



Constructive  
Dialogue  
Institute



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# Election Dialogue Playbook



# Overview

Election season is one of the most difficult times to facilitate constructive dialogue on higher education campuses, and this year is no different. Tensions are running high as people's political differences are in the spotlight, exacerbated by a deeply polarized political climate. Talking about the election and all the issues at stake can feel daunting, and many faculty and staff report feeling anxious that student conversations will take a turn for the worse on their watch.

Yet, giving students the chance to have structured conversations about the election is a powerful way to navigate this difficult climate. These opportunities can provide them with a platform to express their viewpoints, engage in respectful discourse, and refine their communication skills in a non-adversarial environment. By participating, students can better understand diverse perspectives, build empathy, and cultivate resilience and agency amidst controversy and contention.

Implementing dialogue opportunities requires intention and preparation. So how can we foster conversations that become drivers of learning and understanding, rather than further division and polarization?

This resource guides staff and faculty through the process of planning and facilitating constructive election-related discussions amongst students. It provides step-by-step planning strategies, sample language for tone-setting, question banks to invite conversation, and insight on navigating common obstacles that arise during election-related conversations.

# Step One



# Set the Tone



# Share Purpose

Constructive dialogue is about **fostering mutual understanding, rather than persuading or convincing others** that you're right and they're wrong. When framing the dialogue to students, be sure to state this purpose clearly and check to see if they can all get on board with that purpose.

## Sample Language

*"The purpose of dialogue is to understand what you and your peers think about topics related to the election. The purpose is not to persuade or convince others that you're right and they're wrong. This dialogue will be about discovering not just WHAT others think, but WHY, focusing more on experiences and values that have informed their beliefs."*

**TRY IT OUT!** Use this space to write out your own purpose statement:

# 2

## Set Norms

Norms are **explicit standards that describe both *what* students can expect to experience in a dialogue and *how* they should expect to participate**. Before starting the conversation itself, suggest a list of norms and get students' input on what they'd like to add, change, or remove from the list.

### EXAMPLE NORMS LIST

1. Communicate your perspective thoughtfully and with the intention of being understood.
2. Give others the benefit of the doubt: listen with curiosity first, rather than judgment.
3. Speak for yourself - use "I" statements.
4. Embrace discomfort as an essential part of the learning process.
5. Honor confidentiality - others' stories are only theirs to tell.
6. Participation is always voluntary - you can "pass" if you don't want to share.

### Sample Language

*"Since election-related topics can easily become controversial and tense, it's helpful to set some group norms on how we want to navigate those tense moments if they arise. Here are some proposed norms. Read them over. Do you want to add a norm, remove a norm, or change anything about this list?"*

**TRY IT OUT!** Use this space to come up with your own norms and language to introduce them.



# Connect

**Establishing connection and trust between students** can help them navigate tense moments when they arise, rather than avoid or escalate the conflict.

Ask yourself: Do students know each other to a degree? Do they care about one another's feelings? Do they have curiosity about one another? Once there's a level of trust and respect, conversations go more smoothly and learning can happen more quickly.

Activities that promote student connection can take myriad forms, but should always focus on **finding what's shared, promoting levity and/or inviting personal sharing** that is accessible to all.

## EXAMPLES OF CONNECTION-BUILDING ACTIVITIES

1. Minute Meetups with conversational prompts
2. A short "Spotlight" activity in full group or pairs
3. A fun or silly game (improv games are great for this)
4. Pairs race to find 5 things in common faster than others
5. Go-round where everyone has 1 minute to share about an item that has meaning for them
6. Go-round where everyone shares the story of their name

# Step Two



# Establish a Topic

**Constructive dialogue is best when it focuses on a specific topic or issue. When the topic is too broad or theoretical, participants tend to share in vague terms, and conversations stall. The activity below helps students generate and hone in on possible topics related to the election that they'd like to discuss together.**



## ACTIVITY

# Chalk Talk

A Chalk Talk is a way for students to brainstorm silently while still reacting and responding to each other's ideas. Students (all at once, or in no particular order) go up to a white board and write topics they want to discuss. They then read others' writing on the board and can circle, draw a line with a new idea or question, or star it if they agree. Once students are satisfied with what's on the board, they can openly discuss the topics that seem of most interest to the group. Groups might see a clear topic, or choose to put it to a vote if there are several top contenders.

## Directions

1. Invite students to think silently for 1-2 minutes on the following prompts:
  - What issues are on the ballot?
  - What policies or issues do you want to discuss here?
  - What's at stake in this election for you?
  - What political issue gets you most fired up?
2. Invite students to go to the white board and write as many election-related topics they would like to discuss. Ask them to do this silently.
3. Once they sit down, have them read what's on the board, and return to the white board to add questions, comments, additional topics, or "stars" to topics they agree with. Again, this should be done silently.
4. Once the white board is populated and students feel comfortable with what's up there, open up a discussion.

