## Teaching around the Election

Emily Gravett, Toolbox coordinator, here. Given that it's election season, it seemed like a good idea to include a Teaching Toolbox about how to address it in class. Andreas Broscheid, a fellow assistant director in the CFI, who also happens to be a political scientist, suggested that we ask people who actually teach about government, elections, civic engagement—that is, our local subject-matter experts—to find out what they do.

Now, obviously the time and attention you spend on the election will vary, depending on your course's topic, your comfort with political conversations, your students' age and development, and more. And what I might have to say about the presidential election, in my small, upper-level Race and Religion course will probably be different than what a political scientist has to say to students in a large, lower-level GenEd American Government course. But the hope here is to provide some ideas and inspiration, direct from the folks who teach this stuff all the time, based on which you can create your own paths forward. The following JMU professors graciously responded to my call:

### How to Vote in the 2024 Presidential Election
In an introductory American government course, most students are not political science majors. There are a variety of majors and classes, but what many of them have in common is that they are new to political engagement. For some of our students, this will be their first time voting, and for many, their first time voting in a salient, nation-wide presidential election. Part of the learning objectives for POSC 225 is to understand the institutions and processes of the US government and the current issues confronting the American political system. To further the understanding of these topics, this semester I am partnering with the Civic Engagement Center here on campus to educate students about voting.

There is a lot of information that one might need to cast a vote, including how to register, where the polling precinct is, and where to get helpful, non-biased information about the voting process and the candidates. A unique challenge that many JMU students face is deciding whether they want to register and vote on campus (or in Harrisonburg), or register at home. If they are registered at home, then they will need an absentee ballot. You no doubt have heard that the Center has in-class visits to discuss the ins and outs of voting, but they also have a [screencast](#) that I am using for my online class. As a non-partisan institution, they do not endorse or oppose any candidate or party, the Center also provides invaluable resources on these topics, including the challenges of political participation in such a polarized environment:

- Jennifer Byrne, Professor of Political Science, byrneje@jmu.edu

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**Teaching the 2024 Election in an Introductory American Government course**

My pedagogical focus when it comes to teaching the current election in POSC 225 is divided into two parts—style and substance. They are certainly related to one another, but also have distinct qualities associated with them. In today's angry, polarized political climate, how we teach is just as important as what we teach. When it comes to teaching style, I work really hard to appear unbiased to my students. Their antennae are up, and they are actively looking to check out if the professor comes off as partisan. For the same reason, I do my best to be nonjudgmental when they inevitably express a political opinion in class. To minimize those occasions, I try to steer the discussion away from policy debates and towards dispassionate assessments of how or why something is the case, not whether it is right or wrong. Easier said than done, I know. Most of all, I strive to teach with humanity, humility, honesty, and humor. I feel this is the best way to navigate the rocky terrain of current American politics. As for the substance, and keeping in mind all of the above, it is most likely that I will use the 2024 election as a real-world example of something we are already learning about. As we are all aware, polls are ubiquitous. It is really nice to have actual public opinion data to elucidate topics like selection bias, margin of error, and social desirability. I also like to predict how various demographic groups will vote based on past electoral data. Teaching in the fall of an election year allows us to assess what we got right and what we did not. The unpredictability of modern presidential campaigns and the razor-thin margins certainly give me practice being humble. The students appreciate that.

- Marty Cohen, Professor of Political Science, General Education Distinguished Teacher Award, cohenmg@jmu.edu

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**Bringing Election News Into the Curriculum in POSC 225**

Teaching POSC 225, a General Education class in the American and Global Perspectives area, is always exciting, but never more so than during a presidential election year. While most of the students in this 180-seat U.S. Government course are non-political science majors, the ongoing presidential election provides an excellent opportunity to bring in real-world applications of curricular material on topics ranging from political parties, to voting behavior, to public opinion, to the media and politics. This fall, I have facilitated class discussions about the presidential debate, presented timely examples of "fake news," and shared polling updates on the ever-changing state of the race. Using Microsoft Forms, each day in class I post a series of mostly closed-ended poll questions—some about course content, some about the election—that students answer anonymously via their phones, and we examine and discuss

the results as a class. I've found that students are at times surprised that the assumptions they make about their classmates' partisanship, vote choice, or policy views are not always accurate. While group work can be challenging in a large class, I give students opportunities in think-pair-share activities to share their reflections on developments in the campaign, and we hosted a visit from the Madison Center for Civic Engagement earlier this month to encourage voter registration. By the end of the semester, I hope that students will have developed the awareness, knowledge, and confidence to inform themselves of their electoral choices, to have fruitful discussions about politics with family and friends, and to cast a vote in November.

