How to Host a Debate Watch

Debate Watch nights are some of the easiest and best JSA events you can plan in your area. They consist of watching a candidate debate on television and then hearing from a panel of speakers afterwards and discussing it. Here are some easy steps to planning a successful debate watch night:

1) Choose a location and date. You will need a location where you can get live TV and fit enough students. A high school library or auditorium usually works very well, because students know where it is and usually live nearby. Be sure to get school approval well in advance as well as a teacher willing to supervise. Also make sure you can bring food in there. A pizza place or other restaurant might work as well but is usually more complicated. The date may be predetermined for you since it is best to watch debates live, but if there are multiple debates between candidates you should pick the one which occurs on a Friday or Saturday night as that is when you will get the most people to come. If all debates are on weekdays, you may want to consider recording the debate and then showing it on a Friday night. The only danger with that is that people may have already seen the debate, so use your judgment. Tell people to arrive at least a half hour before the debate starts so that they have plenty of time to get food, talk with friends, and get settled.

2) Invite Speakers. Mail out invitation letters to potential speakers on JSA letterhead from the office (sample letter attached at the end). Be sure to fax or mail the letter first and then follow up with a phone call to their office. Don’t expect the speakers to call you back. Since you will be watching a debate between two or more candidates, ideal speakers would be representatives from their campaigns or parties. Local elected officials or candidates are also great, as are political analysts such as political science professors. The key is to set up a panel of about 3 or 4 people with several varying viewpoints that can intelligently discuss the debate and the election. Invite enough speakers to be sure you have some but be wary of inviting too many at once as you may then have a panel which is too large and not have enough time for student questions. The ideal is to send out speaker invitation letters in waves, first inviting the speakers you want the most and if they can’t come, then sending out invitations to other speakers. Beware: some speakers (especially if you send invitations to party headquarters) will just show up without confirming, and you may end up with more speakers than you thought you would have. Have extra Thank You mugs just in case.

3) 1 month before: Send out requests for food donations. Free food is a very important part of debate watch nights, as it is a good way to attract attendees. Many grocery store chains give their managers the discretion to give out gift certificates to non-profits without going through their corporate office; these are the ones you want to target. If a chain has several stores in an area, you can usually ask them all separately and thus multiply your donations. Put together a list of local stores and addresses and write a form letter (sample attached) to them. Then make follow up calls and ask to speak with the managers, don’t expect them to have read or even kept your letter so explain what you are doing and what you
need. Often they will ask you to re-fax the letter or bring it with you to the store. Chips and other snack food is always good, trying to get a whole meal together is usually too complicated.

4) **1 month before to date of event:** Publicize! Publicize! Publicize!- make flyers for your event (include date, location, map, and make sure to mention the free food) and e-mail them to the chapter presidents in your region so they can put them up around their school and print some out yourself and post them all over your school and in classrooms. Also have them included in the monthly JSA mailing. Go around to history/government/civics teachers and ask them to put up a poster in their room and talk to their class about it. Also ask if they can offer *extra credit* for attendance, this is usually the most effective way to get attendees. Bug everyone you know to come and continually bug your chapter presidents over e-mail and the phone so that they don’t forget when and where it is. Just sending it out once won’t get them to do much. Though some chapter presidents will be very proactive in getting their chapter involved, most won’t, so work with the idea that they aren’t going to do anything unless reminded and even then you should count on getting most of the attendees yourself. If chapter presidents and their chapter members come of their own free will, that is a welcome plus, but don’t count on it. Since your fellow chapter members and people at your school are the ones you can have the most direct contact with, make sure EVERYONE at your school knows that the debatewatch night is going on, go personally talk to teachers to try to get extra credit, advertise on your campus news, and most importantly bug everyone you come into contact with.

5) **Expansion mailings** - The debatewatch night is also a great expansion tool. Put together a list of schools in your area without JSA chapters and get the names of history or government teachers on their school websites. Put together a list of the teachers’ names and the school addresses. Then send your Debate Watch night flyer as well as a What is JSA brochure and a letter (sample attached) explaining JSA and inviting them to come to your event. This may seem like it has very little return because for every 20 schools you send stuff to you will probably only have one new school come, but it takes very little effort and it is worth it if you can get even one more school to get interested in starting a JSA chapter.

