



SPHERE

Fostering Civil Discourse and Diverse Viewpoints for Every Classroom

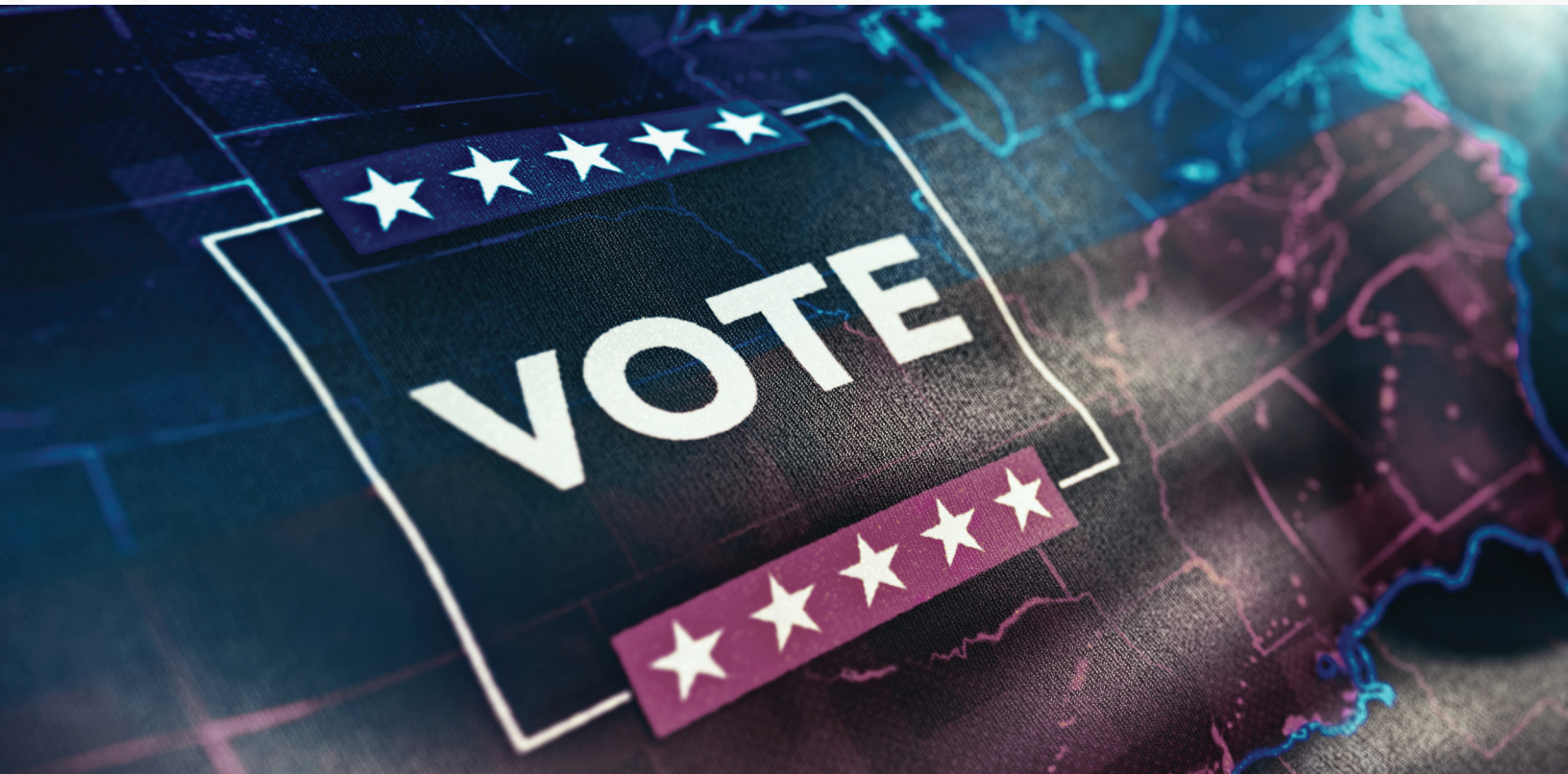
Guide to Discussing Presidential Elections in a Hyperpartisan Environment

BY KELLY YOUNG-RAYMORE

GRADE LEVEL: 8TH-12TH GRADES

Introduction

Discussing presidential elections can be challenging, and when you add a hyperpartisan environment, it can be even more challenging for teachers. It is important to create an inclusive space for students to engage in meaningful discussions while respecting different perspectives. This guide provides strategies and tips for navigating these conversations effectively.



