



Election and Debate Watch Toolkit

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Introduction

*“Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed— Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme That any man be crushed by one above.”*
--“Let America Be America Again,” Langston Hughes

The past few months have created unprecedented challenges for our students, our institutions, and our democracy. The deep divisions that marked the beginning of the 21st-century have become chasms of almost unimaginable depth. Students are being asked to navigate an increasingly polarized landscape where they feel isolated and disconnected from democratic structures and where partisanship impedes their ability to address key public policy issues and be fully engaged citizens. The good news is that a [recent survey](#) found that a plurality of Americans view colleges and universities as the best institutions at allowing competing ideas to be heard, discussed and considered. Americans still believe in the transformational impact of higher education. Furthermore, alongside business and communities, colleges and universities are viewed as a key driver of innovation in the country, demonstrating their value to strengthening economic and social capital. The bad news is that recent evidence from Gallup and Pew show that, while public confidence remains high, it is declining. Thomas Jefferson argued eloquently that the key to a successful democracy was an educated citizenry. It is essential that our students have the knowledge, skills and experiences to be fully engaged citizens, and that we create the conditions that ensure students welcome and actively seek out opportunities for civic engagement while in college, and as professionals.

A hallmark of our democracy is our voice, our first amendment rights, and our ability to effect change through the ballot box. While voting on the national level is far lower than many other developed countries, we have seen a promising rise in student voter turnout over the past few years. Some of our ADP campuses have achieved as high as 65% turnout and others, which previously had among the lowest rates in the country, increased by 23%. A key to voter engagement is voter education. While voter registration efforts can register high number of voters, if we want students to have a sense of efficacy and agency, it is imperative that we combine voter registration with initiatives that build knowledge, support civil discourse and deliberative dialogue, and provide digital literacy awareness and the ability to discern facts and to identify credible sources of news and information.

This Toolkit was developed with the help of many of our ADP campus educators, civic fellows and coordinators, along with partners like NIFI, The Kettering Foundation, NASPA, ALL IN Democracy Challenge, the Commission on Presidential Debates, The New York Times, and other subject matter experts working in civic and political education and engagement. We focus on the upcoming debates and election and hope this Toolkit provides the resources that will aid our community in key areas of deliberative dialogue and civil discourse, digital literacy and ideological bias. We also included a calendar of events and workshops to provide access to current strategies, techniques and resources; we hope you sign up for some/all of these. We are also holding facilitated conversations on Debate nights on the Discord platform, and hosting our first national “Times Talk” – “So What Did You Think About the Debate” as a way for faculty,



students, and staff to get together and debrief and discuss the debates. Join us for these events and workshops and let us know if there is additional material we can add to this Toolkit.

Our work to prepare students with the knowledge, skills and experiences to be informed and engaged citizens, ready to address the current and future challenges facing our society and enact change for the public good, is more important than ever. Our campuses live the mission of public higher education for the public good. Our goal is to equip our students with the skills that ensure deliberative dialogue, open inquiry & a commitment to strengthening democracy, and to vote.

All our best,
Felice and Cathy

Felice Nudelman
Executive Director
American Democracy Project
AASCU

Cathy Copeland
Program Coordinator
American Democracy Project
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Collaborators

The Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD)

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Indiana University Southeast

National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD)

The Kettering Foundation

The National Issues Forum Institute (NIFI)

ALL IN Democracy Challenge

National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA)



Calendar of Events

September 25th, 1:00-3:00 p.m. ET:

A Workshop to Prepare for Elections and Debates. [Register here.](#)

September 25th, 3:00-5:00 p.m. ET:

4Quad Ideology Diagnostic Workshop. E-mail fourquadsorg@gmail.com to join.

September 29th, 9:00-10:30 p.m. ET:

First Presidential Debate. [Join in our Debate Watch parties on Discord.](#)

September 30th, 12:00-1:00 p.m. ET:

So What Did You Think About The Debates? A National Times Talk with Students.
[Register here.](#)

October 2nd, 3:00-5:00 p.m. ET:

Digital Literacy Workshop: A Deeper Dive to Prepare for Elections and Debates.
[Register here.](#)

October 7th, 9:00-10:30 p.m. ET:

Vice-Presidential Debate. [Join in our Debate Watch parties on Discord.](#)

October 8th, 12:00-1:00 p.m. ET:

So What Did You Think About The Debates? A National Times Talk with Students.
[Register here.](#)

October 9th, 2:00-3:30 p.m. ET:

Deliberative Dialogue Workshop: A Deeper Dive to Prepare for Elections and Debates. [Register here.](#)

October 15th, 9:00-10:30 p.m. ET:

Second Presidential Debate. [Join in our Debate Watch parties on Discord.](#)

October 22nd, 9:00-10:30 p.m. ET:

Third Presidential Debate. [Join in our Debate Watch parties on Discord.](#)



Workshops

A Workshop to Prepare for Elections and Debates

[AASCU's The American Democracy Project](#), [ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge](#), and [NASPA](#) present a two-hour comprehensive workshop on Friday, September 25th from 1-3pm ET designed to engage faculty, staff, and students at higher education institutions in preparation for the 2020 Elections. Join experts from the fields of deliberative dialogue, digital literacy, and voter education & engagement. Sign up to attend this free workshop [here](#).

Four-Quadrant Political Ideology Diagnostic

Are your classes or events inclusive to those with different political ideologies or are they tilting more to one side of the political spectrum? How do we understand political or ideological bias, our own or others? How do you know if your political engagement committee really represents a wide spectrum of political ideologies? Learn how this free [4Quads Political Diagnostic Tool](#) can provide insight to the political ideology makeup of your classes, teams, and committees to guide conversations and address campus climate. The team will be providing training on September 25th from 3-5 pm ET. If interested, please contact fourquadsorg@gmail.com.

Digital Literacy Workshop: A Deeper Dive to Prepare for Elections and Debates

[AASCU's The American Democracy Project](#) presents a two-hour workshop on Friday, October 2nd from 3-5pm ET for faculty, staff, and students at higher education institutions. The 2020 Election and the Debates provide a launching pad to discuss how to navigate the post-truth era. Join Mike Caulfield, Mark Canada, Paul Cook, Polly Boruff-Jones and Christina Downey, experts in the fields of digital literacy and digital polarization, to explore messaging, persuasion, and rhetoric; delve into the psychological principles of mere exposure effect and trusting authorities; and discuss how to interact with "fake news," political platforms, fact-checking, and charged language. We will include an in-depth discussion of how the "Mind over Chatter" modules can be utilized across the divisions and discuss strategies for integrating them into your curriculum. These modules focus on the cognitive biases that make us susceptible to faulty information in the first place, as well as the many subtle framing techniques used by a variety of media to obscure and mislead. The workshop will conclude with a focus on how the popular SIFT model can be adapted for fact-checking across disciplines and areas of exploration. Register for this free workshop [here](#).

Deliberative Dialogue Workshop: A Deeper Dive to Prepare for Elections and Debates

[AASCU's The American Democracy Project](#) presents a 90-minute workshop on Friday, October 9th from 2-3:30pm ET for faculty, staff, and students at higher education institutions. Join Betty Knighton, Lori Britt, Steven Koether, Katia Campbell, and Kara Lindaman to discuss civil discourse and deliberative dialogue, in the context of the ongoing Presidential Debates. Our experts will also explore the framework of intentionality and morality within deliberative dialogue, how robust civil discourse relates to student success outcomes, and provide examples of how to foster an inclusive campus environment. Register for this free workshop [here](#).



THE COMMISSION ON PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

News Release: Debate Moderators

All debates will be moderated by a single individual and will run from 9:00-10:30 p.m. Eastern Time without commercial breaks. As always, the moderators alone will select the questions to be asked, which are not known to the CPD or to the candidates. The moderators will have the ability both to extend the segments and to ensure that the candidates have equal speaking time. While the focus will properly be on the candidates, the moderator will regulate the conversation so that thoughtful and substantive exchanges occur.