### SUGGESTED LANGUAGE

- *"What topics seem to be most important and interesting to this group?"*
  - *"Does anyone have a question or concern about the topics or issues that have the most stars?"*
  - *"Is our topic clear, or should we put it to a vote? At the end of the day, everyone in this room should have a level of interest in the topic we choose."*
5. Finally, encourage students to get specific. If the topic that got the most stars is "the election," ask them: "What specifically about the election is important to you? Think about the issues at the heart of this election, or things you're worried or hopeful about."
  6. The discussion should conclude with a decided topic to move forward with. Remind students that, if their topic wasn't chosen, there will be other opportunities for these discussions to take place.

# Step Three



# Invite Sharing

**Now that you have a topic of interest to your students, invite conversation through introducing a QUESTION and establishing a clear STRUCTURE for sharing.**





# Questions

In order to maintain a constructive dialogue that is rooted in personal experiences, values, and perspectives (rather than just the exchanging of articles and sources), instructors should carefully craft their opening question(s).

No matter what the topic, questions should:

- Encourage participants to share *personally* (rather than just intellectually)
- Be accessible to everyone in the group – everyone should be able to participate regardless of whether they’ve had an experience related to this topic
- Be open-ended – avoid yes/no questions

## QUESTION EXAMPLES

1. When it comes to this issue or policy, what’s most important to you?
2. What experiences have led you to believe what you believe about it?
3. What values or personal commitments come to mind when you think about why you hold this belief?
4. What do you worry about most when it comes to this issue or policy?
5. What do you hope for most when it comes to this issue or policy?
6. What questions do you have for someone who holds the opposite viewpoint?
7. Have you ever felt conflicted about this issue? If so, how?

**TRY IT OUT!** Use this space to come up with your own opening questions.

# 2

# Structure

Now that you have a question bank on your topic, use structure to invite sharing. Even though students might be eager to discuss this topic, it can be difficult to know where to start. Structure can provide an accessible entrypoint to all different types of sharers and ensure all voices have the chance to be heard.

## EXAMPLES OF SHARING STRUCTURES

- Go-round
- Think Then Speak
- Turn-and-Talk
- Small Groups
- Fishbowl

## Sample Language

*“Let’s start by thinking for 2 minutes about your answer to the question: When it comes to the issue of guns in America, what’s most important to you? What has made you believe what you do about this issue? Once the 2 minutes are up, we will share in small groups for 10 minutes and then discuss in the full group.”*

**TRY IT OUT!** Use this space to craft your own structure to kick-start the conversation.

Now the real dialogue has begun. Throughout the conversation, instructors should focus on the following commitments:

- Uphold norms
- Stay rooted in purpose
- Sustain conversation

In other words, if norms aren't being followed, point out the list of norms and give suggestions for a different approach. If students are no longer focused on understanding but rather persuading or proving one another wrong, restate the purpose of dialogue and invite them to dig into curiosity in pursuit of understanding. And finally, if the conversation is stalling or spinning out of control, try pausing, breaking into pairs or small groups, or asking another question to invite a new kind of exchange.



# Step Four



# Debrief and Summarize

# 1

## Debrief

Before adjourning, it's important that the dialogue is brought to a close proactively. Much of the learning in constructive dialogue happens in the debrief, or the "talking about talking" portion of the conversation. Instructors can use the same structures listed above to invite students to share for the debrief.

### Sample Language

- *"To close out our conversation, let's do a 1-word go-round. What is 1 word you'd use to describe the dialogue today?"*
- *"Let's each go-round and share 1 question you're left with."*
- *"Popcorn style, shout out someone you appreciated today, or shout out the group for something specific you appreciated today."*

**TRY IT OUT!** Use this space to compose some of your own ways to prompt the group to debrief the conversation.

# 2

## Summarize

Sometimes a dialogue is left feeling incomplete or tense. A summarizing closing statement from the facilitator can help end on a positive note regardless.

Based on how the conversation went, instructors can focus their summary on offering gratitude, naming tensions, normalizing conflict, and reminding participants that dialogue is a beginning and not an end to the conversation.

