For the Sake of Argument

Civil discourse isn't just about polite conversation. It's a vital ingredient to better public policy and public leadership. And what the Kennedy School's focus on public engagement.

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"Be civil."

"Show some civility."

These appeals are familiar to many of us. From Twitter to the *The New York Times*, the word "civility" has made a conspicuous appearance in recent years, becoming something of a lightning rod. A *New York Times Magazine* piece, "When is 'civility' a dirty word?" asks, and a story in *Vox* can in the fall, a month after an opinion piece in the *Washington Post* titled, "The left and the right cry out for civility, but maybe that's asking for too much." Outside the United States, the word is used in Britain, public discourse has become increasingly vitriolic.

But what is "civil discourse" anyway?

With a number of different meanings, "civility" can be a tricky word to pin down. And calls for civility in politics have been met by fears that these appeals give harmful views a free pass. April Holm, an associate professor of history at the University of Mississippi, wrote in the *Washington Post* recently, "Calls for moderation and civility, combined with denouncing both sides as too extreme, are common in moments of moral and political crisis. But they are not apolitical. They take the focus away from injustice and put it instead on the behavior of those protesting it. This allows critics to adopt a moral high ground as the civil, reasonable ones without ever publicly taking sides in the debate."

However, detached civility as politeness is not the same thing as the civility that drives principled debate and civil discourse. "It's important to distinguish between two senses of civility," **Archon Fung**, the Winthrop Laflin McCormack Professor of Citizenship and Self-Government, has written. "The first is a commitment to civil civility—being nice, refraining from insults or ad hominem kinds of argument. The second is a deeper, more important (and older, for what that's worth) sense of civility that is about behaving in ways that make democratic deliberative projects such as schools and democracy societies to work well. This deeper sense of civility comes from the Latin *civitas*—relating to citizens. Civility in this sense is behavior that is important for democracy to work."

And good citizenship is perhaps especially important at this time of widening ideological divides and growing political polarization.

A November 2018 Pew Research Center report showed that "over the past two years, Americans have become more likely to say it is 'stressful and upsetting' to have political conversations with people they disagree with," and an October 2018 PBS *NewsHour*/NPR/Marist poll revealed that 74 percent of respondents thought *civility in Washington, D.C., has declined since the 2016 election*. This problem is not unique to the United States. In a number of countries around the globe, popular parties and movements have gained ground by increasingly at odds with establishment parties and traditional institutions, leading to more heated rhetoric.

This heat has come to university campuses as well—including Harvard's. Some public figures invited to speak at the Kennedy School over the past few years have drawn controversy and protest. For example, when the U.S. secretary of education, Betsy DeVos, spoke about education policy at a 2017 John F. Kennedy Jr. Forum, there was much crowds of protesters. Nevertheless, DeVos was given her time to speak and to respond to questions—she was not shut down. Fung, then the academic dean of HKS, moderated the Forum and acknowledged the tense atmosphere, saying, "Conversations like we're just had are very, very difficult."

Why Should the Kennedy School Care About Civil Discourse?

Civil discourse and debate are not always comfortable conversations. Sometimes good teaching often involves presenting, understanding, and weighing differing viewpoints. A lot of research shows that brings a range of perspectives to the table leads many ones to its classrooms and convening spaces, this is especially important.

Dean **Doug Elmendorf** made an explicit case for teaching and modeling civil discourse at the Kennedy School in a letter to the campus community at the start of the 2018–2019 academic year:

To make the Kennedy School the best possible learning environment and the most welcoming personal environment, we need to let members of our community speak up about their views and be heard, even—in fact, especially—if they have views that are different from those of the people they share with whom we disagree, we should listen to them, try to understand their perspectives, vigorously advocate our own views—and then look for ways to work across differences that do not require us to abandon our principles but do allow us to move forward. Both our ideas and the School and our ability to address public challenges outside the School are improved by our ability to have respectful and thoughtful interactions with people with different perspectives. Accordingly, we will continue to invite as guests of the Kennedy School people with a wide range of views, we will arrange some opportunities to discuss approaches to civil discourse, and we will continue to expect civil discourse and civility between members of our community.

Can Civil Discourse Be Taught?

