

Debate Watching 101

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 who and what they stand for.

At the same time, we can watch debates with a critical eye in order to get the most out of them. Many candidates rehearse thoroughly for debates, making it hard to get candid, spontaneous answers. Debates—and the extensive commentary afterwards—can tend to emphasize form over substance, such as the candidates' appearance instead of their stands on the issues. You may watch a debate and still not get answers to the questions you have about the candidates and issues.

Before the Debate

- Plan to watch the debate in a group and discuss it afterwards! This can be a great way to clarify your thoughts about what was said in the debate, and how the candidates performed. [Download our debate watching party ideas.](#)
- Think about the issues and candidates in advance, and think about what issues matter most to you as a voter. **What do you want to hear from the candidates about the issues that matter most to you?**



- Visit the candidates' websites and read recent news coverage. What are the major topics dominating headlines? How are the candidates talking about pressing issues facing our community and our country?
- Think about the questions you have and the information you want to get from the debate to help you in your decision making as a voter.
- Open your mind to new opinions/impressions of the candidate regardless of party affiliation.

During the Debate: Things to Look For

The format and media coverage of debates are also important factors to consider while watching a debate in addition to candidates' responses. They can influence public opinion and alter your view of a candidate. When watching the debate, keep these questions in mind as you judge the candidates.

The Debate Format and Questions

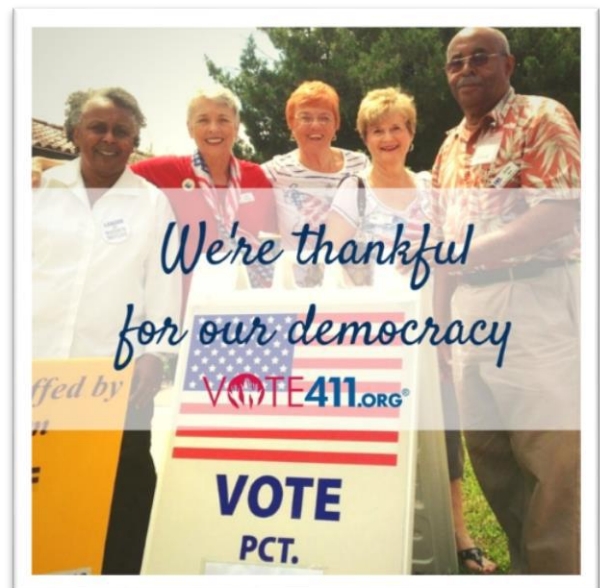
1. Is each candidate given equal opportunity to speak and respond to questions?
2. Are the questions clear, fair and equally tough on all candidates?
3. Do the questions cover the issues that are important to you?
4. Is the moderator in control of the debate? Does the moderator need to say less and let the candidates say more?

Media Coverage

1. Are reaction shots or other techniques used to create a sense of drama or conflict?
2. Are commentators' statements before/after the debate influencing your opinions?

The Candidates

1. Do they answer questions directly, or evade them?
2. Do they give specifics about their stands on the issues, or speak in generalities?
3. Do they support their positions and arguments with facts and figures?
4. Do they talk about their own policies and positions, or mostly attack their opponents?
5. Are their proposals realistic? Can they actually carry out promises they are making?
6. Do they appear sincere, confident and relaxed?
7. Do they show how their backgrounds and experience qualify them to hold the office?
8. Are their answers consistent with their previous positions? If not, do they explain why?
9. What image of themselves are they trying to create?
10. Do their responses appear overly rehearsed?



After the Debate: What Now?

You've successfully watched the debate carefully and critically – now it's time to digest all of the information you just took in. Take some time after the debate to reflect on what you have just seen and heard.

1. Compare your impressions with others who watched the debate.
2. Ask yourself, based on the information you got from watching the debate, which candidate appears most qualified for the office.
3. Identify the issues on which you agree with a candidate and those on which you disagree, and decide how that may affect your vote.
4. Ask yourself: did you learn something new about the issues or the candidates?
5. Think about whether you have more questions about the issues or the candidates
6. Get more information about the candidates' positions from nonpartisan voter information websites such as VOTE411.org, news reports, or the candidates' websites and social media pages.

