

A CANDIDATE'S GUIDE TO DEBATES

WHAT IS A DEBATE?

Debates provide a neutral forum where candidates for elected office meet face-to-face to make statements and answer questions about their policies and platforms. They are an important part of elections in every corner of the world and at every level of government, from city council to provincial legislature to parliament and president. More than 50 countries have made debates an integral part of their elections. Post-election debates are becoming popular as well to promote accountability once candidates come into office.

Debates usually take place in front of a live audience and are often televised or broadcast on the radio and Internet, giving viewers and listeners a chance to compare the candidates and their positions directly, and make an informed choice on election day.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS TO CANDIDATES AND POLITICAL PARTIES?

While debates provide voters with critical information that aids in their decision making, they also help candidates by giving them an opportunity to get their message out, inform voters of their views on important issues, and sharpen their campaign skills. Debates give candidates an opportunity to explain why they are running, draw contrasts between themselves and their opponents, and convince voters that they are the best candidate or party to represent them.

Debates are a way for candidates and parties to show the public that their campaigns are a constructive contest of ideas. Debates encourage candidates to develop better policy positions during the campaign and can demonstrate to voters that political adversaries can compete in a peaceful manner.

Debates also help candidates and parties by providing:

- An opportunity to speak directly to the voters without filtering by the media.
- Free access to valuable media time that may otherwise be inaccessible or unaffordable.



Serbian parliamentary debate, 2012

- An opportunity to reach more voters in one day than months of one-on-one outreach.
- An opportunity to connect with voters who have not yet made a firm decision on which candidate or party to support.
- A level playing field for all parties to compete for votes, even where one party has traditionally dominated the media.
- An opportunity to demonstrate inclusiveness by showcasing women and youth leaders.
- **The ability to challenge opponents' statements or respond to misrepresentations on the spot.**

Debates Inform Voters and Increase Confidence in Elections

A national survey commissioned by the National Democratic Institute after the 2012 Commune Council election candidate debates in Cambodia found that more than one million people listened to the debate broadcasts. Some 89 percent of listeners said the candidates spoke to the issues that were most important to them and their families. More than 85 percent of those who listened agreed that the debates increased their confidence in election fairness.

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Candidates join hands after a Commune Council election debate in Cambodia, 2007.

FORMAT

The rules and format of a debate are typically negotiated by the sponsor and the political parties or candidates that are participating. While specifics may vary, debates usually follow one of the following formats or some combination thereof:

- Single moderator - an objective moderator questions candidates.
- Panel - a panel of journalists or experts asks the questions.
- Town hall - questions are asked by members of a live audience, or sometimes by other voters via SMS, phone, email, or on-the-street interviews.

Debates generally include the following sections:

- Moderator welcome and introduction of participating candidates.
- Candidate opening statements.
- Question and answer session.
- Candidate closing statements.
- Moderator closing.

Depending on the agreed to format, there may be follow-up questions and, in some cases, candidates are given the opportunity to ask questions directly of each other. There is almost always a time limit for candidates to make their statements and respond to questions, and it is the moderator's responsibility to ensure that these limits are enforced as well as other rules governing the debate.

Debates Help Candidates Campaign and Govern

"I think they [debates] help us prepare...They force us to think about issues that maybe we hadn't focused on — they force us to think ahead." -Bob Dole, former U.S. senator and Republican Party presidential candidate

"...And I am convinced that the debates I went through...actually helped me to be a better president." -Bill Clinton, former U.S. president

Quotes from *Tension City — Inside the Presidential Debates, from Kennedy-Nixon to Obama-McCain*, by Jim Lehrer, 2011

PREPARING FOR A DEBATE

Debates are always a significant event in the course of a campaign, so it is important that candidates prepare and practice prior to taking part.

BEFORE TAKING THE STAGE

Prior to a debate, it is important for a candidate to:

- Be fully aware of the rules and format – especially time limits for statements and responses.
- Do a walk-through of the venue in advance.
- Arrive early to the debate so you are relaxed, not rushed and have time for final preparations.
- Identify statistics and anecdotes that support your positions.

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- Bring notes on key policies, statistics, and accomplishments if permitted by the agreed upon format.
- Prepare short, meaningful quotes that can be remembered long after the debate and easily repeated on TV or radio.
- Practice responding to difficult questions or criticisms. Even the most experienced politicians rehearse and engage in mock debates as part of their preparations.

- What you hope to achieve if elected.
- Presentation and repetition of a core message.
- Thank you to audience, other candidates, and sponsors.
- Asking voters for their support.

In preparing closing statements, candidates should leave time to raise issues they were unable to discuss during the debate, or challenge statements made by opponents during the debate.

QUESTIONS

While it is impossible to predict every topic that may surface during a debate, some consideration of important issues ahead of time will allow candidates to anticipate questions and prepare responses. It is also important to **prepare a strategy for addressing an opposing candidate's** statements and potential criticisms.

In preparing for a debate, a candidate should:

- **Learn his or her party's platform and position on key issues.**
- **Memorize the opposing parties' platforms and positions on critical issues.**
- Be up-to-date on the latest local, national, and international news.
- Meet with voters and ask them what they think are the most important issues.
- Speak with voters and policy experts about potential solutions.

The better informed candidates are about the issues, the more confident they will be in their positions and the better they will perform in a debate.



Presidential debate in Haiti, 2010

OPENING AND CLOSING STATEMENTS

A candidate's opening and closing statements are critical because they are opportunities to speak on any topics the candidate wishes. By preparing and practicing in advance, candidates can make the most of their time allotment by knowing exactly what they want to say and how long it will take to say it. As a candidate, the core elements of your statements should include:

- Introduction and explanation of why you are running for office.
- The values and issues you care about most.



Candidates debate in Iraq, 2010.

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Candidates debate in Colombia, 2013.

POST-DEBATE ACTIVITIES

To maximize exposure and influence media coverage of the debate, after the event candidate campaigns should:

- Issue a post-debate statement that repeats core message and key positions, and addresses any issues that you were unable to call attention to during the debate.
- Monitor media outlets for event coverage.
- Distribute positive news articles to supporters, donors, columnists and interest groups.
- Correct any errors or misrepresentations in the media.



U.S. presidential candidates debate, 2012. (Photo courtesy of Mark Abraham and the Commission on Presidential Debates).

CONDUCT DURING THE DEBATE

During a debate, a candidate's supporters will be counting on a good performance, while his or her opponents will be looking for missteps to draw attention to throughout the remainder of the campaign. During the debate, as a candidate you should:

- Always act as though the cameras and microphones are focused on you.
- Show respect for the other candidates, audience and moderator, even if you disagree.
- Expect criticism and do not visibly show anger or exasperation.
- Project confidence in your positions.
- Maximize your exposure by using as much of your time allotment as possible, but be careful to avoid diluting your message by drifting into other topics or dwelling on one point too long.
- If you have nothing more to say, use remaining time to discuss how an issue relates to your message.

This guide was authored by Josh Hills, media and campaign expert and former NDI debate program advisor.



455 Massachusetts Ave, NW, 8th Floor
Washington, DC 20001-2621
p: 202.728.5500 | f: 888.875.2887
www.ndi.org



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