

## Civility: It's all the rage

Last week, the University of Arizona announced the establishment of a National Institute for Civil Discourse, naming former presidents Clinton and Bush (Sr.) as chairs. Acting in the wake of the violent rampage in Arizona that took the lives of 6 people and maimed 19 others, including Arizona Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, Arizona Board of Regents member Fred DuVal charged the Institute with the task of defining "best practices and corrosive practices" in debate. He asked, "How do we nurture robustness on one hand and not in any way chill speech, and keep it in bounds that are not destructive to democracy? Will it change the nature of dialogue? That will be a tall order."

We've been writing about civility and its kin, "respect" since TDI formed in 2007. In our [FAQ](#), the response to the question on the relationship between deliberative democracy, deliberation, and dialogue notes that quality discourse is respectful and adherent to particular ground rules. In our February 1, February 19, and March 30, 2010 [missives](#), we commented on uncivil and arguably destructive partisan tactics that affect free speech and community on campuses and off. In the [TDI framing paper](#), we call for "inclusive and respectful dialogue" (p. 6) and note that one possible outcome of public dialogue is increased civility and respect (p. 8). In their article, [Dialogue on Campus: An Overview of Promising Practices](#), TDI board members Ande Diaz and Stephan Hiroshi Gilchrist argue that learning to engage in democratic dialogue involves an agreement among participants that they "listen to each other with attention and respect." They conclude, "The dialogue process can surface the importance of respect, civility, intercultural understanding, connections, and breaking down barriers, which are preconditions to more tangible changes." In his [op-ed piece](#) immediately following the Arizona rampage, TDI board president Bruce Mallory wrote,

A civil society, one based on the principles of a pluralistic democracy, creates opportunity for the constructive expression of difference and dissent. A civil society makes it possible for those with opposing views to engage in informed, respectful deliberation, where the argument is about ideas, not about the people who hold those ideas. A civil, democratic society places its trust in those it elects to make the hard choices necessary to solve complex problems. A civil society is one that is based on laws, not on the actions or threats of individuals.

BUT (you knew there was a "but" coming, right?) in TDI's [Statement of Principles and Practices](#), we do not call upon colleges and universities to teach students to *be* civil or respectful.

That wasn't an oversight. We don't think that colleges and universities should teach students to *be* civil and respectful. We expect colleges and universities to teach students *about* civility and respect.

TDI board member Peter Levine sorts through this nuanced distinction in [Teaching and Learning Civility](#), chapter 1 in [Educating for Deliberative Democracy](#), released last week by Jossey Bass Publishers. In his chapter, Peter writes:

Civility is not a self-evident or transcendent good. It can promote fair, responsible, participatory democracy, but it can also trade off against other democratic values. Civility is welcome by, and

likely to benefit, some citizens more than others, and is likely to help in some situations more than in others ...

The ethical question is *how to think about civility if promoting it would have asymmetrical effects* (p. 13).

In May, TDI member Rodolfo Lewanski (Univ. of Bologna) and I are presenting a session on deliberative democracy at a UNESCO-sponsored International Leadership Training Program for young human rights activists. We will be addressing activists working to stop slave trade, youth abductions into militia, sexual abuses and oppression against women, and censorship and political imprisonment. When policies or actions are especially egregious, is "civil" discourse the right approach? Quoting William Chafe's *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (1981), Peter Levine reminds readers in his chapter that, "From a black point of view, of course, the ground rules, or 'civilities,' were often just a way of delaying action."

In Wisconsin, protesters have just completed what the Christian Science Monitor called, a "week of rage," protests over the governor's proposed budgetary cuts that would weaken collective bargaining power of public employees. Their rage is being compared to that expressed by tea party activists over the past year and even activists leading the protest that caused Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to resign several weeks ago.

Violence under any circumstances is unacceptable. And we need to find ways to say what we think without targeting and vilifying those with whom we disagree. But who decides what is "egregious" enough to warrant civil unrest that stops governments from working, that closes businesses and schools, and that draws comparisons between Madison, Wisconsin and Cairo, Egypt? Are we going to justify the mode of political participation by the outcome (e.g., only protest could have forced Mubarak to resign – whereas deliberation might be more effective in Wisconsin)?

TDI's position (again, mapped out in our [Statement of Principles and Practices](#)) is:

- We believe that dissent and conflict are transformative agents. We encourage the view that conflict presents an opportunity for reflection, study, growth, and change. Commensurately, we reject discrimination, coercion, intimidation, or other behaviors that restrict the free exchange of ideas and civil discourse.
- We challenge individuals to engage in public life responsibly – to study ethical, social, and political issues, to seek to understand multiple viewpoints, to balance competing values and perspectives, to communicate responsively, and to engage in an open process of informed public reasoning.

We hope that campuses are seizing these teachable moments in history. Colleges and universities should be teaching students to think critically about whether civility is a value, how it can conflict with other values, and how, at times, it can be employed or disregarded by good people doing their best under challenging circumstances.