

## Resource Guide

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### Approaches to Political Discussions in the Classroom

Hess & Gatti (2010) argue that the classroom is the ideal location for discussing politics and other controversial issues. They point to the benefits of considering varied perspectives when learning. The instructor represents only one perspective while students reflect diverse cultures, experiences, and political perspectives. Classroom diversity offers opportunities for deepening understanding, and there is evidence that political discussions can increase political tolerance (e.g., Avery et al., 1992). That said, without the right atmosphere present to “activate” the pedagogical benefits of a diverse classroom, these benefits are unlikely to be realized (Marin, 2000).

Engaging in political dialogues, especially in times of greater political polarization, may be intimidating to instructors who fear disruption in the classroom or an inability to balance dialogue with their own political opinions. These fears can be assuaged through preparation for how to bring political discussions into your classroom:

#### Framing of Issues

For discussions around specific political topics, you can help focus the discussion by identifying the level of debate around that political topic using these three categories:

- **Open**
  - Topics that have legitimate variety in their answers. It would be inappropriate to teach one solution as “correct” to these topics (e.g., what role should government play in regulating harmful substances?).
- **Closed**
  - There is one answer to the issue. These issues may have been in other categories previously but, currently, are not up for debate (e.g., interracial marriage).
- **Tipping**
  - Issues that have previously been “open” or “closed” that are in a period of transition between the two categories (e.g., legalization of sports gambling). Framing these topics as “open” or “closed” is likely to undermine discussion as students may disagree with the characterization of the topic.

When planning discussions in your classroom, framing those issues as opened, closed, or tipping can help students understand your expectations for the discussion. For tipping or open topics, students can enter the discussion with an understanding that different opinions are

*expected*. For closed topics, they may recognize the discussion as related to how the topic came to be “closed” and what evidence or processes contributed.

- **Consider framing the discussion around perennial issues**
  - Perennial issues are the recurring questions that are applicable across time and location (e.g., what role should government have in citizen health). These are more inclusive than more acute, time-specific examples of political issues, as non-American students will feel more comfortable participating. Perennial issues may also evoke less emotion from students who are personally invested in more specific examples of political topics.

### Preparing for Productive Discussion

- **Establish political tolerance as an expectation**
  - Hess & Gatti (2010) define political tolerance as “willingness to extend civil liberties to groups with whom one disagrees.” Introducing this form of tolerance as an expectation for all discussions in your classroom can help set the groundwork for productive political dialogues. This is especially true for unplanned discussions, where you can return to the expectation of tolerance to help maintain classroom civility.
- **Ask students to prepare**
  - You may also ask students to prepare for the discussion by gathering evidence and familiarizing themselves with the nature of the upcoming discussion. Providing guidelines about the nature and quality of the evidence to be used to support perspectives in the discussion also helps communicate expectations to students.
- **Encourage most of the class to participate**
  - Splitting students into smaller groups may facilitate more discussion, but smaller groups are less likely to reflect diverse perspectives. Starting discussions in small groups, with instructions to plan to share with the larger group is one way to encourage diverse perspectives. You may include instructions for a “recorder” to keep track of the different perspectives voiced in each small group, then have these shared in the larger group to give shape to the larger discussion.

### What About Instructor Opinions?

- **Share your personal opinions with intention related to student learning (or not at all)**
  - Being transparent with students can encourage dialogue but may undermine the value of the discussion if students believe you are supporting one position over others (McAvoy and Hess, 2013). If you are

perceived as “pushing” a perspective, the perception of the classroom as a space for open discussion will be deeply undermined. You may also simply be uncomfortable sharing your opinions as you engage in political discussions. If it isn’t contributing to student learning and makes you uncomfortable, there is no reason to force this into a discussion.

## Your Discipline as a Framing Device

Remember, your discipline has specific connections to political topics that can help focus these dialogues. These connections may not be immediately apparent to students, providing an opportunity to deepen their understanding of the broader field in which they are being educated (e.g., how research in your discipline is, or isn’t, funded).

You also set an example for your students as far as how to engage in dialogues that include varied perspectives and opinions. Maintaining a focus on political tolerance, defining what constitutes evidence in the discussion in a way that fits the topic, and showing appreciation for all viewpoints that are shared will help alleviate some of the fear that may be associated with political dialogues.

Above all, remember that the stress you feel related to some topics are likely felt by your students as well. In creating an expectation of political tolerance, you may also emphasize the importance of avoiding harm in any form, for you or your students.

## Resources

Hess, D., & Gatti, L. (2010). Putting politics where it belongs: In the classroom. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 2010(152), 19-26.

Marin, P. (2000). The educational possibility of multi-racial/multi-ethnic college classrooms. *Does Diversity Make a Difference*, 61-83.

McAvoy, P., & Hess, D. (2013). Classroom deliberation in an era of political polarization. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 43(1), 14-47.

*For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center by [email](#).*