

# Practical Tips for Civil Discourse in the Era of Polarized Politics: Talking About the Racist and the Crook

**Dennis Plane**

*Diversity and Democracy Series, September 28, 2016*

Dennis Plane is Professor of Politics at Juniata College.

I don't have formal training in identifying practical tips for civil discourse, but this is an area where I have lots of practical experience. Primarily, I'm an academic. I have conducted research on the nature and extent of incivility by ordinary citizens during the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections, and I have presented this research at political science conferences in recent years. The tips that have evolved from this work have made it into the courses I teach, and now I want to take this opportunity to pass them along to you.

Since 2004, I have also served as a faculty leader for groups of students at the Democratic National Convention, and since 2008 I have sent Juniata students to parallel programs at the Republican National Convention. These experiences have been part of a series of nonpartisan academic seminars sponsored by the Washington Center for Internships and Academic Seminars. The students not only learn about the convention, they live it. They participate in volunteer fieldwork assignments where they are imbedded in some element of the convention, whether it's with a media organization, an interest group, a state party, or something else. And they need the tools for talking about politics in mixed ideological company; even though the convention is dominated by one party, the media organizations and surrounding environs are decided less so. Thus, students must learn how to talk politics with those subway riders, Uber drivers, restaurant patrons, and townspeople who they interact with while in the host city. And they must be cognizant of fieldwork placements where uncivil political discourse could lead to their dismissal.

As an academic, I am often asked by the media to comment on contemporary politics. Of course, this is also a time for reasoned analysis and civil discourse.

But I am also an activist. I was part of the Bernie Sanders delegation to the 2016 Democratic National Convention. Specifically, I served on the Platform Committee, which brought me to Orlando on July 8-9, 2016 to finalize the Democratic platform that the delegates would adopt a couple of weeks later

in Philadelphia. This was a perfect role for showcasing civil discourse, as incendiary platform language would only serve to engender negative backlash played out in the media.

And as a field volunteer for several campaigns, I'm not going to convince undecided voters to vote for my candidate by using uncivil language. Indeed, it is incivility that may well be the reason why the citizens are reluctant to vote in the first place.

So while I don't conduct trainings telling people how to talk civilly about politics, I have been doing it informally for a long time, and it's part of what I think is fundamental to a democracy. Teaching citizens how to talk civilly about politics is just a natural extension of who I am as an academic, an activist, a citizen, a democrat, and a Democrat.

With that as a backdrop to who I am, let me stipulate that we are in the midst of a particularly challenging election season. Both presidential candidates are unpopular. Both are divisive. Both sides often resort to incivility, though not necessarily to the same extent. Donald Trump often says uncivil things, and they are repeated by his followers. Democrats often respond with uncivil retorts about what fools Trump and his supporters are. And we still have forty days left until the election. How are we going to survive these forty days?

I want to talk first about a report from the Southern Poverty Law Center that looks at this election from the standpoint of teachers.<sup>1</sup> It looks at elementary and high school teachers, many of whom are responding to this election simply by not talking about politics. We have a long tradition in the United States of teachers and schools holding mock elections and talking about the candidates. This is very healthy for a democracy; it's a beneficial type of political socialization. But one response some teachers are having to the 2016 presidential election is instead to withdraw and not talk about it because talking about these candidates, especially Donald Trump, raises a lot of red flags. Some find some of Trump's comments to be offensive, and we don't necessarily want that in our schools either. But I would say that we have to talk about the election. The temptation to withdraw—to say, "it's too tough to talk about this election; let's move on to greener pastures"—is missing the whole point. We must talk about these things. Discussion and deliberation and an evaluation of our candidates is part and parcel of democracy; if we are not teaching our kids these skills, then we are doing them a great injustice. And if we are doing our kids—our future citizens and voters—a great injustice, then we are doing our future democracy an injustice as well. And that is simply unacceptable.

If we are not teaching our students how to talk civilly about politics, where are they going to learn how to do so? They are going to listen to their families, which in some cases may be just as uncivil as the kind of dialogue that teachers are trying to avoid. Or they will listen to the cable TV news—as if that would be any better! People are being exposed to uncivil messages all over the place, and as teachers we have the responsibility to show a different way to engage in a discussion about politics, and then

hopefully students can model those behaviors and carry them forward as they become fully participating citizens.

