



Member Spotlight: Amel Ahmed Fosters Civic Engagement on Campus Ahead of 2024 Election

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In September, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst introduced [Democracy in Troubled Times](#), an innovative campus initiative designed to promote civic engagement, resilience, and open dialogue leading up to and following the 2024 presidential election. Through a speaker series, structured discussions, and civic engagement activities, the initiative seeks to establish a framework for meaningful discourse on campus. Political science professor [Amel Ahmed](#), who directs the initiative, discussed her research and how it led to developing the initiative. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Q&A with Amel Ahmed

You've been studying democracy and electoral systems for a while. What initially got you interested in this field?

That is a historical question at this point. I didn't start off focusing on this area. I kind of stumbled into it in grad school when I discovered my love for history, particularly the history of democracy. It's a story that's not often told, and I'm not alone in pursuing this—there was a group of us who revived interest in studying democratization. The field had been a bit dormant, but we began looking more closely at processes in Europe and the U.S. For me, the focus became institutional origins, where these institutions came from. I find that history helps to denaturalize the present. We tend to think certain things are normal, but history shows how much they've radically shifted over time.

I'm teaching a class on democracy in America, about the right to vote rights, and students were absolutely stunned to learn how unstable and contested those rights have been throughout U.S. history. It's a reminder that the things we take for granted often have complex and contentious origins.

Have your perspectives or areas of focus changed over time?

Yes, it's an "all hands on deck" situation with the study of democracy. I've turned my attention, both in my research and public engagement, to the challenges democracy is facing today. And I've taken a bit of a

dissenting view that while today's situation is unique in some ways, it's not entirely unprecedented. A lot of what we're seeing now are new versions of older fights over the rules of the game. And one of the arguments I make in my forthcoming book is that this current regime contention isn't new. We're fighting similar battles we've fought in previous eras, just in different forms. But I think identifying that trajectory so we can address both the old and new challenges of democracy is really important. So, I focus my attention much more on the present. Terms like "backsliding" get thrown around, but we need to ask whether we were tracking these imperfections closely enough in the first place.

Let's talk about the initiative you're leading at UMass Amherst, Democracy in Troubled Times. Can you give us an overview of what it's about and its goals?

The initiative launched on September 17th, Constitution Day. We started building it around this time last year. A group of faculty from social and behavioral sciences, along with leadership and staff in the college, came together, anticipating a pretty challenging fall and spring on campus. We tried to figure out what we could do and what we could put in place. But in putting it together, it has broadened, bringing together different components and turning into a solid foundation for campus institutions. It has evolved beyond just having some speakers on campus into its own dynamic model to integrate our learning expertise across the campus and reach audiences who want to benefit from this, even if they're not in our specific area.

The initiative is designed to engage the campus and broader community in dialogue and reflection about the challenges democracy is facing in the U.S. and elsewhere. I wanted to create a model that wasn't just abstract, especially given the challenges we face on our campus. One of the key ideas we focus on is "democratic contention"—the idea that we disagree on many things, including what democracy even is. This disagreement can feel disempowering and paralyzing. Rules that you thought were fixed are being contested, and ideas that you believed in are being unsettled. The goal is to embrace this contention and disagreement but still enable action.

Another important thing is to encourage a "reflexive civic education." Civic education often involves someone telling you what democracy is and how to participate, but as a democracy scholar, I'm not comfortable doing that. Instead, I start the conversation by acknowledging that we don't agree about what democracy is. How can we have a conversation? One key point we've emphasized is that we don't have to agree, but our activities have to promote understanding.

How is this initiative structured and how has it been received?

We've really worked on creating an integrated model, combining curricular offerings, co-curricular opportunities, and engagement events. One key part of this has been the speaker series, which has been phenomenal. But we wanted it to have more of an impact for students—we engaged with faculty to incorporate the speakers' works and lectures into their syllabi. We got a lot of faculty buy-in across

departments, which has really amplified the initiative's impact. We've also offered civic engagement opportunities and encouraged faculty to give students credit for participating. The idea is to incentivize students to get involved and to support faculty and staff as they navigate these uncertain times.

For example, we're putting together resources for faculty, especially with big events like elections. Faculty across the university—not just in political science—will have to decide how to address the elections. Do they acknowledge it or just carry on with business as usual? We're offering structures and resources to help faculty navigate these moments, express care for their students, and, if they choose, engage in the topic in a meaningful way. It's also important to recognize that faculty and staff are experiencing this as well. So, we're providing forums where they can check in, share exchanges, and get support.

Tell us more about the speaker series. What have been some highlights?