6) **2 weeks before event:** Be sure your speakers and food donations are confirmed. Confirm location and TV and all logistics. Make new flyer with your speakers on it. Renew efforts at publicity and extra credit searching. Call chapter presidents to remind them of debatewatch night.

7) **1 week before:** Send a press release to your local newspapers and TV stations. The press often cover the debate and are interested in hearing student reactions, so it is a good way to get publicity. (sample attached, though not a particularly good one)

8) **1 week before:** call chapter presidents again, ask for attendance estimates from their chapters. Deal with last minute panics. Make sure TV can
actually get live television and doesn’t only play tapes. (realizing this one week before is much better than the night before)

9) 2 Days before: Bug everyone in sight about coming, check all last minute details. Pick up food donations. Assign people to bring bowls, napkins, etc. Make sure you have cabinet members signed up to come early and help with registration, food. Have someone taking pictures.

10) Day of: Relax. Get there early, set up a registration desk for people to sign in as well as an info table with flyers and things. Set up food in a good place. Set up chairs. Put up signs to direct people to your location from all the parking lots and streets. Make sure someone is outside to greet the speakers. Maybe set up a donations box in case people want to donate to the chapter. As people start coming in, direct them to food and tell them to sit down. Before the debate starts, give a brief introduction as to what JSA is. When it is time for the debate to start, turn on the TV and turn off the lights. Watch the debate. After the debate is over, have your panelists sit at a table at the front of the room. Ask each of them to introduce themselves briefly and give a brief opinion of the debate (hopefully they will have watched it). Then open it up to questions from the students, and tell them questions can be addressed to one panelist in particular if they’d like, it can be time consuming to hear every panelist answer every question. When you run out of time, thank the panelists and give them their mugs. Thank everyone for coming and remind them to come to chapter meetings and to Fall State. It is nice to also e-mail everyone who came afterwards and thank them for coming and let them know about other JSA opportunities ahead.

The same procedure can be followed to hold a movie night as well, just pick a politically interesting movie and substitute it for the debate. Speakers are good for movie nights as well, as is food. Food is always good.
Date

Dear Speaker's Name:

Hello, my name is Your Name and I am writing on behalf of the Dos Pueblos High Chapter of the Junior State of America. We are a student run, non-profit, non-partisan political awareness organization that seeks to get high school students interested and involved in politics and government. JSA allows students to voice their opinions on important issues and determine their own political beliefs.

On date, about 60 students from ____________________________ counties will meet at Location to watch and discuss the something debate. This will be a great way to bring students together and hold an informed discussion on the election, the issues, and what we can do about it. Meanwhile, JSA chapters and regions across the nation will be holding similar events so that we can measure the opinion of youth in elections nationwide. We hope to have speakers from both parties speak to us after the debate. It would mean a lot to us if you could join us in watching the debate and speak to us afterwards about who you believe won the debate and what it will mean for the election. Our event will take place on date, at time at Location.

These days, many Americans do not even bother to show up at the voting polls, but these students will be giving up their Friday night to learn, discuss, and become involved in the issues they care about. By speaking to us, you will be showing the youth that even though we cannot yet vote, our ideas are worth listening to, and our involvement is important. Democracy cannot function without informed citizens. America’s youth will be the citizens of tomorrow.

For seventy-five years, The Junior State has sponsored political awareness activities on high school campuses across the country. Our events provide an opportunity for students to participate in organized debates, listen to current political leaders speak, and learn more about the world around them. JSA debates, conventions, regional events, chapter meetings are organized and run by dedicated high school students.

We will contact you to follow up on this matter. Thank you so much.

Sincerely,

Your Name
Position
Junior State of America
www.jsa.org
Email
Phone Number
Sample Food Donations Letter

To Whom It May Concern:

Hello, my name is Your Name Here and I am writing this letter on behalf of the Dos Pueblos Chapter of the Junior State of America. We are a student run, non-profit, non-partisan political awareness organization that seeks to get high school students interested and involved in politics and government. JSA allows students to voice their opinions on important issues and determine their own political beliefs.

