HANDLING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN THE CLASSROOM RELATED TO POLITICS & VOTING

Reflections from Professor John Frazier, Kendall Campus, Art History

Question from iCED: What do I do if a student asks me what I think about a controversial topic, or who I'm voting for? Is it ok to share my personal opinion? How do I handle controversial topics in my class? What is appropriate to share? What recommendations do you have?

SHARING YOUR OPINION AS A PROFESSOR:

Professors can share their opinion and why they believe the way they do. I do not generally share my opinions as I don't want to influence their opinions.

- I never share who I am voting for with my students, even when students ask, but we are allowed to if we want.
- I do openly tell students that I am an independent-- a fiscal conservative and socially liberal so every vote I ever make is a compromise--the two party system really doesn't work for me. What I do for my students is list out what I believe are the most important issues/values for me to consider when voting:
  - ✔ moral person representing our nation,
  - ✔ education as the basis for continuation of the American Dream
  - ✔ supporting the disenfranchised to have the opportunity to achieve the American Dream
  - ✔ stable international policy as we currently are the world's stabilizing factor
  - ✔ and finally and most importantly, in a democracy--which candidate has the best interests for the majority of America even if that is against my own personal interests. I am willing to have higher taxes if those taxes are being used to promote the above causes.

- I tell students that the most important thing about being a "voter" is you are voting not just on your future but the future of all Americans so you should know what you prioritize most when you head into the polling station.
- And I tell them the pitfalls of a representative democracy is that we all have to look out for everyone as some of the greatest thinkers in world history warned against the "tyranny of the majority" including George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Plato, Socrates and Aristotle.

- So when students want to talk about voting, I do turn it around on them and ask what they care about to help determine their candidates.

EMOTIONS/FACTS/CONTROVERSY

- The conversations can get emotional but must be factual. I will not let false claims go unchallenged. If a student says that mask-wearing is a hoax or human-made climate change is a hoax or that privilege doesn't exist, I will bring up scientific or social science evidence to the contrary.
- If the topic is controversial I absolutely present both sides--both the pros and the CONS of BOTH sides. Our issues are not getting solved because they are hard, and our political system is currently set-up like a win-lose situation rather than a win-win situation. For example, if we want to talk about solving the issue of our enormous budget deficit it involves a value conversation of military spending as being the world's police force (Neo-Con) mentality vs spending the money to help local individuals who are not able to attain the American Dream--it's almost impossible to do both. Europe has free health care and college for everyone BECAUSE the US spends nearly 25% of our taxes on world defense and military. This is a real conversation that students are generally interested in, and there is no easy solution--only compromises. Supreme Court justices is a huge deal when you break it down to students which they almost have never thought about because they don't see it as relating to them-- until we break down the issues coming at them in the future-- internet privacy, retirement age, pre-existing medical conditions, Roe v Wade, LGBTQQ rights protections in the workplace, paid family leave, who can vote and how, government funding for college, net neutrality, etc.

In my class where I talk about voting comes up in early October where I talk about how to plan to vote--tied to budget deficit of ancient Rome compared to our budget shortcoming today (Art History Course).

For more information, contact Professor Frazier at jfrazier@mdc.edu

SUMMARY/DEFININING CHARACTERISTICS OF APPROACH: Honesty, openness, respect, deep exploration of issues, recognition of complexities and need for compromise…and being clear that this is his opinion, but he isn't telling his students how they should think or vote…