First presidential debate:

Chris Wallace, Anchor, Fox News Sunday

Tuesday, September 29, Case Western Reserve University and Cleveland Clinic, Cleveland, OH

Vice presidential debate:

Susan Page, Washington Bureau Chief, USA Today

Wednesday, October 7, The University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT

Second presidential debate (town meeting):

Steve Scully, Senior Executive Producer & Political Editor, C-SPAN Networks

Thursday, October 15, Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts, Miami, FL

Third presidential debate:

Kristen Welker, Co-Anchor Weekend TODAY, White House Correspondent, NBC News

Thursday, October 22, Belmont University, Nashville, TN

This year's debates will build on the successful 2012 and 2016 debate formats which introduced longer segments, allowing the candidates to focus on critical issues.



THE COMMISSION ON PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

News Release: Debate Format

The format for the debates, announced on June 23, 2020, will be:

First presidential debate:

- The debate will be divided into six segments of approximately 15 minutes each on major topics to be selected by the moderator and announced at least one week before the debate.
- The moderator will open each segment with a question, after which each candidate will have two minutes to respond. Candidates will then have an opportunity to respond to each other. The moderator will use the balance of the time in the segment for a deeper discussion of the topic.

Vice presidential debate:

- The debate will be divided into nine segments of approximately 10 minutes each. The moderator will ask an opening question, after which each candidate will have two minutes to respond. The moderator will use the balance of the time in the segment for a deeper discussion of the topic.

Second presidential debate:

- The second presidential debate will take the form of a town meeting, in which the questions will be posed by citizens from the South Florida area. The candidates will have two minutes to respond to each question and there will be an additional minute for the moderator to facilitate further discussion. The town meeting participants will be uncommitted voters selected under the supervision of Dr. Frank Newport, Senior Scientist, Gallup.

Third presidential debate:

- The format for the debate will be identical to the first presidential debate.



ADP National Discord Conversations

During the debate, we'll have the channel open for text-only chat. Faculty and ADP staff will help facilitate the conversation with guided questions. The link will be open pre- and post-debate, and we encourage participants to keep the conversation going!

For the Invite Link, contact CopelandC@aaascu.org.

How To Join Discord

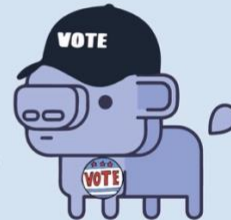


DISCORD

DEBATEWATCH
2020

Join the Debate Watch 2020 server!

1. Open your web browser and head over to "discordapp.com/register."
2. Fill out the information including your email address, username, and password.
3. Once you fill out the required information, click on **Continue**.
4. You have now successfully created your Discord account!



5. Sign into your Discord account.
6. Click on the "+" icon in the left column.
7. Click on "Join a Server" or "Join a friend on Discord."
8. Enter in the invite URL: "https://discord.gg/ZnaKpEf."
9. After entering the invite URL click on **Join Server**.
10. You have now successfully connected to the **Debate Watch 2020 server!**





On the Debate Watch 2020 Discord Server

Follow these steps to gain full access to the Server:

- 1 On the left-hand side of your screen, you'll see #read-me, #rules, and #roles. Click on #rules. Please read them.
- 2 Then, click on #roles. This brings you to a channel where you can assign roles to yourself.
- 3 The first question is "Did you read the rules?" Please react by clicking the small thumbs-up icon below the question.
- 4 Once you've done that, you'll see that the left-hand column will open up to show additional channels that we'll be using for our Debate Watch.

To explore more:

- In #roles, you can choose your pronouns, where you are located, and any other information that you wish to share.
- In #polls, you can take and see poll results.
- In #suggestions, you can suggest ideas for the server.
- All of the channels that start with # are text discussions. Explore and chat at will.
- All of the channels with a sound icon are voice channels. If you wish to join, click on that channel. Tell your friends which Voice Channel you're join so they can join too. To disconnect from the voice channel, you'll need to choose the disconnect button at the bottom left.
- If you would like the administrators to create a text channel for deeper discussions (see: Cross-Country-Conversations), message Cathy Copeland (Server Administrator) and she can set that up.

To report concerning behavior:

- You can "ping" the server staff by typing @Server Staff within any channel. We will be able to locate your concern immediately.
- Or, for a more private option, you can click on anyone in the "Server Staff" (listed at the top right of the Server). When you click, you'll see information about us followed by a message box where you can type your concern.

Debate Ballot

We have included a debate ballot on the following page for your use either during the debates, or as an exercise post-debate. Here is a different version: from the [Media Literacy Clearinghouse](#).

You can open either debate with students with a basic prompt: "Based on your observations and scoring in each category, who won the debate and why?"



Using the criteria below rate the performance of each candidate using the following scale;
1- Poor, 2-Fair, 3- Average, 4-Good, 5- excellent.

Joe Biden (D)		Donald Trump (R)
Score: Comments:	<p>ARGUMENTS How well did the candidate support their assertions (facts, stats., experts, research, examples)? Did they cite the sources of their evidence? How well did the candidate combine logical, emotional, and ethical appeals (appeals to the head and heart of the various audiences as well as appeals to their own competence, concern, and trustworthiness)?</p> <p>ORGANIZATION How easy was it to follow the candidate's main points? How directly did the candidate address each question they were asked or point they were refuting? Did they stay on topic, did they provide previews or summaries of their points?</p> <p>LANGUAGE/AUDIENCE ADAPTATION What key words or phrases did you hear the candidate repeat across responses? Was their use of language fluent, accurate, clear, precise, inclusive, and eloquent? Did they use personal pronouns (we, our, us,) and appear to speak to the viewers rather than at them or over them?</p> <p>VOCAL & PHYSICAL DELIVERY Did the candidate seem poised? Did the candidate seem congenial? How effective was the candidate's eye contact, facial expression, gestures, and body language? How congruent or contradictory were the messages sent by what the candidate said and how they said it?</p>	Score: Comments:
Score: Comments:		Score: Comments:
Score: Comments:		Score: Comments:
Score: Comments:		Score: Comments:



National Times Talks



So What Did You Think of the Debate?

A National Times Talk with Students

September 30th 12-1 p.m. ET

Join faculty, staff, and students from across the country on September 30th 12-1 p.m. ET for a national discussion to debrief and discuss the first Presidential Debate. Designed to reach across differences and create a space for discourse, this national facilitated dialogue is based on the fundamental value of the pursuit of knowledge for the public good. We will provide access to articles covering the previous night's debate and use those for guided questions and prompts for a lively conversation. Open to all ADP campuses, faculty, staff and students. Bring your classes, student organizations, and join us for this national dialogue. [Register here](#)



So What Did You Think of the Debate?

A National Times Talk with Students

October 8th 12-1 p.m. ET

Join faculty, staff, and students from across the country on October 8th 12-1 p.m. ET for a national discussion to debrief and discuss the Vice-Presidential Debate. Designed to reach across differences and create a space for discourse, this national facilitated dialogue is based on the fundamental value of the pursuit of knowledge for the public good. We will provide access to articles covering the previous night's debate and use those for guided questions and prompts for a lively conversation. Open to all ADP campuses, faculty, staff and students. Bring your classes, student organizations, and join us for this national dialogue. [Register here](#)



Voter Education and Engagement

Columbia College Chicago's 51-State Guide

This resource walks a student -- or someone assisting students -- step-by-step through the process of registering to vote and requesting a vote-by-mail ballot. The state guide pages give crucial advice for students about registering in specific states, such as making your signatures match, getting a ballot notarized, and where to have your ballot sent if you live in a dorm (i.e. not to a residence hall, in case it is closed when your ballot arrives).

To customize this resource for your school's voting program, you should make **your own copy** of the [Customizable Link Page](#). It is a google doc, so it's easy to edit your copy. That page is a welcome to your students and to anyone who is helping students register and request vote-by-mail ballots. **This is the place to list where to get help on your campus, and what kinds of help are available.** Then, it has a link to each of the 51 State Guide Sheets.

Voter Engagement Resources

[ALL IN Democracy Challenge](#) has a [College President Commitment](#) and the College Student [Pledge](#) to Vote [Leaderboard](#) and initiatives to [work with college coaches](#), especially through their [Coaches Playbook](#).

We invite you to explore their most recent handbook A Leadership Handbook: Students Vote Twenty Twenty soon available on their website. We've also included their [Virtual Engagement Toolkit](#) and [All in to Vote One-pager](#) within the Resources section.

