

Faculty Resource: Talking About Elections In Your Classroom



If you want students to vote, your best bet may be to facilitate classroom conversations that encourage their electoral participation. Here are some reasons why election-related conversations in your classroom matter—and suggestions on conducting them.

Why voting matters

Given widespread generational mistrust of candidates and political parties, and that [80% of young voters stayed home in 2014 and only half participated in 2016](#), classroom conversations can be critical in helping students think through why it matters for them to vote, including in primaries where they'll have a broader range of candidates to support. You can encourage students to participate even with mixed or negative feelings, and stress that elections aren't about abstract purity, but about taking responsibility for who is elected in their name. You can also emphasize that their votes can in fact determine the outcome, as student votes



have in previous close elections: national, statewide, or local. ([Our 90-second Close Elections video](#) may help.) These conversations are also

chances to stimulate critical thinking about which candidates best align with their values and who they want to support. Our [nonpartisan candidate and issue guides](#) are useful for this.

Classroom conversations

These conversations matter across all disciplines. Even if they feel beyond your comfort level, they're worth the risk for their potential impact on student participation. You may hesitate for fear of politicizing your courses, or because you're unsure how to lead the conversation. But elections are too important to leave to the political science majors. You needn't be a political expert to facilitate student reflection on their electoral role, because giving them the context to exchange perspectives with peers may be as important as anything else you do. With the right approach, you can serve learning and critical thought, while encouraging students to participate as engaged citizens. Health courses can talk about Obamacare and its alternatives; science classes can talk about climate change; business and accounting classes about tax and budget plans; sports classes about "locker room talk" and NFL protests. Beyond discipline-related topics, every classroom can use the issue-by-issue comparisons of CEEP's [guides](#), or our discussion of [political cynicism](#) as ready-to-use departure points for framing the conversations. You can also use our resource on [Incorporating Election Engagement into Your Courses](#).

Here are some suggestions for promoting civil discourse on these emotionally laden issues—most of which, unsurprisingly, echo good general classroom practice:

UNDERSTANDING YOUR ROLE

- Don't feel you need to be a political expert, knowing all the answers with perfect responses.
- Remember that your role is to get students talking and thinking, not to lead them toward a particular political viewpoint or electoral outcome.
- Consider having a couple of students facilitate the conversation with you.
- You may supply information, context, and sources for further inquiry, but you are mainly providing an environment where all in the classroom are respected. Let the students take the lead as much as possible.
- When discussing where candidates stand on key issues of interest to students, be accurate and fair, whatever your personal views.

FACILITATING THE CONVERSATION

- Encourage students to passionately articulate their perspectives, but treat each other with respect.
- Anticipate disagreement and make clear in advance that it is an inevitable part of a democracy. And that demonization makes addressing common problems much harder. Remind students of this as needed if emotions run high.
- Particularly support students with whom you personally disagree, both to ensure that your own biases don't prevail and to make them feel included where they might otherwise feel uncomfortable.
- Encourage students to listen, hear each other's perspectives—particularly where they differ—and work to understand the experiences that generate these perspectives. Resources like [Living Room Conversations](#), [AllSides](#), and [CIRCLE's guide to political conversations](#) can be especially useful, because they're focused on fostering civil dialogue between participants of differing perspectives.
- Ask students to argue their case with evidence, even while expressing subjective feelings.
- Ask them to tie their arguments into what they've been studying in your class, or in other courses.
- Help them reflect on how they formed their own perspectives, the genesis of their values.
- Help them look for common ground—not necessarily with the candidates, but with the fellow students with whom they may disagree.
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Engaging conversations and why students' votes matter

Classroom conversations on the elections needn't be set up as formal debates. But do engage students enough to help make the elections salient—and help them think through why their vote matters and why they might choose one candidate over another. You can also offer historical perspective, reminding them that social change doesn't stop (or even necessarily start) on Election Day, but that the elections create the landscape within which social change movements can either make progress or regress. Encourage students to explore the complementary relationship between electoral choices and social movements, from the civil rights to Tea Party and environmental movements.

You can also use your courses to encourage students to [volunteer in campaigns of their choosing](#) or nonpartisan engagement efforts on or off campus. Students can also interview peers on responses to the elections, host conversations on why voting matters, or reflect on the responses when they engage their friends through social media. This kind of volunteering lets students learn critical civic skills, like how to voice their beliefs and listen to others. If they want to volunteer in partisan campaigns, our [candidate guides](#) list relevant candidate websites.

Giving extra credit for this kind of student volunteering can be a powerful way to encourage it and make it more likely to happen. You can incorporate an academic

component by requiring follow-up written or oral reflections on students' engagement experiences. Our student Election Engagement Fellows have called their experience “life-changing” and “the most important thing I've ever done”—a testament to how much their election volunteering affected them. Students who advocate for candidates they believe in (or believe are better than the alternatives) can learn comparably valuable lessons. You can even have students describe their experiences through oral presentations, sharing with fellow students what they've learned. If students end up volunteering for opposing campaigns or causes, they can explore parallels and differences between what they encountered. They may also find ties between the subject matter of your courses and their conversations with people whom they engaged.

Whether or not you give extra credit for volunteering, bringing the election into the classroom fosters a culture that acknowledges its importance. Instead of academic studies competing with the election, they can complement it. Students can find value in what they learn in the classroom—and bring classroom lessons into the public sphere. And it helps emphasize that they have a voice in electing leaders whose agendas will profoundly shape our world, now and in the future.