

Discussing civic media after electoral loss – discussion guide

This guide was developed by Mariel García-Montes (graduate student at MIT CMS/W, Center for Civic Media)

This guide is based on chapters from *Civic Media: Technology, Design, Practice*
Open to collaboration, modification, adaptation, criticism.

Length: 1.5 to 2 hours

Participants: 5 to 10 per discussion group

Facilitators: 1-2.

Objectives:

- To allow for post-election emotions, both negative and positive, can be shared openly and processed collectively in a safe space
- To explore ideas around democracy and civic participation in elections and in other territories
- To discuss the ways participants see themselves engaging civically going forward

References: *On democracy and the digital age* by Peter Levine; *Superpowers to the people! How young activists are tapping the civic imagination* by Henry Jenkins, Sangita Shresthova, Liana Gamber-Thompson, and Neta Kligler-Vilenchik; *Partnering with communities and institutions* by Ceasar McDowell and Melissa Yvonne Chinchilla, and *Effective Civics* by Ethan Zuckerman. All of these are chapters in *Civic Media: Technology, Design, Practice*, edited by Eric Gordon and Paul Mihailidis (2015, MIT Press)

Materials: Discussion guide printout for facilitator (optional: cards/slides with the questions); post-its in two colors and pens, tissues (not joking)

Additional comments:

This discussion guide does not include ice breakers because it attempts to elicit participation through questions, but ice breakers could be done before or after the introduction and ground rules; equally, the closing activity can be substituted for other ideation and/or bonding activities.

As this was implemented in an academic setting, it was the role of the facilitator to ensure that all the background content was covered, which left less time for free-flowing discussion; in other contexts, the background content itself can be left aside.

The questions listed throughout pose different framings to get the discussion going, set the tone, and allow for the display of emotions. Facilitators should flow between them, or others, depending on how conversations flow.

Keywords: civic media, civic participation, civic engagement, dialogue

Dialogue outline (90 minutes)

1. Introduction and ground rules (5 minutes)
2. The importance of elections (10 minutes)
3. Democracy and its challenges (both perennial and in the digital age) (10 minutes)
4. Democracy as theory of change (10 minutes)
5. Other theories of change (10 minutes)
6. Considerations around participation (both perennial and in the digital age) (15 minutes)
7. How this relates to our own participation (15 minutes)
8. Closing (15 minutes)

1. **Facilitator provides a framing on why the discussion is taking place, and shares ground rules (5 min)**
Example: *We are here to talk about civic media, the fortunate or unfortunate topic of today's class. We'll see. But, really, we get to discuss something that affects us in different levels and try to make sense of it together.*

Ground rules: *It is okay to cry, or laugh, but not okay to apologize for doing either. It is not okay to make fun or judge others for how they deal with their emotions today. Talking about how we feel is good, silence is good too. We must remember that we all come from different contexts, experience these processes differently, and none of the reactions we share here are right or wrong. They are just ours (and no, nobody can take that away from us).*

Rules can be elicited from participants, too.

2. **The importance of elections (10 min)**

2.1 Why does this election matter to us personally?

2.2 What do we feel about what happened? Where do these emotions come from?

2.3 What is it that we feel? Is it fear, is it panic, is it pain?

3. **Democracy and its challenges (both perennial and in the digital age) (10 minutes)**

3.1 Today we are not mourning a *coup d'état*. Why does it hurt us that someone was voted in, or that someone was not voted in?

Background content: from Levine's text – democracy as the government that is accountable to the people it represents, which means that people vote. Historic discussions on who gets to vote and how people vote (as form of public loyalty, after the progressive turn that favored informed voting, and the enablers of informed voting)

3.2 What would it have taken to have a different outcome in the election?

Background content: from Levine's text – the perennial challenges of democracy. Why should people vote, how do we give power through the votes of the majority while protecting the rights of minorities, how do we remain true to our other ethical values in the process

3.3 Digital media have enabled new forms of political work, but what are the challenges they have posed to existing processes?

Background content: from Levine and Zuckerman's texts – the challenges change rapidly. A decade ago, there were fears around anonymity; now there are fears around lack of privacy. Other challenges: the professionalization of political campaigning, the new disaggregation of choice (through information overload, cyber balkanization), difficulties of sovereignty, the legibility of society to the state with new surveillance capabilities.

4. **Democracy as theory of change (10 minutes)**

4.1 We recognize the challenges, and yet here we are, dealing with these feelings. Why do we care about elections in the first place?

4.2 What exactly did we all lose?

Background content: from Zuckerman's text – democracy as theory of change. Voter registration efforts after rev Al Sharpton's speech one week after Michael Brown's murder. This one theory of change is easier to evaluate (than other theories of change), but it also deals with loss of faith like today's.

5. **Other theories of change (10 minutes)**

5.1 If not through elections, what are the other ways that people make change?

5.2 What are the other civic uses of media that don't really spin around electoral cycles?

Background content: from Zuckerman and Jenkins et al – other theories of change are judicial (to protect

the rights of minorities through strategic litigation), related to markets (from the Montgomery bus boycott, some actors have seen buying as voting), related to norms (and long term cultural perception change), to code (Stallman and Lessig – in a way, related to activism dealing with modifying infrastructures), monitorial (to address media coverage); narratives and spectacles doing political work

6. **Considerations around participation (both perennial and in the digital age)** (15 minutes)

6.1 Going forward, how do we get people to participate?

6.2 What are the challenges we face in current modes of participation? How do we address them?

6.3 What forms of participation do we see today that inspire us?

Background content: from Jenkins et al, Zuckerman and McDowell, Chinchilla's texts – voice, narrative as ways people signal their affiliation, get facts out and state their civic imagination (superhero narratives are one example in youth engagement); civic processes are shaped around exclusion, so our task must be to include by bridging divides, thinking hyper-locally and changing locus of design

7. **How this relates to our own participation** (15 minutes)

7.1 People on our social media, friends, public figures – many seem to be saying that this is not the end and they're ready to be engaged, fight, make their contribution. What do we think they mean by that? What do we mean by that when we say it?

7.2 What are the ways that we can commit to engaging civically going forward?

7.3 How can you be effective in your engagement, whatever it is?

Background: From Zuckerman's text: there are different levels and degrees of engagement. Think of the engagement ladder figure. What are your causes? How much can you commit to them? How can you be effective?

8. **Closing** (15 minutes)

Example: *We have talked about how we feel (quick summary); what democracy has to do with it, the challenges we face today, and ways we will participate (quick summary). I hope that by doing this we all see that it's important to honor our emotions, even if it is not easy, and not lose sight of the way forward. Before we wrap this up, we could do a brief activity...*

Activity: Post-its in two colors are distributed; participants are asked to write about a special moment in their lives that really inspired them to make change, and about the vision they have for the world they want to help make. Post-its are pasted on the wall, clustered by color; participants are asked to read them. At the end, participants grab their own post-its and exchange them with someone else.