

BUILDING **thriving** COMMUNITIES

community conversations: a facilitator discussion guide on civic engagement



Virginia Sexual and Domestic Violence
ACTION ALLIANCE

community conversations: a facilitator discussion guide on civic engagement

audience for this guide

The audience for this discussion guide is eligible voters across Virginia. We seek to use the Action Alliance membership as a vehicle for reaching survivors and community members more broadly to discuss and inspire civic engagement throughout the Commonwealth.

overview and purpose

The Building Thriving Communities campaign was designed to transform Virginia communities through increasing public participation in the formation of public policy that promotes healthy communities. We seek to accomplish this by building authentic connections between people, across differences, and around issues that make communities healthy, safe, just, and compassionate for all. We believe that through ongoing education and critical discussions focused on engaged citizenship, democracy, and power, we can invest in outcomes that shape positive change for communities, families, children, and individuals.

This conversation guide is designed for use in small group settings ranging from formal and structured (a workshop or support group) to informal social gatherings (a dinner with neighbors, a walk with friends and family). This guide is intended to support those who want to start an informed discussion.

facilitator tips for transformative conversations

Facilitating a supportive and meaningful conversation takes intention. This is especially true when talking about topics like power, justice, and access and when working with community members who may have experienced sexual or intimate partner violence. Take a moment to prepare for this discussion by looking through the following tips.

Find out who's who.

It's always a good idea to make sure everyone knows one another. If you are bringing folks together who may not know one another, take a few moments to have everyone introduce themselves. People are more likely to engage if you take a few minutes at the beginning of your discussion to break the ice.

Ask about pronouns.

It's important to refer to participants (and everyone else) in the way that feels best for them.

In the English language we use gendered pronouns in place of people's names (they/them, she/her, he/him, etc.). Rather than make assumptions about the pronouns people use, just ask! When introducing yourself to the group say something like, "Hi everyone! My name is ____ and I use _____ (they/them, she/her, he/him, etc.) pronouns. Can we go around the room so I can hear your names and pronouns too?" For more information about pronouns and their importance please refer to: mypronouns.org.

Use group agreements.

Group agreements ensure that everyone can participate and has clear expectations. Survivors (and many community members!) are often bombarded with rules on how they can and cannot move through spaces that can be oppressive. Group agreements are a great tool to empower people to name the ways they can collectively make the space feel best for themselves and create a structure for accountability. Some example group agreements include:

- One diva, one mic (when one person talks, others listen).
- Be present.
- What's said here stays here, what's learned here leaves here.
- Seek to understand before being understood.
- Suspend judgment and listen and contribute openly – without losing ourselves in the process.
- Listen for insights and solutions that bridge or transcend the core tensions that divide us (move from either/or to both/and), and in the process find new perspective that may uncover unexpected solutions.
- Bring deep honesty, curiosity, and openness so that we ourselves are changed and impacted.

Embrace Curiosity.

Transformative movement conversations require being okay with exploring the unknown and choosing to believe that there is a path forward. We can do this through engagement with different perspectives, by being courageous enough to create space for differing views, by being open to new perspectives, by being in touch with and aware of our discomfort, and by allowing for transformative change to occur. The big thing to remember is that conversations are a way forward. You can use this opportunity to have meaningful conversations with one another!

Ask reflective questions and dig deeper.

This guide provides some questions to guide your conversations – encourage folks to reflect on their teammate's thoughts and reactions – and to focus on the conversation moving towards collective hopes and visions. This is best achieved by reflecting what you've heard in discussion (i.e. "So what it sounds like you're saying is this...") and asking simple, reflective questions like "I wonder why that is" or "How does that make you feel?" Ask further questions to find nuances and see the bigger picture. Encourage folks to allow the conversation to deepen – encourage them to listen to the opinions and thoughts that are different from theirs – to seek understanding of those perspectives, even when they don't agree.

Use your superpower(s).

Conversations about power and politics can be passionate and can even become heated at times. But as advocates and healers, we have a unique set of skills and superpowers in our toolbox that allow us to recognize when things might be getting tense and to respond with validation, support, and grounding techniques. If you feel a conversation becoming tense, you can help the group breathe through it. You can always hit “pause” and address what’s happening from a place of curiosity and compassion. Remember to practice active listening, reflection, and to support one another in feeling comfortable and grounded as you move through these discussions.

Remember to provide closure.

Be sure to end with asking the group for appreciations, insights, and unanswered questions. This helps people read the temperature in the room, wrap up on a note of appreciation and connection to others in the room, and it provides the facilitator with a sense of what questions might still need answering.

Make this guide your own.

