

Sensitivity to Student Perceptions in Political Discussions

Before any big election, individuals are likely to have opinions—sometimes strong opinions—about the various topics and candidates on the ballot. In many classes, it is appropriate to discuss both sides of ballot issues relevant to the material in the course outline of record. Other issues may affect the educational environment. In addition, “service learning” projects may involve optional participation in political campaigns, or in projects—such as ecological awareness— that some individuals might perceive as partisan.

Recently, the Professional Ethics and Responsibilities Committee was asked to respond to students working on an article for the *Corsair*. The article addressed faculty members who may or may not have been crossing the line with respect to political speech. The discussion with the reporter illuminated some situations where misunderstandings may occur. Mindfulness regarding these situations, as well as sensitivity to possible student reactions in the face of opinions different from their own can create teaching moments that promote tolerance and strengthen students’ abilities to tolerate ambiguity.

Take the situation where a faculty member wears a political button, supporting a proposition or candidate, to class. Many students believe that professors are not permitted to do this. Wearing a button, however, is allowed “First Amendment speech.” It does not violate Government Code Section 3205, which prohibits government officers from political activity while “wearing a uniform.” As clarified in a recent memo from SMC Executive Vice President Randal Lawson, it is OK for professors to wear buttons to class (see link below).

Nevertheless, it helps to take a moment to think about how students might react to this button:

- Students might think that the professor is an authority and is pressuring the student to think as the professor thinks.
- Students might feel intimidated because they hold an opposite opinion, and may be fearful of letting the professor know how they feel.
- Students might perceive the wearing of the button as invasive, or as “constant” political speech during class.
- Students who (wrongly) believe that it is illegal for professors to wear political buttons might be outraged about the presumed rule breaking, and may even assume that rule-breaking may occur in other arenas as well—testing and grading, for example.
- Students who grew up in environments where it was unsafe to voice an opinion different from an authority may be fearful, resentful or angry, which could disrupt their learning process.
- Students might become aware of the political issues addressed by the instructor’s button, and then seek to become more informed and more likely to vote one way or another (the result that most SMC professors would hope for).

If the button-wearing professor takes a moment to say, “You might notice I am wearing a political button. I am wearing it to let you know that it is an issue that matters to me. Please do not take it personally if you have a different position. I totally respect your right to have a different opinion about this issue. If you like, you can ask me questions after class regarding this matter. I am curious about your thoughts as well.” This might help defuse any misunderstandings.

Any discussion of political matters is made safer for individuals on both sides of the issue if the ground rules of fairness are made clear. If the whole class can collaborate on the **stated intention** to be unbiased and proceed with honor for all individuals and opinions, then every student can feel included and respected.

Keeping things fair is also a legal mandate. According to California Education Code section 7054, section b.(2), if educational discussions of ballot measures are conducted, it is necessary that:

“The information provided constitutes a fair and impartial presentation of relevant facts to aid the electorate in reaching an informed judgment regarding the bond issue or ballot measure.”

As professors in a diverse teaching community, it is a challenge to maintain a detached presence and create a sensitive environment when divisive topics are discussed. Maintaining a safe environment for student learning enhances the ability for everyone to be heard.

Link for further guidelines regarding political speech:

[Memorandum from Executive Vice President Randal Lawson regarding political speech on campus](#)