



A DCI Deliberation Guide

The Future of Democracy

*What Kind of Political Community Do We Want,
and How Can We Create It?*

Throughout the last election cycle, countless voices and interests vied for our attention, our time, our advocacy, our energy, and our votes. The coronavirus pandemic, racial justice movements, nation-wide elections, and other headline-dominating events have highlighted deep questions we have about our political and social communities.

This conversation is an opportunity to discuss how recent events have shaped our current political community, and to examine how we can create the kind of political community we want moving forward.

Format for Deliberation

- I. Conversation - 15 min.
- II. Discussion 15 min.
- III. Dialogue - 15 min.
- IV. Debate - 15 min.
- V. Deliberation - 15 min.
- VI. Reflections - 15 min.

Conversation - Exchanging Thoughts to Engage (15 min.)

In this section, we will review the “Expected Outcomes,” “Conversation Agreements,” and “Introductory Questions” sections together in order to stimulate our exchange of thoughts and perspectives about some of the broader topics and issues that are relevant to today’s topic but will not be the main focus of our D Team meeting.

Expected Outcomes

Given the complexity of this topic, we do not expect to come to any formal agreement or declaration in this conversation. Instead, **our focus** is on deepening our understanding of each other’s perspectives and sharing our own thoughts and feelings. Such understanding is foundational to any effective and meaningful action that we might undertake on this issue. Like

all DCI events, we will be following up with resources for potential actions to take related to this important topic following your discussion.

The DCI has identified several “**deliberative dispositions**” as critical to the success of deliberative enterprises. When participants adopt these dispositions, they are much more likely to feel their deliberations are meaningful, respectful, and productive. Several of the conversation agreements recommended below directly reflect these dispositions, which include a commitment to egalitarianism, open mindedness, empathy, charity, attentiveness, and anticipation, among others. A full list of these dispositions is available at <https://deliberativecitizenship.org/deliberative-dispositions/>.

Conversation Agreements

Participants may volunteer to take turns reading these **conversation agreements** aloud. In entering this discussion and to the best of their abilities, participants all agree to:

1. Be authentic and respectful
2. Be an attentive and active listener
3. Be a purposeful and concise speaker
4. Approach fellow deliberators’ stories, experiences, and arguments with curiosity, not hostility
5. Assume the best - and not the worst - about the intentions and values of others, and avoid snap judgements
6. Recognize that no one has all the answers, and bring intellectual humility to the discussion by asking questions and making space for others to do the same
7. Critique the idea we disagree with, not the person expressing it, and remember to show empathy and grace
8. Note areas of both agreement and disagreement
9. Respect the confidentiality of the discussion
10. Avoid speaking in absolutes (i.e. “All people think this,” or “No educated people hold that view”)

Introductory Questions

Each participant can take 1-2 minutes to share their name, where they live, and what drew them to this conversation, and then answer one of the following questions:

1. What personal identities are most important to you and why?
2. What are your hopes and concerns for your family, community and/or country?
3. What would your best friend say about who you are?
4. What sense of purpose / mission / duty guides you in your life?

Discussion - Mapping Differences to Learn - 15 min.

The past year and a half continued to reveal deep fractures in American politics and society. While most people agree that certain derogatory or hateful language directed towards others is offensive and inappropriate, there is significant disagreement about freedom of speech in the United States and what perspectives should and should not be welcomed in various civil, social, and political settings. Many people are frustrated by groupthink, echo chambers, and the threats of being “cancelled” should they offer a perspective that is not in the majority. At the same time, many others are concerned about misinformation, troubling fringe ideas, and hate speech becoming widespread under the guise of free speech.

In this section, we will have a discussion in which we map the range of opinions and perspectives about the current state of American democracy. We will share our own positions and ideas as well as explore the broader conversations society is having about the future of democracy. Choose any one of the questions below to address.

1. How do the political divisions in our country impact your life at this time? What do you think people can do to help bridge those divides?
2. What do you see as the biggest threat to American democracy today?
3. What fears, if any, do you have about how you will feel or what you will say or do when listening to people whose beliefs or experiences differ from your own?

Dialogue - Engaging Perspectives to Understand - 15 min.

In this section, we will have a dialogue oriented towards revealing and understanding the underlying experiences, interests, assumptions, and values related to both our own ideas about democracy as well as those who may not be present in the room. Choose any one of the questions below to address.

1. What is motivating you to pay attention to or look away from certain political voices?
2. What values are you promoting or seeking to protect in your vision of what American democracy should look like?
3. How do you demonstrate respect for others, while maintaining an ability to speak your mind?
4. How do we balance being political peacemakers and truth-tellers?
5. Do you believe there is room for acceptance of political actions that you disagree with? Why or why not?

