

AFTER THE DEBATE

It will help clarify your thoughts about the candidates and the issues if you take some time after the debate to reflect on what you have just seen and heard. You can do this by:

- Comparing your impressions with others who watched the debate;
- Asking yourself, based on the information you received from watching the debate, which candidate appears most qualified for the office;
- Identifying the issues on which you agree with a candidate and those on which you disagree, and deciding whether that makes you more or less likely to vote for a particular candidate;
- Thinking about whether you have more questions about the issues or the candidates which you want to follow up on.
- Getting more information about the candidates' positions from candidate websites and nonpartisan voter information websites.
- Attending and participating in a local debate. Find out if there will be a live audience at a candidate debate. If so, ask if the public is invited to attend. Prepare questions you would like the candidates to address.

CONCLUSION

Candidate debates have a long history in American politics. At every level of government – from city council to state legislature, from Congress to President of the United States – candidates participate in debates to help voters understand for whom and for what they stand.

You can get the most out of a debate by thinking about the issues and candidates in advance, by viewing the debate with care, and by continuing to research the issues and the candidates after the debate.

HELPFUL INFORMATION

- Election Information
(562) 466-1310
- League of Women Voters of Los Angeles
(213) 368-1616

www.smartvoter.org

League of Women Voters website detailing local and state candidates and ballot measures

www.vote-smart.org

Project Vote Smart website provides voting records of national and state candidates

www.debates.org

The Commission on Presidential Debates

www.DNet.org

DemocracyNet (DNet)

www.publicagenda.org/firstchoice2004

Public Agenda

www.lwvlosangeles.org

League of Women Voters of Los Angeles

www.ca.lwv.org

League of Women Voters of California

www.lwv.org

League of Women Voters of the United States

www.lavote.net

L.A. County Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk

www.calvoter.org

Information on candidates, ballot measures and campaign finances

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF A DEBATE



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WHAT IS A DEBATE?

A debate is an event at which candidates who are running for an elected office meet face-to-face to answer questions. A televised or broadcast debate allows many more people to watch and learn about the candidates and the issues.

The most common debate formats are:

- Single moderator: one person asks the questions;
- Panel: a panel of journalists or experts ask the questions;
- Town hall: questions are submitted prior to the debate via email or by members of the audience or randomly selected voters, in person or by phone.

The debate usually begins with an introduction of the candidates, who may be allowed to make opening statements. The heart of the debate takes place when the candidates are asked questions and they respond within a certain time limit. The questioner may ask follow-up questions to get the candidates to fully explain their responses. Some debates allow candidates an opportunity to ask questions directly of each other. The debate usually ends with the candidates giving their closing statements.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

The candidates and the issues

Before the debate: On a piece of paper, create a table with three columns. In column one, list the issues in which you are interested. In column two, write your position on these issues.

During the debate: Mark column three with the name of the candidate whose position most closely matches your own. If you do not understand the candidate's answer, write "don't understand." If the candidate avoids the question, write "avoids question."

After the debate: Have you changed your opinion or did the debate help you make up your mind? Which candidate matches your position most closely?

The candidates and their leadership qualities

Before the debate: On a piece of paper, along the left margin, list the qualities of a good leader. (Examples: good communicator, good listener, honest, intelligent, etc.). Next, for each quality, make a column with the name of each candidate in the debate.

During the debate: Note ways in which each candidate does or does not show the leadership qualities you listed. Your examples should come both from the candidates' statements and from the images they convey.

After the debate: What impressed you most: content or image? How was the debate helpful in teaching you about the candidates' leadership qualities? How might it be deceptive? How do your impressions compare with those of others?

BEFORE THE DEBATE

Preparing for the debate will help you focus on what to look for in the debate so that you get the information you need in deciding for whom you will vote.

It will help if you take time before the debate to:

- Follow the campaign to learn about the candidates and their backgrounds;
- Find out what the important campaign issues are and decide what issues are most important to you;
- Think about questions you may have and information you want to get from the debate to help you in your decision making;
- Open your mind to new opinions/impressions of the candidate regardless of party affiliation.

You may want to make plans to get together with friends or family to watch the debate. Watching the debate in a group and discussing it afterward helps to clarify your thoughts about what was said in the debate and how the candidates represented themselves.

A debate might not include all of the candidates running for a particular office. Sometimes candidates who are invited choose not to participate. Candidates with a strong lead might refuse to participate because they think there is no advantage to be gained by debating a lesser known opponent.

DURING THE DEBATE

Asking questions like these will help you judge the fairness of the debate and the candidates' performances:

The candidates:

- Do they support their positions and arguments with facts and figures or do they speak in generalities?
- Do they answer questions directly, evade them or fail to answer the specific question?
- Do they talk about their own policies and positions, or do they mostly attack their opponents?
- Are their proposals realistic? Does the office for which they are running have the authority to carry out the promises they are making?
- Do they show how their backgrounds and experience qualify them to hold the office?
- Are their answers consistent with their previous positions, and if not, do they explain why?
- Do they appear sincere, confident and relaxed? Do their responses appear 'canned'?
- What image are they trying to create?

The debate format and questions:

- Does the format give each candidate an equal opportunity to speak and to respond?
- Are the questions fair and equally tough?
- Do the questions cover the important issues?
- Is the moderator in control? Does the moderator need to speak less and let the candidates speak more?

Media coverage:

- If you are watching the debate on television, are reaction shots or other techniques used to create a sense of drama or conflict?
- Are you being influenced by comments made by reporters and commentators immediately before and after the debate?