



Teaching After an Election

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Given the tenor of the United States' national political discourse and the increasingly high stakes attributed to election cycles by people across the political spectrum, elections and their consequences permeate our learning environments. At the same time, in light of everything we have individually and collectively experienced over the past several years, the energy and capacity different folks have for facilitating various conversations about the election with students will vary widely.

When deciding how to talk about the election, it can be helpful to bear in mind your own goals for teaching and learning, the fact that major events can be distracting and make it more difficult to teach and learn, and that students in your class may have differing perceptions of what is at stake in the election in light of their own histories and identities. While research indicates that students appreciate when instructors respond in some way to upheavals in the wider world, instructors do so in a wide variety of ways ([Huston & DiPietro, 2007](https://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tia/17063888.0025.017/--13-in-the-eye-of-the-storm-students-perceptions-of-helpful?rgn=main;view=fulltext) (<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tia/17063888.0025.017/--13-in-the-eye-of-the-storm-students-perceptions-of-helpful?rgn=main;view=fulltext>)). This resource outlines some factors you might want to consider as you plan your responses and a few different paths you could take in your response.

Factors to consider

There are a number of factors that you might want to consider when deciding how to respond to the election in each of your classes.

Your own response and comfort-level

The first data point to consider as you plan for your response is your own capacity and well-being. If the election is causing you added stress or exhaustion and you don't feel like you are in a place to facilitate a conversation with your students, a low-stakes approach might be the best choice. While teaching about the election or any other weighty topic does not require perfect facilitation, it is important to take honest stock of how you are doing both to maintain important boundaries for your own wellbeing and in order to give your students the best chance of success at a difficult task.

Burnout

Students may also be feeling exhausted by numerous conversations about the election. Engaging in critical conversations can also take a particular toll on students from historically marginalized groups, who are likely to be subject to microaggressions during those conversations ([Sue, Lin, et. al., 2009](https://bc-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN_cdi_proquest_miscellaneous_67123441&context=PC&tab=pci_only&search_scope=pci&vid=bclib_new&lang=en_US) (https://bc-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN_cdi_proquest_miscellaneous_67123441&context=PC&tab=pci_only&search_scope=pci&vid=bclib_new&lang=en_US)). Being asked to focus on the scheduled course content might be a relief for some students who are being asked to engage in more extended conversations in many other settings.

Connection to learning

If you do decide to engage in a conversation with your students, it is often helpful to go into the conversation with a clear idea of what you are trying to accomplish, so that students have a clear sense of what is being asked of them and so that you have a clear sense of the boundaries of the conversation. Taking a look back at your learning goals can help you decide how to frame the conversation with your students, whether you can explicitly connect the election to course content and themes or tie the conversation to the development of a skill set you are working on together over the course of the semester.

Student belonging

Research shows that a sense of belonging ("people like me fit in here and succeed at this kind of work") is important to student learning and persistence ([Romero 2018](https://studentexperiencenetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/What-We-Know-About-Belonging.pdf) (<https://studentexperiencenetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/What-We-Know-About-Belonging.pdf>)). In the aftermath of an election, students might be feeling a threat to their sense of belonging based on their perception of what their peers, instructors, or the people they bump into in their everyday life believe about them based on election results. Students from historically marginalized groups are particularly likely to experience belonging uncertainty as

they pick up on cues that the environment wasn't constructed with them in mind. When you open a conversation about the election, it's worth considering how you will frame a conversation to mitigate the risks of belonging uncertainty.

Classroom community

One factor that can mitigate risk to belonging uncertainty is a strong pre-existing sense of connection in the class. If students feel known by you and by their peers, they are more likely to feel ready to participate in difficult conversations. If you have a sense that a particular class hasn't really clicked this semester for whatever reason, engaging in a robust conversation following the election might be more difficult and students might perceive it as a riskier endeavor. A conversation that goes off the rails could also negatively impact students' willingness to engage with one another moving forward. However, if the class has bonded already and engaged in some courageous conversations, discussing the election can be an opportunity to further practice work you've already been doing and strengthen the sense of community in the class.

Distribution of potential risk and harm

When entering into a conversation about the election, different instructors and students will have varying perceptions of the potential risk and harm that could accompany the discussion. Students from marginalized groups are at greater risk of being subject to dehumanizing discourse and presumptions, while students who perceive themselves to be in a political minority — or believe the instructor holds opposing political views — might worry that they risk their standing in the class if they speak honestly about their political persuasion. The way an instructor frames the conversation (by asking students to apply a particular principle or skill to the discussion, by allowing students to participate in a variety of ways, by having a clear plan for how to address dehumanizing language, etc.) can mitigate, though not eliminate, the potential for risk and harm during the conversation.