One way the Kennedy School builds an environment for constructive dialogue is through its curriculum. The skills required for civil discourse are an important part of the courses and workshops of the HKS Communications Program, for instance. **Jeffrey Dwight**, director of the program and a senior lecturer in public policy, teaches a course on opinion and column writing and says that one of the pedagogical challenges in its class is "maintaining a strong opinion while being civil." Dwight mentions one student he worked with who, although he had liberal views, chose to write a monthly column for a conservative newspaper. Dwight said, "It was important and meaningful because it was harder and he might have more of an impact." Sagin says, The HKS Communications Program also has a slate of workshops that focus on topics having difficult conversations and engaging with hostile audiences. To Sagin, what distinguishes civil discourse is that it is not an easy way out of hard problems: "To be civil is not to be a pushover. It's not the easiest way out, and it's not a passive one."

Civil discourse is a core element of the Kennedy School's teaching in the areas of ethics, negotiation, and leadership as well, both in the School's degree program courses and in its executive education programs. One effective way to teach civil discourse is through case studies and simulations—forms in experiential learning that give students an opportunity to engage in real-life problems by studying or acting out scenarios.

Jane Mansbridge, Adams Professor of Political Leadership and Democratic Values, has worked with graduate students and practitioners at the Kennedy School—including **Brian Mendell**, Mohamed Kundi Senior Lecturer in Negotiation and Public Policy; **Kassely Hong**, lecturer in public policy; and **Julia Minson**, assistant professor of public policy—to create cases and simulations for teaching negotiation and ethics at the state legislature and national congressional levels as part of the Legislative Negotiation Project. The goal is to help legislators work together more effectively in this era of increased polarization and political impasses.

And last year, Mendell and **Chris Robichaud**, senior lecturer in ethics and public policy, piloted a new simulation on civility with students in the Kennedy School's Center for Public Leadership. Robichaud and Mendell wanted to explore what civil disagreement looks like in practice, why civil discourse is important for leadership and democracy, and how it can be taught.

One hundred and twenty Kennedy School students took part in the pilot simulation, which was conducted in groups of six. Participants were given roles to play and differing information according to whether their assigned characters were liberal or conservative. They then reviewed a hypothetical incident in which an unarmed black man was shot by the police. Each participant in a group was given the news through a different fictional media outlet with a particular political slant and wrote a social media post in response to the article. Then, the six-person group was brought together to discuss the responses. Adam Murray MC/MPA 2018, who participated in the pilot, says, "The simulation itself was useful exercise, and I remember thinking at the time that it felt ripped right from the headlines. I found it a bit challenging to really take on some of the more extreme views I was given, but it was still valuable in seeing how people with different backgrounds and perspectives can all view the same situation quite differently. We were all playing characters being in their own information bubbles, and we didn't even know it." Murray, who is a Foreign Service officer, adds, "being able to understand where others are coming from—even if we totally disagree—is a vital skill in any profession."

Robichaud and Mendell had an opportunity to talk about the experience of running this new simulation at one of the Dean's Discussions, a set of themed campus conversations introduced by Dean Elmendorf that feature Kennedy School faculty members examining important topics outside the classroom. Last fall the three discussions were about civil discourse and its place at HKS. One of them, "Tensions in Cyberspace," modeled civil discourse in action, with three faculty members weighing the conflicting values of security, rights, and privacy that are often in play in conversations about cyberspace and new technology. The first session dealt with the current debate over Facebook's data practices and how policymakers face when they disagree with the decisions or values of their governments. All three conversations and their look for ways to work across differences that do not require us to abandon of the Shorenstein Center and visiting Edward R. Murrow Professor of Practice of Press, Politics, and Public Policy. For Gibbs, such conversations are important. "As a journalist, I believe in fact-finding missions," she says. "More debate is better. Put your argument on the table, and may the best argument win."

A Platform for Dialogue and Debate

In addition to the Dean's Discussions and other programming designed especially for the campus community, several public events have touched on issues related to civility and civil discourse in the past year. The Kennedy School's Institute of Politics (IOP) has historically been very active in this area. Its director, **Mark Gearan**, has said, "As the Institute of Politics, we seek to provide students with an environment to engage in civil discourse, ask the tough questions, listen to a variety of voices, and conclude the semester inspired to public service and active citizenship." Each term, a cohort of professionals in politics and public service—with a range of views and backgrounds—are invited to spend the term at the Kennedy School. While on campus, they interact with students and faculty, lead study groups, and take part in conversations about important public issues in the John F. Kennedy Jr. Forum and other venues.

