

Intro

These questions are drawn from the 100+ questions Eric LaForest received after the faculty meeting on September 25. The first set of questions (in blue) are general questions around policy and partisan politics, and those were answered by Sheila. The second set of questions (in green) concern navigating political conversations with students, and those were answered by Eric and Alec. Finally, the third set of questions (in red) focus on supporting students through this difficult election season, and those were answered by Fiona.

General Questions

Can we talk about federal policies and what we believe is wrong (or right) about them? If a student asks for our opinions, do we say the school has told us we are not allowed to share our opinions with them?

You should not be supporting a partisan stance or saying anything to either support or denigrate a political figure, candidate, or political party when you are presenting in your formal role as a Loomis Chaffee faculty member. You may express your private opinions outside of the classroom in casual conversation or on social media—but you should be clear that these are your private opinions and have nothing to do with the school. You should also be mindful of the power dynamic. Students sometimes feel that if a faculty member's politics appear to be different from their own, that the faculty member will discriminate against them. So, if you wish to share your political opinion, it is good to ask yourself the following: why do you need to share your political opinion? Is sharing necessary or appropriate to the situation? What is the likely outcome of sharing? Could you be seen as intimidating or trying to sway a students' own views?

There are several issues I can think of (BLM, immigration, etc.) where we have taken a moral stance as a school that might contradict the statements of a major party candidate. How do we know what counts as "political"?

What is political? Anything that involves a political candidate or political party. As a school we are neutral and support no candidates and no parties. If in doubt as to what is political, err on the side of caution. It is, however, okay to speak in support of the stated values of the school—but it should not be necessary to tie these to a particular politician or political outcome. If you are talking about issues that are political, a good pedagogical tactic is to ask questions, to explore opinions, and to press for deeper analysis—all while keeping your own politics out of the equation.

I am concerned about caring for students who have strong emotions about politics. Usually I like to validate students on their feelings and empathize, but how do I do that while remaining impartial?

It helps to keep in mind that you are supporting a student and that it is their feelings that matter. Presumably, one need not have experienced a tragedy or traumatic event to be empathetic toward someone who is having a hard time. The same goes for elections. We will have upset students no matter who wins the presidential election—it is our job to support all of our students regardless of whether their politics align with your own.

Questions on Navigating Conversations with Students

How will we educate students about civil, reasoned political discourse if we are being discouraged/forbidden to express political viewpoints and therefore unable to have political discussions with them?

Good question. We feel that a political discussion is possible--and preferable--when the teacher refrains from offering their own political convictions or partisan perspective. We distinguish those from stances the school has taken based on values, as you are encouraged to speak up on topics like the science of climate change, homophobia, or antisemitic graffiti. Admittedly, it can be hard to know where to draw that line at this time of fracture and hyperpoliticization, and we would advise you to be aware of the context and setting of your interactions with students. [One recent article](#) on political conversations in the classroom endorses “meta-discussions” with students, wherein you can explain the purpose and expectations of the conversation at the outset. Such a meta-discussion could help you establish more intentionality in your work with students in a classroom setting. For those who would like more resources for teaching the election in class, please see [this collection from Facing History](#).

What if a student gets political in the classroom? Are we to engage the group in a conversation or should we just say “that is off-topic” and move back into the lesson?

There are a variety of approaches one can take.

1. Yes, if you have material to cover and the topic of conversation is unrelated and/or you are uncomfortable having this conversation, then don't! You can also refer the student to others on campus who might be more comfortable having the conversation (Eric, Alec, Elizabeth, Ahmad, Miles, Fiona, Jake, etc.) or to a more appropriate venue for the conversation (The Shultz Fellows, the Young Dems, Young Repubs, PRISM, Spectrum, etc.). We have many venues for political discussion on campus - they do not all have to take place in your classroom right now...
2. Slow things down... ask questions of a student's claim to consider the depth and validity of their own knowledge about it. Encourage them to look more carefully into good sources and back up their argument with references and facts (encourage them to use the KBL page on media and sources for this!). If you are not familiar with the facts, then this gives you some time to read up on them - assuming you want to do so!
3. Moderate and model good civil discourse. Listen, ask for clarification, keep the discussion calm, help students focus on speaking from the 'I' perspective, and be very careful about factual claims, taking turns speaking, etc. Help students consider that different political beliefs often come from different starting points. Alec is using a very short book by Arnold Kling titled *The Three Languages of Politics*, that is available in the bookstore. Kling contends that Progressives, Conservatives, and Libertarians frame issues from very different starting points. His conceptualization is fairly simple, and could help you give students excellent language to use for having these discussions more constructively. Have a read if this interests you! Good civil discourse takes time and mental energy... if you don't have the time or desire to dig into this kind of discourse, then it's OK to refer to #1 above!

If students are engaging in the political conversation through TAG or other group meetings, are we just meant to be moderators? How are we supposed to have a conversation about the election

without stating our own opinion in TAG? This restriction seems like it will make the conversation unnatural and insincere.