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Nonpartisan Election Resources

[Council on Foreign Relations: Election 2020 Series](#)

CFR offers a full suite of resources to help parse the positions of Donald J. Trump, the Republican incumbent, and Democratic challenger Joe Biden, and understand how they see the U.S. role in the world. Please examine the CFR's modules of *The Candidates on Foreign Policy*, *The Role of the Vice President*, *Protecting U.S. Elections*, and More.

[PEW Resources on the 2020 Election](#)

Pew Research Center is a nonpartisan fact tank that informs the public about the issues, attitudes, and trends shaping the world. It conducts public opinion polling, demographic research, media content analysis and other empirical social science research. Pew Research Center does not take policy positions.

[Free Speech and the Inclusive Campus](#) from NASPA

The research involved in developing the guide included interviews and conversations with campus stakeholders who have multiple perspectives; the initial drafts were reviewed by individuals with direct experience in student affairs and higher education.

[Institute for Democracy and Higher Education \(IDHE\)](#)

IDHE is addressing the civic measurement gap and catalyzing change at the campus level and in U.S. higher education.

- [The National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement \(NSLVE\)](#) allows colleges and universities to learn their student registration and voting rates *and*, for interested campuses, a closer examination of their campus climate for political learning and engagement and correlations between specific student learning experiences and voting.
- [Election Imperatives 2020: A Time of Physical Distancing and Social Action](#) offers ideas for the current context, an equity checklist for everyone in higher education, and recommendations for senior leaders, professors and academic affairs, and student-centered offices and teams (e.g., voting coalitions and student affairs).

SIFT: Digital Literacy Guide

Developed by Mike Caulfield from Washington State University Vancouver, the “SIFT” is an acronym that reminds us to:



STOP



INVESTIGATE THE
SOURCE



FIND BETTER COVERAGE



TRACE CLAIMS, QUOTES
AND MEDIA TO THE
ORIGINAL CONTEXT

These four simple “moves”—and a handful of web-based shortcuts, several of which you probably already know—can rapidly improve digital information literacy and help curb the spread of false, misleading, manipulated, and improperly-framed information.

- If a piece of content makes you feel strong emotions, surprises you, makes you feel vindication, or creates an irresistibly strong desire to share it: **Stop**. Use that feeling as a reminder to check it. Problematic information often uses emotional resonance as its first line of attack.
- Then **Investigate the Source**. See if the sharing source has enough credibility of their own to be worth your attention or a share on social media. You can hover over with your cursor as a first check, and follow up with a URL + Wikipedia search. Also: reverse Google image search.
- If the reputation of the source is not up to the size of the claim, or if you simply want to see whether more trusted outlets are reporting on a particular claim or story, **Find Better Coverage** using a Google news search (for recent news). Watch your search terms, and keep an eye out for fact-checks in the results. If the claim is particularly contentious or breaking, you may want to wait until multiple sources report it. This is also known as “trading up” for better coverage.
- Even when you recognize a shared source, **Trace Claims, Quotes, and Media to the Original Context** to make sure the way the story, photo, or video is framed is correct. Use Control-F (or its equivalent if on a Mac or mobile) to see if terms in the summary appear in the article. Check the date to make sure that the story is truly related to current events.

Suggestions for teaching about digital literacy:

- Explore the super-abundance of information on the modern web (or “information plentitude”) and how this pertains to the precipitous rise of **problematic information**
- Define **basic terminology**: disinformation, misinformation, click-bait, data-dredging (or “p-hacking”), and improper framing of information;
- Use **SIFT** and other web-native techniques for fact-checking and lateral reading
- Impress the ~~importance~~ necessity of practicing a daily media habit, developing a short list of trusted sources, and practicing basic mindfulness to reflect on your information diet and promote good information hygiene.



Introduction to Mind over Chatter: Essential Skills for Navigating the Post-Truth Era

A blog post from March 29, 2020 by Paul G. Cook of Indiana University Kokomo

Mind over Chatter: Essential Skills for Navigating the Post-Truth Era is a series of five interactive, Canvas-based learning modules designed specifically for first-year college students and aimed at curbing the spread of problematic information in our time. Made possible by a generous grant from the Rita Allen Foundation and RTI International, these modules can be dropped into any course at almost any level. The Mind Over Chatter modules were created at Indiana University Kokomo by Mark Canada, Paul Cook, Polly Boruff-Jones (Oakland University), and Christina Downey.

Grounded in cognitive psychology and reflective pedagogy, this digital intervention provides students with a fluid set of digital skills, habits, and a basic working knowledge of how to navigate the web and social media, as well as recognize information that is false, misleading, inaccurate, manipulated, or improperly-framed. Students also learn about the complexities of information-gathering and exploration in a digital environment where information and media are abundant and cheap, while attention is rare and much more expensive.

Imminently practical and self-contained, the following modules may be completed in order or as stand-alone activities in virtually any course or discipline. Each module takes approximately 20 to 30 minutes to complete.

The six modules in *Mind over Chatter* are available now for free download or import in [IU Expand](#) (open access) and the [Canvas Commons](#) (Indiana University credentials required). We also encourage you to download and read the *Mind over Chatter* teaching [manual](#), a document that includes a wealth of collaborative activities, writing projects, discussion prompts, and other materials to introduce students to the complexities of media and mindful information-gathering in the post-digital era.

The five modules (plus one epistemological overview) are as follows:

1. **Initiation into MoC:** This overview, which is embedded in the MoC Teaching Manual, is a general overview of the nature of knowledge, facts, and truth, and how higher education works to help students form an understanding of truth in a world full of complex information and diverse perspectives.
2. **Framing Effects:** This module introduces students to the elements of messaging, persuasion, and rhetoric that shape our understandings of the world.
3. **Paradox of Authority:** This module explains the relationship between knowledge and trust of authorities/experts, and how that can both help and hinder our comprehension of reality.
4. **Mere Exposure Effect:** This module introduces students to a psychological phenomenon that influences what we believe and how we become committed to certain beliefs, ideas, and assumptions.



5. **Confirmation Bias:** This module engages students in an interactive activity meant to reveal how our brains form rapid understandings and then work to preserve those understandings in the face of both confirming and disconfirming or even contrary evidence.
6. **Mindfulness, Media, and Misinformation:** This module helps students understand how mindfulness, reflection, and simple web-based search techniques can help them guard against skewed, incomplete, misleading, improperly framed, or inaccurate beliefs about reality.

In the classroom, experienced writing instructors and trained peer instructors guide students in discussion, reflection, and exploration of the concepts and skills showcased in the modules. We are currently piloting *Mind over Chatter* in first-year writing courses (ENG-W 131) because of their focus on critical reading and literacy as students develop as academic writers, researchers, and responsible users of information. In Fall 2020, we plan to expand MoC to all sections of first-year writing at IU Kokomo.



Fact-Checking Resources

[Sifting Through the Coronavirus Pandemic](#) (Washington State University Vancouver)

The resources on this site use the SIFT method of digital fact-checking to engage students in parsing out fact, fiction, and farce in the face of the coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic.

[“A Handy List of Reputable Coronavirus Information”](#)

This curated post includes links to sources of reputable information like the CDC and the WHO as well as a smattering of resources for detecting and debunking misinformation online.

[Data & Society](#) is an independent nonprofit research organization that produces original research, reports, and teaching-related documents to support evidence-based public debate about emerging technology.

[Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life](#) This Rand report explores the causes and consequences of what the authors term “Truth Decay”, and examines eras of US history to identify evidence of Truth Decay’s trends. It also outlines a research agenda and a strategy for investigating the causes of Truth Decay.

[Snopes.com](#)

The granddaddy of urban legend fact-checking sites, Snopes has been ferreting out problematic information on the web and doing deep-dive research into urban legends since 1994.

[PolitiFact.com](#)

Recipient of a Pulitzer Prize, this fact-checking website uses its patented “Truth-o-Meter” to rate the accuracy of statements made by politicians and other public figures.

[FactCheck.org](#)

Published by the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg Public Policy Center, this nonpartisan, nonprofit fact-checking website monitors the accuracy of statements made by politicians and others in positions of power.

[Media Matters for America](#)

Launched in 2004, this nonprofit site is openly liberal in its political bias and its commitment to fact-checking “conservative misinformation” (“About”).

[News Busters](#)

This site is a project of the conservative-leaning Media Research Center. Their mission is “to provide immediate exposure of national media bias, unfairness, inaccuracy, and occasional idiocy” (“AboutNewsBusters.org”).

