

A CONVERSATION FOR TRUST & UNDERSTANDING

an exercise to reduce political polarization



This three-step exercise uses questions and intentional listening to shift how the participants feel about joining political conversations, particularly around an election. It also engenders trust both between the participants and in the possibility of healthy conversation itself.

This is intended to help you engage meaningfully with people who have avoided political discussions, been on the outside of conversations in the past, or who hold a minority perspective in your context. It helps participants feel heard and taken seriously—an important first step toward healthier norms around conversations across political differences.

This exercise is designed to be used in one-on-one conversations. But it can also be used in small group settings. For instance, you can use it to engage a group of stakeholders with similar views and/or identities as you map a community. You could also use this to gain buy-in from people who are skeptical of talking politics in a team, organization, or community.

1. Invite the Conversation

Identify a person in your life with whom you are comfortable connecting but who has seemed anxious or reluctant to engage in political conversations, especially around an election.

This might be a colleague you know, but not particularly well. It might be a Facebook friend you've been meaning to reach out to or a family member who's been a bit isolated. Maybe it's another student in your class who's been unusually quiet or a person who has historically held a minority perspective.

You might open the invitation by saying something like:

- I wanted to check in and see how you're doing
- I've missed hearing your perspective in our team meetings and I would love to hear a bit about where you're at
- I apologize it's taken me so long to bring this up, but I've noticed recently that I haven't always been the best about inviting you to share your perspective in class. I'd love to have a conversation about how I might better include your voice

Then make sure to tell them you have this worksheet from Essential Partners that includes some questions to help you have a constructive conversation, if they're willing. The goal of the



conversation is to begin to talk about politics / an election in a new, better, healthier way, without engaging in polarized cycles or arguments. The purpose is to get to know one another better, to hear one another more deeply—not to change anyone’s mind.

Keep in mind that some people, especially if they have only had negative experiences of political conversations, may decline. It’s alright if they do. Just by reaching out, you may have helped them feel seen, cared for, and less isolated. That can be transformative.

2. Having the conversation

Begin by connecting personally. Ask them what they’ve been reading or watching, what they would like you to understand about how they’re doing, or about something they’ve done to take care of themselves in the past few weeks.

Then, name what you’ve noticed that made you want to reach out. Invite the person to share a bit about how they’re doing using the nine questions below.

1. Help me understand what about this issue / the election matters most to you. What feels at stake, or what is having the most impact on you right now?
2. What would you like to have others accurately understand about you, your perspective, and your experience [as you navigate the days and weeks around the election]?
3. What questions do you wish others would ask you?
4. How do you feel misunderstood and how has that impacted you?
5. What would you like to understand better about the perspectives or experiences of others? What questions would you like to ask them?
6. What values do you imagine you have in common with others; where might you differ?
7. What would you need to be able to do (think, feel, say) in order for a conversation with others to go well? What would you need from the others?
8. What would shift for you, and them, if you could have this conversation and it went well?
9. When you’ve had a successful difficult conversation in the past, what did you do that contributed to it going well?

Feel free to make these questions your own. Ask follow-up questions grounded in your curiosity about what has been shared, if it feels helpful. Progress through these nine questions in a way that feels conversational. Stay faithful enough to the questions to avoid getting stuck in tangents, venting, or frustrations.

When you listen to the person speak, listen for the hopes they imagine underneath the fears or concerns. Rephrase what you hear them say and share it back with them. Ask if there’s anything you missed or misheard. If you missed something, that’s OK—ask them what they want you to understand about their experience.

If they ask you to share your perspective, respond honestly. Share a personal story about an experience or relationship that shaped your political views. Model the kind of conversation you hope to have.



3 Closing the conversation

As you wrap up the conversation, draw attention to what has changed since the start of the conversation. You might ask questions like:

- How do you feel now about the possibility of a conversation with others?
- Is there anything that feels different now as you think about having conversations about this issue / the election? Maybe there are people you might be open to talking to, circumstances that might encourage you to participate in conversations, or conversations you want to invite in this community.

Conversations about politics can be intimidating because they reveal our deepest values, hopes, and fears. And people do not often respond well when they're anxious, afraid, or angry.

By having a conversation like this one, which is designed to engender a measure of trust, you make it possible to have more difficult conversations across differences possible later.