### Sample Language

*"I want to share my gratitude for everyone's courage and effort to understand each other today. This group clearly cares a lot about learning from each other, and also cares deeply about [\_\_\_\_\_ topic discussed]. Disagreements exist here on this topic, and on our campus, and that's totally okay. Understanding each other despite our differences is important work that is never easy. Thank you all for showing up and let's continue the conversation as we go forward."*





# Tips for Obstacles



**Even if you've run through the 4 steps for facilitating a dialogue about election-related topics, you may encounter obstacles. While there are no one-size-fits-all answers to handling these obstacles, here is some insight.**

### **What happens if a student defends harmful ideas or actions?**

Start from a place of curiosity rather than a common instinct to shut that student down. Ask yourself: "Am I absolutely certain this student can't learn or improve?" When we encounter someone who holds a view we find abhorrent, we may assume they lack the capacity to change. But we know that humans can change their minds throughout their lives.

Research suggests that people are most likely to change their minds if someone treats them with compassion and engages them in a nonjudgmental conversation. If we simply write them off and refuse to engage, it's unlikely that they'll ever be able to see things differently or recognize the error of their ways. Even worse, they might find others with shared opinions and become even more deeply committed to their harmful views.

We're certainly not saying that you must tolerate extremist beliefs from students; however, you may have the opportunity to invite student perspectives amongst their classmates in a space that supports dialogue where an honest conversation could prompt them to reconsider their positions. Consider questions like: "How did you come to believe this?" "What makes you care about this issue?" "What makes you worried or unsure about this issue?"

## What should I do if students are disagreeing on basic facts?

Unfortunately, as our media ecosystem becomes increasingly fractured and as misinformation spreads, this issue will become more common.

An understandable response is to try to correct misinformation when someone shares it. However, remember, that research tells us that confronting misinformation by telling someone they're wrong is typically ineffective. It can put someone on the defensive. That adversarial dynamic can easily spread, undermining a dialogue.

Instead of directly confronting misinformation, a facilitator can model reframing the conversation to focus on values, commitments, and unmet needs. Someone may believe something that is false because, in their mind, it illustrates or supports a deeply held value. That more deeply-held value may not be false at all. Focusing on values can shift a conversation from arguing about facts to discussing deeply held beliefs. Consider questions like: "What's an experience that's made you care about this issue so much?" "What's at stake for you when it comes to this topic?" "What personal values have contributed to you holding this particular belief?"

## The burden always seems to fall on minorities to explain themselves. How do I navigate this issue while also inviting students to share personal experiences with others?

Sharing our personal experiences with others – especially traumatic or painful ones – is already difficult, but made even harder when you're speaking with someone who disagrees with you on social or political issues that are relevant to who you are. No one should be forced to share in constructive dialogue, and it isn't fair that some people have to do much more work than others in order to be understood and seen for who they truly are. It's vital to encourage students to take care of themselves, so they have enough energy to tackle the things in their lives that really matter to them. This goes for you, the instructor, as well!

It's also valuable to recognize that these challenges can also serve as opportunities. Have you ever thought to yourself, "I wish they knew X, or would think about Y?" By encouraging students to use their voices, you could create a space of learning and better understanding what they were missing before. Never underestimate the power of conversations to motivate others – whether to rethink their view, join a cause, or do their own independent learning.

## What should I do when students don't seem to want to listen to or understand each other?

In extreme cases, you might see bullying or harassment behavior from students, and we'd suggest you pause the conversation in those cases, as dialogue can no longer be constructive under those conditions.

But most of the time, you'll encounter less severe cases, where students express themselves rudely but aren't necessarily acting in bad faith. In those situations, try doing a little detective work to evaluate their intentions. You can ask yourself: Am I certain that their goal is to derail the conversation or to offend others?

If you're not certain, it's best to give them the benefit of the doubt. Some people might appear to be attacking others when they're really passionate about expressing their viewpoints. Maybe they are experiencing a fight-flight-freeze response, but they actually do want to engage in a real discussion. Focusing on the values that support their beliefs may even help you figure out whether you're dealing with passion, rudeness, or trolling.

To get them to embody curiosity, try reminding students of the purpose for engaging in dialogue to begin with: "This conversation is all about pursuing a little bit more understanding. People in this room are here because they really care about this issue. Can folks get on board with genuinely hearing other points of view in order to keep to that purpose?" If you determine a student truly has no interest in having a productive conversation, you always have the choice to pause the conversation and revisit it at a later time.

# Conclusion

Talking about the election can be an exciting learning opportunity. After all, many college students are voting for the first time in their lives, so understanding the issues at stake might carry extra relevance and importance for them.

As instructors work to integrate the structures, activities, and tips laid out in this guidebook into their work with students, we hope they begin to see the power of conversations that value peoples' experiences of the election as much as the substance of the issues at stake. And while this work won't entirely alleviate the understandable fears students often have when talking with others who disagree with them, it might bring in a level of empathy and understanding that wasn't there before.

