

Difficult Classroom Conversations About Political Issues



Created for faculty

Students often approach faculty with politically charged opinions and questions. These conversations can be awkward and uncomfortable, especially if you are a faculty member who would rather your students not know your political opinions. The key to these conversations is to focus on your students' experiences with and assumptions about political topics—the evolution of their beliefs—rather than their specific opinions. Below, we provide examples of how you can guide conversations about politically charged issues toward healthy dialogue, possibly in conjunction with CEEP's [nonpartisan candidate guides](#). You can use these responses for student comments from either side of the political aisle.

Here are some possible responses to politically charged opinions students may raise or questions they may ask. The goal is to create healthy dialogue between you and the student you are speaking to:

- How did you come to your position?
- How do you define that term?
- Can you think of an exception to your position?
- What would be something that could cause you to change your thinking on this subject?
- What is at risk for you in this discussion? What do you hope for?
- How would you go about creating the change you would like to see? How might you be partially responsible for creating the very situation you think needs to be changed?



Abortion

Student Comment: I cannot believe we are killing babies!

Faculty Response: What has shaped your position? Why do you think others think that they have the right to choose abortion? What assumptions do you think people make when they argue for a right to choose abortion? How much control do you think women should have over their bodies?

Student Comment: Everyone should be able to choose whether and when they get an abortion.

Faculty Response: What has shaped your position on abortion? Why do you think others think that people should not have the right to choose abortion? What assumptions do you think people make when they say that abortion should not be available? What responsibility do you think women have in how they control their bodies? Why?

Affordable Care Act

Student Comment: The government has no business controlling the healthcare system, that's socialism.

Faculty Response: Can a government role in health care exist with a successful capitalist economy? What would be the appropriate role? Are there ways you see private healthcare superior to public healthcare or vice versa? Do you have some experience with the healthcare industry that has caused you to believe that? How could you change our healthcare system if you could?

Student Comment: The healthcare industry is out of control! We need universal healthcare like Medicare for all.

Faculty Response: When you say, "universal healthcare," what does that look like to you? Do you have some experience with the healthcare industry that has caused you to believe that? What do you think is the appropriate balance between individual, business and government in terms of providing healthcare? Why do you believe that is the best way?

Black Lives Matter

Student Comment: Why do they keep saying Black Lives Matter. ALL lives matter!

Faculty Response: What does it mean for a life to matter? What does Black Lives Matter mean to you? What does that look like in society? Have you had experiences or seen instances where lives have not mattered? Can we find something in the historical record, or in current conditions, that would drive people to focus on the importance of Black lives?



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Student Comment: Why hasn't [our department/university] done more for Black Lives Matter?

Faculty Response: What have you seen and experienced around campus? What do you think [our department/university] has not done and should do for Black Lives Matter? Broadly speaking, what does support look like to you? How might individuals, groups and institutions illustrate it?

Student Comment: Abolish the police!

Student Comment: We can't abolish the police! It wouldn't be safe.

Faculty Response: There has been a lot of conversation about this - but with different definitions of abolish. What is your personal perspective? What would it mean to reform? Replace? What functions are you thinking of? What community support and regulation might you want to see? What reinforcement should exist to keep it up? What are the roles of government in providing for public safety? And how well suited are modern police forces to fulfill those roles?

Confederate Symbols

Student Comment: I do not understand why we have to rename or remove every statue.

Faculty Response: In your hometown, do you have any statues? Why do you think they were placed there? Did the government rename any of them? Tell me about that experience and how your community reacted to it. Why do you think others want to rename or remove Confederate statues?

Student Comment: We should ban the Confederate flag altogether.

Faculty Response: Have you seen the Confederate flag in your community? Where was it? Tell me about how it made you feel. Why do you think others want to keep the flag?

COVID-19

Student Comment: They can't force me to wear a mask.

Student Comment: People who don't wear masks are selfish.

Faculty Response: What has your experience been wearing a mask? Do you see any benefits to wearing a mask? Do you see any drawbacks to wearing a mask? From your perspective, how much of it is an individual decision versus something bigger? Do you have a responsibility to protect others if you are sick or might be contagious and not know it?



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Student Comment: It is not fair to ask me to practice social distancing when I know other people who are not socially distancing.

Student Comment: If anyone gets within six feet of me they deserve to be yelled at.

Faculty Response: What has your experience been with social distancing? Do you see more benefits or harm from social distancing? How much of it should be an individual decision versus something bigger?

Environment

Student Comment: I do not get why so many people are worried about climate change. Nothing has happened.

Faculty Response: How did you come to this perspective? Are you frustrated by the amount of attention given to climate change? Why do you think so many people care about climate change? Do you trust scientists' reports on climate change?

Student Comment: I do not get why so many people could care less about climate change. We are destroying our planet more and more each day!

Faculty Response: What do you know about climate change? What concerns do you have about it? How did you come to this perspective? Have you taken any actions due to your concerns? Why do you think others do not care about climate change?

Fake News

Student Comment: No one is reporting the truth anymore. It is all fake news. It seems like everyone is consuming news that fits their political views.

Faculty Response: Have you ever discovered a story you had talked about or shared on social media that was "fake news?" What happened? What makes it fake? What does a healthy news environment look like to you?

Student Comment: I am disappointed that people do not trust the media. The media has always been a reliable source of information. If we do not have trust in the media, then who can we trust to provide us with information?

Faculty Response: What news sources do you trust and how do you decide which ones to trust? Why do you think some people hold negative views toward the media? Can you think of any solutions to restore people's trust in the media?