We have Danielle Allen coming on Monday, which is a highlight. She's going to be talking about, "How to be a Confident Pluralist," and I'm very excited for people to engage with this topic. Pluralism is under serious challenge right now and Dr. Allen's talk is so timely. For me, pluralism in democratic politics is this recognition that we may not agree on what is the common good. It's not the same as multiculturalism, which is more about diversity in culture or identity. Instead, pluralism acknowledges that we have very different perspectives on what constitutes the common good, and that's okay. The idea goes back to thinkers like Max Weber and Joseph Schumpeter, and I don't fully agree with their views on everything, the key point in modern political orders is to govern ourselves without necessarily agreeing on what's best for everyone.

The pluralist model accepts these differences and settles them through competition. Populism, on the other hand, tends to push for a single, unified answer. And so I think one of the key points we've been trying to highlight is that these fights that we have—democratic contention or disagreement—these are not bad things. This is the stuff of politics. And politics is good. Politics is what allows us as a nation of over 300 million people to live together, and democratic politics allows us to live together better.

Beyond the speaker series, you mentioned civic engagement activities. What do those entail?

The different components we've identified are Learn, Reflect, and Act. Most of our engagement activities fall under Act. They're designed to encourage dialogue on our campus, particularly around issues like free speech, dissent, and voice, which many campuses are struggling with. The first component is called "Voice & Dissent." It's an invitation to anyone on campus to submit a view—up to 400 words—on something that they believe is unpopular or underrepresented. We post these without editing or commentary.

Another is called "Can We Talk About Politics?" These are structured, facilitated conversations about what political conversations are and what they do. We try to help people understand that political conversations are unique and serve a critical purpose in a democracy. We find that people either avoid talking about politics entirely or they go in ready for battle. One key takeaway is that talking politics with your neighbor or

roommate isn't going to achieve a political objective. Instead, it helps deepen your understanding of different viewpoints. The goal is to reframe how people think about these conversations.

Finally, the component that is more recognizable in terms of civic engagement is called "Mobilize, Organize." A lot of effort has gone into voter mobilization and registration, but we try to think about it more broadly to think about other avenues for organizing. Several of our panels have been about union organizing and the place of unions within democracy. We've brought in many of our campus unions to engage with students and offer opportunities to learn more about that kind of activism. And we're in the process of engaging local organizations—whether civic, legal, or workers' groups—as a way of giving people an opportunity to plug in.

What impacts have you seen so far on students and the community because of this initiative?

There's been a lot of enthusiasm for it. One impact is that students are attending things, which, honestly, post-COVID has been a real challenge. Engaging students on campus has been a struggle. There's been a very high level of participation, which is really heartening. These students are very engaged and care deeply about what's happening around them. We have a very diverse campus—ideologically, socially, racially, and ethnically—and they're coming to these events with open minds.

The entire initiative has been leading up to Election Day, but the focus isn't solely on the elections itself. I've been trying to emphasize the message of resilience. Regardless of the election results, we all have to get up the next day and keep working toward what we think is important. The goal is to prepare students for the day after the election. Acknowledging that there may still be some uncertainty, but how do we prepare ourselves? And how do we make sure that we don't either collapse in victory or collapse in defeat? What does resilience look like? In many ways, I've taken on the role of part therapist, part cheerleader, trying to make sure we are okay and that we continue the important work to do here.

How do you see this initiative evolving in the future?

Post-election, I'm sure there's going to be more conversations to help people center themselves. We're already having discussions about how to institutionalize this initiative because it's clear it fills a specific need on campus. The expertise coming out of the social sciences is usually not well harnessed by universities, and this initiative has highlighted how important that is.

We have been collaborating with various offices, including the Chancellor's and the Provost's offices, to provide guidance on how faculty can navigate post-election discussions. This has also expanded to broader conversations—how faculty can address any major events in the world and how they can ground themselves before addressing these issues with students. It's about more than just elections; it's about equipping faculty and students to handle whatever comes next.

The course that I'm teaching right now is very deeply integrated into the initiative, and it's been fantastic. I'm hoping that we can continue using it as a model for how to integrate curricular and co-curricular offerings and engagement opportunities. So, all that is to say, I'm not exactly sure where it's going because it's like we are kind of building the plane as we're flying it. But there is broad recognition that this initiative is fulfilling a need we didn't fully realize before.

AMEL AHMED

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Ahmed's main area of expertise is the study of democratic institutions and particularly electoral systems. She is especially interested in how the "rules of the game" affect democratic outcomes: who participates; how influential certain groups are; and what are the policy consequences of these two issues. She studies the development of electoral systems historically to see how the mechanics of democracy can impact the substance of democratic politics. This research illustrates that even small shifts in voting rules; districting decisions; and electoral systems can have a significant impact – not just on who wins and who loses; but also on who gets to play the game.