The prep work for these types of discussion begins long before you get to elections or any other sensitive topics. Start with creating a classroom atmosphere that fosters community, connection, and trust. In a polarized education environment, it is important to remember to advocate for civil discourse among administration, build a home-to-school community with students' families, and bring in strategies to create a space of trust to engage in critical conversations. See Sphere's "[Principles of Civil Discourse Primer](#)" for information on how to implement strategies for working with each of these different groups.

Students need to see each other as humans and community members that they have a connection with. Engaging students in discussions about elections is a valuable way to promote critical thinking, civic engagement, and understanding of the democratic process. Facilitating student-led conversations allows them to take ownership of their learning and develop important skills, such as active listening, respectful communication, and critical analysis.

Effectively facilitating student-led discussion can mitigate concerns of teacher political influence.

Start this process at the beginning of the semester with the following community and capacity activities:

- Students complete a Me Map. In this activity, students are instructed to confirm their name story the night before and prepare to share it with the class. For students who do not know the background of their name, they can add another unique aspect around their identity or what they would like to have their classmates know about what they think their name means. See this [example on Flip](#).
- Discuss as a class how you want to set up your discussions and build a framework for norms. Check out [this template](#) to get started.
- Build a home-to-school connection using [this template](#) to email students' families to inform them about what you might be discussing regarding elections and set the tone for the beginning of the year with this [email template](#) inviting families to be active participants in their students' civil discourse journey.

Establish Ground Rules

Before diving into discussions about presidential elections, it is crucial to establish ground rules to ensure a respectful and constructive environment. You might consider the following:

- Encourage students to listen to and respect each other's opinions, even if they disagree.
- Emphasize the importance of actively listening to understand different perspectives.
- Encourage students to provide feedback and engage in constructive criticism without attacking individuals.

- Emphasize the importance of using reliable sources and fact-checking information before sharing it.
- Approach the conversation dispassionately with genuine intellectual curiosity and compassion.

Encourage Critical Thinking

Promote critical thinking skills by encouraging students to analyze and evaluate information independently. Here are some strategies to foster critical thinking:

- Teach students how to evaluate the credibility and bias of different sources.
- Encourage students to analyze arguments, identify logical fallacies, and question assumptions.
- Encourage students to support their arguments with evidence from reliable sources.
- Students can practice these skills through “Exploring the 10 Most Common Issues in Presidential Elections” lesson.

Teach Media Literacy

In a hyperpartisan environment, media literacy is essential to help students navigate the vast amount of information available. Consider incorporating the following into your discussions, but remain cognizant that facts are not the only influencing factor in developing opinions and ideological beliefs:

- Discuss different types of media bias and how it can influence public opinion.
- Teach students to differentiate between factual information and opinions.
- Help students recognize and overcome their own confirmation biases.

Foster Empathy and Understanding

Encourage students to develop empathy and understanding toward different perspectives. This can be achieved through the following:

- Encourage students to put themselves in someone else's shoes and consider their viewpoint.
- Teach students how to engage in respectful and civil discussions, even when they strongly disagree.
- Encourage students to challenge stereotypes and preconceived notions about different political ideologies.

Encourage Student Preparation by Providing Background Knowledge

- Assign prediscussion tasks such as reading articles, watching videos, or conducting research on specific topics related to the election.
- Ask students to prepare questions or discussion points to bring to the conversation.
- Provide resources and guidance to help students navigate and evaluate information from different sources.
- Start by providing students with a basic understanding of the election process, including key terms and concepts. See “Lesson Plan: Exploring and Comparing State Elections” to teach students the basics.
- Share information about the candidates, their platforms, and the issues at stake in the election. See “Exploring the 10 Most Common Issues in Presidential Elections.”
- Encourage students to research and gather information from reliable sources to enhance their understanding.

Provide Diverse Perspectives

Expose students to a range of perspectives to broaden their understanding of presidential elections. It is important that the exposure is at the same time. Research shows that if the opposing perspectives are introduced later, it creates a bias toward the perspective presented first. Consider the following approaches:

- Invite guest speakers from different political backgrounds to share their insights.
- Organize structured panels where students can discuss perspectives of different candidates or policies using the “[Principles of Civil Discourse Primer](#).”
- Compare and contrast presidential elections in different countries to provide a global perspective.
- Showcase the Cato video modeling civil discourse, “[Intern Debate: Conservatism vs. Libertarianism \(Cato vs. Heritage\)](#).”

Conclusion

Discussing presidential elections in a hyperpartisan environment can be challenging, but with the right strategies, it can also be a valuable learning opportunity. By establishing ground rules, promoting critical thinking, teaching media literacy, fostering empathy, and providing diverse perspectives, teachers can create an inclusive and educational environment for students to engage in meaningful discussions.