You know your community best! Have fun, change things up, and experiment the best way to communicate these values.

citizen power: a discussion on building thriving communities (90 mins.)

objective: The goal of this exercise is for people to investigate what civic engagement and voting mean in the context of building thriving communities. This is done by breaking down the components of engaged citizenship – voice, empowerment, education, and voting - into smaller pieces and discussing each. This is designed to provide many opportunities for dialogue on what community-lead policy priorities might look like, what involved and empowered citizenship means, and how voting is an essential part of building the world that we want to see.

materials needed: Flip-chart/Newsprint paper, markers, crayons and/or colored pencils, technology (phone, computer, laptop) to play or listen to TED talk video, handout for participants (included in this toolkit).

a. reflection & sharing: democracy (20 mins.)

Source: Daring Democracy Discussion Guide from the Unitarian Universalist Association: http://www.beacon.org/Assets/PDFs/UUACCommonReadDiscussionGuide_DaringDemocracy.pdf

• **Ask the group: *What is your first memory of participating in democracy?***

Invite participants to take a moment to reflect on their own democratic life, its beginnings. Say that they may close their eyes, if they wish, while you guide their reflection. Then say:

When, where, and how did you first participate in democracy? When we think about democracy, we often think about voting, or maybe we think of something else. What was the first time you remember being that you were experiencing democracy? What messages from growing up in your family and community brought you to that experience?

If the group needs a bit more guidance about what “democracy” might mean, here is an optional quote to read aloud:

“Humans thrive best when the communities we create enable each of us, not just a privileged few, to experience a sense of power (that is, agency or simply knowing that our voices count), a sense that our lives have meaning beyond our own survival, and that we have a satisfying connection with others. Add those together, and what do you have? The essence of democracy” (Daring Democracy, page 102).

You can ask participants to pair up or reflect on their own with paper and pen if they prefer.

Tell them they will have four minutes for reflection either on their own or with a partner (two minutes each), and then the option to share with the larger group.

You might sound a chime to begin the time of reflection. Let pairs know when two minutes have passed so they can switch speakers. After four minutes, regather the group and invite several volunteers to tell a brief version of their democracy story.

If you have time, use these questions to go more deeply into participants’ stories:

- What obstacles were involved? What opportunities?
- What did you feel?
- Do you recall feeling heard? Unheard?
- What did you believe about the system? (Fair? Effective? Wonderful? Flawed? Confusing?)

Now invite participants to return to their partner (or pen and paper) to reflect on their democratic journey since the time of the story they recalled. How have their early messages and first experiences of democracy borne out? What has changed?

You can sound a chime to begin, and again at two minutes so pairs can switch speakers. After four minutes, regather the group. Invite volunteers to comment.

b. voting: democracy in action (20 mins.)

Explain that for many, participating in democracy means voting. And while there’s certainly more to it than this, we’re going to spend just a little time discussing our elected officials, what decisions they make, and how voting for them works. First, we’ll start with a little power-mapping exercise....

- **Ask the group: *What are some elected positions, in your community, in the state, and nationally, that you can vote for?***

Write the group’s responses up on flip-chart paper under the following categories or groupings: Federal, State, City, County. You can use the below cheat sheet to fill in other positions that aren’t mentioned by the group.

<p>Federal: President U.S. Senators U.S. House of Representatives Congresspeople</p>	<p>State: Governor Lt. Governor Attorney General Delegates State Senators</p>
<p>City: City Council Mayor Sheriff Treasurer Commonwealth’s Attorney School board Clerk of Circuit Court</p>	<p>County: Board of Supervisors School Board Sheriff Clerk of Circuit Court Commonwealth’s Attorney</p>

- **Ask the group: *What are some examples of decisions that are made by these elected officials?***

Again, write these responses up on sticky notes and try to group these answers by the position or level of government with which they apply.

Examples might include:

- Filling potholes or funding roads and infrastructure in your community (City and State mostly)
- Decisions about criminal justice and responses to harm (City, County, State, and Federal – Commonwealth’s Attorneys, Prosecutors, etc.)
- Military spending (Federal)
- Funding for education/schools (Federal, State, County, and City), etc.

The bottom line is this: All the decisions from where our resources are spent to how the criminal justice system will respond to harm to how to plow snow or where to fill a pothole or maybe even building a new bike-lane are decisions made by those officials who we elect when we go to the polls. So, when we as communities come together to articulate a new or maybe different vision for how to do any of these things, we have the power to make that happen through supporting candidates that share our visions and values. And we have the power to do that through voting those candidates into positions of power and holding them and their colleagues accountable to the voting power of our communities.

• **Ask the group: *Does anyone know how often elections are held in Virginia?***

Answer: there are 95 counties and 38 independent cities in Virginia, multiply these positions by those numbers, and it's no wonder every year is an election year in Virginia. So, it's important to know as much as we can about voting so we can make sure that our input/voice is counted.

So, let's talk a little bit more about **VOTING**. Provide group with **Voting Basics Handout** (page 9 of the Building Thriving Communities Toolkit).

