

Election Day De-escalation

by Lauren Natale



*For Election Officials, Poll Greeters,
Voter Advocates, and Poll Observers*

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Our goals/ rolls:

- Every eligible voter can vote.
- Make the polling place streamlined and welcoming.
- Provide information and assistance as needed.

NOT our goals/ rolls:

- We will not be changing any minds.
- We do not need to “win” any arguments.
- We do not make ANY eligible voter feel unwelcome.

Understanding escalation

People bring a lot of baggage to the polls. Here are a few reasons someone may forget how to act on Election Day:

- **Patriotism.** People care deeply about their country. Elections can feel do-or-die, especially for those who have integrated their political beliefs as a core component of their identity.
- **Prejudice.** Hate groups work hard to dehumanize their defined “other” in the public eye, making it seem okay to intimidate or harm members of that group.
- **Anxiety.** Individuals who feel victimized by hate can become scared, defensive, and angry very easily.
- **Lies.** Misinformation has caused many people to doubt the security of our elections.
- **Clumsiness.** Political conversation is often considered taboo, so people have limited experience discussing politics IRL. Online troll culture does not help.

Anyone can de-escalate

You do not have to be a saint or a hostage negotiator to diffuse tensions. Just remember a few simple (and intuitive!) strategies.

Empathy is the key! Remember the Golden Rule: treat everyone as you would have them treat you. If you are in doubt as to what to do, imagine how you’d like to be treated when you’re upset.

In 99% of cases, agitated people expect to be treated as an enemy. Respect surprises them and deprives them of the adversary they anticipated.

Set a positive tone

- Be aware of your facial expression (keep a smile on your face as long as appropriate).
- Make it your goal to greet everyone, regardless of what they look like.
- Treat everyone with equal respect.

Remain calm

- Check in with yourself often and take breaks if needed.
- Breathe deeply and slowly.

Make space for big feelings

- Do not gang up on anyone. Communicate with your fellow poll workers on who feels ready to de-escalate.
- Those who hang back should film interactions as subtly as possible.
- Stand no closer than 2 arm-lengths from anyone who seems agitated.
- Keep an open, non-threatening posture. Hands by your sides or gently gesticulating.
- Remove yourself and others to safety and call professionals in case of violence.

Keep things moving

- Ignore over-the-shoulder remarks.
- Assist if there is a solvable issue.
- Opt out of debate, *"You pose interesting questions, deserving in-depth conversation, but I have to fill X roll right now."*

Remember humanity

- Your lanyard can make people view you as a representation of an idea, rather than a human.
- Mark each other as people by introducing yourself.

Head off danger

- Use your privilege to shield others.
- Avoid calling in police unless there is an imminent threat of violence.

Help them feel heard

- Ask open-ended questions, *"How can I help?"*
- Allow them to finish speaking.
- Check your own emotions before responding.
- Use a quieter volume than they used, measured speech, and low tones.
- Acknowledge their struggle, *"That would have me worried too."*
- Rephrase and repeat back what they said, *"You're concerned about election security."*
- Or simply, *"I hear you."*
- Let them know how their concern is being addressed, *"Virginia requires a social security number to register and government ID to vote."*
- Look for commonalities, *"You're a veteran? So am I!"* or just, *"It sounds like you care deeply about our country. I can appreciate that, as I do too."*
- Be honest.

When in doubt, remember the Golden Rule!