

Electioneering

How persuasive are you?

Themes	Democracy, Citizenship, General human rights
Complexity	Level 2
Group size	Any
Time	45 minutes
Overview	This is a discussion-based activity that addresses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Rights and responsibilities connected with democracy ▪ Democratic discussion
Related rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The right to participate in the democratic process ▪ Freedom of opinion and expression
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To consider some of the controversial aspects of a democratic society ▪ To practise and develop skills of listening, discussion and persuasion ▪ To encourage co-operation
Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ An open space ▪ Card (A4) and coloured pens to make the signs ▪ Sticky tape ▪ Small cards and pens for making notes (optional)
Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Make two signs, “agree” and “disagree”, and tape them one at either end of a long wall. Make sure there is enough space along the wall for people to form a straight line. ▪ Place two chairs in the centre of the room, about 50cms apart, and with space around them for people to move about.

Instructions

1. Point out the two signs at either end of the wall, and explain that you are going to read out a statement, with which they may agree to a greater or lesser extent.
2. Select one statement from the list below and read it out to the group.
3. Tell people to position themselves along the wall between the two signs according to “how much” they agree or disagree: if they agree or disagree totally they should stand at one of the ends; otherwise they should stand somewhere between the two points.
4. When people have positioned themselves along the line, invite the two at the furthest extremes to occupy the two chairs in the centre of the room. Everyone else should now gather around the chairs, positioning themselves behind the person whose view they agree with “most”; or occupying a position in the centre if they are undecided.
5. Give each of the people sitting in the chairs one minute to state their reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with the original statement. No one should interrupt or assist them. Everyone should listen in silence.

THEMES



DEMOCRACY




CITIZENSHIP



GEN. HUMAN RIGHTS

COMPLEXITY



LEVEL 2

GROUP SIZE



ANY

TIME



45 MINUTES

6. At the end of the minute, ask the others in the group to move behind one or the other of the speakers (they cannot remain undecided), so that there is one group of people “for” the statement under discussion, and one group “against”. Allow the two groups ten minutes apart from one another to prepare arguments supporting their position and to select a different speaker to present these arguments.
7. At the end of the ten minutes, call the groups back and invite the two new speakers to occupy the two chairs with their “supporters” around them.
8. Give these speakers three minutes each to deliver their arguments, at the end of which time, supporters for one or the other side may change position and move to the opposite group if the opposite side’s arguments have been convincing.
9. Give the groups a further five minutes apart to work on their arguments and select a third speaker. Again, after the speeches, allow people to change position if they wish to.
10. Bring the group back together for the debriefing.

Debriefing and evaluation

Now move on to reflect on the process and purpose of discussion as a form, and on the reasons for valuing a pluralist society. Try not to get drawn back into discussion of the issue itself.

- Did anyone change their mind during the course of the discussion? If they did, what were the arguments that convinced them?
- Do people think they were influenced by things other than the actual arguments that were being put forward, for example, by peer pressure, emotional language or a feeling of rivalry?
- For those that did not change their opinion in the course of the discussion, was there any purpose in talking through these issues? Can they imagine any evidence that might persuade them to change their views?
- Why do people hold different opinions? What should be done about this in a democratic society?
- Should *all* opinions be tolerated in a democracy?

Tips for facilitators

The first part of this activity, when participants position themselves along the line, should not take more than a couple of minutes. The point of this is simply to establish people’s “starting positions” and for them to see where they stand in comparison with others.

The purpose of the activity is as much to practise skills of communication and persuasion as to think through the issues themselves. Therefore, participants should be encouraged to think not only about the content and presentation of their own opinions, but also about the type or form of arguments that will be most persuasive to people on the other side. They are aiming to draw as many people as possible into their “party”. They can use the breathing time between “speeches” to consider the opposition’s position, and to think about ways of weakening it.

You may have other topics besides those suggested below that could equally well be used as the basis for discussion. The important thing is to select a statement that will be controversial within your group.

Note: it will take about 30 minutes to discuss one statement going through the different rounds of discussion. If you want to use more statements, you will have to allow more time accordingly.

It is advisable to be flexible about the exact order of events, depending on the strengths and weaknesses of the group and on the liveliness of the discussion. For example:

- You may want to add one or two more intervals for the groups to prepare arguments, so that different speakers have the opportunity to present their points of view.
- If you have performed this activity before with the group – or even if you have not – you can keep an element of surprise by varying the way that the first speakers are chosen – for example, you could select the two people *third from each end*.
- You may decide, in one of the intervals for preparing arguments, to ask the “supporters” of each speaker to work with the opposing speaker – in other words, to prepare arguments *against* the position that they themselves hold. This can be a good way of getting people to consider the opposite point of view, and can provide an interesting variation if people do not appear to be changing sides at all.

You may want to allow the speakers to have a postcard-sized piece of paper on which to make brief notes to remind them of the different arguments and to which they can refer while speaking.

You may want to raise the issue of whether “pluralism” or freedom of expression should be subject to any limits in a tolerant society: should fascist or nationalist demonstrations be permitted, for example?

Suggestions for follow-up

If you are interested in following up the idea of how opinions are formed or changed, especially by the media you may want to look at the activity “Front page”, on page 135.

Ideas for action

If you choose the statement on voting, you may want to follow up the activity with a survey of voting habits in your local community; see the activity “To vote, or not to vote”, on page 238.

Statements for discussion

- We have a moral obligation to use our vote in elections.
- We should obey all laws, even unfair ones.
- The only people who have any power in a democracy are the politicians.
- “People get the leaders they deserve”.
- It is the responsibility of citizens to control the day-to-day activity of the government.

Key date

24 October

United Nations Day