Debate - Evaluating Positions to Prioritize - 15 min.

In this section, we will engage in a type of discourse that the DCI identifies as “debate,” but it is not the acrimonious kind we often witness in today’s media. Instead, this form of debate is oriented towards highlighting differences, exposing weaknesses in arguments and evidence,

and identifying which positions are the strongest and best-supported as they relate to the future of democracy. Choose any one of the questions below to address.

1. What do you think are the best ways to create truly inclusive communities where people feel both safe and able to express their divergent perspectives?
2. What do you think people are taking for granted or overlooking in today's meeting? Are there any voices not in the room that would have something different to say?
3. Which perspectives and positions that we've discussed today do you most agree with? Why? What are the strongest arguments for these positions?
4. Which perspectives and positions that we've discussed today do you least agree with? Why? What are the strongest arguments against these positions?

Deliberation - Generating Ideas to Transcend - 15 min.

Despite the challenges and divisions currently facing our country, there is also a growing desire for people to come together across differences and manage the hyper-polarization that has become characteristic of many people's interactions. In this section, we will focus on engaging in deliberation, which is oriented towards building both shared and new understandings of the future of American democracy. These new conceptions will ideally transcend some of our previously-held positions and possibly enable us to generate some innovative collective solutions and policy actions. Choose any one of the questions below to address.

1. On political issues where values appear to be aligned, what common ground solutions would you like to explore?
2. What are some of the features of the kind of political community we, as a group, want to see the country create and work towards?
3. What might both the winners and losers in political elections do to ensure that all people feel a sense of belonging in our democracy?
4. How can you stay connected to others you care about who feel differently about the state of American democracy?

Reflections - 15 min.

While today's conversation is an important step in the journey, creating the political community we want will take time and commitment. Please reflect on the insights from your discussion with your fellow participants today, and then take ~2 minutes each to answer a question below without interruption or crosstalk. After everyone has answered, the group is welcome to take a few minutes for clarifying or follow up questions/responses. Continue exploring additional questions as time allows.

1. Is there a next step you would like to take based upon the conversation you just had?
2. What is one thing you can do to help define and create the political community you would like to see moving forward?

3. What was most meaningful / valuable to you in this conversation?
4. Do you still have concerns about the future of our democracy? If yes, what concerns do you have and why?
5. What learning, new understanding or common ground was found on the topic?
6. How has this conversation changed your perception of anyone in this group, including yourself?
7. Were there any perspectives missing in this conversation? What value might they have added?

About This Guide

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The Deliberative Citizenship Initiative

The Deliberative Citizenship Initiative (DCI) is dedicated to the creation of opportunities for Davidson students, faculty, staff, alumni, and members of the wider community to productively engage with one another on difficult and contentious issues facing our community and society. The DCI regularly hosts facilitated deliberations on a wide range of topics as well as organizes training workshops for deliberation facilitators. To learn more about these opportunities, visit www.deliberativecitizenship.org.

DCI Deliberation Guides

The DCI has launched this series of Deliberation Guides as a foundation for such conversations. They provide both important background information on the topics in question and a specific framework for engaging with these topics. The Guides are designed to be informative without being overwhelming and structured without being inflexible. They cover a range of topics and come in a variety of formats but share several common elements, including opportunities to commit to a shared set of Conversation Agreements, learn about diverse perspectives, and reflect together on the conversation and its yield. The DCI encourages conversations based on these guides to be moderated by a trained facilitator. After each conversation, the DCI also suggests that its associated Pathway Guide be distributed to the conversation's participants.

DCI Pathways Guides

For every Deliberation Guide, the DCI has also developed an associated Pathways Guide, which outlines opportunities for action that participants can consider that are related to the covered topic. These Pathways Guides reinforce the DCI's commitment to an action orientation, a key deliberative disposition. While dialogue and deliberation are themselves important contributors to a healthy democracy, they become even more valuable when they lead to individual or collective action on the key issues facing society. Such action can come in a range of forms and should be broadly understood. It might involve developing a better understanding of a topic, connecting with relevant local or national organizations, generating new approaches to an issue, or deciding to support a particular policy.

If you make use of this guide in a deliberation, please provide attribution to the Deliberative Citizenship Initiative and email dcid@deliberativecitizenship.org to tell us about your event. To access more of our growing library of Deliberation Guides, Pathway Guides and other resources, visit www.deliberativecitizenship.org/readings-and-resources.