

# Student and Faculty Leaders Emphasize Political Discourse Leading Up to Election

*News - Eric Bollar '22*

With this year's Election Day overlapping with the pervasive political tension in our nation as well as COVID-19's massive impact on our daily lives, SHP is taking action to ensure that political discourse remains peaceful in our community.

School principal Dr. Jennie Whitcomb emphasized the importance of peaceful discourse in our community, and how students should not focus on "[trying] to 'win' the debate in class." Instead, she hopes that community discussion will give students "a chance to listen to one another and to share [their] experiences both openly and without a desire to provoke discord." Dr. Whitcomb also detailed one notable action taken to maintain peaceful discourse at SHP, namely "[the updating of] the school's 2018 Peaceful Discourse Pledge to integrate ... language from the Civilize It Pledge," an initiative of the US Council of Catholic Bishops.

Furthermore, Ms. Lauren Benjamin, Assistant Principal of Mission and Culture, who is not only involved in the classroom but also in many student groups, noted how students have been very involved in the Peaceful Discourse Pledge in the past. Ms. Benjamin says that peaceful discourse is about "promoting a ... shared understanding" and that political discourse is "not a game; it's not about taking sides or [being a] winner or loser." Both she and Dr. Whitcomb want to ensure that students realize the impact that these discussions have on others in our community. Trying to belittle those with opposing viewpoints does not align with SHP's goals and values. Ms. Benjamin explains that

everyone's perspectives and experiences are different: "there's multiple truths; there is not one right or wrong answer." SHP faculty members want to encourage everyone to speak their mind while still being mindful of how their words might affect others.

At the student level, different groups and clubs that focus primarily on politics aim to keep civility between students. SURJ, while not a political group, is a new organization this year that aims to create a space for discussion. Anne-Sophie Lacombe '21, a leader of SURJ, listed several rules that the club has implemented for meetings, including that one should "speak from the 'I perspective,' lean into discomfort ... and listen, listen, listen, then speak." These rules for discussion encourage members to actively hear what others with different viewpoints are saying and to build the conversation in a positive way. Similarly, Theodore Purcell '21, a leader of SHPPolitics, states that the significance of peaceful discourse in their club is so vital to them that they "[begin] their first meeting with a discussion ... about it."

Both groups are taking steps towards preventing any unproductive, hostile dialogue. However, both leaders also emphasized the importance of diversity of thought. Anne-Sophie continued by stressing how necessary it is for SURJ to "have different opinions," and how their space is a place designed for one to "[discuss] one's own experiences in a group of people with a similar identity factor." For SHPPolitics, Teddy said that in the current times, "it has never been more important to include students of all

political viewpoints." Overall, the message for both groups is to promote social unity through peaceful discourse while welcoming and even encouraging multiple, diverse viewpoints.

In anticipation of the outcome of the election, SURJ and SHPPolitics are preparing for any candidate to win. Anne-Sophie mentioned providing "safe spaces for people to talk ... and give students the opportunity to connect" while Teddy likewise noted the club's plan to "[allow] open, free flowing discussion about the election." However, the shift to online learning has created many challenges for these groups. Having a club meeting over Zoom is not nearly as engaging or interactive as meeting face to face. Anne-Sophie hopes that "even through Zoom meetings, students will feel like they have a space where they can feel comfortable and accepted." Teddy echoes that "the online format has a significant effect on [their] ability to thrive as a club" as "discussions are always more effective in person." However, the two groups will still seek to engage in insightful conversation despite shifting to an online format.

Both at the student and faculty level, leaders of the SHP community are implementing ways to maintain peaceful discourse between students with differing political views during this tense time leading up to this year's Election Day. While efforts will certainly be focused on the political groups that students can join, peaceful discourse will be prioritized in classroom and extracurricular activities in order to make sure that the community approaches the election in a unified manner.