As Juniata students, you also have a responsibility. People tend to hang out with others who hold similar political views, but staying with your in-group—as safe as it might feel—is not consistent with a traditional liberal arts education. Break out of your in-groups and break down some of our political differences. To be able to do that, you have to have some tools for civil political discourse.

Democracy depends on our ability as citizens to deliberate on issues without resorting to name calling and fisticuffs. We have a duty and responsibility to civilly talk about the election, the candidates, and the issues—and to model this civil discourse for others. The vibrancy of our democracy depends on it. How are we going to do that? I’m going to offer you twelve practical tips that I’ve come to embrace during my time as both an academic and an activist.

1. Don't use loaded terms. So how do you talk about an election featuring a “racist” and a “crook”? For starters, you don’t talk about the racist or the crook. You have to strike these sorts of divisive words from your language. They are conversation enders, not conversation starters. I’m not saying you have to accept racist ideas or rhetoric coming from others, but if you respond by outright calling someone a racist, that person is not going to want to engage in any meaningful discourse and you’ve lost your chance to move the needle in the direction that you want it to move.

Instead, if you have a friend or a family member who is saying things that you believe to be racist, then you use phrases like “racially insensitive.” Or say that you don’t think that their words “respect minorities.” Or argue that we shouldn’t be basing our immigration policies on what someone’s religion is. You can address the racist policy or rhetoric without saying that the person is racist. Instead, try broadening the context so that you are not the one making the accusation. “Well, I understand why some people find a candidate’s remarks so offensive, and it’s because of X, Y, and Z.” It’s no longer you against an accused racist; it’s an expression of empathy with someone who feels harmed and an invitation to talk about it. While Donald Trump may be saying things that you consider racist, feel free to challenging the statements, but don’t label Trump or his supporters as racist. Rather, acknowledge that candidates are people and that all people make mistakes. You can note that you might not like some of the things that a candidate represents, but keep in mind that the candidate or the citizen is not fundamentally flawed, even if their ideas or statements are.

Likewise, let’s look at the word “crook.” I’m not saying you have to accept that Hillary Clinton’s actions were appropriate or even legal. It’s possible that she broke the law, and it’s quite reasonable to vote against her because of this. But don’t go around calling her a crook because that’s what ends the conversation, not what starts it. You can get your point across in other ways. Move from the person to the behavior. “I’m concerned that Clinton has not always acted legally and, therefore, I don’t want her as my

president.” It’s a civil way of expressing the same sentiment. That can start a dialogue. Since the goal is to be able to talk civilly about the election, avoiding using loaded terms is the best way to start a healthy dialogue.

What do you do if someone engages in this sort of name calling while you are conversing with them? You simply ignore it. If someone says that Clinton is just a crook, understand it to mean that the person thinks that Clinton hasn’t always followed the letter of the law. If someone says that Trump is a racist, understand it to mean that the person thinks that Trump is not always respectful to minorities. Remember, it take two to engage in civil discourse, but only one to end it. Don’t be the one to end it. Don’t let your emotions get in the way of a potentially insightful conversation. Ignore these cheap shots, and model civil discourse.

2. Listen and learn. Millions of Americans like Trump. Millions of Americans like Clinton. Why? It’s your job as a citizen to learn the reasons why. What is the fascination so many millions of Americans have with these candidates? Why do people like Trump, despite his racially insensitive language, despite the fact that he says things that do not respect women? Why do people like Clinton, despite her potentially illegal use of email? If we want to change someone’s heart and mind, we have to learn what’s causing these beliefs in the first place. Friends, fellow students, and family members who have political views that we don’t agree with are stand-ins for millions of other Americans. They are stand-ins for my son’s soccer coach or my daughter’s teacher or any of the other millions of Americans who I disagree with politically. What makes them tick? The first step to answering this question is listening. When I get on an airplane, I love it when I end up sitting next to someone who I don’t agree with because I can spend an hour listening and learning what makes them tick. Once, I spent two hours talking to someone sitting next to me on a plane who was on her way to provide NRA gun safety training for kids. Her job is to go around and teach kids how to use guns safely. I’m a liberal Democrat; I believe in gun control. I didn’t like a word of what she was saying, but I spent two hours understanding her, and because of that I have a much better understanding of her views on guns—and the views of millions of Americans like her. As a liberal Democrat, I can now go out and use that knowledge to try enact sensible gun control measures. Opportunities to listen and to learn are priceless.

