



CAMPUS ELECTION ENGAGEMENT PROJECT

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DebateWatch Guide

DebateWatch events are powerful ways to engage students in state or local races—but you have to get students to come, and provide appropriate contexts to reflect. Here is a guide to some useful approaches, both for getting students to watch key debates and for helping them reflect in their wake.

Getting Students to Come

- Throw a campus-wide DebateWatch party at an auditorium, sports stadium, or other location with a large screen or multiple TVs. Then, break into smaller groups of six to twelve for discussion. Make a night of it by soliciting local restaurants to provide free food and inviting a local band to play before the debate starts.
- Hold multiple debate watch parties in major common spaces like the student union, large auditoriums, classrooms, dining halls, multi-cultural center, or residential dorms.
- Get faculty to give extra credit or make watching a class requirement –Florida Atlantic University got 1,100 students in its football stadium through this approach.
- If you teach classes that conflict with the debates have students watch the debates later online and follow up with classroom discussions.
- Promote Debate Watch events in campus publications, with fliers, handouts, postcards, banners, sidewalk chalk, and through email, social media and class announcements.
- Get your event on the student activities board calendar.
- Use social media to foster discussions with unique usernames, custom hashtags, live Twitter conversations, online web streaming. If you are hosting a debate for a more local office, provide a way for students to submit questions that can be answered by experts and panelists.
- Use DebateWatch to talk about the issues important to students and young people, such as education and jobs.
- Tap into your campus media—the student newspaper, the college radio station, etc.
- If you're having a large event, promote it campus wide. If decentralized events, like in residence halls, encourage their hosts to promote them through social media and invite friends. Have hosts create a Facebook event page so you they keep track of everyone who is attending.
- Invite students to write messages on large banners, whiteboards and signs that can be displayed in prominent spaces on campus.
- Hold follow-up discussions in dorms.

Involve Partners

- Find the political junkies at your school by promoting your event to the student government and the local chapters of the College Democrats/Republicans.
- Also involve all key campus leaders: President, Provost, Deans, Student Government, Student Affairs, student clubs, campus newspaper, Service-Learning Coordinator, Civic Engagement office, Residence Life office, Greek Life, academic departments, faculty members and staff, and more.
- Encourage diversity: Bring together College Republicans, Democrats, Libertarians, disabled students, veterans, LGBT students, sociology and political science majors, grassroots groups, campus affiliates or the Tea Party, NAACP, National Right to Life, NARAL Pro Choice America, commuter students on residential campuses, living & learning communities, etc.
- Invite representatives from local government, Supervisor of Elections office, League of Women Voters, local political party representatives.



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- Think about food, particularly if you're holding decentralized events. While not a total necessity, free food always helps attendance. You could try making it a potluck—ask each person to bring one item, like chips, dip, cookies, etc.

At the Events

- Make sure everyone who attends your DebateWatch party is registered to vote by distributing and collecting paper registration forms, and having a laptop open to your school's designated voter registration page, to [Rock The Vote](#) and [Turbovote's](#) online platforms (both of which will also send text or email reminders), or your secretary of state's website.
- Keep track of everyone attending, so you can follow up with reminders to vote and [info on voting rules](#). Your campus nonpartisan engagement effort can create and publicize a Google Form where people can log in with laptops or cell phones, or hosts can enter participant info.
- If you're having small-group events, arrange seating in the room so that everyone can see the TV easily. Keep pens and papers handy in case anyone wants to take notes during the debate. Once everyone is settled, have people introduce themselves if that works for the size of the group, then turn the TV on about five minutes before the debate starts but leave the volume off until it actually begins.
- Break into groups of 6-12 people to help people reflect in a less intimidating context. Even in a large venue like a stadium, people can still talk with people who are adjacent.
- Provide students with a “debate scorecard” so they can evaluate the candidates as they answer questions and address important issues.
- Turn the TV off when the debate ends—avoid the pundits!—and take a short break. If there are more than 12 people at your party, break into smaller groups for discussion. Remind everyone that the night is about discussion and there are no right or wrong opinions. Start the conversation off by asking some of the questions listed below.

Follow-up conversations

- Keep post-debate forums fair and balanced, informed by multiple perspectives.
- Hold classroom follow-up discussions after dialogue forums or major debates. Faculty can have students reflect through presentations, papers, break-out sessions or classroom conversations.
- Plan wrap-around programming: hosted audience discussions, small group break-out discussions, or a moderated panel with time for audience questions.
- Have political science, sociology, or communications classes survey other students for their perspectives, and then publicize the results in the campus paper.
- Encourage students to talk with peers who have different political perspectives, while practicing “active listening” to make sure each side feels their perspectives are heard.

Some approaches from [Living Room Conversations](#) to encourage respect and civil dialogue with the goal of participants learning and understanding opinions different from their own:

- Be curious and open to learning
- Be authentic and welcome that from the others
- Show respect and suspend judgment
- Be purposeful and to the point
- Look for common ground
- Own and guide the conversation



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Possible Discussion Questions

Here are a few possible questions to kick-start post-Debate conversations. Feel free to rephrase them however you want—once you get your group going, you may find you don't need them.

General questions:

- Why did you decide to participate in this conversation?
- What did you learn about the candidates or issues that you didn't know before?
- What topics or issues discussed were most useful or informative?
- Were there any issues raised that you considered irrelevant or unimportant?
- Were there issues that you wanted to see addressed but that weren't addressed?
- Will participating in this discussion affect the way you read, watch or discuss the election?
- Will participating in DebateWatch influence or change the way you vote in the election?

Additional Sample Questions, adapted from [Fair Elections Legal Network's Campus Vote Project](#)

- Are you familiar with the responsibilities the candidates would hold in positions for which they're running? Did this discussion help you to see how they would carry out their work? Why or why not?
- Were you already familiar with the candidates? Should other candidates have been included? How might the discussion have changed if more or fewer candidates were invited to participate?
- Was there a dominant theme in the debate? If yes, what was it? Was it relevant to the issues you care about or your community cares about? Why or why not?
- How did the candidates respond to the questions posed? Were they straightforward, evasive or somewhere in between? Did this impact your opinion of them? If so, how?
- Did the candidates put forward specific ideas or policies, or speak more thematically? What ideas or policies were offered and what themes were represented?

After about an hour, or when the discussion naturally ends, give everyone a chance to make any last comments and then wrap up.

This guide includes approaches from previous [Rock the Vote](#) Debate Watch guides, and from a 2012 guide put together by [Florida Campus Compact](#).