Teaching around the Election

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This has been, to put it mildly, a divisive presidential election season. Elections can raise many emotions and we know they can affect learning. Psychology Professor Ben Blankenship's recent podcast with JMU Civic, Election Emotions & What We Can Do About Them (Democracy Matters, ep. 36), may help us not only better understand (and respond to) our own emotions surrounding the election, but harness students' emotions for the sake of education. Instructors across the country are preparing to teach about the election and crowdsourcing ideas for how to do so; you may also want to take time now to think about how, if at all, to integrate this important event into your teaching over the next few weeks.

Given your particular context (e.g., your discipline, your course topic, your personality, your student population, etc.), you may pursue a range of goals related to the election, such as providing emotional support to students; getting students to connect the election to the class content; helping students engage in difficult political conversations; or applying JMU's Eight Key Questions to a novel context. You get the drift. Depending on those goals, you may choose to simply acknowledge the election and check in with students about how they are doing; take time in class with students to process, debrief, and discuss the results; or even include an entire unit that analyzes the election outcomes in light of your course topic. If you do want to teach directly about and to the election, and facilitate what may feel like a difficult conversation, here are some considerations, ideas, tips, and resources for doing so.

Create ground rules for discussion.
An excellent way to talk about the election includes discussing with your students how the election *should* be discussed. Student reasoning improves when alternative viewpoints can be considered and engaged, and such deliberation can help overcome polarization and reduce extremism. We can encourage collaboration and move away from divisiveness and competition. You could have students select agreements from a list of possibilities, such as those proposed by AORTA's Anti-Oppressive Facilitation for Democratic Process, Campus Compact, University of Michigan's Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, and others. The challenge is to create a "brave space" that allows students to take risks and speak candidly while at the same time being mindful of the consequences of arguments and language that others may perceive as demeaning.

Get students to self-reflect.
Our identities impact our perspectives on candidates and the results of elections. As a result, asking your students to reflect on what they think and feel about the election, and why, is a good start for conversation. You might encourage self-reflection among students using an activity like Political IdentiTree.pptx or by posing a set of questions, such as:
- What memories do you have about politics from your childhood? How did you experience politics in your family?
- When did you first become aware of having political opinions and what shaped them?
- How do you think the events we're living through this year may affect you, personally and professionally?
- How might you feel about the election if you had a different identity?

In addition to self-reflection, you can encourage students to develop curiosity about the experiences of others. For example, you can ask students to share their post-election self-reflections anonymously

using online tools like Mentimeter or Padlet; then ask them to find a self-reflection that is clearly different from theirs, and task them with describing the difference and its possible causes. This may have the happy benefit of strengthening empathy skills, which are badly needed this election season.

Use texts and other materials to stimulate discussion.
Many of us are used to assigning readings, and there is a wealth of readings of various partisan and ideological as well as disciplinary approaches, at various levels of difficulty, about the election. For summaries of political science research, for example, Andreas likes the Monkey Cage blog; for high-brow political debate, he often introduces students to sources such as Colorlines (focused on racial justice), Democracy Journal (progressive-liberal), the Atlantic (moderately liberal), the National Review (conservative, though not necessarily pro-Trump), the Claremont Review of Books (pretty right-wing), and others; you may have your own list of preferences. One text that Andreas found to be quite effective in creating open conversations about politics right now is Parker Palmer's Five Habits to Heal the Heart of Democracy. But not all course material has to be text, of course: there are plenty of images, videos, and podcasts (such as this one…) that can provide a stimulating foundation for class discussion. Take a look at JMU's own Lisanby Museum and their current exhibit on voting rights for locally curated images on the topic of elections. Beyond assigning readings (or other materials), why not ask the students themselves to contribute articles, videos, images, or other media products (tweets? memes? gifs?) that express what they think or feel about the election. You can ask them: How does this make you feel? How does this express your thinking? How might someone else, with a viewpoint different than your own, react to this?

Structure student interaction intentionally.
Students are often reluctant to contribute to class discussion in large (or even fairly small) classes—especially in synchronous online environments, where many are even reluctant to turn on their cameras. As a result, it is important that we structure student interactions in a way that reduces pressures and gives them clear opportunities to share their thoughts. One way is to allow students to share opinions confidentially. The anonymous boards mentioned above are an option (but be careful in large classes, where students might be tempted to post offensive responses under the cover of anonymity). Or, you might simply remind students that they can post responses as messages to you in the Zoom or WebEx chat, so that other students don't know who made a contribution, while you can report it to the class.

Another approach to encouraging student interactions is to make use of the various methods developed over the last decade, for example, by the Liberating Structures movement. Building on liberating structures, Mia Zamora, Maha Bali, and Autumn Caines have developed a number of online community building activities that may be especially valuable for difficult conversations like the ones surrounding this year's election. Conversation structures, like the World Cafe Method, the Conversation Café (yes, there is definitely a pro-coffee bias here), W3, and Critical Uncertainties, may offer helpful prompts to structure a conversation about various aspects of the election. Keep these safety considerations in mind.

Pose open-ended questions.
Questions themselves can also provide the structure that students need to learn; open-ended or "divergent" questions, in particular, can prompt deep thinking, writing, and/or discussing while also providing students with the agency needed to express their varying thoughts and feelings and to explore different and difficult arguments, including those you might not expect. Examples of such questions are:
- What did the election mean to you? How did you experience it?

- Or, following the [W3 structure](): What did you notice about the election? What did you feel? In what way was this important to you? What should happen next?
- Why might people be disappointed in the election outcome? Why might people be happy?
- How should elected officials act now, after the election?
- How can you address issues that are important to you by engaging different levels of government and connecting with others in your various communities?
- What barriers or challenges are there to addressing issues facing our community, nation, and world? How can we overcome them?
- What is something that inspires you for the future of our democracy?
- What kind of reforms would like to see to make our democracy more just and inclusive?

Close the loop.
Considering the emotionally charged and [possibly traumatic experience]() of a polarized election in the middle of a pandemic, be sure to provide a closing activity that helps students make sense of the conversation and that enables you to check in (or out?) with them. This does not have to be a major activity; a brief 1-3 sentence [minute paper]() or an ungraded Canvas survey might do. Be sure to follow up on the responses. This can be done by commenting on common themes, for example, at the next class meeting, or, in smaller classes, by responding to students individually, inviting them to talk to you during office hours or to stay for a few minutes after class. Such small [acts of practicing care]() are especially important during a time when many of us work remotely and are all *socially* distanced.

If you're interested in learning more, please join Abe Goldberg and Carah Ong Whaley of [JMU Civic]() on Friday, October 30, at 12PM, for a faculty workshop on tools for facilitating constructive conversations around the 2020 elections, regardless of the outcomes. To register, visit [this website](). And, if you find that it's not only your students who need time and space for processing, we in the CFI invite you to a post-election conversation for faculty on Friday, November 6, 10-11:30AM ([register here]()).

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https://www.jmu.edu/cfi/teaching/other/teaching-toolbox.shtml