As we are listening, remember, we don’t always need to get someone to change their minds. In fact, they usually are not going to change their minds. Don’t measure success as the ability to change someone’s mind. If you do, you are setting yourself up for failure. Instead, measure success by your ability to get into someone’s mind, to learn what they are thinking. Then, later on, you can work towards the sort of solutions that you envision.

3. Understand and acknowledge. As you listen to people who don’t agree with you, understand what they stand for, understand where they have been, understand what motivates them, and acknowledge

that there is some lived experience that is the basis of that understanding. Most Trump supporters are good people. Most Clinton supporters are good people. Clinton got in trouble when she said that half of Trump supporters were in a basket of deplorables. That's false. There are some deplorable people in Trump's basket, but it's not half. We can debate and research whether it's 0.01%, 1%, or 10%—but it's not half. So we should acknowledge that most Trump supporters are good people. We need to know where they are coming from. For many Americans in rural areas, in poor areas, in mostly white areas, the American dream is crumbling. The economy has changed. We are less reliant on the type of manufacturing jobs that used to be prevalent, so it's harder to find work. Many no longer believe that they can do better than their parents—the essence of the American dream. Working hard at a blue collar job is no longer the ticket to the middle class that it used to be. Recognize that. When a candidate comes along promising to make America great again and bring back jobs, it fits what many people so desperately crave. Trump doesn't give a lot of details, but he implores these “forgotten” voters to trust that he will be able to turn things around. That's an appealing message. That's a message that says, “I understand your situation. I acknowledge that it's based in reality. And I am going to try and fix it.” That's Trump's appeal.

How do you have a conversation with the 95% of Americans who are not well-versed about politics? These tips will work with most Americans because most Americans are not informed about politics. That's not an insult; it's just reality. Most Americans have enough other things on their plate that politics is often not a priority. Just talk in a way that connects with your audience. This is where Trump's brilliance is. He knows how to connect with average, ordinary Americans who have a long history of not being actively engaged in politics. The flip side is that this is one of Clinton's weaknesses. Like other recent Democratic candidates, Clinton has trouble connecting to ordinary Americans. Republicans, on the other hand, are really good at this. One of the best predictors of someone's support is which candidate they would rather sit down and have a drink with. More Americans want to have a beer with Trump than with Clinton.<sup>2</sup>

America is changing, and change is hard for many people. The United States is less white and less Christian than it used to be. Our tradition of assuming that everyone is Christian, of having prayers and Christmas parties in school, is changing and has changed. I'm liberally educated, and I think that this change is a good thing. But this change also challenges the way some people understand what it means to be an American. Recognize and acknowledge this. That doesn't mean you have to agree with those who are worried about the direction the United States is going, but you do have to understand where they are coming from.

4. Discuss but do not preach. There is a reason church attendance on Sunday mornings is declining; people do not like to be preached at. Your goal is civic dialogue. It is to talk with people, to

engage them, but not to preach down to them and not to say that you have it right and they have it wrong. We have to be able to discuss without preaching. Civil discourse is a valuable skill; the ability to discuss is a valuable skill. It is not just valuable for the next forty days, but also to survive at your next job. No one wants to work with someone who can't discuss things civilly. Civil discourse is a valuable skill that is transferrable to the workplace. I assume most of you want jobs, right? You will have a better chance of getting that job and keeping it if you learn how to discuss and disagree civilly and respectfully—whether it's about politics or business.

A successful conversation, then, is simply one where each side better understands the other side. The goal is not to change behavior; the goal is to better understand each other. That is successful dialogue. If your dialogue is successful in getting someone to change their opinion, that's great, but it does not define victory.

5. Respect. Healthy conversations are fueled by respect. Avoid insinuating that candidates you dislike are bad people; they are not. My son, who just turned ten, came home from school last week and asked if Donald Trump is a bad person. Many of my Democratic friends might say, "Yes, he is. He's racist. He's sexist. He's xenophobic." But I didn't say any of those things. I said, "No, he's not a bad person. We just disagree on which direction we should take America. And let me tell you why." That's how you model civility.

