

Guide to Youth Civil Discourse and Civic Engagement

In a world with rising political polarization, teaching youth how to engage in discourse on civics, politics, and divisive topics is crucial. At Voters2Be, we have identified several steps and areas to focus on to help youth have the skills to engage in civil discourse on the issues that affect them.

Setting Norms:

A facilitator or participants must create a list of norms or guidelines at the start of a conversation. Ensuring that dialogue is directed towards an idea rather than targeting any person is best for fostering productive discourse. Good sentence starters for sharing different perspectives include: “The way I look at this issue is...”, “I believe this...because of ...” and “I have a different perspective on that idea...” Also, if you can weave at least one piece of empirical evidence into your statements, the discussion will be more fact-oriented and driven by critical thinking. We hope to teach our students to facilitate conversations in this way through our course curriculum.

Fundamental Education:

Before a discussion, young adults and teens need to be informed. They need to understand both the political issue at hand, the overall political system in America, and the historical context of the topic. We aim to provide students with reliable, clear, and informative media sources that they can use to learn about politics and use as sources before discussing politics.

Keeping an Open Mind:

While teens may feel very strongly about a specific topic, active listening and hearing others out are important. Active listening is a critical skill in political discourse and all aspects of life. It is important to encourage teens to come into the conversation open to expanding their views, considering other viewpoints, finding common ground, and connecting different insights.

A Diversity of Viewpoints:

It is easy to speak with other people who share similar opinions. However, talking to people on the other side of the political spectrum is essential to intellectual development and dialogue across lines of difference. Centering around policies, laws, and social issues rather than political figures helps simplify discussions and distill them into understandable topics.

Plan for the Future:

Voters2Be hopes to design a new course series to teach students how to engage in political discourse. The class will center around practicing facilitation and discussion skills through five conversations focused on different areas of public policy. We plan to design this course over the next few months and begin teaching it in the Summer of 2025.