Consider these as well:

[A Media Specialist’s Guide to the Internet](#)
an interactive and nuanced [Media Bias Chart](#)
the New York Times [Tracking Viral Misinformation column](#)
a [“Spot the Troll” quiz](#)

Resources for Teaching about Dialogue, Deliberation, or Facilitation



de•lib•er•a•tion

di,libə'rāSHən/

noun

long and careful consideration or discussion.

Deliberation is a process of thoughtfully weighing options

[With The People](#) is designed as an ongoing initiative that encourages sustained practices of public deliberation on campuses and in communities across the country. It includes information for discussing public issues (in person and online), Issue Discussion Guides, Research, and Stories.

[NIFI](#) provides a foundation for deliberative dialogue, including [resources for moderators and convenings](#), as well as [NIF Issue Guides](#).

[The National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation \(NCDD\)](#) is a network of innovators who bring people together across divides to tackle today's toughest challenges. NCDD serves as a gathering place, a [resource clearinghouse](#), a news source, and a facilitative leader for this extraordinary community.

[Living Room Conversations](#) is a conversational model developed by dialogue experts in order to facilitate connection between people despite their differences, and even identify areas of common ground and shared understanding. They provide over 100 conversation guides on all sorts of topics that can otherwise be tense to talk about with friends, strangers, and even loved ones of differing backgrounds and political persuasions.

The [Kettering Foundation](#) created the [Deliberative Democracy Institute \(DDI\)](#), which is a learning exchange in which people from diverse nations explore a range of ideas that can improve public life at the community level and beyond by encouraging citizen participation and advancing knowledge of democratic practices. They have a Conceptual Overview of Process that could be used to facilitate Deliberate Dialogue. Regarding Deliberative Dialogue resources, Brad Rourke shared an explanation of the [Kettering and NIFI Material Development Process](#) which explains how deliberative dialogue works best when one approaches it with openness and a willingness to alter course based on what is learned.

The [Interactivity Foundation \(IF\)](#) works through the use of a small-group discussion process to explore diverse perspectives and generate an expanding set of divergent possibilities. The [student-facilitated Educational Discussion guides](#) are one unique element of their site.



This [resource page](#) from the Pericles Project contains printable information on:

- How to Facilitate a Discussion Guide
- Choosing a Topic for Discussion List
- Sample PowerPoint Presentations
- Additional Facilitator Resources

These resources offer a framework for connecting course content to a real-world policy concerns, and for facilitating a deliberative dialogue discussion where students explore their stance on a critical civic issue. The resources offer tools to facilitate discussions that can be customized for courses across the fine arts, humanities, social sciences, and STEM. The goal of the discussion is to empower students to see the connections between their stances on discipline-specific issues that affect them and the importance of voting.

[We the People national initiative](#) has resources (complimentary discussion materials, support materials, and research resources for classrooms, campuses, and communities) for college faculty to use online or in-person.

[Common Ground for Action \(CGA\)](#) online deliberation [platform packs](#)

[Leading Groups Online PDF](#)

[Active Learning while Physically Distancing](#)

[EveryDay Democracy](#)

[Civil Dialogue](#)

[Essential Partners resources](#), specifically the [Working with Higher Education resource](#)

Resources from the [Difficult Dialogues Initiative at the University of Alaska Anchorage](#)

Webinars from the [Difficult Dialogues National Resource Center](#)

[White Ally Toolkit](#)

Recommended Books

- Josina Makau's [Dialogue & Deliberation](#)
- [Start Talking: A Handbook for Engaging Difficult Dialogues in Higher Education](#) by Kay Landis and Patricia Jenkins
- [Stop Talking: Indigenous Ways of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education](#) by Libby Roderick
- Libby Roderick's [Toxic Friday: Resources for Addressing Faculty Bullying in Higher Education](#)

“Times Talk” Example Tool Kit

Updated September 2020 by Janet Hoffmann, Professor of Rhetoric, Coordinator of the American Democracy Project at Georgia College and State University

This guide provides a template for setting up and administering a Times Talk program at your college or university. It is based on the experience at Georgia College which was the first institution of higher learning in the United States to institute Times Talk on campus in 2005 by Political Science faculty member Gregg Kaufman.

Times Talk is a weekly discussion/conversation series on current issues and events. At Georgia College faculty, staff, students, and local community members meet at noon on Wednesdays in the campus library to share pizza while engaging in a 50 minute lively dialogue about important issues reported in the *New York Times* (NYT). Each conversation is facilitated by one or more faculty, staff, students, or local community members who choose the topic and background reading article(s). One or more articles in the NYT or other relevant credible information sources provide a starting point for each discussion. Our Times Talks are open to all campus and local community members, though your college or university will set your own guidelines based on your individual goals and constraints.



Times Talk and Informed Citizenship

Times Talk has become an integral part of the Georgia College experience, rooted in the liberal arts and based on the fundamental value of the pursuit of knowledge and truth for the public good. See a short video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xlvCnaQM7wo>. Our institution provides a complimentary digital NYT subscription to all current faculty, staff, and enrolled students. Times Talk is one of our flagship co-curricular civic engagement programs



administered by our campus chapter of AASCU's American Democracy Project, a network of 296 state colleges and universities focused on higher education's role in preparing the next generation of informed, engaged citizens for our democracy. Now more than ever, digital information literacy is a necessary and fundamental skill for responsible citizenship and having a Times Talk program on campus has been a great way for us to implement our institutional mission and reach across differences and into the community beyond our campus. The best thing about Times Talk is that everyone is there because they want to be! There are no grades, no papers, and no expectations other than abiding by the norms of good conversation and contributing to the spirit of inquiry and perspective sharing (while sharing pizza). Enjoy!

Ten Basic Steps to Get Started

1. **Choose a coordinator** to organize and administer the program and promote the series.
2. **Determine a schedule, place, and time.** Weekly, semi-weekly, monthly? Your location should be central, accessible, conducive to conversation (allow for circular seating), and have access to parking if you are inviting people from off-campus. We have found the campus library best meets our needs. In terms of timing, keep it to 50-60 minutes ideally and think about what times of day/week there might be the fewest conflicts for the people you want to attend. Because we wanted to maximize staff and local community member access, we chose noon-12:50 for our weekly discussions, which also fit into class session times on Wednesdays.
3. **Recruit** faculty, staff, and students to facilitate discussions at the beginning of each semester. Prospective student facilitators may be drawn from specific courses or student organizations. Facilitators choose a topic and send one or more articles from the *Times* to the Times Talk coordinator ahead of their session.
4. **Promote** and disseminate the week's topic several days before the scheduled Times Talk. Use email, social media, and other university communication outlets. Include a URL link to the background article(s).
5. **Create** and strategically place Times Talk signs, posters, and banners around campus in places where they will be widely seen.
6. **Free food** helps! Arrange for food and/or beverages to nourish participants.
7. **Provide copies** of the background article(s) at the venue for those who might not have had a chance to read in advance.
8. **Welcome** the participants and announce the day's topic.
9. **Launch the discussion.** If necessary, assist the facilitator(s) in drawing as many people as possible into the conversation with a particular focus on student contributions.
10. **End promptly.** Thank the facilitator and participants and announce the next session's facilitator.



50-minute Timeline Template

1. The coordinator/host takes 2-3 minutes to a) welcome the participants, b) review discussion etiquette (silence devices, be present, actively participate, listen to understand, hear each other out, disagree respectfully, be brief), and c) introduce the day's discussion topic, the background NYT articles that will be referred to during the discussion, and the day's facilitator(s).
2. The facilitator(s) typically take(s) 10-15 minutes max to share their perspectives and insights on the topic question, integrating information from the background articles to set up a shared context or frame for the group discussion. The more interactive the facilitator can be the better, as Times Talk is designed to be a conversation rather than a lecture. When you meet FTF, I recommend you set up the seating in a circle (or use circular tables) to encourage participation.
3. As much as possible of the 50 minutes should be devoted to eliciting participant comments, perspectives, questions, and dialogue.
4. The host should give a 2 minute warning and hand it back to the facilitator(s) for their closing remarks, after which the host will thank everyone, invite them to stay for one on one conversation if they would like, and encourage everyone to attend the next scheduled Times Talk.
5. It is imperative to strictly adhere to the time limit and make sure to let everyone go at the designated end time, as people will need to get to classes and back to their offices on time.

