HOW FACULTY CAN PREPARE TO HANDLE THE POST-ELECTION CLASSROOM

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After this historic and exhausting election ends, students and faculty probably fall into one of two camps: those who want to talk about it and those who do not. For faculty, this poses a dilemma. The election might be beyond the scope of the course content, or the professor might not feel ready or able to facilitate politically charged discussions. Faculty will also need time to process their own feelings about the election. And we know from our conversations with colleagues that they are already overwhelmed by the stress of the pandemic and how it has affected their teaching, student advising, and their personal lives.

While we empathize, we do not think that any professor can take a pass. In IDHE's campus climate studies, students complained about professors who acted like nothing happened the day after a national event (an election) or tragedy (the murder of George Floyd). Students interpreted the professor's silence (or worse, a test or tough assignment) as insensitivity, indifference, or malice.

For the record, we share the students' expectations. The classroom is the ideal setting to break down polarization, tackle lies and misinformation, insist on standards and evidence, teach students to disagree without personal animosity, build mutual trust, and find common ground that can help build collaboration. Talking politics across disciplines is not only appropriate, it's the job.

Remember, "political" and "partisan" are not interchangeable terms. Education is inherently political. Professors can be political, and even take sides on issues if backed up by evidence and standards (e.g., yes, climate change is real), but they can't be partisan, meaning directing students to support a candidate or party.

Curb student expectations about when the election will end. A record number of voters are voting early. In AL, MS, PA, and WI, ballot processing starts on Election Day. Unless there is a blow-out, and uncounted ballots won't matter, this could take 3 to 9 days post-election. Even then, President Trump has threatened to contest the election if it doesn't go his way. We could be looking at another Supreme Court decision like 2000.

Talk with your students about their post-election expectations. Ask students what they prefer for class in the day(s) after the election ends. Then, discuss what class might look like: Small group discussions? One large discussion? You will want to set up ground rules or group agreements (more below).

BUILD CLASS COMMUNITY

Ideally, this happened early in the semester, but if not, start now. Education researchers have long known that a sense of community and an inclusive classroom environment improves learning outcomes. Social cohesion is also a critical foundation for political discussions, a finding from IDHE's

[research on healthy campus climates for political learning and engagement](#). Students on highly cohesive campuses described their professors as "caring" and "having their backs." Here are some simple changes to make, if not already in place.

- **Use daily icebreakers**: Compensate for the lack of in-person learning (and pre- and post-class mingling) by taking a few minutes to set a tone and build relationships. Create a Google Doc (for large classes, Google Sheet) with a table that allows students to add their names and responses to various icebreaker prompts. Consider topics such as bucket list items, dream job/vacation, favorite birthday experiences, see [this list from Winthrop University](#)). Another option is to ask students to put into the chat how they are feeling, in this case, about the political climate. While you do not need to discuss what students wrote at length, you might want to point out shared responses.

- **Invoke humor**. Invite students to share images, clips from shows or movies, memes, [(non-partisan) videos](#), or share some of your own. Anything to diffuse tension.

- **Compile links and resources; hold more office hours if necessary**: If you hear students describe feelings of isolation or disillusionment, provide a link to a mental health hotline or counseling services. If students are complaining about feeling confused over election mechanics, provide a link to resources to demystify the process. If students are feeling overwhelmed because of the workload, provide a link to an academic resource center. If they express concerns over the course content, slow up, find out where the disconnects are, and correct them. Clarify when your office hours are and increase them, if possible.

SET AND REINFORCE GROUP AGREEMENTS AROUND GROUND RULES

Ground rules are agreements that the group accepts to guide in-class behavior. Group agreements can either be decided and announced or written collaboratively. [IDHE's training guide for facilitating politically charged discussions](#) (p. 7-8) offers two approaches, one that takes about 10 - 15 minutes and another much longer, to setting up agreements. In our experience, most students know how to do this. Simply ask them, "how do you want discussions around the election to go?" They are likely to create a list like the one seen in the sidebar.

> **Sample Rules of Agreement**
> - Listen for understanding.
> - Assume good will.
> - If you are offended, say so and say why.
> - Seek perspectives not your own.
> - Share airtime.
> - It's OK to disagree, but don't personalize.
> - Speak for yourself, not for others.
> - What's said here stays here, other than broad themes
> - Phones off. No taping (accept for accessibility purposes).

If proposed, talk through, "this is a safe space." On one hand, it is nearly impossible to always prevent insults. Ideally, the "ouch" rule (say if your offended and say why) allows people to explain or restate their position in less offensive ways. Often, people do not realize that what they say is offensive, and sometimes, it's *not* actually offensive.

On the other hand, as the professor, you cannot remain a bystander to comments that are targeted and racist, homophobic, misogynistic, or otherwise toxic and discriminatory. Researchers at Teachers

College published a paper, "[Disarming Racial Microaggressions: Microintervention Strategies for Targets, White Allies, and Bystanders](#)." The article offers multiple ways to intervene, ranging from, "That's not the way I view it" to "That comment violates our agreements."

The rule "listen for understanding" sounds easy, but it's not. Model good listening by, for example, not responding with a rebuttal to a comment before first rephrasing what was just said. Suggest students do the same. Set the expectations of students listening to what is being said by their classmates or you as an instructor. In many instances, a core of arguments and debates comes from miscommunication, so as a facilitator, minimizing the amount of miscommunication and misinterpretation is ideal.

