

Planning for Difficult Classroom Discussions Around the 2020 Election

You may choose to make space in your classroom to discuss the outcome or process of the 2020 election. These conversations can be both worthwhile and challenging. Here are some steps to help create a supportive environment and meaningful dialogue.

Establish your own goals. Before you begin, think about why you are engaging your students in this conversation. Grounding in your own goals will help you respond to student resistance thoughtfully and guide the conversation as needed. Some possible goals are:

- To help students process their emotional responses
- To connect to course content
- To achieve specific learning objectives, like practicing evidence-based discourse

Collaborate with students on community guidelines. Agreeing upon guidelines for discussion will help to maintain a functional conversation, even during uncomfortable moments. If you have time, create these agreements before the election so you're ready to go—and ask students to sign a copy. Here are a few to start with:

- Speak from your own experience, and do not expect others to speak as representatives of any group
- Ask genuine questions
- Be ok with silence (and discomfort)

Start on common ground. Offer students a short reading, video, or audio segment to discuss initially. You may choose something that broadens the historical context of the moment, like a piece on contentious elections in other countries or eras.

Redirect to writing. If the conversation becomes too heated to move forward, or if students don't feel comfortable contributing verbally, offering a short writing prompt is an inclusive alternative to open discussion. In a virtual setting, ask students to turn off their cameras and write for a set period of time. Then, you can choose to resume the conversation or close the topic (or class meeting).

Follow up. Reach out to students who struggled during the conversation or in writing. During the next class period, calmly synthesize key points from the discussion or students' written work, without naming names. Offer relevant resources for further reading and wellbeing.

References and Resources

[Caplan, Paula and Ford, Jordan C. 2014. The Voices of Diversity: What Students of Diverse Races/ Ethnicities and Both Sexes Tell Us About Their College Experiences and Their Perceptions About their Institutions' Progress Toward Diversity. Aporia 6\(4\):30-69.](#)

[Establishing Classroom Ground Rules, Washington University in St. Louis](#)

[Let's Talk: A Teaching Tolerance Guide. Discussion Race, Racism, and Other Difficult Topics with Students.](#)

[Brookfield, Stephen D. and Preskill, Stephen. Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms. Jossey-Bass, 2005.](#)

[Nash, Robert J., Bradley, DeMethra LaSha, and Chickering, Arthur. How to Talk About Hot Topics on Campus: From Polarization to Moral Conversation. Jossey-Bass, 2008.](#)

Essential Partners Resource Page <https://whatisessential.org/resources>