

Televised Debates: Candidates Take a Stand

Topic: Televised Debates

Grade Level: Grades 3 – 6

Subject Area: Media Literacy, Social Studies, Language Arts

Time Required: 3 class periods

Goals/Rationale

The 1960 debates between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon are historically significant because they were the first live televised presidential debates and they had great impact on voters in a close election. As students investigate a historic event from the 1960 presidential campaign, they will learn how political debates help voters select a candidate for office.

Essential Question: What criteria should voters use to select a leader?

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- identify important elements of a debate, such as taking a stand on an issue.
- describe the importance of the 1960 debates.
- identify information viewers can learn about a candidate from a televised debate.
- determine and describe important criteria for selecting a candidate.

Connections to Curriculum (Standards)

National Standards for Civics and Government

V: What are the Roles of the Citizen in American Democracy?

National History Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation

NCTE/IRA Standards for the English Language Arts 4, 5, 6

Prior Knowledge

It is helpful for students to have an understanding of the electoral process before implementing this lesson. Preview these vocabulary words:

Candidate Campaign Debate Poll Election

Historical Background and Context

During the fall of 1960, polls showed that Senator John F. Kennedy and Vice-President Richard Nixon were in a very tight race to become president of the United States. Although still recovering from knee surgery, Nixon dashed from state to state, hoping to fulfill his campaign

promise to visit all fifty states before the election. Kennedy campaigned hard to convince the public that though he was 43 years-old, and had not yet completed his second term as senator, he would make an excellent leader. His religion was another obstacle; he had to persuade a large segment of the population that it was unfair to dismiss him as a candidate because he was Catholic.

In the fall of 1960, Americans had an opportunity “to meet” the candidates in a way never before available to voters. For the first time in history, Americans were able to watch presidential candidates from the Republican Party and the Democratic Party*, side by side, on television. Kennedy and Nixon had agreed to discuss their opinions on important issues in a series of four nationally televised debates. The first meeting took place on September 26, 1960.

The debates caught the attention of the nation. By 1960, about 90% of American households had television sets and about 70 million people tuned in on the evening of September 26, 1960, the date of the first debate. They watched at home and in public places. They watch in cities and in the small towns. They watched to see what the two candidates would say, to hear where they stood on the issues, and to see how they responded to difficult questions. And what did they see?

Kennedy and Nixon were both skilled debaters. Nixon had been a star on his high school debate team and had polished his talent ever since. However, some historians believe Kennedy was able to use the debates to persuade undecided or skeptical voters that he had the ability to be president. He was an appealing figure to watch and he had learned how to speak to television audiences. Kennedy’s confidence, knowledge, and leadership ability came through during the debates, and this reassured voters who had questions about his background and experience.

Did the debates help either candidate win over voters? Before the first debate, a Gallup poll showed Nixon only slightly ahead, 47% to 46%. In a Gallup poll taken after the fourth and final debate, Kennedy had edged out Nixon, 49% to 46%. A survey after the four debates showed that of an estimated four million voters who were undecided before the debates, three million became JFK supporters. Some historians believe that the debates made the difference in this close election.

*A Florida Democratic Primary Presidential debate was televised nationally on May 21, 1956 between two Democratic candidates for president, Adlai Stevenson and Estes Kefauver.

Materials

- An “Agree” poster and a “Disagree” poster
- Chart paper
- Internet connection and projector
- Photograph of the fourth Kennedy and Nixon debate

Procedure

Part I: Taking a Stand

1. Explain that in a campaign, candidates need to let the voters know where they stand on the issues. *What does it mean to take a stand?*

2. Post a sign that says “Agree” on one side of the room. Post a sign that says “Disagree” on the other side. Read one or more of the following statements (or create your own) and ask students to stand next to the sign that represents how they feel about the statement.
 - *(5th) graders should be allowed to vote for president.*
 - *Students should be able to have cell phones in school.*
 - *(5th) graders should be able to set their own bedtimes.*
 - *TV viewing should be limited to a certain number of hours a day.*
 - *Violent movies should be outlawed.*
 - *People should be required to eat healthy food.*
 - *The United States should send money to countries in need.*
3. Ask two or more students from each side to give a reason why they “agree” or “disagree” with the statement. If you so choose, invite students to change sides if they have changed their opinion after listening to their classmates’ responses.
4. Show the photograph of the debates and ask the following questions:
 - What people do you see? What objects do you see?
 - What do you think the candidates are doing? (*Explaining what they believe in, what they would do as president.*)
 - Why is it important to have both candidates in the same place? (*To hear what each candidate thinks is important, what they plan to do, and compare their ideas, knowledge, and beliefs.*)
5. Explain that the photograph was taken on October 21, 1960, at the fourth and final debate between Senator Kennedy and Vice-President Nixon. Describe the purpose of a debate, emphasizing how the “take a stand” activity models a debate. Share the background information about the campaign of 1960 provided above.

Part II: Picking a Winner

1. Ask students to imagine that it is the morning of September 26, 1960, the day of the first live televised presidential debate. At home and at school, people are talking about the event and how they will get to see Senator Kennedy and Vice President Nixon on television that evening. Explain that debates provide a way for people to learn about the candidates in order to help them choose who they will vote for in an election.
2. Show students footage from the first debate. Access a 15-minute documentary on the first live televised presidential debates by visiting <http://www.museum.tv/debateweb/html/greatdebate/index.htm> (Excerpts begin at 4:23 minutes into the film.)