Big picture, **you are teaching students to share responsibility for the success of the class and/or discussion**, just as they should behave outside of the classroom. Imagine how different this nation would be right now, in the throes of a growing pandemic, if the first ground rule for citizenship were, *share responsibility for making our community and this nation work.*

PRACTICE TALKING POLITICS BEFORE ELECTION DAY

Start today. Incorporate activities into learning that have democratic elements, allowing students to experience the process of shared decision making. This can be as simple as an assignment where students research a topic and present potentially opposing views or different solutions to a problem. Consider, for example, having students do an online version of a Town Hall, where they worked in pairs to prepare an ~10-minute presentation of a policy relevant to your field, i.e. a Science Education policy that would have ethical implications for the school district. Let the class collectively serve as the town council, asking questions, particularly about any ethical concerns the policy raises. At the end, the town council/students can vote for the more convincing policy.

While students studying government or political science would spend semesters on these topics, others can engage in short conversations that whet their appetites and raise awareness about what's at stake in this election.

If you want to assign some readings and work with helpful discussion questions, consider IDHE's *[Making Sense of ... guides](#)* (e.g., voting rights litigation or the Census). [Campus Election Engagement Project](#) (CEEP) also offers valuable discussion guides.

LEARN THE (NOT DIFFICULT) ART OF PERSPECTIVE SHARING

It might help to discuss and emphasize the differences between arguing and discussing opinions that differ from your own. People often argue to prove that the other person is wrong, which leaves them closed off to hearing other perspectives. Political discussions, which generally incorporate differences of opinion, should be framed just as that. Talking with others about perspectives different from their own facilitates learning, open-mindedness and growth on both/all sides, even if, overall, opinions have not been changed.

[One approach](#) is to invite all perspectives, without discussion at first. Ask students to provide their viewpoint as well as other perspectives. Once you have put on the table different opinions and viewpoints, you can ask:

- Which viewpoints are closest to your own?

- Why do you hold the viewpoint you hold?

- [Choose a viewpoint you don't hold](). Discuss why you think someone might hold that viewpoint.

There's more to say about the differences between dialogue, deliberation, debate, and discussion. One excellent resource is the [National Coalition of Dialogue and Deliberation, with a handy *what are dialogue and deliberation*? page]().

[As the professor, you do not need to accept opinions offered that are not backed up by science, evidence, or facts](). You can and should insist on standards, and you can warn students in advance that you will challenge baseless assertions. Feel free to ask, "what is your evidence of that?" In this era of misinformation and "alternative facts," it's important to insist on truth.

PREPARE FOR SPLIT-SECOND OPPORTUNITIES IN CLASS DISCUSSION

You cannot predict all discussion challenges, but we can think of quite a few ranging from the students who will not participate to the students who says something that is objectively offensive. This book chapter, *[Readiness for Discussing Democracy in Supercharged Political Times]()*, covers trust building and setting ground rules, as well as how to frame questions, how to use silence, and other arts of discussion leadership.

If an argument erupts, take control of the situation. This can be done through strategies such as interrupting ("What is happening here? Let's pause") or tossing the conversation back to the group ("What do others think? How should we proceed as a group?) or suggesting reflection ("Let's think about this for a couple of minutes") or suggest that the group pause, look for a video or interesting article that would lead to a resolution of the argument and asking them to share them beyond class time. Redirecting the conversation can work, but be sure to ensure that students do not feel that they have been discounted or avoided.

You can find other troubleshooting tips in IDHE's [Facilitating Political Discussions training guide](), pages 26-29. For other excellent resources on facilitating election discussions, see [Living Room Conversations]() or [James Madison University's website on facilitating election conversations.]()

RECOGNIZE HOW THAT THE RESULTS WILL AFFECT STUDENTS DIFFERENTLY

However, do not be naïve about it. Donald Trump's win in 2016 [revealed to people of color how few white Americans voted with their interests and concerns in mind.]() The Trump win signaled a return to the status quo of structural racial inequality and bias. The election results left many white Americans baffled over how the results could turn out this way, while many Black Americans were hardly surprised. This trope was noticeable enough that it was [parodied on Saturday Night Live](). With the acute national climate surrounding race and underrepresented groups, this oblivious perspective is no longer acceptable.

In the wake of the agonizing murder of George Floyd in the hands of those charged with protecting the public, this nation is finally facing a reckoning about structural racism and longstanding injustice. Don't make assumptions about what students are thinking or about their lived experiences. Consider

how you ask questions, whether they are insensitive, whether they are based on cultural assumptions, who gets called on, who gets overlooked, your tone, the use of leading questions, etc.

For those who want to study how to be anti-racist, consider [Racial Equity Tools](#) and [Project Home's resources](#). Also consider the difference between [culturally *relevant* teaching vs. culturally *responsive* teaching](#).

Space permitting, we could say more, but instead, provide links to resources about [threats to academic freedom](#), faculty fears of [politically motivated accusations of liberal indoctrination](#), [taking a stand for democracy](#), discussing the [big questions facing voters in 2020](#), and [teaching for justice versus remaining neutral](#). Feel free to contact us for more information and ideas.