

CIVIL DISCOURSE

The League of Women Voters of Lane County has chosen **civil discourse** as a recommended program item for 2017-2018. Delegates to the Oregon convention in June 2017 voted to accept by concurrence the civil discourse position of the League of Women Voters of San Luis Obispo:

"Promote civil discourse through action and education for all government bodies, staff, and citizens for the purpose of improved public policy decisions and processes. Civil discourse means, at a minimum, mutually respectful, courteous, constructive, and orderly communication."

Goals for this reading and discussion are to:

- Better understand some of the benefits, barriers and issues for civil discourse.
- Outline potential roles for the LWV of Lane County in promoting civil discourse in local government and our communities.
- Ask LWV of Lane County members to consider and offer input about possible actions or next steps.

Understanding is a two-way street. - Eleanor Roosevelt

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

Incivility has a cost—in the workplace, the classroom, on ball fields, at public meetings, in halls of government—whether committed by a public official, candidate, boss or neighbor.

Rude behavior, bullying and other strands of incivility create discomfort. They affect the creativity, productivity and buy-in of those who experience and observe disrespect and hostility. Incivility also can affect general health and resilience by wearing people down and increasing distress.

Incivility damages relationships. In some situations, incivility invites retaliation and negatively charged engagement. In other circumstances, it can lead people to opt out of discussions, participation and support. Incivility also has a way of infecting a group or effort, with ripple effects that persist.

The quick, ad hoc nature of communication by cell phones and texting may encourage less thoughtfulness among some users. Additionally, social psychologists who study the effects of technology warn that a lack of acknowledgment creates an “absent presence.” When those around us ignore us, stress levels rise.

“Rudeness, disrespect and hostility sideline collaboration and compromise,” according to the National Institute for Civil Discourse (NICD), which notes that candidates in the 2016

campaigns exacerbated political incivility through disrespectful comments, name calling and insults toward members of minority groups. The Institute suggests the tone of campaigns led to physical violence—that uncivil words lead to uncivil actions.

Core NICD research has found that most people think that mocking a political opponent, making demeaning statements, refusing to listen to different points of view, and making exaggerated statements that misrepresent the truth are all uncivil behaviors.

Evidence suggests civility, or the perception of civility, has declined. Americans participating in a 2010 study (*Civility in America*) said politics and roadways were the most uncivil spaces in life. In a July 2017 poll, PBS NewsHour/NPR/Marist learned that Americans broadly believe civility is declining, with 70 percent of respondents saying incivility has increased since the 2016 presidential election. Americans blame politicians (64 percent), Internet and social media (63 percent), and news media (54 percent) for contributing to greater incivility, according to KRC Research, an international public opinion research consultancy.

Polarization contributes to incivility to the extent people are unable or unwilling to understand the viewpoints and choices of those with whom they disagree, and to mistrust and even disparage those others.

Social psychologist John Haidt has established a “moral foundations theory” that lays out principles that, to varying degrees, “undergird most people’s moral values and judgments.” He asserts that the moral worldviews of liberals and conservatives are composed of different combinations of these foundations. “Because each group has difficulty understanding the others’ morality, they often demonize each other,” Haidt says.

Research shows that online or offline, we tend to talk politics with people with whom we already agree. This can further like-minded enclaves (virtual and physical) in which we may misunderstand and mistrust outsiders more. Ignorance, mistrust and fear across differences also may drive disrespect and incivility.

Lack of civic education may contribute to incivility by reducing understanding of the roles, responsibilities, needs and assets of both government/civic institutions and community members. Distrust of government and traditional institutions weakens support and cohesion.

For the purposes of this study topic, the League focuses primarily on civil discourse as a value and set of behaviors for conducting the public’s business in “an open exchange of ideas and expression of values that will lead to better problem-solving and more effective government.” (National Institute for Civil Discourse)

WHAT IS CIVIL DISCOURSE?

“Civil discourse means, at a minimum, mutually respectful, courteous, constructive, and orderly communication.” – LWV of San Luis Obispo, Civil Discourse Study, 2014

“A dialogue in which all participants have a right to speak and to be heard. Such dialogue is characterized by respectful participation, sharing the time equitably, attentive listening, and balanced discussion” – LWV of San Diego, “Putting Civility into Action”

“Civility in our democracy is not about squelching assertiveness, protest, civil disobedience, or rigorous discussion of the issues. Civil discourse and deliberation is a set of attitudes, behaviors and skills that support thoughtful, fact and values-based discussions when citizens and public officials do come to the table to talk.” – LWV of Washington, “Civility in Our Democracy Program,” 2012-2013

“A 2011 conversation among national leaders from many fields, held at the US Supreme Court, defined civil discourse as ‘robust, honest, frank and constructive dialogue and deliberation that seeks to advance the public interest.’ “ (Brosseau 2011)

Civility is “...the sum of the sacrifices we make for the sake of living together.” – Stephen Carter, Bloomberg View

WHY DOES CIVIL DISCOURSE MATTER?