In thinking about TAG in particular, we do suggest a facilitator/moderator approach. Modeling political engagement is important for students to see, and a facilitator can offer an opinion on, for instance, a convocation on the election without directly endorsing a political candidate or party. That said, there is always risk in a brave space setting for one group to feel excluded or threatened by others' political speech. As John Palfrey put it in *Safe Spaces, Brave Spaces*, "One person's flourishing (or a community's flourishing) could lead directly to another person's (or community's) harm." A nonpartisan moderator must respond if it seems harm is being done, though a sensitive and sensible response is possible without endorsing a particular position. For more on this concept, consider [this infographic](#) on the "political classroom." On a practical level, please review the two TAG lesson plans on the election as they are released and be in touch with Eric LaForest or Jess Matzkin if you would like to discuss your approach.

Questions on Supporting Students

How do we support students with conservative viewpoints that run counter to social norms/expectations in our liberal community?

- Individual relationships matter. Build trust with your students so that you reach a point at which students feel they can open up about their concerns about politics or any other topic. Creating group discussion norms early in the term can help to build such trust and establish guidelines for students to discuss controversial topics respectfully and with empathy.
- Balance your discussion of various topics by including the voices of writers and thinkers from both sides of the political spectrum. (Some progressive opinion writers: Michael Tomasky, Frank Bruni (LC Alumnus!), Adam Serwer, Robin Abcarian, Jamelle Bouie, or Eugene Robinson; some conservative opinion writers: Mona Charen, Ross Douthat, George Will, Walter E. Williams, Ramesh Ponnuru, or David French).
- Ask students to tackle topics from multiple political perspectives. For example, teachers could ask all students to think through in writing the liberal and conservative view on a particular topic. Doing this in writing before discussing can allow students time to process their thoughts before diving into a conversation and, hopefully, mitigate some potential tension.
- Ask students to identify and discuss the various political ideologies that various writers and texts espouse. Be transparent allowing students to consider a variety of perspectives and also examine the pros and cons of both viewpoints.
- Be mindful of humor and off-hand comments. At a conversation with David French in March, many conservative students shared the impact that teachers' jokes have had on their willingness to speak about their politics. Help liberal students see the nuance of conservative positions--a good chance to model empathy.
- Establish conversations as spaces where all opinions (short of hate speech) are welcome, and reiterate your role as facilitator and moderator. Your responsibility is to gauge the room and ensure that students feel safe, seen, and heard, and it's equally important to invite conservative students to share their viewpoints and let other students hear and debate those viewpoints. These conversations are a profound opportunity to test civil discourse.

- Remind the student that there is a lively political culture that liberal, conservative, independent, and undecided students can and do participate in. Shultz Fellows, Young Republicans, *The Log*, etc.

How can we work with students who feel that another student's political beliefs make them feel unsafe?

This is very important, and if a student expresses concern about their safety, it should be taken very seriously. Working with the student's support networks would be very important to ensure that they feel supported and heard and, if necessary, protected. You don't need to be neutral when it comes to our students' safety and sense of belonging. Take time to listen to the student's perspective and feelings so that they feel heard and seen and don't feel as if their concerns are being trivialized.

Discuss the context of the student's concern -- is it from a comment made in the classroom/in your presence, on social media, an assumption about another student's beliefs, in the dorm, etc.

Such concerns should be taken to the deans. Elizabeth Parada and the office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion will be coordinating student support efforts with the deans and counseling office. Follow up with the student as well as their support network to make sure that they feel as if they were heard and that there has been some sort of action taken to support them.

Where I was teaching in 2016, there was definitely a portion of the student body who felt like "winners" and "losers." This was incredibly hard to navigate—how do you tend to the emotional needs of some students who are grieving?

- Be transparent. Acknowledge to your students how difficult it can be when a candidate that you support does not win and discuss this moment as an opportunity for emotional growth and the building of empathy across ideological and political party lines. Doing so may open the door for students to examine and process their emotions. It will also create space for other students to practice empathy. You can relate this specific experience to other such moments in which a specific team or person or belief system was not declared the winner.
- Encourage students who are grieving their candidate's loss to become politically active. Assure them that there is a process in place to ensure that no one political ideology dominates our government or society. Point them in the direction of ways that they can get more involved in the political process or support ideas that they believe in. This is a great moment to encourage students to become engaged citizens and actively work to see the change they believe in.
- Acknowledging a student's emotional response is paramount. Allow them space to process aloud and to know and feel that their feelings are heard and seen. It might not be advisable to process this right in the middle of class, but finding time to talk with those students outside of the classroom can go a long way. That said, if a student expresses such feelings in class, it is important to acknowledge that there are often high emotions after an election and that it is safe and reasonable to express such feelings. Then make space for that student to process outside of class.
- Rely on support networks in place: Elizabeth Parada and the office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion will be coordinating student support efforts with the deans and counseling office. Reach out to additional support networks including advisors, dorm parents, coaches, teachers, etc.