Facilitator pre-discussion preparation tips

1. We recommend that Times Talk discussion topic titles be composed to end with a question stem, so that participants are primed for a conversation and exploration of a variety of perspectives and insights rather than a lecture. For example: "Should the U.S. make college tuition free?"
2. Prepare a brief well formulated summary or key quotes from each background article. Be sure to define any necessary terms and explain any confusing aspects. If you have questions about anything in the article, more than likely everyone else does too. A good summary gets everyone on the same page. Odds are not everyone has read the article and a concise summary will help clarify terms and definitions and get the group thinking.
3. Bring prepared discussion questions and/or interactive breakout activities: Have a set of questions to ask to keep the discussion moving. Your questions should be a) about the article and/or issues surrounding it, b) help move the discussion/keep it going, c) be open-ended (who/what/when/why/how/where...) rather than yes/no. Try to have at least five prepared open-ended discussion question prompts. You might also use a mini-debate or breakout pair-share or small group format at any time to respond to the discussion questions and increase participant involvement. *Note: A good first question to ask is if "anyone has any initial responses, comments, or concerns relating to the article?"



Discussion moderating tips

1. Limit your intro/summary to 10-12 minutes max and leave 35-40 minutes for the participants to interact and contribute.
2. Be comfortable waiting 20 seconds for a response to any question you throw out before you speak again. This is very hard but very necessary. Research tells us it takes up to that long for the receiver to process the question asked and formulate a response in their head, so make yourself count silently to 20 in your head while smiling and waiting for someone to respond. They will if you give them time, trust me. The rookie mistake is for the facilitator to move on or say something too quickly because they are uncomfortable with silence. Silence is your friend more often than you think for promoting good discussion.
3. Listen to each response and let the discussion develop authentically by encouraging piggybacking on previous comments and asking spontaneous follow-up questions. Trust the room. Odds are the discussion won't go exactly the way you planned and that is the beauty of a good conversation, you dive in and end up with unanticipated insights you hadn't imagined beforehand because of the variety and diversity of participant's contributions. As long as there is meaningful, lively, and relevant discussion it is a success!
4. If more than one person has an immediate response they would like to make to a particular prompt question, tell participants to raise their hand (virtually if not in ftf mode) and then "stack" them by giving each a number or noting their name if you know it so that they can put their hand down knowing you will get to them for that question.
5. If you are using a virtual platform like Zoom, set up the chat box options so that participants can only chat with everyone (disable the private chat function), and encourage them to respond with comments, questions, resource and article links in the chat box, and bring those questions and comments into the discussion.
6. Draw from any examples below that may help you in the moment:
Questions to stifle a dominator and/or enhance more participation:
 - Thank you. What do others think about that?
 - How would anybody else respond to the concerns just expressed?
 - I'd like to create some space for those of you who have been quieter. Someone else?
 - Would anyone we haven't heard from yet like to weigh in on this?
 - What ideas haven't been expressed yet?
 - Does that bring up anything for anyone?

Transition questions as you move from one issue/topic to the next

- Is there anything else anyone would like to add or respond to concerning this issue or point before we move on to the next?
- Let's have one more comment on this issue, and then we have to move on to a new topic.



Questions that re-direct misinformation from a participant

- Does anyone have a different perspective on that?
- (use the article) “the article states....How does that fit in with the information you just gave us?
- Would you give us a specific example to help clarify your point?

Sample templates

Sample call for volunteer facilitators:

The American Democracy Project at Georgia College requests your support for another semester of engaging, lively weekly discussions on current events and topics of local and/or global public interest in any discipline or field. Times Talk is celebrating its 15th year as a GC campus tradition and a nationally innovative civic engagement program by providing a space in the GC library for interested community members to gather from noon-12:50 pm every Wednesday to eat free pizza and discuss a chosen topic of that week's volunteer facilitator who spends a few minutes providing perspective and insights on the topic, uses a New York Times article for factual background/context, and encourages participants to share their perspectives, observations, insights, and questions. Become part of the tradition by volunteering to facilitate a discussion on a topic of interest to you or your class. Co-facilitator teams of faculty, staff, and/or students are encouraged.

To volunteer, send your name (and co-facilitators names if any), topic idea (in question format if possible) contact info, any preferred date if you have one (Wednesdays noon between Sept. 4th and Dec. 4th) to jan.hoffmann@gcsu.edu who hosts and serves as timekeeper/moderator for each program. You will be contacted as soon as possible for follow-up. Times Talk facilitation dates are filled on a first come first serve basis.

Sample reminder template

TO: all facilitators. CC: host

Thank you for volunteering to facilitate a Times Talk conversation. Can you please confirm the accuracy of the details below regarding your upcoming Times Talk? (Insert topic title, facilitators and article links if sent). If you have any changes to make to this information, please send them to me by the Friday prior to your scheduled date. Please note that we still need a link to the article(s) you plan to discuss. Please reply at your earliest convenience and thanks again!

Sample campus digital publicity announcement:

Join us for this week's Times Talk on Wednesday Sep. 25 at noon-12:50 in the Pat Peterson Museum Education Room in Russell library (Clarke St. entrance) facilitated by English Dept. faculty member Dr. Hali Sofala-Jones, noted Samoan Poet who will facilitate a discussion entitled "Power to the Poets: Can Poetry Save Us During Times of Social and Cultural Upheaval?" The following background articles which will be referenced in the conversation:

- “Political Poetry is Hot Again”



<https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.nytimes.com/2018/12/10/books/review/political-poetry.amp.html>

- “Room for Debate: Does Poetry Matter?”

<https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2014/07/18/does-poetry-matter>

Listen to the Podcast preview of “Why This Times Talk” at <https://soundcloud.com/wrgc/why-this-time-talk-podcast-power-to-the-poets>, and tune in to 88.3 FM WRGC our local NPR station Tuesday evening at 8 pm for a half hour interview with our facilitator conducted by station manager Daniel McDonald.

Join the conversation via twitter (#gctimestalk) and Facebook. Times Talk is celebrating 15 years of informed, insightful, and lively campus-wide discussion of current events as reported in the New York Times. Brought to you by the American Democracy Project at Georgia College and the Ina Dillard Russell library. Just bring your brain! Free pizza while it lasts...

Other Tips

Align with other events. Hold Times Talks in coordination with related events on campus. At Georgie College, we hold a special constitutional Times Talk to coincide with Constitution Week.

Coordinate with all your campus media programs. We have a campus radio station, a local NPR affiliate radio station, a student-run television station and a student-run newspaper. We are able to provide half hour programming to our regional state-wide NPR radio audience via pre-recorded podcast interviews of our facilitators that go out the evening before our live Times Talks, which includes a 3-4 minute preview teaser via soundcloud we send out with our live event announcements.


Be flexible. Sometimes local, national, or global events will dictate shifting the schedule to allow the time and space to discuss issues that are timely and relevant. Be prepared to revise the schedule as needed.

Look for unexpected facilitators. Faculty, staff and students are obvious choices as facilitators. Don't forget both alumni and the local community have a wealth of talent to draw upon too.

Provide food. Have we said this before? Like it or not, free food is a great incentive!



An example graphic is the last section of our “Times Talk” Example Toolkit:



Times Talk Schedule Fall 2019

Join us every Wednesday
12:00-12:50 in the Pat Peterson Museum
Education room
Free Pizza
Just Bring your Brain!

<u>Date</u>	<u>Topic</u>
Aug 28	Should the US ban hate speech?
Sept 4	Do we still need nuclear weapons?
Sept 11	The Hong Kong Protests: What's at Stake?
Sept 18	Marijuana and the Supremacy clause (constitution week)
Sept 25	Power to the Poets: Can Poetry Save Us During Times of Social and Cultural Upheaval?
Oct 2	Medicare for All: What does it Really Mean?
Oct 9	The 50th anniversary of the Stonewall uprising
Oct 16	Should the U.S. make college tuition free?
Oct 23	Dinosaurs, Donors, and Determining Science Content: Presenting Climate Change in the new Dinosaur Hall at the Smithsonian.
Oct 30	How has Habitat for Humanity affected local housing needs?
Nov 6	Globalization: Promise, Peril... Prevail?
Nov 13	Fifth Estate or Fifth Column? How social media and dark money are killing our democracy in the name of free speech
Nov 20	Why is Colombia Going Back to War, and Why Should We Care?
Dec 4	“Resurgent Anti-Semitism and White Nationalism: How will you respond?”

