



SPHERE

Fostering Civil Discourse and Diverse Viewpoints for Every Classroom

Middle School Teacher Resource: Let's Talk about Elections!

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Overview

Teaching students how to have respectful conversations about elections can improve their communication skills and understanding of the electoral process. It also helps them learn to find common ground with people who have different opinions.



Why Should Election Topics Be Included in Middle School Civil Discourse Discussions?

Students need to learn to engage in respectful and constructive dialogue about elections. **Civil discourse** allows students to practice this skill. During civil discourse discussions, students must analyze information, evaluate different perspectives, and form reasoned opinions while respectfully listening to diverse viewpoints and finding common ground. These skills are invaluable for students' future participation in the democratic process and may help to ease societal polarization and foster a more united community.

What Do Students Learn from These Discussions?

Even during **politically charged times**, middle school classrooms can cultivate skills for engaged citizenship. By establishing a respectful classroom atmosphere and equipping students with tools to participate in classroom discussions, students can develop critical thinking skills, recognize and overcome confirmation bias, and master fact-checking techniques. **Election-based discussions** allow classrooms to explore how personal values influence votes, building empathy and resilience while boosting student comprehension and teaching students to be engaged and informed citizens.

Do My State Standards Support It?

All 50 states and Washington, DC, have included civics, political science, and government in their **social studies standards**. Consequently, civil discourse and the election process are widely endorsed as subjects of study across the United States. Additionally, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) curriculum standards incorporate these ideas into Themes 6 and 10. NCSS Theme 6, "Power, Authority, and Governance," allows for the study of elections, and NCSS Theme 10, "Civic Ideals and Practices," encourages civil discourse. Finally, the C3 Framework Dimension 2 (Civics) includes the study of "Participation and Deliberation: Applying Civic Virtues and Democratic Principles" and "Processes, Rules, and Laws." **Support for civil discourse** lessons on elections is abundant in state standards and subject area guidance across the United States.

The Dos and Don'ts of Election-Based Civil Discourse

Dos	Don'ts
<p>Do plan nonpartisan lessons using nonpartisan news and media sources.*</p> <p>*Not sure if it is balanced or biased? Check Allsides.</p>	<p>Don't promote or criticize a specific candidate or platform from the teacher's podium.</p>
<p>Do follow state standards and use school-endorsed curriculum in election-based civil discussion lessons.</p>	<p>Don't ignore the power of open-ended questioning to encourage students' critical thinking development, and don't miss the opportunity to use civil discourse activities to assess student communication skills.</p>
<p>Do communicate with parents and administrators about your election-based civil discourse plans before teaching lessons to address possible questions in advance.</p>	<p>Don't shy away from classroom discussion because of fears of the polarized political climate. With planning and support, your students can participate in content-based civil discussions in a balanced way.</p>
<p>Do plan discourse activities carefully, after providing lessons on behavior expectations, empathy, making reason-based claims, and fact-checking.</p>	<p>Don't allow students to insult each other in the name of free speech or make claims without citing evidence from reliable sources.</p>

Prepare for Success!

Success starts with careful lesson planning aligned with state standards, local curriculum guidelines, and unique school values. Before teaching election-based lessons, parents and administrators should be informed that election-based civil discourse lessons intend to promote a nonpartisan environment. The goal of election-based discussion is to teach students about elections, improve their communication skills, and foster a deep understanding of democracy.

