

Engaging in Difficult Election Conversations

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2024 is shaping to be yet another divisive presidential election year. Elections can raise many emotions and we know they can affect learning. There are a range of strategies that can be pursued, from providing emotional support to individuals to connecting and engaging in constructive and mutually-reciprocal experiential activities in local communities. This guide focuses on supporting individuals to engage in constructive conversations around the 2024 Elections, regardless of the outcomes. It includes some considerations, ideas, tips, and resources for doing so.

An excellent way to talk about the election includes how the election *should* be discussed. Reasoning improves when alternative viewpoints can be considered and engaged, and such deliberation can help overcome polarization and reduce extremism. We can encourage collaboration and move away from divisiveness and competition if we intentionally structure interactions. The following are some important Points to consider when setting the framework for discussions and grounding conversations:

- 2024 is shaping up to be a divisive election year, but we can work together to address pressing public problems and to cultivate a more just and inclusive democracy.
- Affirm the belief in the safe and peaceful transition of power (if one is required by the election outcome) as central to democratic societies.
- Diversity is an asset that makes us stronger and more creative when we are inclusive and ensure that everyone has equitable access, voice and participation in discussions and decision making.
- No one's existence should ever be questioned. Affirm belief in the dignity of every human being and believe that everyone should thrive.
- Politicians don't always live up to democratic ideals.
- We may not know the election results on November 5, 2024. Election administration is facilitated by localities, local election boards, and state departments of elections. It takes time to count every vote. There may be challenges to the results. Be patient, but persistent and willing to question.

1. Create agreed upon ground rules but provide open space for facilitated discussion.

Encourage collaboration over competition. Reasoning improves when alternative viewpoints can be considered and engaged, and deliberation can help overcome polarization and reduce extremism. Ground rules might include:

- Everyone's viewpoint counts equally.
- Share "air time." Especially online (e.g., on Zoom), there are lots of ways to contribute/participate that don't involve speaking, like in the chat box, an anonymous poll, etc.
- One person shares at a time.

- If you are hurt or harmed, say so and say why.
- Individuals can disagree, but don't personalize it; critique the ideas, reasoning, and evidence, not the person
- There are diverse perspectives in this conversation and we can talk respectfully even if we don't all agree.
- Hate speech will not be tolerated.
- This is not about changing minds. It's about listening and developing empathy and understanding.
- Avoid judgment and focus on listening with curiosity and for understanding.
- Confidentiality: what happens in the discussion, stays in the discussion.
- Consider adopting a "brave space" that allows people to take risks and speak candidly, but allows people to respond when it hurts their feelings and share why.
- Additional Resources: [Self-facilitation conversation starters from Living Room Conversations](#); [World Cafe Method](#); [Liberating Structures](#).

2. Discuss why you are having the conversation.

Elections can raise many emotions and not everyone will be satisfied with the outcomes. We can still work together on the many issues facing our community, nation, and world, even if our candidate or political party is not in power. Voting in elections is one of many ways people can participate in and influence decision-making. Other ways to get involved, include: public commenting on issues you care about to local boards and commissions; contacting elected and public officials about the issues you care about; or volunteering to fill the need of a local organization or community.

3. Offer opportunities for self-reflection and encourage curiosity about the experiences of others.

Our identities impact our perspectives on candidates and the results of elections. As a result, asking your students to reflect on what they think and feel about the election, and why, is a good start for conversation. Ask participants to reflect on their own identities, prejudices, positions and biases and how these may impact their perspective on the election. Some prompts might include:

- Reflect on your own identity, biases, and prejudices and be willing to authentically share how it influenced your perceptions of or reactions to the election.
- As a child, were you around people who were engaged in politics through their participation and/or conversations? If so, what memories do you have about being engaged in politics? If not, did anyone ever speak about why they were not more active?
- When did you first become aware of having political opinions? What do you think shaped them? Have your political opinions changed during this election cycle? Why/why not?
- How do you think the events we're living through this year may be affecting your political beliefs? Why?
- How would you feel about the election if you had a different identity?