Access to the NYTimes.com for Georgia College faculty, staff, and students is provided by the Office of Academic Affairs

Directions to get the digital subscription of New York Times:

1. Visit <http://accessnyt.com>
2. Select Georgia College
3. Use your Bobcats email to create an account
4. Confirm your email
5. Receive an incredible all access, complimentary resource!

The Tribalism of Truth

As political polarization grows, the arguments we have with one another may be shifting our understanding of truth itself

By Matthew Fisher, Joshua Knobe, Brent Strickland and Frank C. Keil

IN A KEY MOMENT OF THE FINAL TRUMP-CLINTON PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE, DONALD TRUMP turned to a question regarding Russian president Vladimir Putin:

“He has no respect for her,” Trump said, pointing at Hillary Clinton. “Putin, from everything I see, has no respect for this person.”

The two debaters then drilled down to try and gain a more nuanced understanding of the difficult policy issues involved. Clinton said,

“Are you suggesting that the aggressive approach I propose would actually fail to deter Russian expansionism?”

To which Trump responded,

“No, I certainly agree that it would deter Russian expansionism; it’s just that it would also serve to destabilize the ...”

Just kidding. That’s not at all what happened. Actually each side aimed to attack and defeat the other. Clinton really said,

“Well, that’s because he’d rather have a puppet as president of the United States.”

To which Trump retorted,

“You’re the puppet!”

IN BRIEF

The existence of moral objectivity is a thorny philosophical question. Cognitive scientists have gathered empirical evidence to see how ordinary people actually think about relativism versus immutable truth.

As political polarization grows, arguing to win is seemingly a more popular style of discourse than arguing to learn, especially in online forums such as Facebook and Twitter.

Researchers have found that the style of discourse people engage in actually changes their understanding of the question itself. If arguing to win is on the rise, it is very likely that objectivism is, too.



Episodes like this one have become such a staple of contemporary political discourse that it is easy to forget how radically different they are from disputes we often have in ordinary life. Consider a couple of friends trying to decide on a restaurant for dinner. One might say, “Let’s try the new Indian restaurant tonight. I haven’t had Indian for months.” To which another replies, “You know, I saw that place is getting poor reviews. Let’s grab some pizza instead?” “Good to know—pizza it is,” says the first. Each comes in with an opinion. They begin a discussion in which each presents an argument, then listens to the other’s argument, and then they both move toward an agreement. This kind of dialogue happens all the time. In our research, which involves cognitive psychology and experimental philosophy, we refer to it as “arguing to learn.”

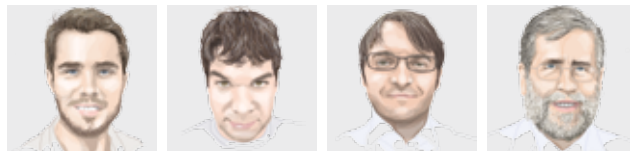
But as political polarization increases in the U.S., the kind of antagonistic exchange exemplified by the Trump-Clinton debate is occurring with increasing frequency—not just among policy makers but among us all. In interactions such as these, people may provide arguments for their views, but neither side is genuinely interested in learning from the other. Instead the real aim is to “score points,” in other words, to defeat the other side in a competitive activity. Conversations on Twitter, Facebook and even YouTube comment sections have become powerful symbols of what the combativeness of political discourse looks like these days. We refer to this kind of discussion as “arguing to win.”

The divergence of Americans’ ideology is accompanied by an animosity for those across the aisle. Recent polls show that partisan liberals and conservatives associate with one another less frequently, have unfavorable views of the opposing party, and would even be unhappy if a family member married someone from the other side. At the same time, the rise of social media has revolutionized how information is consumed—news is often personalized to one’s political preferences. Rival perspectives can be completely shut out from one’s self-created media bubble. Making matters worse, outrage-inducing content is more likely to spread on these platforms, creating a breeding ground for click-bait headlines and fake news. This toxic online environment is very likely driving Americans further apart and fostering unproductive exchanges.

In this time of rising tribalism, an important question has arisen about the psychological effects of arguing to win. What happens in our minds—and to our minds—when we find ourselves conversing in a way that simply aims to defeat an opponent? Our recent research has explored this question using experimental methods, and we have found that the distinction between different modes of argument has some surprisingly far-reaching effects. Not only does it change people’s way of thinking about the debate and the people on the opposing side, but it also has a more fundamental effect on our way of understanding the very issue under discussion.

ARE WE OBJECTIVISTS OR RELATIVISTS?

THE QUESTION OF MORAL and political objectivity is a notoriously thorny one, which philosophers have been debating for millennia. Still, the core of the question is easy enough to grasp by considering a few hypothetical conversations. Consider a debate about a perfectly straightforward question in science or mathematics. Suppose two friends are working together on a problem and find themselves disagreeing about the solution:



Matthew Fisher is a postdoctoral research fellow in social and decision sciences at Carnegie Mellon University. **Joshua Knobe** is a professor at Yale University, appointed both in the program in cognitive science and in the department of philosophy. **Brent Strickland** is a researcher in cognitive science at the Jean Nicod Institute in Paris. **Frank C. Keil** is Charles C. and Dorathea S. Dilley Professor of Psychology and a professor of linguistics and cognitive science at Yale University.

Mary: The cube root of 2,197 is 13.

Susan: No, the cube root of 2,197 is 14.

People observing this conflict might not know which answer is correct. Yet they might be entirely sure that there is a single objectively correct answer. This is not just a matter of opinion—there is a fact of the matter, and anyone who has an alternative view is simply mistaken.

Now consider a different kind of scenario. Suppose these two friends decide to take a break for lunch and find themselves disagreeing about what to put on their bagels:

Mary: Veggie cream cheese is really tasty.

Susan: No, veggie cream cheese is not tasty at all. It is completely disgusting.

In this example, observers might take up another attitude: Even if two people have opposite opinions, it could be that neither is incorrect. It seems that there is no objective truth of the matter.

With that in mind, think about what happens when people debate controversial questions about morally infused political topics. As our two friends are enjoying their lunch, suppose they wade into a heated political chat:

Mary: Abortion is morally wrong and should not be legal.

Susan: No, there is nothing wrong with abortion, and it should be perfectly legal.

The question we grapple with is how to understand this kind of debate. Is it like the math question, where there is an objectively right answer and anyone who says otherwise must be mistaken? Or is it more like a clash over a matter of taste, where there is no single right answer and people can have opposite opinions without either one being wrong?

In recent years work on this topic has expanded beyond the realm of philosophy and into psychology and cognitive science. Instead of relying on the intuitions of professional philosophers, researchers like ourselves have begun gathering empirical evidence to understand how people actually think about these issues. Do people tend to think moral and political questions have objectively correct answers? Or do they have a more relativist view?

On the most basic level, the past decade of research has shown that the answer to this question is that it’s complicated. Some people are more objectivist; others are more relativist. That might seem obvious, but later studies explored the differences between people with these types of thinking. When participants are asked whether they would be willing to share an

apartment with a roommate who holds opposing views on moral or political questions, objectivists are more inclined to say no. When participants are asked to sit down in a room next to a person who has opposing views, objectivists actually sit farther away. As University of Pennsylvania psychologist Geoffrey P. Goodwin once put it, people who hold an objectivist view tend to respond in a more “closed” fashion.

Why might this be? One straightforward possibility is that if you think there is an objectively correct answer, you may be drawn to conclude that everyone who holds the opposite view is simply incorrect and therefore not worth listening to. Thus, people’s view about objective moral truths could shape their approach to interacting with others. This is a plausible hypothesis and one worth investigating in further studies. Yet we thought that there might be more to the story. In particular, we suspected there might be an effect in the opposite direction. Perhaps it’s not just that having objectivist views shapes your interactions with other people; perhaps your interactions with other people can actually shape the degree to which you hold objectivist views.

WINNING VS. LEARNING

TO TEST THIS THEORY, we ran an experiment in which adults engaged in an online political conversation. Each participant logged on to a Web site and indicated his or her positions on a variety of controversial political topics, including abortion and gun rights. They were matched with another participant who held opposing views. The participants then engaged in an online conversation about a topic on which they disagreed.

