



Sent: Sept. 16, 2009

Subject: What did your campus discuss last week?

Most campuses are just settling in to the new semester, but we hope no one is getting too comfortable.

When President Obama announced that he'd be giving a back-to-school speech to our nation's school children, political opponents cried "partisan propaganda" and "indoctrination." School districts across the country opted not to air the speech or to allow teachers to show it at their discretion. Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty said the classroom "is no place to show a video address from Obama." This wasn't the first time a sitting president has addressed school children - both George Bush, Sr. and Ronald Reagan did so, but with far less (but yes, some) resistance. Is this president less entitled to address school children - or has something happened in American public life to call into question the right of any sitting president to do so?

Healthcare. We mentioned in our last missive that health care forums across the country had devolved into models of misinformation and incivility. On Wednesday, during the President's speech to Congress, South Carolina Republican Joe Wilson shouted "you lie" at the President when he said that his health plan provides no coverage for illegal immigrants. (It doesn't.) Congressman Wilson apologized, but now he may also be "censored" by his peers.

What do these incidents reveal, if anything? Eroding standards of civility in public life? Disrespect of the Office of the Presidency? Increasing partisanship? (CNN reports that 90% of Democrats approve of the President whereas 85% of the Republicans do not.) Could these be racially-motivated efforts to question this particular president's legitimacy, or a desperate backlash by people who fear they are losing (and entitled to) power and status in society? There are other issues to consider: who has the right to free speech (and freedom not to listen), particularly free political speech?

TDI challenges you to look around campus and identify structured forums for dialogues about democracy. Where do they happen on campus: in the classroom, the residence halls, the library, the student newspaper, the faculty senate? Who is participating, the entire student body or just a few passionate activists or political science majors? How can campuses serve as community hubs for informed, respectful engagement of all citizens? How do we prevent students from stooping to these low levels or, worse, from throwing their hands up and saying, forget it!

We want to hear how your campuses managed these and other dialogues on democracy. Send your story to [TDI](#) and we'll share them on our web site.