You can access two short excerpts of the “Great Debate” on the President’s Desk exhibit on the Kennedy Presidential Library website. Click on the campaign button, and then the television set to access the “Program Guide.” <http://jfk.ibminteractive.com/#>

Note: If you would like to see the hour-long program for your own preparation, or to select excerpts to show students, you can access it at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbrcRKqLSRw>

3. Ask students to think about what people can learn from a debate and record their answers on a piece of chart paper. You may use the following prompts to help students generate ideas:
 - What will viewers learn about the candidates during the debate? (i.e., *What they look like, how well they answer questions, where they stand on the issues*)
 - What might they learn about the candidates' appearance? (*hairstyle, height, style of dress, facial expressions, gestures, eye contact*)
 - What might they learn about their knowledge and experience? (*The details they give on a topic, their ideas, what they have accomplished*)
 - What will they learn about their personalities? (*How they respond to difficult questions, how they hold up under pressure, their emotional responses, confidence*)
 - What will they learn about how they speak? (*their vocabulary, tone of voice, expressions, pace, accent, clarity*)
 - How might a debate influence voters as they prepare to select a candidate?
4. Explain to students that when people watch a debate, they look to see if candidates have important leadership qualities. Ask students to list what qualities they think leaders should have and record their answers on the chart paper. You might also want students to consider if there are important qualities that are not evident in a televised debate or if a televised debate emphasizes aspects of a candidate that are NOT essential to being a good leader (i.e., appearance).

Part III: Creating a Class Book: How to Select a Candidate

1. Assign students to create a guide book to help voters pick the best candidate to lead the country (or state, city, etc.) In small groups, pairs, or as individuals, have students select one of the qualities listed on the chart paper. Each group (or individual) will write a paragraph describing the quality, why the quality is important to have as a leader, and how it can be identified in a candidate. Each quality should be accompanied by an illustration. Assemble the pages into a class book.

Extension

1. Generate a list of important issues in the upcoming election. Select one issue and have students research the topic. Hold a debate with selected students stating their reasons why they agree or disagree with an idea or policy. Conclude by having the class vote on the winner and discuss their choices.

2. Read the attached one-page article, “Lights, Camera, Debates,” adapted from an article that appeared in the May 2007 *Cobblestone* magazine issue on John F. Kennedy. Discuss how the television appearance made a difference for each candidate.
3. Access background information on the 1960 campaign (including the debates), and audio and transcripts of all four debates at: <http://www.jfklibrary.org/JFK/JFK-in-History/Campaign-of-1960>

Have students identify the questions in the transcript of the first debate. Ask them to identify one that they think would help voters learn more about the candidates.

4. Have students imagine they are Richard M. Nixon or John F. Kennedy and write a journal entry immediately following the debate, reflecting on their participation and how it might impact the campaign and election.

Assessment

Have students watch a debate, either on television or provide a video clip. Using the guide book created in class, students will choose which candidate is their favorite and describe the qualities that make this person their choice.

Additional resources

Books

Johnson, Mary Oates and Linda Scher. *Candidates, Campaigns, and Elections*, 4th edition. New York: Scholastic, 2007.

A current and comprehensive teacher resource book that includes projects, activities, and literature links.

Suid, Murray. *How to Be President of the U.S.A.* Palo Alto, California: Monday Morning Books, 2000.

An excellent book of ready-to-use activities.

Websites

The Great Debate

<http://www.museum.tv/debateweb/html/greatdebate/index.htm>

Online resources on the 1960 presidential debates from the Museum of Broadcast Communications. In addition to the documentary referenced above, there are videotaped reflections about the debate from people who witnessed it, historical information, commentary, and lesson plans (for secondary school students.)

Commission on Presidential Debates

<http://www.debates.org/>

The official website of the agency that organizes the presidential debates, the Commission on Presidential Debates. Includes the history of presidential debates and a Debate Watch voter education program.

Nickelodeon Kids Pick the President

www.nick.com/kpp/

Features video footage of “Nickelodeon-aged” youth talking about where they stand on the issues. Includes information on the candidates and the electoral process. There is an active and engaging “message board.”

PBS Kids Go! Democracy Project

<http://pbskids.org/democracy/whatsgreat/>

An effective, engaging introduction to civics concepts for elementary students.



Photo by ABC News

Lights...Camera...Debates

On September 26, 1960, about 70 million Americans tuned in to see Democrat John F. Kennedy and Republican Richard M. Nixon, side by side, in the first televised live presidential debate. The stakes were high: polls showed Nixon slightly ahead of Kennedy, 47% to 46%.

Just 10 year earlier, in 1950, approximately 10 percent of American families had owned television sets. By 1960, the figure had skyrocketed to about 90 percent. Fascinated by images of the presidential campaign, voters scrutinized the candidates in new ways.

That night, viewers witnessed two very different candidates. Well-prepared and confident, Kennedy addressed the cameras, speaking directly to the audience at home. His tanned face and dark suit contrasted well against the grey background of the studio.

Recovering from a knee injury, a pale Nixon sweated profusely under the studio lights. His quick glances at Kennedy made him look nervous and uncertain. He faded into the gray background in his lighter-colored suit.

Although three debates followed, that first encounter is thought by some to have changed the course of the election. Many voters sized up the candidates based on their television appearance that night. The results of a poll following the debate reported Kennedy edging out Nixon, 49% to 46%.