



Be **Curious** ♦ Be **Charitable** ♦ Be **Conscientious** ♦ Be **Constructive**

## The 4Cs Guide to Talking about the 2024 Election

Public universities are excellent sites for civil discourse, a valuable form of democratic engagement. The 4Cs (be Curious, be Charitable, be Conscientious, be Constructive) is a set of virtues that serve as a framework for engaging in civil discourse. The 4Cs can help us have respectful, productive discussions about contentious issues. Doing so is important for maintaining trust and our sense of community at Ohio State during this time of political polarization. This guide provides tips for engaging in civil discourse about 2024 election issues.

### Setting up the Conversation

Civil discourse involves explaining and critically examining our beliefs and values with others who may disagree with us. This might make us feel uncomfortable, threatened, or even angry. But, it's important to recognize that having our beliefs challenged during civil discourse isn't the same as being silenced and questioning the truth of someone's beliefs isn't the same as questioning their right to hold them.

Productive discourse focuses on a well-defined topic that participants are equipped to explore together. It's important that all participants are clear on the issue or question under consideration. Otherwise, we run the risk of talking past one another, which can result in frustration and misunderstanding rather than progress. For example, rather than launching into a discussion on a broad, multi-faceted topic like "abortion," articulate specific questions like, "Should laws regulating abortion access be determined by states?" or "How should disagreements about the morality of abortion influence laws regarding abortion?"

Setting the stage for civil discourse also requires understanding its goal:

#### **Goal of Civil Discourse**

to gain a better understanding of a topic or of someone else's perspective by engaging in an inquiry together

Civil discourse is only possible when participants share this goal, recognizing that the aim is not to persuade, win, discredit an opposing viewpoint, or take someone down.

### Engaging in Civil Discourse

Create an environment in which people feel safe and welcome to share their own ideas and relevant experiences while discussing political issues openly by being **curious** and **charitable**. Discuss those issues fairly and productively by being **conscientious** and **constructive**.

Be **Curious** by reserving judgment until you understand what others are saying. Curiosity is a mindset in which you assume that you have something to learn from people who disagree with you about a political issue, party, or candidate instead of assuming they are misinformed or that you already know what they are going to say. For example, imagine you are talking to someone who says: "I'm voting Democrat because I think women should have rights" or "I'm voting for Trump because I care about the economy." You might feel compelled to challenge the claims that you take these statements to suggest. Instead, respond with curiosity by reminding yourself that you don't yet know what they mean. Invite them to explain and ask questions, listening to truly understand rather than to prepare a rebuttal.

Listening with curiosity doesn't mean you must constantly second-guess all your thoughts and beliefs. It means being open to the idea that you could learn something or that some of your views could change in some way, even if those changes are just about the reasons or beliefs of those with whom you disagree.

### **Tips**

- Cultivate curiosity by recognizing that the truth is complex and human beings often get things wrong. Scrutinizing our beliefs from different perspectives helps us develop our own thinking about social/political issues, correct misunderstandings, and form better beliefs.
- Keep in mind that intelligent people of good will often disagree about what key concepts mean, how to evaluate relevant evidence, and how to weigh competing values against each other.

Be **Charitable** by assuming others have good intentions. People often feel nervous when talking about the political issues at stake in the 2024 election because they are worried about saying the wrong thing, leading to hostile responses or being negatively perceived. We can help others feel more comfortable by being charitable in our interpretation of their words. Let others in the conversation know that you will give them the benefit of the doubt when interpreting their statements and motives—especially if they say something that seems offensive or harmful.

Being charitable about high-stakes political issues involves showing empathy for others by considering how their perspectives are connected to their lived experiences, which might be very different from yours. If you find it difficult to empathize with people who disagree with you about an issue, think about the experiences and circumstances that influence your view on that issue. Then, try to imagine circumstances and experiences that would lead you to hold a different view on it.

### **Tips**

- Keep in mind that people who disagree with you are also emotionally attached to their deeply held beliefs. This is especially important when discussing the 2024 election because many people believe that the stakes are very high. When someone expresses a belief that conflicts with yours, don't assume that they intended to upset you. Consider the possibility that, for them, expressing it was a way of being true to themselves.
- Recognize that harm can occur without wrongdoing. When someone inadvertently upsets you by misunderstanding you or expressing a view that conflicts with yours, be prepared to accept a sincere apology that expresses regret for the negative emotional impact, even if you disagree about whether they did something wrong.
- When talking about political issues like abortion, crime, education, inflation, or immigration, there will be times when others fail to appreciate something that matters deeply to you, such as facts about a community that you care for or the implications of using specific terminology. Instead of becoming defensive or shutting down, give them the benefit of the doubt by gently inviting them to understand your perspective.

It's important to focus on understanding what others are saying, regardless of whether you think they are right or wrong. Demonstrate charity by summarizing what your interlocuter has said in your own words until they agree that you've got it right.

Be **Conscientious** by reasoning responsibly when making and evaluating arguments. Consider the merits of arguments for different political positions rather than rejecting or accepting them based on your feelings about them or desire for them to be true or false.

