

Strategies for Managing Classroom Discussion of Controversial Topics and Current Events

1. Acknowledge the Moment

It's helpful to acknowledge that the election is a significant event, and students may have strong emotions around it. Briefly recognizing the moment shows empathy and creates space for students to process their feelings. You could say something like, "I know this election is weighing on many of us, and I want to acknowledge the significance of this time."

2. Establish Community Guidelines for Respectful Dialogue

If you are going to discuss the election in class, set clear expectations for how the class will engage in this discussion. Emphasize civility, respect, and an open-minded approach to differing viewpoints. Remind students that it's okay to disagree, but it's essential to do so respectfully. That is the Augustinian way. Accepting differences are what makes us stronger. Community guidelines can include:

- Listen actively and without interrupting.
- Avoid personal attacks or demeaning language.
- Focus on ideas rather than individuals.
- Agree to disagree without being disagreeable.

3. Foster Critical Thinking, Not Political Persuasion

Encourage students to critically engage with election-related topics through the lens of course content, as applicable. The goal is to enhance their understanding and analytical skills rather than to promote particular political views. Ask them to consider multiple perspectives, use evidence to support arguments, and reflect on the implications of election outcomes in ways relevant to your field of study.

4. Provide a Nonpartisan, Fact-Based Approach

When discussing the election, avoid endorsing specific candidates or political positions. Instead, focus on helping students understand the electoral process, historical context, or policy implications. You can provide students with reliable, nonpartisan resources to guide their learning and help them cut through misinformation.

5. Manage Emotional Responses and Revisit Community Guidelines

Emotions may run high, especially if discussions become contentious. If the conversation veers off track or becomes too heated, step in to de-escalate and remind students of the ground rules. Let students know that it's okay to step away from a conversation if they're feeling uncomfortable or overwhelmed. Be sure to provide the students resources to use after the class: talk with their RA, access the range of services offered by the counseling center, talk with family and friends, continue the conversation with faculty in office hours, etc.

6. Encourage Students to Focus on What's Within Their Control

Encourage students to focus on actions they can take, such as voting, participating in civic engagement, or advocating for issues they care about. Reinforce that while we can't control election outcomes, we can control how we respond to them.

7. Promote Well-Being and Self-Care

Remind students of the importance of self-care, especially during times of heightened stress. Encourage them to take breaks from the news cycle/social media, practice mindfulness, and engage in activities that bring balance to their lives.

8. Extend Flexibility and Compassion When Appropriate

Recognize that some students may be more affected by the election than others. If appropriate for your course, be flexible with deadlines or workloads if students express a need for temporary adjustments due to stress or anxiety. Showing compassion can go a long way in supporting students through challenging times.