you think the audience at home might react differently to seeing a woman on stage in a general election debate? Note: Hillary Clinton is the first female in U.S. history to make it this far in a presidential debate.

Show clip of Geraldine Ferraro (experience, fears, expectations based on being the first woman as a major vice presidential candidate, the “patronizing” incident) . Let your students know that Ferraro was the first woman in U.S. history to make it on to the vice presidential debate stage. Moderator Jim Lehrer points out in “Debating Our Destiny” that Ferraro worried about the extent of her knowledge on world affairs.

<https://vimeo.com/184868589/d9579186e1>

- Do you think Bush treated Ferraro in a patronizing fashion? Do you think Ferraro’s response was rehearsed as Bush said?
- What parallels do you see in the vice presidential discussion between Ferraro and Bush about gender and Election 2016 between Clinton and Trump?
- Have you heard the candidates discuss gender in the current presidential race? What about the voters? If so, in what context?
- Do you think gender is an issue that should be discussed more or less in Election 2016? Explain your response.

Question: Which is more important – style or substance? Why?

Part 3: Watching the debates

1. Hand out the 2016 General Election Debate Schedule handout or go to the Commission on Presidential Debate’s website [here](#). What debate(s) is your class going to watch? Let your class know if you have a specific reason for watching a particular debate.

2. Let students know which debate they’ll be watching and hand out copies of the [Debate Scorecard](#). Review the categories as a class. Be sure to jot down notes during the debate, but not too much that you miss the “big picture” significance of the event.

- Go over your Debate Scorecard with a partner after you've watched one of the debates. Were you surprised at some of your partner's responses? Was he/she surprised by any of your reactions? What categories did you find helpful or interesting? Why? Afterwards, discuss the results as a class.
- The question as to who won the debate will inevitably be asked. Who decides the winner? How do we know the winner of a debate so soon after it's completed? Why might it be helpful to watch the news analysis following the debate? Why might that not be a wise idea? In the spirit of democracy, your class should decide if they'd like to hold an anonymous poll as to whom they think won the debate.

3. *PBS NewsHour Extra's Student Voices' blog*: Have students write a one to two page opinion piece that addresses the following question: ***Do presidential debates matter?*** Students should use their Debate Scorecard, "Debating Our Destiny" discussion questions and any class notes following the first debate to help them. **Submit to PBS NewsHour Extra's Student Voice blog for a chance to be published:**

<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/student-voices/>

Extension Activities

- High school students should read Chapters 1 and 2 from "Debating Our Destiny" and complete Questions to Consider.
 - Depending on time, students should read the chapters individually in class or with a partner or complete the assignment for homework. You may also wish to take specific excerpts from the chapters to read together as a class and use the Questions to Consider handout afterwards.
- Hosting a Presidential Debate – Lesson Plan
http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/lessons_plans/host-a-presidential-debate-lesson-plan/. Be sure to check out [PBS Election Central](#) for an accompanying video of this lesson plan from the *We The Voters* series. This lesson includes a handout on the "[History of the Presidential Debates](#)," which provides a summary of each of the presidential debates from 1960 through 2012.
- Check out PBS NewsHour's website www.WatchTheDebates.org to view and interact with every presidential debate since 1960.

Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7

Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary describing political, social, or economic aspects of history/social science.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines *faction* in *Federalist* No. 10).

Share My Lesson's Katie Gould and PBS NewsHour's Victoria Pasquantonio contributed to this lesson. You can also find this lesson plan on [Share My Lesson here](#).