Gentrification

Student Comment: Gentrification is dangerous to communities. It ruins them by displacing the people that can no longer afford them.



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Faculty Response: What, from your perspective, is the line between changes that are to be expected/“normal” over time and changes that are dangerous? How might you define gentrification? How does it impact those new to the community? Those who have been there for a while? Can you think of any benefits of gentrification? Are there models that successfully mix poorer and more affluent communities in the same neighborhood?

Student Comment: I am happy that we are tearing down these old buildings and putting up newer structures. It will make the town look much better.

Faculty Response: Just because it makes the town look better, is that the only thing you should care about? Are there any trade-offs between gentrifying a community and not gentrifying a community? How are you defining a “much better” look for the town?

Guns

Student Comment: The U.S. Constitution says I have a right to bear arms. Gun laws infringe on it.

Faculty Response: What are your thoughts about gun laws in our state? Is there anything you would change? If so, why do you think those changes would be better than the laws currently in place? Why do you believe gun rights are important? Do you think the purpose of citizens’ use of firearms has changed over the course of time?

Student Comment: There is no reason for everyday Americans to carry firearms.

Faculty Response: What has caused you to believe this? Is there anything you would change about current state gun laws? If so, why do you think those changes would be better than the laws currently in place? Why do you think people want to have firearms? Do you think that has changed over time?

Immigration

Student Comment: There are people here illegally taking advantage of the system. They are not real citizens and take jobs away.

Faculty Response: What’s the difference between people being here legally versus illegally to you? What is a citizen? Have you had experience with the immigrant community that has caused you to believe this? How do you think immigrants and citizens are different? How do immigrants take away from our economy? Are there ways you think that immigrants add to the economy?

Student Comment: We need to protect immigrants and provide them with resources towards citizenship.



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Faculty Response: Why do you think immigrants need protection? Have you had experience with the immigrant community that has caused you to believe this? What resources do you believe need to be provided, and how should we go about providing them?

LGBTQ Issues

Student Comment: I should not have to teach every person I meet about pronouns just so they can get mine right.

Faculty Response: How do pronouns relate to identity? How might identity relate to student experience in the classroom? Are pronouns different from proper names? Do you see it as a social obligation or an individual obligation to use someone's pronouns correctly?

Student Comment: Why are we giving queer people so much attention?

Faculty Response: How do you think we are giving too much attention to queer people? Why do you think that? How is this conversation related to how we are taught to think about social roles? What might be correct about that way of thinking? What might be wrong? What does it mean for us to be in community and, consequently, in conversation with people who were socialized differently from how we were raised?

Mascots

Student Comment: I don't know why people now want to change the mascot. It has never offended them before, and all the sudden it matters.

Faculty Response: How do people in your community feel about this proposed change? How does the community that the mascot represents feel about this proposed change?

Student Comment: We need to change the mascot immediately. It is extremely offensive.

Faculty Response: How did you first learn about the controversy surrounding the mascot? Why do you think some people want to keep the mascot as is?

Taxation

Student Comment: It is unfair that people who make more money have to pay for those who do not. People worked hard for what they have and should be allowed to keep it.

Faculty Response: What approach would seem equitable in terms of taxation? How should we best fund common needs and decide which needs should be funded? What



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would that look like? How would policies and regulations that interact with a person's wealth be constructed?

Student Comment: People pay too little in taxes and we see the effects of it in our communities. If people paid more in taxes, we would have better roads and schools.

Faculty Response: What are you defining as "too little" in taxes? What amount of total income do you think people should pay for and why? Why do you think some people do not like tax increases?

Vaccines

Student Comment: I refuse to get a vaccine. My body, my choice.

Faculty Response: Where do you get information about vaccines? How do you decide what sources to trust regarding vaccines? Why do you think others decide to get vaccines? Do you have a responsibility to protect others from the possibility of getting sick and spreading it to others?

Student Comment: People who refuse to get vaccinated deserve to get sick.

Faculty Response: What have you gathered from the conversation around the use of vaccines? How do you sit with the tension between its benefits and drawbacks? From your perspective, how much of it is an individual decision versus something bigger? Do you have a responsibility to protect others from the possibility of getting sick and spreading it to others?

Vote by Mail

Student Comment: Someone is going to take my ballot out of the mail! I do not trust the post office.

Faculty Response: Why do you not trust the post office? Have you ever had a lost package? If so, how was that scenario resolved? Did you end up getting your package? What, if anything, would restore your trust in the post office?

Student Comment: The post office has always been a reliable way to deliver my packages, so I trust them to deliver my ballot to the proper officials. It is much easier than voting in-person.

Faculty Response: What about voting by mail makes it easier for you personally to vote? Could you see an argument for in-person voting being an easier way to vote for some people? Why do you think some people lack trust in the post office?



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Welfare

Student Comment: Everyone on welfare benefits is lazy.

Faculty Response: What experience makes you think that those on welfare benefits are lazy? Who do you think receives most welfare benefits in America? Do you know what it takes to qualify for welfare benefits?

Student Comment: We should provide welfare benefits to everyone in need.

Faculty Response: What experience makes you think that welfare benefits are good for those in need? Who do you think receives welfare benefits? Do you think that welfare benefits are always good for people who receive them? What does it take to qualify for welfare benefits?

About Us

Campus Election Engagement Project (CEEP) is a national nonpartisan project that helps administrators, faculty, staff and student leaders at America's institutions of higher education engage students in federal, state and local elections. CEEP views voting as a means to promote a more equitable and inclusive democracy and to address past and present disenfranchisement. To learn more, visit campuselect.org or contact us at info@campuselect.org.

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