

Campus Civic Discussions: A Nonpartisan Guide



Created for faculty

The more students talk about public issues, [the higher their voting turnout](#). Campus Election Engagement Project (CEEP) offers resources for conducting respectful and inclusive conversations about important but potentially divisive issues [in your classes](#). We also have resources for structured conversations around particular issues, which can be held in either classrooms or co-curricular venues.

The approaches described below aren't about taking sides or reaching agreement as a group. They also differ from informational presentations, where students learn about an issue as a passive audience. Instead, they focus on active student participation, providing a chance to exchange ideas, perspectives and experiences.

These discussions can be hosted by individual faculty, students or staff, by academic departments or campus offices, student government or student organizations—by anyone who wants to promote nonpartisan campus conversations on civic issues and events.

What to Discuss

Free or inexpensive nonpartisan discussion guides are available from several sources, including:

- [Living Room Conversations](#) offers over [50 conversation guides](#) on topics from [Does My Vote Really Matter?](#) (created together with CEEP), [Status & Privilege](#) and [Fake News](#), to [Guns & Responsibility](#) and [Immigration](#). [Register your conversation](#) to link to Living Room Conversations' national support network.
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- **Kettering Foundation's [National Issues Forums Institute](#) (NIFI)** offers more than [30 Issue Guides](#), including deliberative forums on [the political divide](#), [homeland security](#) and the [opioid epidemic](#). Guides either are free or cost \$1.99 for a downloadable PDF. NIFI also offers online conversations to support users.
- **The National Museum of African American History and Culture** has a useful initiative on [Talking About Race](#).
- **AllSides** gathers news coverage to provide multiple articles from contrasting political perspectives, along with Dialogue and Debate formats. From election topics like the Electoral College and ballot harvesting to racism, COVID-19 and cancel culture, this resource enables students to explore all sides of an issue.
- **ProCon.org** helps students explore emerging issues with reliable, nonpartisan information. Whether the topic is the 2020 presidential election, calls to defund the police or student debt, the site presents pro and con arguments along with discussion questions.
- **CEEP nonpartisan candidate guides** can be used to discuss not only the stands candidates take on key issues during the campaign, but also how they translate campaign rhetoric into policy positions once they take office. Discussions can center around issues and positions relevant to your course subject or student interests, from climate change to immigration and education funding.
- Use the [Story Circle](#) model to create your own discussions on civic themes.
- Create other approaches using **National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation's [Resource Center](#)** and [Beginner's Guide](#), with information and support on a range of [participatory practices](#) and formats.

Ground Rules and Structure

- Civic discussions are run by participants. The listed guides are designed to be used without a facilitator. The discussion host arranges logistics, provides a welcome and brings participants back to the format if they get off course—but does not lead or facilitate the discussion.
- Conversations can run anywhere from a 45-minute classroom period up to two hours.
- Begin your discussion by reviewing the [conversation guides](#) or ground rules. These provide the basis for a respectful and productive conversation.
- Discussions are typically structured in rounds, each with a list of questions, conversation starters or policy options. Tips are provided to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to participate.
- Discussions are focused on sharing perspectives and experiences and learning from one another, and don't require significant knowledge of the topic. It can be helpful to provide a copy or link to the conversation guide in advance so that participants understand the topic and format.



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- Effective civic discussions are personal, so if you are engaging a larger group, break out into smaller subgroups of five to 10 participants. They can have a richer discussion and then share comments back with the larger group.
- You can observe or participate in a civic discussion before hosting by watching [recorded sample conversations](#) or joining an [online conversation](#). You can sign up for free trainings using Living Room Conversations' [calendar](#).
- Many guides include a quick participant evaluation or questionnaire to be completed at the end. This can help you improve your next discussion, as well as providing valuable feedback to the discussion creators.
- For more ideas for incorporating civic engagement into courses, check out links to CEEP's faculty resources below.

How to Host Civic Discussions in Classrooms

Use existing guides from respected nonpartisan groups, such as those linked below. Use them to foster respectful, nonpartisan discussion on civic and election issues important to students. You can hold these discussions in a broad range of disciplines, including English and Composition, Social Sciences, Business, Environmental Sciences, Political Science and Government, History, Health Sciences and Arts and Humanities courses.

1. Align the topic with course content. Either the instructor or students may select the topic.
2. To keep the self-guided discussion on track, select a host or co-hosts: either the instructor or students.
3. Set a date and location. Make sure students can break into smaller discussion groups.
4. Conduct the discussion. See tips below to make it respectful and meaningful.
5. Solicit and share feedback.

Civic Discussions Outside the Classroom

CEEP encourages civic discussions throughout campuses and through online campus communities and platforms. Anyone—individual students, faculty members or staff, clubs or departments—can host a conversation. Consider reaching out to partners like student government, the Diversity & Inclusion office, the Community Engagement office, Resident Life or Student Life. Connect diverse participants, in person or virtually. Follow the Ground Rules and Structure outlined above.



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Consider:

- **Peer-to-peer student discussions.** Conversations are most meaningful when participants have diverse perspectives. Include participants across gender, cultural, political, age and identity differences.
- **Discussions across campus silos.** Use your civic discussion to connect groups that might not typically interact. Bring together political science, engineering and theater students. Invite faculty, staff and students. Engage community members. Mix it up!

Host your civic discussion...

- **In person.** These discussions can happen anywhere. You just need a comfortable and somewhat private space where the participants can gather. Discussions can take place in a library or student lounge, or under a tree in the quad. Or take your conversation off-campus to a coffee shop, library, home or park.
- **Online.** You can host your conversation using an online video platform so that participants can see one another and interact. Use a free service such as [Zoom](#), [Appear.in](#) or [Go To Meeting](#), or access your institution's online platform. [Living Room Conversations](#) can provide a free Zoom video link to those who register their conversations.

Ground rules, tips and structure adapted from Living Room Conversations, National Issues Forums Institute and National Institute for Civil Discourse.

Know of a great civic discussion guide not listed? Please share it with CEEP at info@campuselect.org so that we can keep improving this resource.

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.