On October 8th, about 60 students from Santa Barbara, Ventura, and San Luis Obispo counties will meet at Anacapa School in Santa Barbara to watch and discuss the second presidential debate. We will also have representatives from both political parties speak to us afterwards. This will be a great way to bring students together and hold an informed discussion on the presidential election, the issues, and what we can do about it. Meanwhile, JSA chapters and regions across the nation will be holding similar events so that we can measure the opinion of youth in this election nationwide. Any tax-deductible donation of food you could give us would be much appreciated.

These days, many Americans do not even bother to show up at the voting polls, but these students will be giving up their Friday night to learn, discuss, and become involved in the issues they care about. By providing this food or donation of your choice, you would be showing the youth that even though we cannot yet vote, our ideas are worth listening to, and our involvement is important. Democracy cannot function without informed citizens. America’s youth will be the citizens of tomorrow.

For seventy-five years, The Junior State has sponsored political awareness activities on high school campuses across the country. Our events provide an opportunity for students to participate in organized debates, listen to current political leaders speak, and learn more about the world around them. JSA debates, conventions, regional events, chapter meetings are organized and run by dedicated high school students.

We will contact you to follow up on this matter. Thank you so much.

Sincerely,

Name
Position
Junior State of America
www.jsa.org
Email:
Phone:
Sample Expansion Letter

To Whom It May Concern:

Hello, my name is Diane de Gramont and I am writing this letter on behalf of the Dos Pueblos High Chapter of the Junior State of America. We are a student run, non-profit, non-partisan political awareness organization that seeks to get high school students interested and involved in politics and government. JSA allows students to voice their opinions on important issues and determine their own political beliefs.

On October 8th, about 60 students from Santa Barbara, Ventura, and San Luis Obispo counties will meet at 5:30 pm at Anacapa School in Santa Barbara to watch and discuss the second presidential debate. We will also have representatives from both political parties speak to us afterwards. This will be a great way to bring students together and hold an informed discussion on the presidential election, the issues, and what we can do about it. The event will be free and some snacks will be provided but if students want dinner they should bring a couple of dollars for pizza. Meanwhile, JSA chapters and regions across the nation will be holding similar events so that we can measure the opinion of youth in this election nationwide.

We encourage faculty and administrators at local high schools to encourage their students to attend our event or hold their own in order to increase understanding of the political process. Please review the enclosed flyer to learn more about the debatwatch nights and how to hold one. If you have any other questions, please contact me and I would be happy to help with anything you need.

Another great way to get your students involved in the political process is to encourage a small group of students to start a Junior State Chapter at your school. Chapters focus on holding once a week meetings in order to discuss political topics. In addition to holding the meetings in high schools across the nation, we also have state and regional conferences several times a year. Our events provide an opportunity for students to participate in organized debates, listen to current political leaders speak, and learn more about the world around them. All of our debates, conventions, regional events, and chapter meetings are organized and run by dedicated high school students. For more information, please look at the enclosed “What Is JSA Flyer”, visit our website, or contact me. Thank you very much for your time.

Sincerely,

Name
Position
Junior State of America
www.jsa.org
Email:
Phone:
STUDENTS DISCUSS DEBATES

(Location)—Tri-county high school students meet to discuss presidential debates, hear candidates speak. The Dos Pueblos High Chapter of the Junior State of America will be holding a DebateWatch night on Oct. 7th, to watch the 2nd presidential debate and hear speakers from several parties, including Jim Gray, the Libertarian candidate for Senate and Don Regan, Republican candidate for Congress. The group will be meeting at Dos Pueblos High School from 5:30 to 8 pm. The Junior State of America is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that is dedicated to teaching high school students about democracy and is the largest student-run organization in the United States. For more information, contact Fred Smith at (234) 555-1111.
John McCain or Barack Obama

Come to the JSA Debate Night
Dos Pueblos H.S. Library on Tuesday, Oct. 7th at 5:30 p.m

Hosted by the Dos Pueblos High JSA Chapter

Come Watch the Debate and hear great speakers including:

State Assemblywoman Hannah-Beth Jackson

House Candidate Don Regan

US Senate Candidate and Superior Court Judge Jim Gray

FREE FOOD!

Questions? Call Fred Smith at 555-1111, or email at fred@email.com