



You want to teach about the election, but there's a lot of hostility and tension getting in the way. Here's your quick guide to surviving the weeks leading up to November 8.

FOR MANY SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHERS, presidential election season is like a months-long holiday. What could be more fun than giving students a real-time lesson in civic engagement, complete with campaign buttons, stars-and-stripes bunting and mock debates?

But this year, many students across the country are missing out. Why? Because educators are wary of teaching an election that features an inflammatory—often bullying—tone, hostile polarization between parties and candidates, and political promises that target Muslims and immigrants.

This year feels so extreme that nearly half the educators who responded to a Teaching Tolerance survey conducted in March said they hesitated to teach about the 2016 election at all. “It is so inflammatory that no one wants to even discuss it,” said one New York middle school administrator via the survey. “Not good when we should be talking about issues.”

To help support teaching about the election, we selected five questions and concerns that educators raised repeatedly in our survey. We hope the answers will help you find the fortitude to “teach 2016.”

★ MY STUDENTS WANT TO KNOW WHY THEY CAN'T USE CERTAIN WORDS OR PHRASES AT SCHOOL WHEN THEY HEAR THE CANDIDATES SAYING THESE SAME WORDS OR PHRASES ON TELEVISION. ★

If your students are elementary age, begin by reminding them of the norms you have in your classroom about respectful language. Tell them those guidelines have not changed, but that it's time to talk about them again. Ask students why they think someone might use hurtful words or phrases, and encourage them to think of another way to achieve that goal. Situate the words or phrases in settings they understand. (*Is it OK to call people "losers" at a baseball game? No, that's being a poor sport.*) Help them understand that grown-ups may forget or break the rules, but if *everyone* neglected to be kind to one another, the world would be a very hurtful place.

When older students raise this question, invite them to keep asking questions that will build their critical thinking skills. Examples might be, "Who do you think the candidate is trying to appeal to with that language?" or "What political goals do you think he or she is trying to meet?" Show examples from past campaigns that will give them context and allow them to filter language they may hear in the political arena. (See PD Café on page 15 for examples.) Make it clear that this election has more mudslinging than usual, but that your school's standards for civil discourse have not changed, even if standards at debates and town hall meetings have.

If students are repeating language that targets people for their identities, take the opportunity to talk about "othering." With young children, discuss why it can hurt people to focus on only one aspect of their identities. For older students, offer examples of how othering has been used to perpetuate social divisions in the past. Encourage students to ask, "Does using this language encourage people to view people as different and lesser?" and "Who has more power: the candidate or the people they're talking about?"

★ WHAT CAN I SAY TO A STUDENT WHO REPEATS XENOPHOBIC IDEAS THEY HEARD FROM A CANDIDATE, FAMILY MEMBER OR TRUSTED ADULT?

Xenophobia—a fear of people who are foreign or perceived to be foreign—is hardly new. Although the targeted nationalities change, immigrants have often been the object of intense distrust, even hatred. Offering this historical context can be a first step toward helping students think critically about the comments they're hearing.

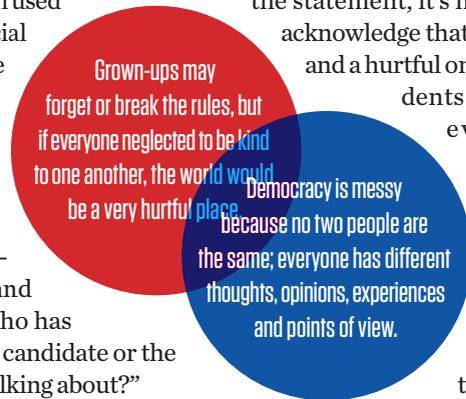
Consider discussing the larger subject of immigration: Why do people come to the United States? How have immigrants been received in the past? What contributions have they made? This offers you the opportunity to explore immigrant stories, including stories of discrimination and even violence, in ways that can lead students to re-examine the beliefs they're repeating. (See "If It Can Happen Here..." on page 31 for a profile of a district that used Teaching Tolerance lessons to curb xenophobic comments.)

It's difficult to tell a student that what they heard was wrong, especially if it came from a parent, but speaking up is imperative. While your first impulse might be to refute the statement, it's more effective to acknowledge that it's an opinion—and a hurtful one. Model for students how to look for evidence when derogatory ideas are presented as facts. Here are some initial questions you might invite the entire class to ask:

- ➊ What do you mean by that?
- ➋ Where did that idea come from?
- ➌ What are the assumptions behind this idea?
- ➍ Is what's being said true? What's the evidence?
- ➎ Can you think of any counterexamples to this statement?