Before

- Use state guidance and local curriculum guidelines to design an appropriate civil discourse lesson. Here is a [civil discourse lesson plan template](#) to get you started.
- Determine what type of primary or secondary sources students will study as they learn about the topic and what the discussion format will be (informal/formal, small group/whole group, spoken response/written response). **Would any of these other formats be appropriate?**
- Send [parent emails](#) in advance explaining your plans to allow time for parent questions; communicate that the purpose of the discussion is not to convert students to a specific viewpoint but to allow students to practice using their communication skills to learn about a relevant topic that is already in the curriculum and state guidelines.
- Adapt lesson materials to student reading levels; allow students to use text-to-speech tools and translation as needed.
- Prepare visuals and media to increase student comprehension and engagement.
- Teach discussion-related concepts and vocabulary before the discussion day to help all students maximize comprehension.
- Curate student groups carefully and arrange classroom furniture if needed.
- If you haven't done so, co-create classroom norms with your students to set a respectful discussion tone. Feel free to use [this poster](#) as inspiration, which can be used for any classroom discussion throughout the year.
- In preparation for the discussion, students should research the topic to help them form opinions and base discussion claims on facts.
- Consider ways for students to reflect on their viewpoints before, during, and after the discussion to develop metacognition about the activity and changes in perspectives. This [student self-assessment](#) tool can help.

During

Provide students with [sentence starters](#) to promote healthy discussion and encourage everyone to join the conversation.

WHAT DOES QUALITY CIVIL DISCOURSE LOOK LIKE?

- Students respectfully restate other's views to build and find common ground.
- Students listen to understand, not to argue their next speaking point.
- Students question, engage, and include their peers.
- The tone is always respectful and never derogatory.
- Students receive feedback from teachers and their peers on performance to foster growth in discourse skills.

WHAT DO I DO IF . . . ?

A student monopolizes the conversation.

- Refer the student back to the classroom norms.
- Use timed speaking limits to reduce this problem.
- After the discussion, ask students to reflect on their speaking behavior to develop awareness.

There is a tragedy or controversy in the news related to the election.

Discussions should be focused on topics that are not raw or painful to anyone in the room. This is the time for sharing feelings and reactions, not debates.

The discussion gets heated.

- Stop the discussion and refer back to classroom norms.
- Ask students to reflect in writing on their ideas about what happened and to think-pair-share with a partner to help understand and discuss.
- Process as a group.

After

Use **rubrics** to assess all stages of the discourse process: Preparation, performance, and participation will help students grow in their understanding of topics and their discussion skills. Collect students' **self-assessments** to learn what students thought of their performance and perspectives in the discussion.

CIVIL DISCOURSE ELECTION DISCUSSION PROMPT IDEAS

- Does voting matter? Why or why not?
- Are local or national elections more important?
- What qualities should we look for in a government leader?
- Voters often choose candidates who have similar values. How can we find common ground with people who vote and think differently than ourselves?
- What are the ethical considerations of leadership?
- How can we become informed voters?
- How can we vote with our logical minds instead of with our egos or emotions?
- What role does polling play in the election process?
- Why is a peaceful transfer of power important?

Looking for more ideas? Here are 20 open-ended election discussion topics.

TRY THESE CIVIL DISCOURSE ACTIVITIES WITH YOUR MIDDLE SCHOOL ELECTION UNIT:

- **Let's Talk about Elections:** Student explainer introducing the civil discourse approach to discussing elections paired with a worksheet to gauge students' prior knowledge, thoughts, and feelings about the American election process.
- **Practicing the Skills of Civil Discourse:** Class presentation.
- **Civil Discourse Bingo Using Election Topics:** Students practice civil discourse techniques and learn from each other as they celebrate classmates who practice excellent discourse skills.
- **Lesson Plan:** Combines activities 2 and 3 into a 2-day lesson.

Extensions

Examine local elections and community issues: Bring in local officials or community leaders from various backgrounds to discuss civic engagement or choose nonpartisan local news articles on relevant local government issues to study as the class prepares for discussion.

Discussion topic: Is voting in local elections as important as in national elections?

Engage in simulations: Conduct mock elections or debates to give students hands-on experience with the process. Ask classroom candidates to practice responding to opposing viewpoints using respectful language and evidence-based arguments in the "Respectful Rebuttal Challenge."

Discussion topic: How can we get along with people who vote differently and have different values?

Teach critical thinking and media literacy skills: Teach students how to evaluate news sources and identify misinformation.

Discussion topic: What can we do to test whether a social media post about the election is real or a deepfake?