

LET'S TALK POLITICS: BIAS, DIALOGUE AND CRITICAL THINKING

APPROACHES AND ACTIVITIES FOR TEACHING ABOUT ELECTIONS



As we enter the final phase of the 2016 Presidential campaign, teachers may want to engage young people in conversations about the election and provide opportunities for students to learn more, ask questions and understand what they are seeing and hearing. Below are tips and strategies for engaging in these potentially contentious conversations in the classroom and doing so with a critical thinking and anti-bias lens. These strategies can also be used with other

controversial issues that arise in your classroom.

DISAGREE WITHOUT BEING DISAGREEABLE

It is critical that students understand that they may not agree with each other on some or many issues. In fact, students may disagree with family members or good friends and actually agree with others with whom they don't have a lot in common. Learning how to respectfully disagree is a skill that is helpful to learn not only around politics but other controversial topics.

- Set up ground rules for the classroom that help promote respectful disagreement such as: actively listen including no interrupting and listening without judgment; don't attack the person and stick to the issues; and everyone has the right to "pass."
- Emphasize that conflict is not inherently negative. Explain to students that conflict is part of life and in fact, often makes life more interesting. Conflict can often lead to bad feelings but it doesn't have to if it is handled effectively. Often when there are conflicts and they are managed well or resolved, the people involved come to new understandings and the relationship actually improves or is enhanced by this new recognition.
- Introduce the concept of dialogue vs. debate. In our society, we often use debate as a way to look at different sides of an issue. Explain to students that dialogue is a different way of discussing a topic that helps people understand one another's positions rather than win an argument. Dialogue acknowledges there are often multiple—as opposed to just two—points of view about an issue. Dialogue can also necessitate suspending one's beliefs in order to find the strengths and virtues in ideas for which they think they disagree, also known as [methodological belief](#).
- When students don't agree with one another, introduce the language of "agree to disagree," which is a polite yet honest way of making it clear that they don't agree and that's okay.

USE CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

Help students understand that the election provides an opportunity to use and/or deepen their critical thinking skills. Critical thinking includes asking inquisitive questions, pointing out lack of or faulty evidence, providing missing data or perspective, questioning sources of information, or shedding light on bias in an argument.

- When analyzing poll numbers and data, have students consider how the following aspects of polling could potentially impact the outcome: what news outlet or company conducted the poll, their sample size, what their perspective and/or biases might be, when the poll (including significant society/world events) was done and where.
- As students watch the debates, use ADL's [Debate Watch Teaching Guide](#). Ask questions prior to the debate that gets students to think critically about it such as: *Who is participating and who is not? Who is sponsoring and hosting the debate and what is their political perspective?* Have

students determine questions and issues they want to learn more about and while watching the debate, have them carefully consider the questions being asked, how candidates answer each question, the stage craft and tone of the debate, surprising and dramatic elements, etc. After the debate, have students consider what they heard and how it was delivered and provide an opportunity for fact checking.

- Provide examples of advertisements and [propaganda](#) and discuss the important role they play in elections. Help students develop media literacy skills so that they can deconstruct various elements of ads (mood, tone, words, emotions, etc.) and understand what the ad is trying to convey, whether it is successful and what strategies are used to influence and persuade the potential voters.
- In addition to sorting out facts from fiction (see above), it is important to help students understand the difference between facts and opinions. Sometimes people share opinions and try to represent those opinions as facts. Explain to students that if something is a fact, they should be able to find evidence and other facts to back it up. Similarly, help students understand the difference between news articles that provide factual information and other articles that offer commentary or opinions. Both are valid and important but there is a distinction and students should learn how to discern those differences.

AVOID STEREOTYPES, BIAS AND NAME-CALLING

Many people have agreed that there has been [too much name-calling](#) on the campaign trail this presidential election season. In addition to analyzing bias, stereotyping and name-calling by the candidates and their surrogates, as students discuss the election they should also be mindful that they don't use some of this biased language themselves.

- Have students check themselves and each other for generalizations about groups of people and avoid assumptions and stereotypes. Use ADL's [Guidelines for Achieving Bias-Free Communication](#) for other helpful strategies in keeping the conversation bias-free.
- Explain to students that while it is okay to describe people according to identity characteristics when it is relevant (e.g. "Latino voters support Senator Jones in large margins"), they should be careful not to use identity characteristics when it is not relevant (e.g. "Congressman Smith, heterosexual presidential candidate, is ahead in the polls in Texas").

- Help students identify the bias that has been present in the current presidential election, in particular the portrayal of women, immigrants and Muslims. This is an important aspect of understanding the election and who the candidates are. At the same time, just because a person supports a particular candidate doesn't mean they agree with all their positions or the biased remarks that the candidates have espoused. You can discuss racism, sexism and other forms of bias in the race without accusing individuals.

UNDERSTAND THE EMOTIONAL CONTENT OF THE RACE

In addition to issues gleaned from debates, ads, speeches, writing and policy positions, there is an emotional component to any presidential race that is difficult to quantify. It is, however, an important factor in influencing voters. It is useful for students to understand the difference between these emotional connections and sound reasoning that informs their and others' decisions.

- Help students understand how to distinguish between their emotional response to a candidate and their logical analysis of the pros and cons of that candidate based on facts and issue positions. Explain that candidates have the potential to upset them or "push their buttons" emotionally. Conversely, they may feel an emotional connection to a candidate or get caught up in the moment of a good speech or zinger at a debate. Emphasize to students that all of those feelings are valid but they need to be deconstructed so that students (and voters at large) can make knowledgeable choices.
- When students look at ads, propaganda, speeches and other election material, they should think critically about the tone and mood being conveyed. It is useful for them to reflect on whether an appeal is being made emotionally and whether the particular ad is trying to capitalize on either their hopes or their fears, which campaigns often use to sway voters.
- The identity of the candidates can play an important role in the emotional connection one has to certain candidates. In this presidential election, candidates have been accused of "playing the woman card." While it is true that some voters may want to vote for "the first woman President," that is an actual emotional reaction that influences how some people may vote. It is important to acknowledge that emotions play a role and at the same time, encourage students to focus on issues rather than identity.

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