### **Tips**

- Fairly evaluate evidence/reasoning for the views we agree with *and* the views we disagree with.
- Resist the temptation to pay attention to evidence that supports your beliefs while ignoring evidence that challenges them.
- Accurately portray evidence. Common ways of misrepresenting evidence include...
  - Oversimplifying evidence or presenting it as clear-cut, ignoring complexities
  - Using hyperbole or exaggerating what evidence shows, presenting things in terms of extremes
  - Relying on false background assumptions, like assuming that there are only two viable policy options when there could be others
- Recognize that, in these discussions, our ideas and beliefs will be questioned and challenged and prepare to be resilient instead of defensive.
- View challenges to your views as opportunities to...
  - learn from people who disagree with you
  - gain a better understanding of why you disagree
  - examine your own reasons for your beliefs
  - explain that reasoning in ways that are responsive to others' reasons for disagreeing or taking a different position
- Keep in mind that we can question the truth of someone's beliefs without questioning their right to hold them.

Be **Constructive** by staying focused on the goal of fostering greater understanding. Use that goal to evaluate the productivity of the conversation. Remember that civil discourse isn't about convincing anyone to endorse your preferred candidate or ballot initiatives. Civil discourse is a success when participants gain a better understanding of the issue being discussed, the diversity of positions on that issue, and the strength of the evidence related to those positions. If you find yourself or an interlocuter deviating from the goal, take a step back to acknowledge that and see if you can find a way to return to civil discourse.

### **Tips**

- Look for common ground by figuring out where participants agree and disagree.
- Don't assume that people in a different political party or on the opposite side of an issue have different underlying values.
  - When we disagree about a policy, we should explore the values and reasons underlying the disagreement.
  - Some political disagreements occur because people who hold the same values disagree about the relative weight or implications of those values in certain policy areas.
  - Alternatively, people who hold different values may favor the same policy or candidate but for different reasons. Often, different values can support the same policy conclusions.
- Don't assume that people who disagree about an issue or candidate are uninformed or misinformed.
  - Discuss the relevant empirical evidence for your opposing positions.
  - If your disagreement about policy stems is empirical, consider why you disagree about the empirical claims. Are you drawing evidence from different sources? Are you drawing on the same evidence but interpreting it differently?
- Instead of rigidly sticking to your beliefs, be flexible enough to change your mind about something if you encounter evidence or good reasons to do so.

- Engaging in constructive dialogue means being intellectually, emotionally, and practically prepared to change your mind. Even if you don't end up endorsing a different candidate or policy, you might change your mind about the strength of argument for or against your position or the rationale or motives behind opposing positions.

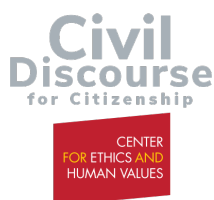
**Note:** you might not resolve these disagreements. Clarifying disagreements about evidence or values isn't a dead end or failure because the goal is to better understand the sources of disagreement. In some cases, this understanding allows us to engage in collaborative problem-solving that leads to compromise.

When wrapping up the conversation, spend a few minutes reviewing the conversation with your interlocutor(s) to take stock of what you've achieved. Identify any new questions that have arisen, any points where participants have changed their minds, any weakness in arguments that have been identified, and any disagreements that have been clarified.

### **Additional Considerations and Tips**

*Discourse Across Hierarchies:* It is inevitable that you will occupy positions in various hierarchies, regardless of whether these are informal social hierarchies or formal occupational ones. When you are seeking to engage in civil discourse with someone who occupies a lower position in a relevant hierarchy—suppose you are a teacher talking to a student in office hours or a workshop presenter talking to an attendee about a topic of mutual concern rather than simply imparting information to them—you must be especially mindful of the difference between persuasion and civil discourse. Be explicit in asking them to challenge your views (and even help them brainstorm objections) and be suspicious when they concede points too easily.

*Emotionally Volatile Discourse:* We should never discount the value of someone's contribution to civil discourse merely because they are having a strong emotional reaction to the topic, but we should also not pretend that a chorus of adversarial emotional outbursts is likely to be constructive. A good middle ground is to realize that people are at different places with respect to the degree to which they are emotionally connected to an issue as well as with respect to their capacities for emotional regulation. Once you realize this, you can then seek conditions that will allow the unique group of people in front of you to actually achieve civil discourse. One tip is to select a narrow sub-topic that the group is ready to discuss. Another is to always be ready to jump to a meta-question *about* how the discourse is going whenever things are starting to get heated. It may be the case that the most useful outcome of the present discussion is to set the stage for future discussions through such meta-reflections.



### **“Education for Citizenship”**

*The health of our society depends on continued efforts to learn from and understand each other better, even when we disagree about important matters. While civil discourse is not the only relevant form of democratic engagement, it is the aspect of democratic citizenship that universities are uniquely well-positioned to support.*

### **To learn more about the 4Cs of Civil Discourse...**

- take [a short online training](#) through Scarlet Canvas (free, publicly available).
- attend a [workshop, dialogue facilitation, or related event](#)
- [plan a workshop](#) in partnership with CEHV.



*For questions or comments, contact Dr. Kathryn Joyce (.173), Civil Discourse for Citizenship Program Director or Dr. Aaron Yarmel (.2), Associate Director of CEHV.*