Give the group a few moments to read through the Voting Basics Handout. Ask them to make notes on the handout or in a notebook just flagging those items that they're learning for the first time or that they're finding surprising.

Voter registration: the basics

Remember, you can't vote unless you're registered! To register in Virginia, you must:

- be a citizen of the United States;
- be a resident of Virginia and of the precinct in which you want to vote;
- be 18 years old by the next general election;
- not have been convicted of a felony, or have had your civil rights restored; and
- not currently be declared incapacitated by a court.

If you want to...

- Check on your voter registration status
- Update your voter information, address, etc.
- Register to vote for an election
- Apply for absentee voting
- Find your polling place
- See your voting history

**You can do all of this
by visiting:**

**[https://vote.elections.virginia.gov/
VoterInformation](https://vote.elections.virginia.gov/VoterInformation)**

What documents do you need? When submitting a voter registration application, no additional documents are required for your registration to be processed. The state confirms your citizenship and eligibility through the information provided on your registration form, such as your state-issued license/ID number or the last 4 digits of your SSN.

When you show up to vote at your polling place, you will need a photo I.D. in the form of:

- Virginia Driver's License or other photo ID issued by Virginia
- US Passport
- Any government-issued photo ID card (issued by the US Government, Commonwealth of Virginia, or a political subdivision of the Commonwealth)
- Student ID that has a photograph and that was issued by any institution of higher learning in Virginia
- Student ID issued by a public or private school in VA displaying a photo
- Employee ID card that has a photograph and that was issued by the employer in the ordinary course of business
- Valid Virginia DMV issued Veteran's ID card
- Tribal enrollment or other tribal ID issued by one of the 11 tribes recognized by the Commonwealth of Virginia

You do not need to register with a political party. In Virginia strict party affiliation is not required in order to vote in a primary or general election however you can only vote in 1 party's primary, not both. To vote in a party primary you need to visit your polling place. They will ask which primary you want to vote in and there you can request your intended party's ballot to cast your vote.

Discuss the voting process

- Address privacy
- Laws around IDs
- Procedures in polling place
- Go over Sample ballot
- You can vote for one office (or all! or none!)

c. understanding power and engaged citizenship (4 mins.)

***Note for facilitators:** This portion of the discussion requires watching a video. As the facilitator, you should watch the video ahead of time and determine where or if you'd like to cut the video off at a certain point. You can choose to facilitate a discussion on one of the two following videos:

How to Understand Power (7 mins): <https://ed.ted.com/lessons/how-to-understand-power-eric-liu>
Turning protest into powerful change (5 mins): <https://ed.ted.com/lessons/how-to-turn-protest-in-to-powerful-change-eric-liu>

Begin this section by asking the group the following questions and discussing the answers (you can write answers on newsprint/flip-charts or you can keep mental track of any themes that may emerge):

Ask: What does this quote mean to you? What feelings or thoughts does it bring up for you?

- *Where in your life do you feel like you have power? Or powerlessness? How does this show up and does this ever change?*
- *Where do you think power comes from?*

Watch video on Power <https://ed.ted.com/lessons/how-to-understand-power-eric-liu> or **video on turning protest into change** <https://ed.ted.com/lessons/how-to-turn-protest-into-powerful-change-eric-liu>

Ask the group: What are your thoughts on the video you just watched. Did this resonate?

Ask the group to think back to the earlier discussion on what types of decisions are made by which elected positions... Now ask the following questions: What are some issues that you want to see changed in your life? Or in your community?

Examples of ideas that a group might generate or that a facilitator can prompt:

- Everyone should have control of their own reproductive health, their ability to create and support families, etc.
- Everyone should have access to jobs that pay enough for them to survive and meet basic needs.
- Children should be safe in schools.
- Everyone should have access to healthcare and/or health insurance.
- Everyone should have access to clean water.

Pair and share activity: Once you have a few issue areas identified, ask the group to split into pairs or smaller groups of 2-4. Then assign a different issue area to each group (i.e. Group A: clean water, Group B: safe schools, etc.) and ask them to consider the various ways that they might go about building power and influencing decisions and decision-makers on this issue.

Give the pairs or small groups 5-7 minutes to discuss this and then bring everyone back together to share out about the ideas that were generated and discussions that took place.

***Note for facilitators**

- Remember that ALL politics is local and the personal IS political.
- Call back to video that the group watched and note that we can achieve radical shifts in policy and in those resources and decisions that impact our communities as a direct result

- of citizen power/engagement.
- Note the historical impact that communities of color, women, and survivors of violence in particular have had in shaping policies and practices that move the needle closer towards justice.

