

Activity from [Contemporary History](#) and [Foreign Policy](#)
Activity

Discussion Activity: Post-Cold War Engagement with China

Learning Objectives

Students will analyze primary source documents to evaluate U.S. attitudes after the Cold War and how they influenced economic policy towards China. Use the [Primary Sources From Post-Cold War Engagement with China](#) Learning Journey to facilitate the discussion activity below.

Length

1-2 class periods

Instructional Plan

Talk radio was among the most influential public forums in 1990s and early 2000s America. National call-in shows—from NPR's "Talk of the Nation" to commercial AM programs—drew millions of listeners and gave ordinary Americans a chance to weigh in on the issues of the day. Hosts moderated debate, pressed callers for evidence, and put competing perspectives into direct conversation. In that spirit, stage a call-in radio show in class to debate U.S. trade policy towards China. Students will be assigned roles, learn about the era by exploring a collection of primary sources, and then have students "phone in" to share their views with the host and other callers.

Part 1: Overview and Assign Roles

Guiding Questions:

- What factors shaped U.S. policy toward China after the Cold War?
- How realistic were U.S. hopes that engagement with China would lead to political reforms?

Have students read the overview, which will outline the historical context shaping Americans' feelings towards post-Cold War globalization and China's integration into the WTO.

Assign students their roles. In the event there are more students than roles, more than one student can play the same role. They should still participate individually, they'll just share the same assigned perspective (e.g., there could be two software developers or three college students).

Roles:

Silicon Valley software developer
Factory worker in the textile manufacturing industry
Executive at a major retail company
Soybean farmer from a midwestern state
College student
Human rights advocate who defected from China
U.S. Navy Lieutenant stationed in Japan
Chinese-American small grocery store owner

Consider adding unique details to each role, or ask your students to write a short profile to give their role additional background. For example:

Cynthia Phelps is a tech entrepreneur living in Palo Alto, California. She grew up in Philadelphia and has degrees in computer science and business management. Two years ago, she founded NetConex, which creates computer software. Though it's still a small company, its products have sold well domestically. Now, Cynthia is turning her focus to expanding internationally. Outside of work, Cynthia is heavily involved in philanthropy and closely follows domestic and international news.

Part 2: Primary Source Gallery Walk

Put students into groups. Spread the documents around the room and assign each group to one or more documents. Students should read the document together and answer the following questions:

- Who is the author of the document? What do we know about them?
- When and where was the document produced?
- What insight does this document give about the guiding questions?
- How would my assigned role think about the information in this document?
- What questions does this document raise that you'd like answered?

Once students have examined their primary sources, have groups briefly share out one or two key insights from their documents. This ensures all students have exposure to all sources, not just the ones their group analyzed.

Part 3: The talk radio discussion

For homework, have students write a short position paper in the voice of their assigned role, reflecting their character's perspective. They should write persuasively, using evidence and reasoning, as if writing an opinion piece for a newspaper.

Have students make placards that indicate their role. At the start of the discussion, ask them to briefly introduce themselves in their role to set the scene. (Optionally, students could bring props.)

Conduct the discussion in class. Introduce the exercise with a brief scene-setter:

The year is 2000. You're driving home on a rainy Saturday and tune your radio to a national call-in program. Today's topic: U.S. trade relations with China. Congress is currently debating whether to grant Permanent Normal Trade Relations to China, a step that would clear the way for China to join the WTO. Listeners across the country have strong feelings about whether the United States should promote China's integration into the global economy. You pull over, pick up your phone, and call in to share your view.

As instructor, play the host of the call-in show. The host opens the program, introduces the topic, takes callers in turn, asks follow-up questions, and invites callers to respond to each other.

Once students are ready to begin discussion, consider the following questions:

- What effects, if any, do you think China joining the WTO will have on China?
- What are the pros and cons of China joining the WTO? In what ways might this policy impact American citizens?
- What are the different approaches the United States could take to trade relations with China? What are the pros and cons of these different approaches?

Whenever necessary, push students to provide evidence and reasoning for their comments.

Consider recording the class or using a transcription app to help with giving feedback and assessment.

Leave time at the end of the discussion for a debrief in which students can step outside their roles and reflect on what they learned. Optionally, consider also assigning students a short reflection paper in their own voice.

Consider the following questions:

- In the discussion, what seemed to be the most important points of agreement and disagreement?
- What made this a controversial policy? In other words, why did people disagree about it?
- Do you think promoting China's accession to the WTO was the right approach for the United States?