Methods for discussing the election in class

Briefly acknowledge the election

If your central goal after the election is to continue on with the work of your course, you may want to plan for a brief moment when you simply acknowledge the election and how it is playing out in civic and political realms. This moment during a class session or even via email can provide you and your students a second to recognize a potential source of significant stress and distraction and intentionally refocus on your collective work. You might decide to take a moment of silence; or, if you [make use of contemplative practices in the classroom](https://drive.google.com/file/u/1/d/1ZwiMhxqJmeoQWP4mBMFWXlxfCCPK9nZV/view?usp=drive_open) (https://drive.google.com/file/u/1/d/1ZwiMhxqJmeoQWP4mBMFWXlxfCCPK9nZV/view?usp=drive_open), you might invite students to take part in an exercise that honors their experience and while refocusing on the task at hand. Whatever tack you take, moments when instructors acknowledge what is happening in the wider world can also help to strengthen students' sense of connection to the instructor and the course, ultimately supporting learning ([Wilson, Ryan & Pugh, 2010](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00986283.2010.510976?src=recsys)) (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00986283.2010.510976?src=recsys>).

Create optional times to debrief

If you want to give students an opportunity to debrief their response to the election with you and other members of the class community, but you are worried about students feeling pressured to participate in that conversation, or don't see a clear way to connect a discussion of the election to course material, you might want to set aside an optional moment to discuss. This might look like offering additional office hours and encouraging students to stop by individually or with a group, or holding a portion of time at the end of a class period for students who would like to stick around for an election debrief.

Facilitate reflection and discussion

The curricular or thematic focus of your course, or your understanding of what it means to be a part of a learning community might prompt you to facilitate more robust reflection and discussion of the election. If you are planning on engaging this question more explicitly, it can be helpful to clarify the connection between this discussion and student learning, and your expectations for engagement (privacy, strategies for sitting with and navigating conflict, etc.). This allows students to make informed decisions about how they

participate. Ideally, a conversation about the election is not the first time the class will engage in a “difficult dialogue,” and the skills the class has been practicing throughout the semester can be brought to bear on the conversation.

Delay the conversation to a later point in the semester

You may want to have a more robust conversation about the election at a later point in the semester. You might make this decision if there is clear curricular relevance in a later unit, or if you have reason to believe that your students will be better prepared to engage in this conversation in a way that makes sense for your course at a later point in the semester. If you take this route, you will likely want to briefly acknowledge the election in the initial days after and let students know you will be returning to it later on. Putting some distance between the election and the discussion might allow for students to engage in conversation from a less visceral place, provide students with a chance to reflect more on the implications of the election prior to the discussion, give a break to students who are feeling overwhelmed from election-related discussion in the days immediately following, and can acknowledge the on-going effects of the election.

Additional Resources

- [“Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom \(https://eloncdn.blob.core.windows.net/eu3/sites/126/2017/04/Managing-Hot-Moments-in-the-Classroom-Harvard_University.pdf\)”](https://eloncdn.blob.core.windows.net/eu3/sites/126/2017/04/Managing-Hot-Moments-in-the-Classroom-Harvard_University.pdf) (Harvard University, 2000)
- [“Teaching in Response to the Election \(https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/2016/11/teaching-in-response-to-the-election/\)”](https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/2016/11/teaching-in-response-to-the-election/) (Vanderbilt University, 2016)
- [“Teaching During the U.S. Election \(https://sheridan.brown.edu/resources/classroom-practices/teaching-times-disruption/teaching-during-us-election\)”](https://sheridan.brown.edu/resources/classroom-practices/teaching-times-disruption/teaching-during-us-election/) (Brown University, 2020)
- [“Preparing to Teach About the 2020 Election \(and After\) \(https://crlt.umich.edu/blog/preparing-teach-about-2020-election-and-after\)”](https://crlt.umich.edu/blog/preparing-teach-about-2020-election-and-after/) (University of Michigan, 2020)
- [“Putting Politics Where it Belongs: In the Classroom \(https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/he.408\)”](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/he.408) (Hess & Gatti, 2011)
- [“Teaching in an Era of Political Divisiveness: An Exploration of Strategies for Discussing Controversial Issues \(https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00098655.2020.1762063?scroll=top&needAccess=true&journalCode=vtch20\)”](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00098655.2020.1762063?scroll=top&needAccess=true&journalCode=vtch20) (Reynolds, Silvernell & Mercer, 2020)