

Example Format for Community Dialogue

Topic: Trust in Democracy

In the “Good Talks 2024” series, we are working to design good conversations about politics in the run-up to the 2024 general election. The goal is a dialogue – not an adversarial debate, and not an unstructured discussion. Careful scaffolding and planning enables meaningful conversation across difference. This document captures some of our design choices to inspire your own.

Build a Foundation

- *Provide an article, podcast, or video for participants to review.* Everyone will come in with different backgrounds and experiences. At Middlebury, we are starting with short (~15 minute talks to introduce an issue. On 9/10, Professor Bert Johnson will offer an overview. We will [post the recording here](#).
- *Small Group Introductions:* if you have more than 6-8 participants, breaking up into smaller groups will offer more opportunities for dialogue. Have people introduce themselves with a light question – [a suggested list is here](#).
- *Discuss Guidelines for Engagement:* to remind folks that our habits of public dialogue are not always constructive, you can suggest some guidelines and then ask participants to add their own. Some ideas: (1) take turns, (2) don’t interrupt, (3) assume goodwill, (4) listen to understand (not to persuade or respond), and (5) be present (no phones).

Provide Open Discussion Questions

A good question can transform dialogue, promoting curiosity and complexity and preventing personal attacks or debate. Below are the four questions we will ask on 9/10:

1. What is your earliest memory of civic action? What was the outcome of that action?
2. What are 2 or 3 core characteristics that you would expect to see in a democracy?
3. What sorts of trust are necessary for a democracy to function? Trust in neighbors, in government, in political parties, in elected officials, in information? Something else?
4. How do you feel about democracy in the US? What gives you hope? What frustrates you?

Reconvene as a Group

Invite participants to share any new insights, identify information that they still need, or suggest steps for engaging the community or civic leaders.

Additional Resources

Kevin Vallier, *Trust in a polarized age*. Oxford University Press, 2020.
OECD, Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions (2024) ([link](#)).
Living Room Conversations, *Trust In Elections Conversation Guide* ([link](#)).