- Resource: [Gender and Intersectional Effects on Candidate Evaluation](#), Center for American Women and Politics, Rutgers University
 - Resource: [Demographics and Politics](#), Pew Research Center
- 4. Ensure everyone has the opportunity to contribute and feel understood. Consider starting from a common text.**
- Suggest listening to a podcast or reading a common article or text ahead of time. Then start the discussion around that text.
 - Consider showing a photo or image from the election and asking for employee responses to questions like: How does this image make you feel? What do you see in this image? How might someone from an opposing viewpoint from your own react to this image?
 - Activity: Ask participants to take a photo (as high quality as they can) that speaks to a challenge to good politics and democracy and/or issues facing communities. Create a description (no more than 100 words) of what the photo speaks to and pair it with a graph of data. Create a display of the photos, data and descriptions to discuss and reflect. Resource: [example from University of Virginia students](#).
- 5. Lean in to politics and to discrepancies between ideals and reality.**
- Admit there are problems with political and partisan divisions in our country that make it difficult to solve public problems (e.g. climate change, immigration, etc.). Ask participants for their ideas for addressing political divisions and for solving public problems.
 - While many individuals are knowledgeable about what is happening, they don't necessarily see politics and outcomes reflecting their knowledge, positionality, perspectives, or backgrounds. Ask them what they would like to see from elected leaders and from our government and for their ideas of how we might get there.
- 6. Pose questions that allow people to express how they feel or what they are grappling with.**
- Questions can provide the structure individuals need to learn. Open-ended or "divergent" questions, in particular, can prompt deep thinking, writing, and/or discussing while also providing individuals with the agency needed to express their varying thoughts and feelings and to explore different and difficult arguments, including those you might not expect. Some prompts might include:
- What did the election mean to you?
 - If you participated in the election, how did you feel about it? Why?
 - Can you think of reasons why some people might be disappointed in the election outcome?
 - Can you think of reasons why some people might be happy about the election outcome?
 - How might those who have been historically underrepresented, marginalized, or minoritized feel about participating in the election or about the results? How can you uplift and support their perspectives and voices?

- What are ways you would like to see elected leaders work together on issues facing our community, nation, or world?
- What are some public issues that are important to you? How can you and others address those issues by engaging different levels of government and connecting with others in their community?
- What will you do to ensure we address issues facing our community, nation, or world? Offer some ideas: creating art, getting involved in student or community organizations, volunteering, providing research or expertise, uplift voices that are traditionally underrepresented, marginalized or minoritized, joining protests or petitions, writing public comments and attending local board and commission meetings on issues they care about, etc.).
- What barriers or challenges are there to addressing issues facing our community, nation and world? How can we overcome them?
- What is something that inspires you for the future of our democracy?
- What kind of reforms would like to see to make our democracy more just and inclusive?

7. News information, Media Literacy, and Election Perceptions

We know that how and from where people get their news matters for their perceptions and beliefs.

- Ask participants to reflect on how and from where they got news about the election.
- Show examples of how media sources can bias our perceptions of politics, elected officials, and trust in political institutions.
- Sources to explore with students: [Pew Research Center](#); [People who get their news from social media are less knowledgeable](#); [Media Literacy in the Age of Deepfakes](#)
- MIT Study: [How “information gerrymandering” influences voters](#).

8. Close the loop.

Considering that the 2024 will be a perniciously polarized, emotionally charged and potentially be traumatic experience, provide a closing activity to help make sense of the conversation. Some ideas include:

- A brief anonymous survey (using a tool like [Mentimeter](#) or other survey tool) or asking participants to write down 1-3 sentence reflections.
- Commenting on common themes that emerged from the conversation.
- Reaffirming ideas for other ways to make positive social change.