Campaign sticker/button design activity: Ask the pairs or small groups to stay where they are and provide the instruction that they will have 2 minutes to come up with a design concept for a campaign sticker or button on the issue that they've been discussing. Let them know that after this, they will have 5 minutes to illustrate their sticker or button using art materials provided (colored pencils, markers, old magazines, etc.)

- If time allows, invite pairs or groups to share their campaigns/designs when they are finished.

d. closing and final thoughts (5 mins.)

Thank everyone for participating in this discussion on voting, engagement, and power and ask them if there are any final thoughts or lingering ideas to share with the group. Provide any local resources, further reading, or relevant options for participants to remain active and engaged with this work and with your organization.

voting basics

remember, you can't vote unless you're registered!

to register in Virginia, you must...

- be a citizen of the United States;
- be a resident of Virginia and of the precinct in which you want to vote;
- be 18 years old by the next general election;
- not have been convicted of a felony, or have had your civil rights restored; and
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if you want to...

- Check on your voter registration status
- Update your voter information, address, etc.
- Register to vote for an election
- Apply for absentee voting
- Find your polling place
- See your voting history

...You can do all of this by visiting: <https://vote.elections.virginia.gov/VoterInformation> or by visiting your local library or city or town hall.

Most community libraries have voter registration forms for public use.

Do I need to register with a political party?

No. In Virginia strict party affiliation is not required in order to vote in a primary or general election; however, you can only vote in 1 party's primary, not both. To vote in a party primary you need to visit your polling place. They will ask which primary you want to vote in and there you can request your intended party's ballot to cast your vote.

what documents do I need to register to vote...and to vote on election day?

When submitting a voter registration application, no additional documents are required for your registration to be processed. The state confirms your citizenship and eligibility through the information provided on your registration form, such as your state-issued license/ID number or the last 4 digits of your Social Security number.

When you show up to vote at your polling place, you will need a photo I.D. in the form of:

- Virginia Driver's License or other photo ID issued by Virginia
- US Passport
- Any government-issued photo ID card (issued by the US Government, Commonwealth of Virginia, or a political subdivision of the Commonwealth)
- Student ID that has a photograph and that was issued by any institution of higher learning in Virginia
- Student ID issued by a public or private school in Virginia displaying a photo
- Employee ID card that has a photograph and that was issued by the employer in the ordinary course of business
- Valid Virginia DMV issued Veteran's ID card
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If I'm in line when the polls close, can I still vote?

Yes! You have the right to vote if you are in line by 7 p.m. when the polls close. (Va. Code §24.2-603)

Can I wear campaign apparel when going to vote?

Yes! You are allowed to wear apparel and buttons or stickers that contain a candidate's name or a political slogan to the polls. (Va. Code §24.2-604(J))

What if I need instructions on how to use the voting equipment?

Ask a poll worker for help. Poll workers are required to assist you at any time you ask, even if you have entered the voting booth. (Va. Code §24.2-647)

What if someone challenges my eligibility to vote even though I am on the list of registered voters?

Ask for the Affirmation of Eligibility form. You have the right to vote if you sign this form. (Va. Code §24.2-651, -651.1)

What if I believe I am registered, but a poll worker says I am not?

Ask the poll worker to contact the local registrar. If the registrar is unavailable or cannot find your name, ask for a provisional ballot. You have the right to cast a provisional ballot even if your name is not on the voter list. However, know that your ballot may not be counted if the Board of Elections finds no record of your registration. (Va. Code §24.2-652, -653)

What should I do if I make a mistake on a paper ballot, or the machine malfunctions?

Do not cast your ballot! Ask for a replacement ballot immediately. You have a right to as many replacement ballots as you need. (Va. Code §24.2-645). If your machine malfunctions, inform a poll worker who will direct you to a different machine or give you a paper ballot. (Va. Code §24.2-642, §24.2-646.1)

What if I need help in the voting booth because of a physical disability or I have trouble reading or writing?

Ask a poll worker for a Request for Assistance form. You have the right to have a poll worker, friend, or relative help you in the voting booth if you sign this form. (Va. Code §24.2-649 (B)). If you think it will be difficult to vote inside the polling place, you have the right to vote curbside. On Election Day, if you are 65 or older or physically disabled, you can send someone into the polling place to request curbside voting on your behalf. Poll workers will bring a ballot or voting machine outside so you can vote. (Va. Code §24.2-649 (A))

What if I need language assistance?

You have the right to bring someone who can translate the ballot and help you communicate with poll workers. (Va. Code §24.2-649 (C)) (Note: Fairfax County is required to provide ballots, election materials and assistance in Spanish. Ask the poll worker for help in Spanish.)

* Some of this information has been provided by the ACLU of Virginia's voter empowerment card 2018: https://acluva.org/sites/default/files/field_documents/2018_voter_empowerment_card_english_final.pdf

all that you touch
you change

all that you change
changes you

~ octavia butler