Half of the participants were encouraged to argue to win. They were told that this would be a highly competitive exchange and that their goal should be to outperform the other person. The result was exactly the kind of communication one sees every day on social media. Here, for example, is a transcript from one of the actual conversations:

P1: I believe 100 percent in a woman’s choice

P2: Abortion should be prohibited because it stops a beating heart

P1: Abortion is the law of the land, the land you live in

P2: The heart beats at 21 days its murder [sic]

The other half of participants were encouraged to argue to learn. They were told that this would be a very cooperative exchange and that they should try to learn as much as they could from their opponent. These conversations tended to have a quite different tone:

P3: I believe abortion is a right all women should possess. I do understand that some people choose to place certain determinants on when and why, but I think it should be for any reason before a certain time point in the pregnancy agreed upon by doctors, so as not to harm the mother.

P4: I believe that life begins at conception (sperm meeting egg), so abortion to me is the equivalent of murder.

P3: I can absolutely see that point. As a biologist, it is obvious from the first cell division that “life” is happening. But I do not think life is advanced enough to warrant abolishing abortion.

It is not all that surprising that these two sets of instructions

led to such results. But would these exchanges in turn lead to different views about the very nature of the question being discussed? After the conversation was over, we asked participants whether they thought there was an objective truth about the topics they had just debated. Strikingly, these 15-minute exchanges actually shifted people’s views. Individuals were more objectivist after arguing to win than they were after arguing to learn. In other words, the social context of the discussion—how people frame the purpose of controversial discourse—actually changed their opinions on the deeply philosophical question about whether there is an objective truth at all.

These results naturally lead to another question that goes beyond what can be addressed through a scientific study. Which of these two modes of argument would be better to adopt when it comes to controversial political topics? At first, the answer seems straightforward. Who could fail to see that there is something deeply important about cooperative dialogue and something fundamentally counterproductive about sheer competition?

Although this simple answer may be right most of the time, there may also be cases in which things are not quite so clear-cut. Suppose we are engaged in a debate with a group of climate science skeptics. We could try to sit down together, listen to the arguments of the skeptics and do our best to learn from everything they have to say. But some might think that this approach is exactly the wrong one. There might not be anything to be gained by remaining open to ideas that contradict scientific consensus. Indeed, agreeing to partake in a cooperative dialogue might be an instance of what journalists call “false balance”—legitimizing an extreme outlier position that should not be weighed equally. Some would say that the best approach in this kind of case is to argue to win.

Of course, our studies cannot directly determine which mode of argument is “best.” And although plenty of evidence suggests that contemporary political discourse is becoming more combative and focused on winning, our findings do not elucidate *why* that change has occurred. Rather they provide an important new piece of information to consider: the mode of argument we engage in actually changes our understanding of the question itself. The more we argue to win, the more we will feel that there is a single objectively correct answer and that all other answers are mistaken. Conversely, the more we argue to learn, the more we will feel that there is no single objective truth and different answers can be equally right. So the next time you are deciding how to enter into an argument on Facebook about the controversial question of the day, remember that you are not just making a choice about how to interact with a person who holds the opposing view. You are also making a decision that will shape the way you—and others—think about whether the question itself has a correct answer. ■

MORE TO EXPLORE

Why Are Some Moral Beliefs Perceived to Be More Objective Than Others?

G. P. Goodwin and J. M. Darley in *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 48, No. 1, pages 250–256; January 2012.

The Influence of Social Interaction on Intuitions of Objectivity and Subjectivity.

Matthew Fisher et al. in *Cognitive Science*, Vol. 41, No. 4, pages 1119–1134; May 2017.

FROM OUR ARCHIVES

Experimental Philosophy: Thoughts Become the New Lab Rats. Joshua Knobe; November 2011.

scientificamerican.com/magazine/sa

DEBATEWATCH 2020

HOSTING A VIRTUAL DEBATE WATCH

Debate watches have long been a tradition in the United States, particularly on college and university campuses. In today's environment, a practical alternative to in-person gatherings is a virtual debate watch where participants watch the debate together or individually online, then come together to discuss what was seen and heard, ask questions and listen respectfully to other opinions.

General Tips

- See the [Commission on Presidential Debates' website](#) for information on dates, timing and updates.
- Register with CPD's DebateWatch2020: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1BU_fIE-3vbFYbP7nuggULdp9nnCyDGBM121Q9a4tCEs/viewform?edit_requested=true
- Email invitations with instructions and the link for online meeting.
- Communicate to the group the elements of respectful discussion.
- If you choose to use facilitators, identify and prepare in advance.

Pre Debate

- Plan to convene in advance of the debate which begins at 9PM ET.
- The pre-debate programming is televised on C-SPAN at 8:30PM ET.
- If viewing the pre-debate programming, ask participants to log in by 8:20PM ET.
If not, ask participants to log in at 8:50PM ET.
- Set the stage by explaining the role of the facilitator, confirm timeline and discuss goals.
- Advise participants that the discussion following the debate will last for ____ minutes.

Watching the Debate

- While not an exhaustive list, the debates may be viewed on major networks: ABC, CBS, CNN, C-SPAN, FOX and NBC. It can also be streamed via network websites.

Post Debate

- Ask participants to turn off the TV or computer immediately following the debate before the post-debate commentary.
- Participants should log back into the online meeting by 10:20 PM ET.
- Facilitator to remind participants of the elements of respectful discussions and begins the discussion.
- Use the "raise hand" or "chat" feature on the platform to take comments in order.
- At the end of the allotted time, close by thanking all for their participation.

Technology

- Use an online platform that is secure and user-friendly.
- Encourage participants to become familiar with the chosen platform. Have experienced technical support available for troubleshooting, if possible.
- Understand and adjust platform settings to prevent disruptions like "zoom bombing."

Let's Scrap the Presidential Debates

They've become unrevealing quip contests.

By Elizabeth Drew

Ms. Drew is a journalist based in Washington.

Aug. 3, 2020

Nervous managers of the scheduled 2020 presidential debates are shuffling the logistics and locations to deal with the threat of the coronavirus. But here's a better idea: Scrap them altogether. And not for health reasons.

The debates have never made sense as a test for presidential leadership. In fact, one could argue that they reward precisely the opposite of what we want in a president. When we were serious about the presidency, we wanted intelligence, thoughtfulness, knowledge, empathy and, to be sure, likability. It should also go without saying, dignity.

Yet the debates play an outsize role in campaigns and weigh more heavily on the verdict than their true value deserves.

Perhaps the most substantive televised debate of all was the first one, between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, which Nixon was considered to have won on substance on the radio, while the cooler and more appealing Kennedy won on television. Since these weren't true debates, the concept of "winning" one of these odd encounters was always amorphous. (To be sure, many questions by panels of journalists were designed less to stimulate debate than to challenge one of the candidates.)



Vice President Richard M. Nixon, left, and Senator John F. Kennedy in a televised debate in 1960. Associated Press

Over time, the debates came to resemble professional wrestling matches, and more substantive debates were widely panned in the press. Points went to snappy comebacks and one-liners. Witty remarks drew laughs from the audience and got repeated for days and remembered for years.

Some of them have been less than hilarious, but they did the job of dominating reaction to a debate. Whatever substance existed was largely ignored. In 1980, when Ronald Reagan debated the incumbent Jimmy Carter, Carter made a serious point about Reagan's position on Medicare, and Reagan's riposte, "There you go again," a non-answer if ever there was one, brought down the house and that was that.

In the first 1984 debate, Reagan, seeking re-election and at 73, the oldest person to be nominated for the presidency, seemed tired and tended to wander off mentally at times. His lackluster performance caused panic among his staff. Democratic supporters of former Vice President Walter Mondale saw an opening.

But another debate soon followed. Thoroughly prepared, Reagan got off the crack, "I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent's youth and inexperience."

President Ronald Reagan during a debate with Walter F. Mondale in October 1984. David Longstreath/Associated Press

The audience roared and Mr. Mondale feigned a laugh, knowing he was cooked. Not even Reagan's ending of that debate, reminiscing about driving along the Pacific Coast and musing about time capsules, was enough to undermine his political prospects. Reagan's "joke" aimed at nullifying the age issue dominated the post-debate chatter.

