



MESSAGE TO FACULTY: TALKING ABOUT THE ELECTION IN YOUR CLASSROOMS

With the 2016 elections fast approaching, there may be nothing more important that you can do than facilitate classroom conversations that encourage student electoral participation. Whatever else students do, they all take classes. Whatever they study, classroom conversations can play a key role in involving them. You may hesitate for fear of politicizing your courses, or because you're unsure how to lead the conversation. But if you approach it right, you can serve learning and critical thought, while encouraging students to participate as engaged citizens. So here are some reasons why these conversations matter so much, and some suggestions on conducting them.

In a year where young voters in general strongly mistrust both leading presidential candidates and may be considering not voting, direct conversations become [more important than ever](#). Classroom conversations that you facilitate can be critical in helping them think through reasons for participation. They're opportunities to stress that students can participate even with mixed feelings or outright negative feelings, and 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, whether national, statewide, or local. These conversations are also, of course, opportunities to stimulate critical thinking about which candidates best align with their values and who they want to support—both at the presidential level and down ballot. Our [non-partisan candidate guides](#) should be quite useful in that context, as well as our resource on the trade-offs of [Third Party voting](#) if they're considering that option. But you don't have to be a political expert, because giving them the context to exchange perspectives with peers may be as important as anything else you do.

These conversations are important across all disciplines and political perspectives. So even if this kind of conversation feels beyond your discipline or comfort level, it's worth the risk to create the opportunity for your students. Regardless of your discipline, you can promote classroom reflection on the upcoming election. If you're in political science, political communications, or sociology, it should be a natural, easy fit since the topics overlap so closely. But elections are too important to leave to the political science majors. Health courses can talk about Obamacare and its alternatives; science classes can talk about climate change; business and accounting classes about questions raised regarding the Clinton and Trump Foundations and the candidates' tax and budget plans; sports classes about "locker room talk," sexual harassment issues, and the Colin Kaepernick protests. And separate from discipline-related topics, every classroom can use the issue-by-issue comparisons of CEEP's [nonpartisan candidate guides](#), our [Third Party voting](#) resource, or our discussion [of political cynicism](#) as ready-to-use departure points for framing the conversations.

Here are some suggestions for promoting civil discourse on these emotionally laden issues—most of which, unsurprisingly, resemble 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 particular electoral outcome.
- Consider having a couple of students facilitate the conversation with you.
- Although you may provide information, context, and sources for further inquiry, you are primarily 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 and scapegoating much more likely. Remind students of this as needed if emotions run high.
- Consider being particularly supportive of students with whom you personally disagree, both to ensure that your own biases don't prevail and to make them feel included in a context 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 generates 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.

Classroom conversations on the elections don't have to be set up as formal debates. But you want to engage students enough to help make the elections salient, help them think through [why their vote matters](#), and why they might choose one candidate over another. In an election where the major Presidential candidates leave young voters seriously disappointed, 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 movement to the Tea Party and environmental movements.

You can also use your courses to encourage students to volunteer in campaigns of their choosing, or in campus (or off-campus) nonpartisan engagement efforts. 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 the perspectives of others. If they want to volunteer in partisan campaigns, our [candidate guides](#) list relevant candidate websites, so it should be easy for them to find contexts to participate.

Giving extra credit for this kind of student volunteering can be a powerful way of encouraging it and significantly increasing the likelihood that it will 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 impacted 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 to the classroom, giving a chance for fellow-students to share in the lessons. If students end up volunteering for opposing campaigns or causes, they can explore parallels and differences between what they encountered. They may also be able to find ties between the subject matter of your courses and their conversations with people they reached out to engage.

Whether or not you give extra credit for volunteering, bringing the election into the classroom gives it salience and fosters a culture that acknowledges its importance. Instead of academic studies competing with the election, they can complement it, acknowledging that students can not only find value in what they learn in the classroom, they can 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, both now and in the future.