Despite the language of campaigns (where we talk about air wars, ground wars, war rooms, and going on the attack), we are not at war with people of the other political persuasion. They are fellow Americans, and we owe them some respect. You can respect someone you don't agree with, and even if you believe someone does not deserve respect, you can still talk respectfully with them. This means listening, remaining calm, and not interrupting. Don't let your emotions boil over. Sean Hannity and Rachel Maddow can get away with such disrespectful emotional bluster and banter, but you cannot. If the goal is civil discourse, and of course I argue that it should be, then remember Aretha Franklin and "R-E-S-P-E-C-T."

6. Don't antagonize the other side. The other side will take the bait and then you are in some sort of verbal brawl where no one is gaining anything. Don't say that Trump is racist. Don't say that a lot of racists are Trump supporters. It's a true statement, but it sounds too much like, "a lot of Trump supporters are racist"—which is not true and leads to the same sort of "basket of deplorables" problem that Clinton got into. By saying the former, a lot of people will confuse it with the latter. Some of Trump's supporters might have a different understanding of race relations or be racially insensitive, but most of his supporters are not racist. On the contrary, most of them are good, hard-working Americans who feel like their country is leaving them behind.

This also means avoiding hyperbole. Let's be honest, no one is moving to Canada. Don't go around telling people you're moving to Canada. Clinton supporters sometimes say that they don't need to make America great again because it's already great, but that they will move to Canada if Trump wins. No, you won't. You're staying here. Avoid hyperbole; it's used for dramatic effect and simply antagonizes the other side. Clinton is not going to destroy America if she wins. She might push for policies you don't agree with, but she's not going to destroy America—and neither is Donald Trump. We have elections and other checks that can take care of failed presidents to prevent them from destroying America. There's no need to be hyperbolic about what will happen if the other side wins.

7. Be a good citizen. It's okay to tell people that Trump's rhetoric is unacceptable. I'm not saying not to criticize Trump for his potentially racist rhetoric. It's okay to tell people that what they are saying ignores the reality that many people in our African-American communities face every day. Call Trump out when he says unacceptable things, but do so in a civil way. Even though some of what Trump says might be unacceptable in polite society, he also says some things that have merit. Acknowledge where your opponent makes valuable contributions—maybe even ones that you agree with. As good citizens we must encourage diverse perspectives and an exchange of ideas. We do not want to shut down ideas that we find objectionable; we want to deliberate those ideas so that we have a more enlightened electorate. You might be a strong supporter of the Black Lives Matter movement, but listen to those who believe we should be talking about how all lives matter or about how blue lives matter. It doesn't mean you have to agree with them, but be a good citizen and respect opinions that are different from yours.

8. Teachers should not be afraid to share their political opinions with their students—even in class. Of course, do so using the other guidelines that I've set out, and always explicitly indicate that these are your opinions. Don't just state your opinions; you need to justify them and encourage dialogue from others who might not agree with you. This is how you foster and model civil dialogue. My job as a teacher is not to persuade you to think like I do, but to get you to understand why I think what I do, as well as to help your fellow students understand why you think what you do. Despite conventional wisdom to the contrary, we teachers actually do a disservice to our students when we pretend to be neutral. I spend an inordinate amount of time trying to get my students to give a damn about politics, and then I'm supposed to pretend that I don't have opinions? That's absurd! The better approach is to be honest about how we feel and be respectful of students who might feel differently. You can present both sides, while still favoring one side over the other. I'm not asking everyone to devote lecture time to politics, but most teachers engage in chitchat at the start or end of class. If we can engage in chitchat about the weekend's football results before and after a chemistry class, we can certainly engage in chitchat about politics. In fact, we should. As teachers, we need to model that sort of behavior. Teachers have an obligation to promote and model civil discourse that respects both diversity and a diversity of opinion.

The safe response may be to say, “I’m not allowed to talk about politics in class.” But we do have this thing called the First Amendment, and we also have academic freedom. These provide a lot of protection for speaking what we believe. And talking about politics is at the core of Juniata’s institutional learning outcomes, which states that our graduates will demonstrate “engaged citizenship and respectful interactions.” Thus, it does a disservice to our students when professors say that they aren’t going to give their opinion. It is our job as teachers to model civil discourse. Teachers who fail to call out Trump’s rhetoric as inappropriate are sending the implicit signal that such inappropriate rhetoric is acceptable. I encourage you to stand up and call candidates out—both Democrats and Republicans—but to do so in a respectful way. And don’t be drawn to the false premise that classroom discussions about politics should somehow be equally balanced between opposing sides. Sometimes one side has more weight and gravitas than the other, and it’s okay to say that. But don’t forget to actively listen to those who disagree with you.