But what is the point or relevance of the carefully prepared one-liner? It's as spontaneous as a can of sardines. It's usually delivered from a memory chip in the mind, having been fashioned and rehearsed with aides. When is a president called upon to put down an interlocutor, be it a member of Congress or a foreign leader?

This, by the way, isn't written out of any concern that Donald Trump will prevail over Joe Biden in the debates; Mr. Biden has done just fine in a long string of such contests. The point is that "winning" a debate, however assessed, should be irrelevant, as are the debates themselves.

The better way to pay attention to and choose among the presidential candidates is to follow the long campaign that so many complain about. The reason for such moaning has always been a mystery, because unless the campaign is taking place in your living room, you can simply switch it off.

The key words are "pay attention to," because over the stretch of 2015-2016 it wasn't impossible to see the implications of a Trump presidency. Not just the vulgarity but the ignorance and insensitivity and extreme narcissism were apparent more than a year before Election Day.

Moreover, we didn't need the debates to tell us that Trump had chosen to be the P.T. Barnum of American politics. For him, it was (and still is) all about the show, about distracting the public from reality. It was obvious that Mr. Trump had no real affinity for the working-class people whose votes he was chasing. Nothing in his life suggested that his heart was with struggling workers and farmers. It wasn't impossible to know that he wasn't the skilled businessman he professed to be. His bankruptcies and shady business practices and discrimination against Black tenants were no secret.

The debates took us nowhere nearer the realities about arguably the most disastrous president in our history. They became simply another tool in his arsenal.

The party conventions, also vestigial organs of a political system that no longer exists, are close to being done away with, if not for the reasons they should be. There's no reason not to throw the presidential debates on the trash heap of useless (at best) rituals that are no help in our making such a fateful decision.

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ON THE CAMPAIGN

What Should Be the Purpose of a Presidential Debate?

By Adam Nagourney

April 21, 2008

WASHINGTON Considering that the debate in Philadelphia last Wednesday may well have been the final meeting between Senators Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama in this presidential race, it is notable that most of the commentary has focused not on the candidates, but on the moderators.

In on-line postings, bristling newspaper commentary, and numerous letters-to-the-editor, the ABC moderators Charles Gibson and George Stephanopoulos have been excoriated for pressing a line of tough questioning aimed primarily at Mr. Obama. The interrogation was characterized by their critics as trivial and demeaning to the presidential selection process in general.

“We the undersigned deplore the conduct of ABC’s George Stephanopoulos and Charles Gibson at the Democratic Presidential debate on April 16: The debate was a revolting descent into tabloid journalism and a gross disservice to Americans concerned about the great issues facing the nation and the world,” a group of 40 mostly liberal journalists and bloggers wrote in an open letter to ABC. Among those signing were Ari Berman and Katha Pollitt of The Nation, Michael Tomasky of The Guardian, Kevin Drum of the Washington Monthly, as well as Eric Alterman, Joe Conason and Todd Gitlin.

As Mr. Stephanopoulos later acknowledged, ABC might have handled the forum better. The first 45 minutes or so of the session was devoted not to the major issues of the day Iraq, health care, the mortgage crisis but to pushing Mr. Obama on matters like his relationship with his pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, and his association with former members of the 1960s radical group the Weather Underground, including William Ayers, a Chicago neighbor.

The reaction might have been less impassioned had the moderators, say, asked about Iraq before the Weathermen. Similarly, directing another tough question to Mrs. Clinton might have left Mr. Obama’s supporters feeling slightly less aggrieved. And then there was the question that arguably should have been left back in the studio (“Do you think Reverend Wright loves America as much as you do?”).

For all that, was the debate as frivolous and irrelevant a forum as so many of the critics and Mr. Obama's supporters maintain? Did it fail at what should be the central purpose of a presidential debate: to provide voters and viewers with information they need to measure the suitability of the candidates for the White House?

For all the concern voiced about the lack of discussion about issues like Iraq and health care, it seems fair to say that even the most slightly attuned Democratic voters already have a well-formed sense of the views of Mrs. Clinton and Mr. Obama. Further, one of the central dynamics of this campaign — and why things have seemed so strained as the candidates have sought areas of difference — is that these are two Democrats with fairly similar views of the world.

Thus, there is a premium on trying to find out new things about these candidates' views and how they might react to the problems of the day. And though it took a while to get there, there were a number of memorable instances of this on Wednesday night in Philadelphia.

Take, for example, the different responses from Mrs. Clinton and Mr. Obama on whether they would view an attack by Iran on Israel as an attack on the United States. (Mrs. Clinton said such an attack would result in "massive retaliation from the United States," while Mr. Obama said such an attack would be "unacceptable" and would lead him to take "appropriate action.") Both candidates said they would not raise taxes on the middle class, though Mr. Obama acknowledged he was open to subjecting higher levels of income to the Social Security payroll tax.

Both Mrs. Clinton and Mr. Obama said they were open to raising the capital gains tax, though Mrs. Clinton said the top rate she would consider would be lower than the top rate Mr. Obama put on the table. Both candidates said that they would proceed with plans to bring troops home from Iraq, even if they were told by their military advisers that this was a bad thing to do.

But it was the first part of the debate (the part that, given newspaper deadlines, tends to get the most attention the next day) that has engendered the most criticism, with the discussion of Mr. Wright, the Weathermen and Mr. Obama's downplaying the importance of his decision not to wear an American flag pin on his lapel all the time.

It is questionable whether any of those matters provide any insight into Mr. Obama's character or abilities as president: Mr. Obama's supporters certainly viewed them as trivial, and Mr. Obama himself seemed dismissive of them. Yet while such questions may sound inconsequential to many Democrats and Obama supporters, there are — as Mr. Obama's advisers acknowledged — no small number of Americans to whom these are potentially

disturbing questions, particularly if left unanswered or taken out of context. That is particularly true with independent and Republican voters who have been struck by Mr. Obama's unusual appeal.

Mr. Obama's association with Mr. Ayers, or his decision to continue to attend services at his church, or his remark about bitter working-class voters, are isolated episodes that may say little about Mr. Obama and may pale in significance compared to the weightier issues facing the country. Even so, they are the kind of things that Republicans will no doubt try to use against Mr. Obama. In particular, Republicans are likely to aim that material at blue-collar voters who, to date, have been slow to support Mr. Obama and for whom, Republicans believe, the same questions that Mr. Obama's critics described as trivial could have great resonance if Mr. Obama is the Democratic candidate in the fall election.

"There is a reason Velveeta sells better than brie in this great country," said Nelson Warfield, a conservative Republican consultant. "And for every Obama voter in the primary who shares his sophisticated disdain for the heartland, there will be plenty of McCain voters in the general who are ready to correct him."

If Mr. Obama needed any more demonstration of the ways in which character and values issues could be used against him, it came on Sunday from Senator John McCain, the Arizona Republican and likely presidential nominee, who talked about Mr. Obama to Mr. Stephanopoulos on ABC's This Week.

"I'm sure he's patriotic but his relationship with Mr. Ayers is open to question," Mr. McCain said. "If you're going to associate and have as a friend and serve on a board and have a guy kick off your campaign that says he's unrepentant, that he wished bombed more."

One of the critical questions of this election is whether the lines of attacks that worked for Republicans against Democrats in the 1980s and 1990s are still potent, or whether Americans are now inured to them whether the problems facing the country will transcend that kind of politics.

Mrs. Clinton's advisers and Republicans think they will not. As Mrs. Clinton's advisers have noted, Republicans have already jumped on Mr. Obama's remarks about "bitter working-class voters" who "cling to guns or religion."

"It will be a very big problem for him in November," said Mr. Warfield.

Yet Mr. Obama's advisers, and some Democrats not aligned with his campaign, argue that in a time of such national unhappiness, talk of flag pins and trying to discredit a candidate because of people he has associated with in his life will not work. "Not the year," said Robert

Shrum, a Democratic consultant. “People have common sense: They might say, ‘I don’t agree with the guy.’ But this is not what this is about.”

One way or another, as Mr. Shrum said, these are attacks that Mr. Obama is going to hear frequently should he get the nomination. If nothing else, the ABC moderators gave Mr. Obama a hint of his general election campaign and Democratic voters, trying to figure out who their strongest candidate might be, a hint of how he might weather such attacks.