- Studies show that exposure to uncivil discourse in the media erodes political trust and produces more negative assessments of political institutions.
- A lack of civil discourse impairs the functioning of our civic institutions (gridlock, polarization, shallow support for policies and actions)—leading to withdrawal of public backing and participation, which fundamentally weakens democracy.
- Civil discourse promotes informed discussion of public issues essential for government bodies and citizens to make good decisions. Decisions are seen as more fair and legitimate. People feel a greater sense of empowerment and efficacy.
- We need to be the change we want to see if we are to attract young people to government service and civic engagement (and to keep others in the arena).
- Citizens and elected officials are able to express their free speech, but in an environment that makes them feel safe and respected.

I think a major act of leadership right now, call it a radical act, is to create the places and processes so people can actually learn together, using our experiences. - Margaret J. Wheatley

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS?

League organizations at the national, state and local levels commonly adopt positions on governance. The LWV of Lane County, for example, offers these criteria for evaluating the structure of local government: adequacy of services, organizational simplicity, flexibility, citizen participation, equitable cost-benefit relationship, political feasibility, legal and administrative authority, effectiveness of governance, economy of administration and intergovernmental cooperation.

Though these qualities may contribute to civil discourse, the LWV of Lane County does not explicitly call out civil discourse as a value for local institutions. The LWV of Oregon suggests the following:

Promote	Promote civil discourse in local government and in our communities.
Educate	Educate League members and civic leaders about best practices.
Model	Model civil behavior in all interactions.
Advocate	Advocate for improved civil discourse and inclusive dialogue.
Partner	Partner with others to convene community conversations/ forums.

WHAT IS THE LEAGUE'S ROLE?

LWVOR Convention, May 6, 2017

As previously noted, the LWV of Oregon adopted the civil discourse position from the LWV of San Luis Obispo. Key points:

- “The League (of San Luis Obispo) supports policies and actions that achieve a responsible and representative government, *promote civil discourse*, increase citizen understanding of finances and greater involvement of the public and staff in budget making and long-range financial planning, and provide for the periodic evaluation of locally levied taxes, licenses, and fees.”
- Promote civil discourse through action and education for all government bodies, staff, and citizens for the purpose of improved public policy decisions and processes. Civil discourse means, at a minimum, mutually respectful, courteous, constructive, and orderly communication.

- The LWV of San Luis Obispo emphasized it did not seek a position on civil discourse to take action *against* elected officials. The organization “especially wanted to avoid any misperceptions by citizens that we were out to regulate, control, or impede their first amendment right to free speech. The League of Women Voters has been an active champion of openness in government throughout our history.”

The LWV of Tacoma-Pierce County (WA) in 2016-2017 undertook a series of community forums on civility in public discourse in partnership with the American Association of University Women (AAUW), National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Restoring the American Dream (RAD). Civility, the organizations proclaimed, “is claiming and caring for one’s own identity, needs and beliefs without degrading someone else’s in the process.”

Are there ways in which the LWV of Lane County might better support thoughtful, fact- and values-based discussions among community members and public officials? Options could include adopting and communicating definitions, positions and suggested guidelines; holding community forums and public conversations on civil discourse, including ways to talk across difference; and developing alliances around civil discourse.

WHAT ARE CONSIDERED BEST PRACTICES FOR CIVIL DISCOURSE?

The LWV of San Luis Obispo determined that, for public meetings by local government, the designated leader or chairperson sets the tone. Consequently, its best practices for civil discourse include a focus on that role:

1. Lead by example and encourage others to do the same. Show respect to all in actions, body language, and speech.
2. Encourage open-spirited debates on all facts by contending parties.
3. Provide adequate time for public comment.
4. Actively listen. Thank speakers and, where appropriate, acknowledge public input.
5. Speak truthfully without distortion.
6. Never comment on the motivation of a speaker.
7. Limit discussion to the merits of issues. Explain the rationale and evidence to support opinions and conclusions.
8. Promote rules publicly. Give a brief reminder before meetings.
9. Encourage respectful speech as the most effective form of communication. Discourage or prohibit slanderous, profane, and negatively personal remarks.
10. Regularly review and update rules—city and county codes, codes of ethics, Robert’s Rules of Order, and others.