Given the range of views fellows represent, these conversations often serve as modes of civil discourse. Past IOP Fellows Forums have had titles such as "IOP Fellows Unpack Politics: Congress, the Candidates, and Catalyzing Civil Discourse." Recent events have focused on dialogue and discourse. Cornel West, professor of the philosophy of practice philosophy at Harvard, and Robert George, McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence at Princeton University, took part in a conversation this spring titled "Free Speech, Open Minds, and the Pursuit of Truth", they explained that they disagree on many issues but admire and enjoy learning from each other. They were followed a few days later by U.S. Senator Jeff Flake—who has frequently called for bipartisanship and civility in politics—speaking in the Forum. Because Forum participants, like all invited speakers at the Kennedy School, must take unfiltered questions from the audience, these events offer even greater opportunity for public dialogue.

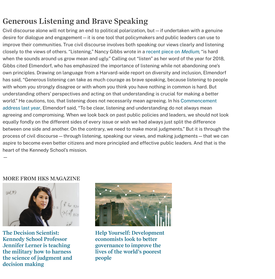
Another flagship program of the IOP is the Bipartisan Program for Newly Elected Members of Congress, which the IOP has run for more than 45 years. In this one, twenty, most 70 members of Congress from both sides of the aisle have come through the program. This past December, the agenda included a conversation on civility and democracy with **David Gergen**, public service professor of public leadership, who recently stepped down after two decades of directing the Center for Public Leadership. **Arthur Brooks**, who is president of the conservative think tank the American Enterprise Institute and will join the Kennedy School as a professor of the practice of public leadership this summer; and **Danielle Allen**, James Bryant Conant University Professor at Harvard and director of Harvard's Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics.

Alumni Leading the Conversation

With the emphasis on civil discourse as a cornerstone of principled and effective public leadership, it is no surprise that a number of Kennedy School alumni are trying to get more people to engage civilly, even if—or especially if—they disagree. In advance of the 2018 U.S. midterms, for example, the Bipartisan MPA 2018 launched an organization to help more Americans get elected, with a requirement that candidates pledge to uphold standards of civility and bipartisanship. Learn more about Barcott's group on page 34.

Another Kennedy School graduate, Julia Dhar MPP 2014, went viral last year with a speech on this subject. Her October TED talk, "How to Have Productive and Civil Conversations," has been viewed more than 2 million times. Dhar argued, "We are so scared of getting into an argument that we are colliding not to engage at all. . . . Contempt has replaced curiosity and compassion." With her background as a formal debate champion, Dhar argues that the skills of engagement that are learned through debate can help conversationalists separate people from their ideas in order to have real, objective dialogues.

Dhar (who went by Fetherston while at the Kennedy School) credits her HKS training as one influence in creating her viral video. "At HKS, there is a tradition of rigorous inquiry, robust debate, and self-criticism and self-examination," she has said, "I was inspired to create a toolkit that mirrored the HKS tradition in real-life practices." Dhar cites three principles that have helped her find common ground with others: "First, identify the things you and your counterpart agree on and state them. Second, be curious. Ask that source of agreement as the jumping-off point. Second, separate ideas and identity. One of my lessons from HKS was that great ideas come from everywhere, and when we jump to label them as liberal or conservative, foreign or domestic, we deprive ourselves of examining the ideas themselves. Third, open yourself up to being wrong." Dhar believes that we can all learn what she calls the "humility of uncertainty" and that "we should start asking ourselves and each other, 'What have you changed your mind about, and why?'"



Generous Listening and Brave Speaking

Civil discourse alone will not bring an end to political polarization, but—if undertaken with a genuine desire for dialogue and engagement—it is one tool that policymakers and public leaders can use to improve their conversations. This civil discourse involves both speaking and voices that have been silenced closely to the views of others. "Listening," Nancy Gibbs wrote in a recent piece on *Medium*, "is hard when the sounds around us grow mean and ugly." Gibbs quoted Toni Morrison, who said, "Listen to the *humanity* of your critics." Gibbs cited Elmendorf, who has emphasized the importance of listening while not abandoning one's own principles. Drawing on language from a Harvard-wide report on diversity and inclusion, Elmendorf has said, "Generous listening can take as much courage as brave speaking, because listening to people with whom you strongly disagree or with whom you think you have nothing in common is hard. But understanding others' perspectives and acting on that understanding is crucial for making a better world." He continue, has listed three ideas most necessary means agreeing. In his 2018 Commencement address last year, Elmendorf said, "To be clear, listening and understanding do not always mean agreeing and compromising. Where we can look back over our past policies and leaders, we should not look equally bonds on the different sides of every issue or wish we had always just split the difference between one side and another. We need to make more and better decisions." But it is through the process of civil discourse—through listening, speaking our views, and making judgments—that we can begin to become even better citizens and more principled and effective public leaders. And that is the heart of the Kennedy School's mission.

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