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Faculty Development

How to teach during a contentious election

Your level of anxiety about national news may already be high, but here are some tips to build your confidence in teaching during the election to offer a meaningful way for students to apply their learning to civic events. For more, please contact **YOUR Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning** (citl@radford.edu)!

Do:

- Teach the election as content if it fits with your course—it's a way to engage real time, important events! You don't have to be teaching political science to connect with the election. You could look at how business markets are affected by an election, or explore statistics and election projections, or discuss how environmental or social policy is likely to be determined by candidates, etc.
- Use tools available to you, such as the Constructive Dialogue Institute's "[Perspectives](#)" program. It's 6 short modules on why we have difficulty speaking and working across differences, and how to overcome them. You don't even have to do all six modules, and the whole thing is available for free this year! Contact Heather Keith (hkeith1@radford.edu) to get your own "Perspectives" course to use with students, or to see what it looks like.
- Acknowledge that emotions may be high. Perhaps share how you deal constructively with your own feelings.
- Check in with students' emotional response to the election. Do "temperature checks" at the beginning of class whether or not you're engaging in discussion of the election. Have students do a 2-minute free write on what they're feeling (you don't even have to collect or read these) or complete a short attendance survey or poll that invites them to weigh in on how they're feeling that day. You'll get good information about how prepared your class is to learn, and they will get a chance to clear their minds a bit before diving into the class.
- Make sure that your students have information about counseling or other resources on campus if they feel anxious or depressed.
- Establish strong ground rules for discussion. Invite students to employ active listening skills. Define empathy and note when students are modeling it.

- Employ a wicked problems approach in which the class together must solve our political woes (invite students to work together against the wicked problem of political polarization, rather than working against each other). Ask students to avoid us vs them thinking.
- Challenge students to remain engaged and active in their communities to make them stronger, regardless of what happens in a national election.
- Invite a colleague or CITL professional to observe your class and/or conduct a brief focus group with students to gauge how things are going.
- Reinforce skills that advance good citizenship, like collaboration, engaging with diverse perspectives, and communication.
- Steadfastly focus on critical thinking skills and media analysis, as appropriate to your discipline.
- Encourage students to prioritize their well-being at difficult times. Remind them to stay focused on their academic goals, get exercise, seek out social connections, etc.
- Watch for problematic behaviors, such as unusual absences or disengagement, acting out in class, etc., and report these via Starfish.
- Remember to stay focused on inclusive, accessible teaching. See our presentation for tips!
- Look for other tools, such as our Brave Pedagogy presentation or other websites that might be helpful: [University of Michigan's election checklist](#).

Sample statement for engaging with the election:

I realize that our class doesn't exist in a vacuum and that many of you may be feeling elevated emotions as a result of the national news. I want to acknowledge that and say that I am also finding it difficult to keep my mind focused. We'll take today's class to really explore how the election is a factor in (discipline, topic, etc.). I want to remind everyone that not everyone may feel the way you do, and I ask that you be empathic and really listen to others during our conversation. Let's first discuss what our community discussion rules should be...

Don't

- Stray too far from your normal content if it is not related to the election and national events, or if you don't feel up to the task of engaging with it.

- Share your own political views in a way that makes students unnecessarily uncomfortable, or that impedes their learning or their own exploration of issues (remember the unbalanced power dynamic).
- Engage in open discussions about the election without first establishing some ground rules for the conversation.
- Allow students to vent their feelings in ways that inhibit other students from learning or contributing.
- Forget that other faculty and staff are similarly navigating difficult discussions—do reach out to colleagues or CITL for help or debriefing.

Sample statement for NOT engaging with the election in class:

I realize that our class doesn't exist in a vacuum and that many of you may be feeling elevated emotions as a result of the national news. I want to acknowledge that and say that I am also finding it difficult to keep my mind focused. However, I want us to remember that what we are doing here is important and to encourage you to remain steadfastly focused on your academic goals and on being successful in this class. Let's take a minute to do a quick free write to clear our minds, and then we'll get down to business.

<https://constructivedialogue.org/articles/election-guidebook> (Faculty/staff guidebook from the Constructive Dialogue Institute)

<https://ginsberg.umich.edu/article/structuring-classroom-discussions-about-elections> (Univ of Michigan's excellent election teaching site)

<https://cteresources.bc.edu/documentation/teaching-during-a-tumultuous-election-year/teaching-after-an-election>

<https://cteresources.bc.edu/documentation/teaching-during-a-tumultuous-election-year/>

<https://www.aacu.org/initiatives/institute-for-democracy-and-higher-education/elections-as-teachable-moments>

<https://teaching.temple.edu/ja/node/436> (Temple's election teaching guide)

<https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/difficult-dialogues/> (Vanderbilt's general guidelines for teaching difficult topics)