- Kathleen Ferraiolo, Professor of Political Science, General Education Distinguished Teacher Award, ferraikm@jmu.edu

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**Getting out of the Echo Chamber**
In principle, I believe that it is more valuable to encounter disagreement than agreement—we simply learn more. I also believe that there are serious arguments to be found on all sides of the political spectrum(s): Arguments that are based on honest assessments of facts, connected to reflections on fundamental values, and that do not merely express self-interest but also broader conceptions of what is good for society and humanity. In other words, arguments that are worth considering and arguing about. (This belief has been severely tested in the last years.) Something that I try to emphasize again and again to my students: Find the serious arguments that you disagree with!

To me, the fact that there are serious arguments on most (all?) sides if you look hard enough, means a number of things: I try to present, in readings and in my facilitation of class meetings, serious arguments from different sides of a political issue, especially if they run counter to common agreement among students. More importantly, maybe, is to unearth, together with students (I teach a small honors U.S. Government section, allowing for fairly open-ended conversations), the subtexts of arguments that on the surface look just funny, even silly: "They're eating the pets" (subtext of prejudices against immigrants) or "he's [here goes a word I am totally too delicate to use]ing the couch" (subtext of prejudices against poor Appalachians). Is the subtext worth discussing? Does it distract us from what is worth discussing? (I am glad—well, not really glad—that I can be fair and balanced in my example here, but the prejudices are not balanced this season, to be honest. That needs to be recognized as well.) Finally, I have to pay attention to the fact that not all disagreement is equal for everybody: What is an interesting intellectual idea for some can be a cruel attack against one's identity, even life, for others. These things have to be named and analyzed in class as well.

In situations in which there is no diversity of opinions in my class, or if one opinion completely dominates the discussion, I find multipartiality to be a helpful approach. In contrast to being neutral (which favors whatever narrative dominates class discussion) or make explicit counter-arguments (which runs the risk of stopping open student inquiry), instructors can try to be "multipartial" by encouraging students to consider opinions and responses that are not their own, for example, through role-play or by raising opinions from a third-party perspective. Such an approach can also be helpful if an opinion is potentially

hurtful for some students, but we do not want them to bear the burden of responding: We can ask the whole class to consider how people with different characteristics might respond to what has been said.

- Andreas Broscheid, Assistant Director at the Center for Faculty Innovation and Professor of Political Science, broschax@jmu.edu

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**How to Talk to Your Students After the Election**
We may not know the outcome of the general election on November 6th, but you may want to discuss and process the election with your students anyway. For most of our current students, this will be their first time voting in a presidential election, so it seems important to offer class space for debriefing together. Below are several strategies to use when engaging students during and outside of class.

First, a caveat: It is reasonable for you to have your own feelings about the elections' outcome. Feel free to decline any one-on-one conversation or defer a class discussion for the following week if you do not feel comfortable discussing the outcome yet.

Prior to having any difficult conversation in the classroom, it is helpful to engage your students in a discussion about how they want the conversation to take place. Allowing your students to co-create class discussion agreements will create agreed upon parameters for a brave conversation. Some of these agreements can focus on ensuring everyone who wants to talk gets an opportunity, that students will listen even when they hear a view they don't agree with, be intellectually curious, open, and humble, don't assume bad faith and give grace when someone says something challenging, and ask questions of each other to understand different points of view. Co-constructing class agreements can help students build trust in their peers that difficult conversations don't have to be uncivil.

Go into the conversation having a game plan about how you want to frame the discussion. You can choose to frame the conversation around course content—how your discipline or specific course might be impacted by the outcome or more broadly about the impact of voting. Ask and model for your students' curious questions:

- Do they feel their vote mattered?
- What animated them to vote?
- What issues are they most interested in having the new administration pursue and why?
- What do they plan to do now?

This moves the conversation away from how students feel about a particular candidate to a conversation about how they can process their own feelings into action.

Feel free to share the resources offered by the Madison Center for Civic Engagement. The Madison Center's Better Conversations Together Facilitation Fellows and Democracy Fellows will be available on November 6th to discuss the outcome.

- Kara Dillard, Executive Director Madison Center for Civic Engagement, dillarkn@jmu.edu