In the long term, make it a habit to test claims in class so that students build their critical thinking muscles.

Finally, plan a lesson on stereotypes so that, when they emerge in class discussions, you can ask, "Wait a sec. Is this a stereotype?"



★ HOW CAN I REASSURE IMMIGRANT AND UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS WHO ARE WORRIED ABOUT THE OUTCOME OF THE ELECTION?

Reiterate to students and families that schools have a legal and ethical responsibility to keep students safe. Educators and administrators, for example, cannot disclose student records without a subpoena. Even so, staff may need training on the issues undocumented families face. Lean on community organizations or institutions of higher education that can offer basic literacy on immigrant rights. The American Immigration Council is a valuable resource for background on this issue.

Student fears around deportation may be entirely founded. While you can't tell them deportation isn't a threat, you can help them cope with the stress. Be aware of situations that might trigger anxiety, such as when a parent is late picking them up from school. Schedule support sessions with counselors, teachers or other staff members who can offer safe spaces for talking through feelings and engaging in mindfulness exercises. Hold sessions for families; ask how they reassure their kids, and inform them about the tools and techniques the school is using to relieve anxiety. Again, rely on community resources to help you meet the needs of this vulnerable population.

Above all, stay alert for signs that undocumented and immigrant students are being targeted at school. Students need to know that the school is safe and that the adults who work there have their backs—especially when the rest of the world feels so inhospitable.

★ STUDENTS ARE USING THEIR SUPPORT OR NONSUPPORT FOR THE CANDIDATES TO ISOLATE OTHERS FROM SOCIAL GROUPS. HOW CAN I LET THEM KNOW IT'S OK TO SUPPORT DIFFERENT CANDIDATES AND STILL BE FRIENDS?

Whatever their age, remind students, "It's possible to disagree without being disagreeable." Nobody is defined exclusively by their stance on an issue or by the candidate they support. Encourage young people to look for common ground rather than isolating themselves from each other. What do they all care about? What can they agree on?

Emphasize with students that democracy is messy because no two people are the same; everyone has different thoughts, opinions, experiences and points of view, and this diversity is valuable. That's why it is especially important that we listen, make space for people to express their ideas and question the ideas of others.

We also have to be ready to compromise because, in a democracy, everyone should count and everyone's voice should be equal. We don't have to agree on everything, but we must honor each other's right to take a position when it comes to candidates and political issues.

Just because our voices are equal doesn't mean our ideas are equally true. Some ideas aren't supported by evidence, so encourage students to ask each other, "How do you know?" Students should also be encouraged to speak up and challenge hurtful ideas, understanding, again, that their right to challenge a political belief is equal to that person's right to hold it. Remind them that freedom of speech is not a guarantee that what they say will never result in consequences.

Finally, underscore that getting along doesn't mean everyone thinks the same way. Tell them about all the famous rivals who managed to be friends: Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. LeBron James and Dwyane Wade. Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa. Or about Mary Matalin and James Carville, a married couple who work for opposing parties.

★ MY STUDENTS WANT TO KNOW HOW I PLAN TO VOTE IN NOVEMBER. WHAT SHOULD I TELL THEM?

Tread carefully. Politics is like religion: Teach, don't preach. Your school or district may have a culture that would discourage this level of disclosure. Ask your principal about relevant policies, and talk with colleagues so you're not caught off guard.

Once you determine you're on steady ground, consider the words of Jonathan Zimmerman, a professor of education at New York University, who says that the idea that teachers should hide their politics is "not quite right." He points out, "Just like anyone else, teachers should be free to express their political opinions in school." But, he adds, they must make it clear that students are free to form their own opinions.

If you decide against sharing, talk instead about how you make a decision. An example might be, "I look for the candidate who is most likely to pay attention to education and the needs of senior citizens," or "I don't vote on the issues as much as I look at a candidate's character. I ask myself, 'Is this person kind, caring and truthful?'"

Regardless of whether or not you disclose, ask your students why they want to know how you're voting. This can open a discussion that can help you get to know your students better; they may be seeking ways to connect with you via a common political belief. Capitalize on this engagement and try to move them from the micro view (how you as an individual are voting) to the macro view (the importance of civic participation at local, state and national levels). Show them concrete ways to voice their opinions on issues and candidates, even if they're under 18. ♦

► VIDEO ◀
Hear members of the Teaching Tolerance Advisory Board talk about how they handle election-related roadblocks. tolerance.org/ttab-election