Civility also was a prominent topic on school and college campuses across the country during the 2016 election. Many educators wrote articles directed to students with suggestions for how to model and encourage civil discourse in their lives. In summary, a review of several such articles calls people to:

- Never underestimate the power of **manners**.
- Seek **understanding**.
- **Use facts** (check your sources), and try to “use your facts in an even-handed manner.” (Guffin and Grady)
- Pause. **Take time** to think before responding.
- Speak **about what you stand for**, rather than what you stand against.
- Use **“I” statements** (and, avoid “you” and “should”).
- **Avoid binary thinking** (also referred to as “black and white” or “either/or” thinking).
- Use **language that engages** and draws the other in (avoid jargon that may seem to score rhetorical points but can preempt true discussion and understanding).
- **End on a positive note**. (Guffin and O’Grady suggest ending with, “I guess no amount of dialogue is going to change either of us. That’s what makes this country so great—we’re free to disagree!”)

Close to home, governing bodies and other organizations throughout Lane County for the most part adopt “ground rules” to communicate expectations, promote robust and civil conversations, and encourage orderliness. The Eugene City Council, as an example, incorporates the following into its operating agreements adopted by resolution:

“The presiding officer shall be responsible for ensuring order and decorum are maintained. Behavior or actions that are unreasonably loud or disruptive shall be cause for removal from Council meetings. This includes engaging in violent or distracting action, making loud or disruptive noise or using similar language, and refusing to obey an order of the presiding officer.

Council members speak only for themselves and shall be open, direct and candid. They work to keep discussion moving, and call for a ‘process check’ if the discussion becomes bogged down. Time limits may be set on topics. When councilors speak to each other during public meetings, last names shall be used during regular meetings but first names may be used during work sessions. The Mayor is, however, always referred to as ‘Mayor.’”

*It is in the common good to hold our political differences
and the conflicts they create in a way that does not unravel
the civic community on which democracy depends. - Parker J. Palmer*

WHAT ARE POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS TO CIVIL DISCOURSE?

Social justice advocates differ in responses to hate speech and incivility. Consider mass protests against white supremacy, for example. Some, defending the social understanding of free speech as a broader value, might choose visible action that does not employ disruptive or violent action. Others assert the importance of denying hate speech a platform. Neither perspective may be interested in finding common ground with people

they see as disagreeable or as holding repugnant and dangerous views. Similar dynamics exist for advocates on other issues and across the political spectrum.

How might this play out in the governmental or civic sphere? Where there is evidence or the perception that a civic institution does not uphold the Constitution, ignores human rights or otherwise violates essential standards, community members may believe their most effective and moral response is one that feels, well, uncivil. When threatened by harm considered existential or believing themselves on the margins, people also might express fear and anger—and may believe that “speaking truth to power” demands a wide range of tactics.

“The fact is, certain speakers in the public sphere are at greater ease to be civil,” according to law professor and critical theorist Bernard E. Harcourt, who notes that what counts as civil discourse is “politically loaded.” How do life experiences affect our views on civil discourse?

*True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice.
– Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*

CIVIL DISCOURSE STUDY QUESTIONS

Note: These questions are intended for personal reflection and may be used as well in unit discussions as time allows. A separate questionnaire focused on the League’s role and potential next steps will be available at unit meetings.

1. How did the level of incivility in the 2016 election affect you personally?
2. What factors play a role in creating incivility?
3. How do incivility and extreme partisanship affect our society?
4. What are the strengths of civil discourse? What are the limitations?
5. “Democracy requires great courage. Courage to speak your mind AND hear the voices of others,” according to Stephani Roy McCallum of Dialogue Partners. Is it always okay to speak one’s mind? Are we obligated to always hear the voices of others--that is, are there times when those voices do not deserve an audience?
6. How might a commitment to civil discourse play out in private?
 - a. Is it a release valve or amplifier when we talk back to the TV news—or make public officials the brunt of jokes in the company of close friends?
 - b. What one or two concrete actions could you personally take to promote civility and civil discourse?

Study prepared by Linda Ferdowsian, Kaley McCarty & Keli Osborn, LWV of Lane County.

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For additional references, please see the LWV of Oregon website: LWVOR.org