9. Students, your job is to give a damn. Have views; own your views. But remember that you don’t have the authority to speak for everyone. You can and should say why you support Trump or why you support Clinton. Ask your teachers, friends, and roommates who they are voting for and why. Americans are often afraid to ask that very basic question, “Who are you voting for?” Asking your friends who they are going to vote for could be the start of a civil conversation about politics. And try to expand your circle of friends to include others with different political opinions. That is part of a liberal arts education. You are doing yourself a disservice if we bring you to Juniata, but you only hang out with people who think like you do. Broaden your perspective; broaden your circle. Having different political views does not make someone a bad person. Have friends with different political views.

After you give a damn, convince your friends to give a damn. Tell them that if they don’t vote, others with different opinions are going to decide the election, the results of which will impact your future. Will college tuition be subsidized by government or not? Other people will be making that decision. Why in the world would you pass that responsibility to someone else? You don’t let other people decide what clothes you are going to wear, so why would you let other people decide what kind of society you are going to be living in? Start small. Start with getting them to vote, and that begins with civil discourse.

10. These same rules apply to social media. Don’t treat social media as the place where you can say things that you wouldn’t say to your friends’ faces. Only post on social media what you would say face-to-face to your friend who has a different political persuasion. Don’t forward uncivil memes. Don’t engage when your friends post something offensive or objectionable. If you wouldn’t have that conversation in person with every single one of your Facebook friends, don’t say it on Facebook. And avoid anonymous forums. They may be havens for free speech, but they are not the place for civil discourse.

11. Turn your frustrations into action. If you are frustrated with Hillary Clinton or with Donald Trump, then join a campaign. Work to have an impact. Join an interest group. Work to overturn a law you think is unjust. Be productive and turn that frustration into action.

12. Channeling Kenny Rogers, you've got to "know when to walk away, and know when to run." Some people are not as practiced in the art of civil discourse as you are. Simply listen and keep your emotions in check. If you can't do that, politely excuse yourself from the situation. That's when you walk away. When do you run? When you are at the Huntingdon County Fair and are approached by someone wearing a t-shirt that says "Trump That Bitch," that's when you run. You are not going to make any progress with that person, and you are likely to lose your cool if you try. Focus on conversations that can be productive.

That is my non-exhaustive list of twelve tips for civil discourse during emotional political campaigns. These are tips to keep in mind for the next forty days until one candidate comes out victorious, and to keep in mind for what comes next. Which brings me to a final bit of advice. In the end, elections create winners and losers. There's a clear delineation—someone takes office and someone else goes home. Some will be elated. Some will be disappointed. It's hard to lose in politics; believe me, I've lost my fair share of contests—remember that I was part of the Bernie Sanders delegation to the Democratic National Convention? My final piece of advice is that you have to keep these tips with you after the election as well, regardless of whether your candidate wins or loses. Regardless of whether you won or lost, you must soldier on civilly, as civil discourse is at the core of democratic society. You must remember that living in a democracy means that the next election is just around the corner, and you must trust that our democratic system of government will work out in the end. You will have another presidential election in four years, and a congressional election in two years. Democracy does not mean that you win all the time. But it does mean that you will win in the long if you learn to talk civilly about politics. Don't lose track of tips one through twelve just because you lose—or just because you win.

## NOTES

1. Maureen B. Costello, "Teaching the 2016 Election: The Trump Effect. The impact of the Presidential Campaign on Our Nation's Schools," Southern Poverty Law Center, 13 April 2016.  
[https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/splc\\_the\\_trump\\_effect.pdf](https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/splc_the_trump_effect.pdf).
2. Rasmussen Reports, S "Would You Rather Have a Beer With Clinton or Trump?" June 15, 2016.  
[http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public\\_content/politics/elections/election\\_2016/would\\_you\\_rather\\_have\\_a\\_beer\\_with\\_clinton\\_or\\_trump](http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/elections/election_2016/would_you_rather_have_a_beer_with_clinton_or_trump).