

## **Lesson Title: Great Debates**

### **Subjects**

History, U.S. Government, Civics

### **Estimated Time**

Three 50-minute class periods

### **Grade Level**

7-12

### **Objective**

To analyze campaign issues and to practice formal debate procedures and elements of logic. Extension activities address the history of presidential election debates and the importance of rhetoric and word choice in debates.

### **Overview**

The class learns, studies and replicates logical fallacies and techniques of persuasion. Examples are drawn from actual debate statements by John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Mitt Romney. Students then watch the satirical *We The Voters* film, which presents two Senators discussing global warming and committing constant logical errors, pausing to discuss each logical fallacy.

Students then hold a debate of their own, focusing on a major issue that emerges from an actual 2020 Biden-Trump presidential debate. Eight students on two debate teams compose arguments and practice debating. On debate day, the class members choose the winning team and try to catch debaters in logic errors.

*Upcoming debates fall on these dates:*

**September 29**, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland

**October 7 (Vice Presidential debate)**, University of Utah, Salt Lake City

**October 15**, Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts, Miami

**October 22**, Belmont University, Nashville

## Materials

- *We The Voters* satirical film
- Copies of Student Handouts
  - Handout #1: Techniques of Persuasion and Logical Fallacies
  - Handout #2: Debate Watch Notes
  - Handout #3: Debate Ballot
  - Handout #4: Debate Arguments Template
  - Handout #5: History of the Presidential Debates
  - Handout #6: A Note on Fact Checking (Extension Activity)
  - Handout #7: Words Count (Extension Activity)
- Stopwatch/timer
- Paper or ribbon debate winner badges (optional)

## Procedure

### Day One: Logical Fallacies Study and *We the Voters* Film

Distribute Handout #1: Techniques of Persuasion and Logical Fallacies. Students may work singly or in pairs to complete their own examples of the logical fallacies, and to explain the four examples of fallacies used by Kennedy, Reagan, Clinton, Bush and Romney. Review answers in whole class discussion.

Play the tongue-in-cheek *We The Voters* film which shows two Senators using most of the fallacies that students have just learned during a debate on global warming. Instruct students to identify the logical fallacies as they watch, and then play the film a second time, pausing to allow students to identify each fallacy.

[We the Voters](#) on [Vimeo](#).

### Homework, Day One:

Instruct students to watch the presidential debate that evening, and to record their own analysis on Handout #2: Debate Watch Notes. As they watch, students should note any examples of fallacies in the candidates' responses. Remind students that the emerging issues may surprise them. For example, in

the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debate, no one could have predicted that a whole presidential debate would center on Quemoy and Matsu, two small islands near Taiwan.

### **Day Two: Preparing the Classroom Debate**

Distribute Handout #3: Debate Ballot. In discussion with the whole class, and referring to the debate issues of the night before, select a debate resolution. Remember that the resolution must always be written in the positive format, i.e. “The United States should strengthen rejoin international treaties with Iran” not “A war with Iran would be a mistake.”

Choose eight students in each class for each of the two debate teams. Each team selects its own debate slots, based on the roles defined in Handout #3: Debate Ballot.

[Note for teacher guidance to the teams: Students who are nervous about or fear public speaking or debating could be encouraged to choose Opening Statement, which can be prepared beforehand and simply read. Students more comfortable with debating can do the Rebuttal Argument. Students most confident of their ability to think quickly on their feet could be encouraged to choose Question Session. The most eloquent speakers could be encouraged to choose the Summary slots. A good comparison for explaining why the debate is sequenced between two teams is the order of games in a sports championship series.]

The eight debating students will then work outside the classroom and for homework, if necessary on the phone at night, to prepare their arguments, using Handout #4: Debate Arguments Template.

While debate teams are working, review Handout #5: History of the Presidential Debates with the rest of the class. Have students read the presidential debate summaries dating back to the 1960 election and discuss the following questions as a class:

1. What debate would you like to have been present for? Why?
2. How could some of the highlights from these debates have swayed the electorate? Would you have been swayed in the same way?



3. How might televising the debates have influenced who had the stronger performance?
4. Does the electorate deserve to see how the candidates will do under the stress of a nationally televised debate? Explain.

You may want to go to YouTube after you have read through the summaries to watch the debates, for example:

Kennedy Nixon First Debate

1960: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QazmVHA00os>

Reagan debates

interview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T43EzCUtSwQ>

Bush Clinton Debate,

1992: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ffbFvKIWqE>

Obama Romney final debate,

2012: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5z0WrEb6p6I>

### **Day Three: Classroom Debate**

Hold the debate in class. While you give the debaters five final minutes for review before starting the debate, hand out fresh copies of Handout #3: Debate Ballot, which are used as the students' ballots. Emphasize the rules at the bottom about objectivity, as well as the observers' extra credit opportunity. Time each portion of the debate carefully, using a timer or stopwatch. The debate itself takes 30 minutes. Allow only five minutes for students to mark their ballots and to fill out the extra credit portion, if they wish to do so. Collect the ballots. Tally the ballots on the board, reading an occasional "This team won the debate because..." if there is time. Excitement is high at this point; be sure you've finished the tally before the bell rings! Consider awarding the winning debaters their "Debate Champion" blue ribbons (real or paper). Grade the debate ballots, using any number of points and extra credit you wish to use.

### **Extension Activities**

- Handout #6: A Note on Fact Checking reviews three principal fact checking sites, as well as two fact-checks of remarks made at the 2016 Democratic and Republican National Conventions, and includes discussion questions.
- Handout #7: Words Count deals with the use of rhetoric, and key quotes from past presidential and vice-presidential debates.



## Standards

### Common Core State Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.7.4 Present claims and findings, emphasizing salient points in a focused, coherent manner with pertinent descriptions, facts, details, and examples; use appropriate eye contact, adequate volume, and clear pronunciation.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.8.4 Present claims and findings, emphasizing salient points in a focused, coherent manner with relevant evidence, sound valid reasoning, and well-chosen details; use appropriate eye contact, adequate volume, and clear pronunciation.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

### Standards from Social Studies for the Next Generation: the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework

D2Civ.2.9-12 Analyze the role of citizens in the U.S. political system.

D2Civ.4.9-12 Explain how the U.S. Constitution establishes a system of government that has powers, responsibilities, and limits that have changed over time and that are still contested.

D2Civ.5.9-12 Evaluate citizens' and institutions' effectiveness in addressing social and political problems at the local, state, tribal, national, and/or international level.

D2Civ.9.9-12 Use appropriate deliberative processes in multiple settings.

D2Civ.14.9-12 Analyze historical, contemporary, and emerging means of changing societies, promoting the common good, and protecting rights.

### Center for Civic Education National Standards for Civics and Government

Conflicts among values and principles in American political and social life: Students should be able to evaluate, take, and defend positions on issues in which fundamental values and principles may be in conflict.

Political communication: television, radio, the press, and political persuasion: Students should be able to evaluate historical and contemporary political communication using such criteria as logical validity, factual accuracy, emotional appeal, distorted evidence, appeals to bias or prejudice.

