Political Polarization

The Basics
Political polarization refers to divides between people of different political affiliations within the United States. For those who identify as Democrat or Republican, 1 in 3 think that violence could be justified to further their political objectives—a large increase over the last three years. This issue sheet is for people who are trying to reduce political polarization and bridge political divides on their campus. It is not focused on specific politics or political issues, and instead is focused on helping people move from dialogue to action in improving the campus climate around politics and political diversity.

The Five W’s
- **Who** has influenced your political beliefs?
- **What** past experiences have helped to shape your political beliefs?
- **Where** on campus do you tend to experience political divides?
- **When** have you experienced political polarization on campus?
- **Why** do you think this group needs to address political polarization?

Guiding Questions
- What personal values of yours are important to you in making political decisions?
- What is important for others to understand about your past experiences or background in order for them to understand your political beliefs?
- What political issues are most important to you and why?
- How do your political beliefs or political affiliation impact your life on campus (or in this community), if at all?
- How does the political environment on this campus differ from the political environment of the community that you grew up in?
- What past experiences, if any, have you had talking with others on this campus (or in this community) about your political beliefs?
- What spaces, if any, exist on campus for you to have dialogue with others who hold different political beliefs than you do? Are there certain characteristics of those spaces that could be replicated elsewhere on campus? If yes, what are they? If not, why not?
- Do you feel that we have an issue with political polarization on campus? What experiences have helped to shape your perspective on that question?
- How can we work together to bridge political divides and/or reduce political polarization on this campus?

If someone brings up a big national or state political event that seems important to the group to discuss, here’s how to ask questions that allow the group to dialogue about it in a way that discourages them from slipping into sharing opinions about the event:
- How does x national event impact your lived experience on this campus? (i.e. How are the impeachment hearings impacting your daily life on campus and your relationships, if at all?)
- What is important for others to understand about your past experiences or background in order for them to understand your perspective or feelings on this event?

Please do not attempt to ask all of these questions. Pick the best ones for your group.

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1 https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/10/01/political-violence-424157
Best Practices for Moderating Dialogue on this topic:

- Set a strong list of group norms and make sure to include norms about not dehumanizing one another, avoiding generalizations, and speaking from personal experience.
- Go over the differences between dialogue, debate, and discussion with your group and remind your group of the goals of these dialogues. The goal isn’t to convince others of our political beliefs or to build consensus about political issues; it’s to listen to one another, build relationships, and then explore how we might work together to reduce political polarization in our community.
- Set expectations within your group that the focus in dialogue is on the lived experiences of people in the room not on interesting topics or opinions. Since this isn’t a current events discussion group, you won’t be talking about the big political events from each week, and big political events or stories should only be brought up in relation to how they impact participants’ lived experiences on campus.

Common Opinions to Prepare For:

- “I’m here because I want to become friends with someone from the opposing political party. I feel like it’s important for me to be friends with someone from the ‘other side’.”
- “I’m here to convince others to change their perspectives so that they’ll vote differently in the next election. Once they have all of the true facts, they’ll have to see things my way.”
- “I’m so tired of people talking about political divides on campus in terms of Democrats and Republicans. There’s much more to it than that, and I’m so sick of conversations like this only focusing on ‘red-blue divides’ because there’s not a place for me in those conversations.”
- “Our true problem with political divides on this campus is that people are overly sensitive and can’t handle anyone disagreeing with them, especially liberals who hold most of the power on campus.”
- “The political system is rigged, and it’s such a waste of time to fight each other about candidates. What we need is a true overhaul of the entire system not just back and forth arguing between Democrats and Republicans who are all being used by Washington elites.”
- “I’m really worried about my safety and the safety of my community because the decisions of the current administration are jeopardizing my safety and rights. Why don’t my classmates understand that when they’re voting, their choices are directly impacting my safety?”
- “It’s exhausting being one of few Trump supporters on this campus. As soon as people know that I support Trump, they start calling me names, and make huge assumptions about me. I’m so sick of it. This campus is not tolerant of political diversity.”
- “I can’t vote, and I’m so sick of people who are able to vote choosing not to do so. The biggest political divide on this campus is between those who care about politics and those who don’t. Anyone who is an apathetic non-voter needs to wake up and stop taking their rights for granted.”
- “I don’t know why people are so upset about political divides on campus. It doesn’t seem like we have an issue with that here.”
- “I don’t feel like our campus is doing enough to respond to the actions of the current administration. Why aren’t more people here paying attention and organizing around national politics?”
- “I’m scared of talking about politics on campus because it feels like there’s no space on this campus for me to voice my views as a conservative (or as a liberal). If I let people know my political affiliation, I’ll be shunned and shut out of communities and projects that I want to be part of.”