

## Perspectives

*“Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see.”*

— NEIL POSTMAN

*“Political civility is not about being polite to each other. It’s about reclaiming the power of ‘We the People’ to come together, debate the common good and call American democracy back to its highest values amid our differences.”*

— PARKER J. PALMER



**AS THE 2016** campaign season ramped up this August, a number of journalists wrote about a new dilemma: how to maintain objectivity (one of the foundations of the profession) in the face of a presidential candidacy that is, to put it bluntly, not “normal.” ¶ It’s a question teachers have been agonizing over, too, according to the survey we conducted last spring. Teachers are asking, “How can we maintain the standards of our profession without normalizing the

rejecting a claim. By routinely asking the basic questions, “How do you know this?” and “What evidence supports this claim?” teachers will be able to keep the class from going off the rails.

One thing I would not do is allow my classroom to become a forum for debating issues that aren’t worthy of debate. A candidate says something outrageous and responds that it was “just a joke.” The classroom discussion that follows shouldn’t be about whether it was a joke or not, but about how sarcasm conflicts with a candidate’s obligation to be transparent. Both candidates have claimed that the other doesn’t have the “temperament” to be president. Rather than debate those statements, I’d ask students what kind of temperament our shared values call for.

I know I’d be struggling if I were still in the classroom, but I hope I’d concentrate fiercely on this truth: My job, as an educator, is to prepare future citizens so the next generation can carry on in that “time we will not see,” to model citizenship and to “call American democracy back to its highest values.”

So the question that each of us must answer is, “What does this election require of me as a citizen?”

—Maureen Costello

behavior and language on display in this presidential campaign?”

It’s a very real quandary. Because I’m no longer in the classroom, I’ve hesitated to dole out advice. And if this were a normal election year, I would remain silent—but this is not a normal election year.

If I were teaching today, I’d begin the year by discussing basic democratic values, sometimes called the “American creed”:

- Government derives its legitimacy from the consent of the governed.
- Government exists to promote the common good.
- Individuals are entitled to political equality.
- People must follow the rule of law, with no one above the law.
- Majority rules but cannot take away fundamental rights.
- Truth is essential to the “American way.”

These ideas aren’t up for debate; they are part of our founding documents. As a nation, we may disagree about how to realize them, but not about their fundamental truth.

It’s not enough, of course, to name the values; we must unpack them.

“Consent of the governed,” for instance, doesn’t just refer to the vote. People can’t consent to what they don’t know, so politicians have an obligation to be transparent in their dealings, and candidates need to provide details about what they plan to do.

After unpacking these democratic values, I’d push my students to think about their own values and use both as a framework for our discussions of the campaign and the candidates. Together, we’d define a corpus of values and ideas we believe are important for our nation and for the future.

In a typical presidential campaign season, our class would spend a lot of time defining the issues and comparing the candidates’ positions and policies. While that’s still important, this year I’d focus on a key critical-thinking and media-literacy skill: the ability to test claims. With the avalanche of information that threatens to bury us daily, students need tools to figure out whether a source is reliable, what evidence supports a claim, and how to explain their reasons for accepting or



**Speak Up for Civility!** This election season, pledge to put kids first by resisting divisive rhetoric, and encourage your school community to do the same! [tolerance.org/civility](http://tolerance.org/civility).