

## Take a Stand: Human Barometer Activity

**Objective:** Students will have an opportunity to reflect on and share personal values and/or beliefs about social issues and topics of national as well as international concern. They will also have an opportunity to share why these issues are important to them (and society) by sharing their rationale for choosing a particular stance. This activity is inspired by *Facing History and Ourselves* “[Barometer-Taking a Stand on Controversial Issues](http://www.facinghistory.org/resources/strategies/barometer-taking-stand-contro),” [<http://www.facinghistory.org/resources/strategies/barometer-taking-stand-contro>].

**Suggested Time:** 20-25 minutes

**Materials:** legible, large print signs that read “agree,” “disagree,” and “undecided,” tape or an adhesive to attach signs to walls, and a designated space where students may form a line.

**Warm Up:** Gauge students’ maturity level, responses, and the classroom climate before engaging in this activity. If students are mature and possess the ability to engage in critical, honest self-reflection, proceed with the following exercise. This exercise asks students to seriously and critically consider where they stand on social topics of national and/or international concern.

**Instructions:** Explain to students that they may excuse themselves from the exercise at any time. However, if they choose to participate, they must respect the opinion and presence of others. Also stress that a student’s racial/ethnic background will not be used as grounds to disqualify them for participating in the exercise.

Prior to engaging in this activity, create a path or open space that spans from one side of the room to another that is free of chairs, desks, and any other type of furniture. This is needed so that students may form a line. On one side of the room place an “Agree” sign in large, legible print and on the opposite side of the room place the sign “Disagree.” Explain to students that they may choose to stand on either side of the room based on how they feel about the topic/sentence that is read aloud. If they neither “Agree” nor “Disagree,” explain that they may stand in the middle of the room and to indicate that they are “undecided.”

To help students understand that they are expected to take some type of stance, have them practice choosing sides or taking a stance based on sample questions. For example, “public schooling should be mandatory for all students.” Ask students to choose “agree,” “disagree” or “neutral.” Afterward, ask some students why they chose a particular side or are “undecided.” It may work best to have a people with differing opinions to share. Explain that students are free to change they minds and move to another side of the room.

Note: There are sample statements listed below to help you conduct the exercise. Please feel free to modify the statement or make your own. It may help to start with less emotionally charged and/or heated statement and gradually move to more difficult ones as the exercise progresses.

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## Sample Statements about Social Issues and Freedom Summer

- In today's society, schools in America strive to provide equal representation and rights to everyone.
- Voting privileges should be extended to everyone who is in America regardless of citizenship status.
- Freedom Summer was effective/ineffective in achieving its goals.
- White volunteers were needed in order to help legitimize the struggles of blacks in Mississippi during the 1964 Freedom Summer Project.
- Requiring that volunteers under the age of 21 secure parental permission to participate in Freedom Summer limited young people's freedom.
- If a project of similar scale was conducted today, college students should be at the forefront because they possess the intellectual capability and clout to provide legitimacy and widespread attention to issues of local, national, or international concern.

*Author's Note: I used this activity during discussion session for an introductory college course. Students appreciated the activity because everyone had an opportunity to participate. However, as the questions that were asked progressively got more detailed and personal, I sensed that some students became uncomfortable. One instance in particular remains with me. I read the statement "Religion should be taught in school." Two students were very vocal in their opinions, which differed. Their peers eagerly watched to see how the dialogue would continue. Please keep in mind that this activity only asks that students share why they took a particular stance and not a debate. I allowed the two students to continue in conversation about the statement. However, in hindsight, I realize that this may not have been the right approach (especially for a topic that involves a highly debatable topic such as religion. As such, if this does occur, it may help to allow for one-on-one or full class discussion following the activity. It also helps to ask if students are in a safe place and/or space before conducting that activity and at the activity's conclusion.*

