

Talking About Elections in Your Classes



Created for faculty

Class conversations on election-related issues are an effective way to support students in exercising their right to vote. This resource from Campus Election Engagement Project (CEEP) shares why these conversations in your classes matter—and provides suggestions on conducting them. You will find links to additional faculty election learning resources at the end of the document.

Why Voting Matters

Given widespread generational mistrust of candidates and political parties, COVID-19 disruptions and the fact that [less than half of young voters participated in 2016](#), class conversations can help students think through why their vote matters. As their teacher, you can help students understand the importance and impact of voting, even if they have negative feelings about politics or disagree with particular candidates' stands. You can demonstrate that elections and elected officials have real consequences for their lives—encouraging students to be active electoral participants.

The conversations can explore how protests and social media activism can be powerful tools for social reform but are not a substitute for voting. You can also emphasize that their votes can in fact determine the outcome of elections, as student votes have in previous close elections: national, statewide and local. ([Our 90-second Close Elections video](#) may help.) These conversations may be even more important for students who are learning remotely, as they'll have fewer avenues to get involved.

The top reason given by students for not voting is that they don't like the candidates or don't feel confident they will make the right choices. The conversations you facilitate can help students think critically about which candidates best align with their values, approaches to evaluating candidates and who they want to support. CEEP's [nonpartisan](#)



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[candidate and issue guides](#) are a key tool to help students get accurate, fair information and make informed voting decisions.

Elections Are Not Just for Political Science Classes

Class conversations on civic and election issues matter across all disciplines. Conversations can be challenging, but they're worth the effort for their impact on student voting and civic engagement. 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 help students reflect on their electoral role and give them the opportunity to exchange perspectives with peers. You can serve learning and critical thought while encouraging students to participate as engaged citizens.

To help at this particular time, CEEP has created a resource on [Coronavirus as a Teachable Moment](#), showing how different disciplines can address the new challenges we're facing. We are also leading calls to address racial equity and find creative ways to weave related issues into diverse disciplines. Health courses can talk about everything from the COVID-19 crisis itself to racial disparities in our medical system and what should happen to Obamacare; science classes can talk about the statistics around viral spread and containment; economics, business and accounting classes about tax and budget choices and the preferences inherent in the stimulus bills; sports classes about athletes who've been speaking out on racial justice. Any course can use the issue-by-issue comparisons of [CEEP's candidate guides](#) as a starting point for discussion, or can build media literacy skills with our guide to [Detecting Disinformation](#). If you'd like sources for structured civic conversations on topics from race and privilege to COVID-19, guns, healthcare, the environment and "The America We Want to Be," see CEEP's [Campus Civic Discussions: A Nonpartisan Guide](#) and our collection of [online civic engagement resources](#).

Here are some suggestions for promoting civil discourse on challenging issues—most of which echo good general classroom practice.

Understanding Your Role

- You don't need to be a political expert or have all the answers. This is a conversation.
- You can supply information, context and sources for further inquiry, making sure that everyone in the class feels respected.



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- Your role is to get students talking and thinking, not to lead them toward particular political viewpoints or electoral outcomes.
- Consider having students facilitate the conversation with you, whether in person or online. Let 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

- Establish the conversation outcome. You may host an informal conversation to improve understanding of the issue and its impact. You may design a formal debate with students assigned to represent different perspectives, perhaps informed by a course assignment. The conversation could even take the form of presentations or videos. Make sure students understand the purpose and format.
- Help students establish ground rules. Examples include ensuring that everyone is heard, speaking from personal experience, speaking only for yourself, showing respect for all opinions, asking clarifying questions to better understand other's views, and keeping comments and stories shared by classmates confidential.
- Ask students to share their *experience with* and *assumptions about* political issues rather than their *opinions* or *positions*. Encourage students to listen, hear each other's perspectives—particularly where they differ—and work to understand the experiences that generate these perspectives.
- Anticipate disagreement. Make clear in advance that it is an inevitable part of a democracy and that demonization makes addressing common problems more difficult. 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.
- 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 with fellow students with whom they may disagree.

Inviting Conversations



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Class conversations on the elections, candidates or issues needn't be set up as formal debates. Use any format that makes the elections salient—and helps students think through why their vote matters and why they might choose one candidate over another. In addition to traditional conversations, students can interview peers on responses to the elections, create videos on why voting matters or reflect on how they and their friends engage in elections through social media.

Incorporate an academic component by requiring follow-up written or oral reflections on students' engagement experiences. Offer historical perspective, reminding students that social change doesn't stop 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 Black Lives Matter movement and earlier civil rights campaigns, to the Tea Party and environmental movements. See [Campus Civic Discussions: A Nonpartisan Guide](#) for detailed conversation guides and instructions.

However you conduct your discussions, think of them as ways to help students understand their perspectives and gain a public voice. That voice includes participating in the choices to elect the leaders who will profoundly shape their world, now and in the future.

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.