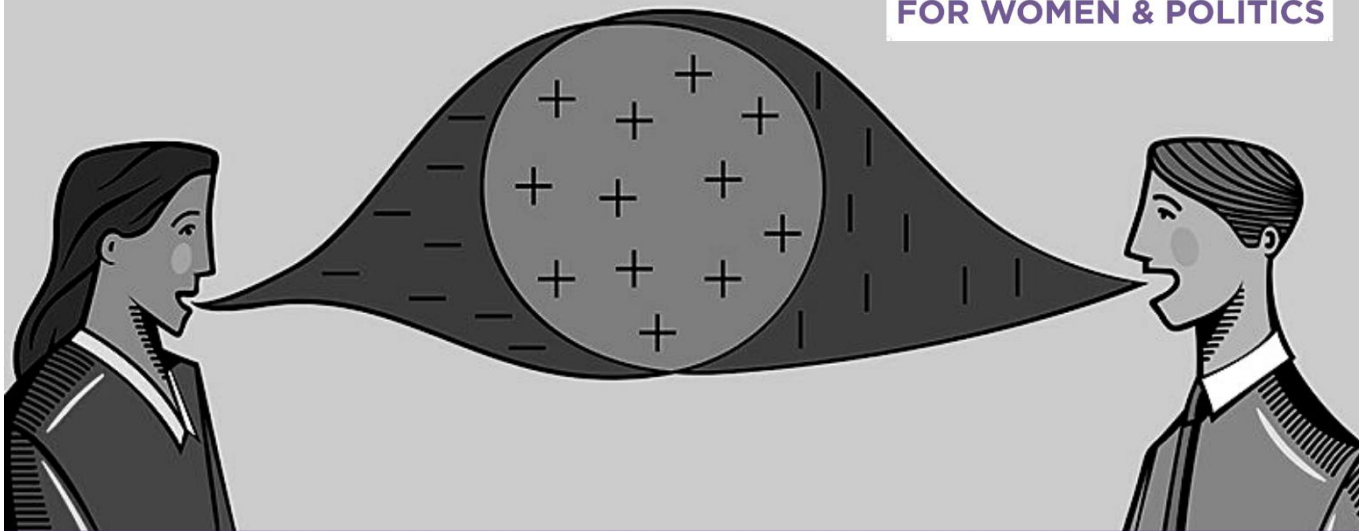


CHATHAM UNIVERSITY  
**PENNSYLVANIA CENTER  
FOR WOMEN & POLITICS**



# **RESOURCES FOR CIVIL DISCOURSE**

**PREPARED BY THE PENNSYLVANIA CENTER  
FOR WOMEN AND POLITICS**

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## About the Pennsylvania Center for Women and Politics

Mission: “To increase women’s influence and leadership in public life in Pennsylvania and improve the quality of women’s lives by providing them with educational and training opportunities in politics and public policy.”

The Pennsylvania Center for Women and Politics (PCWP) at Chatham University is a non-partisan center devoted to fostering women’s public leadership through education, empowerment, and action.

The first to focus on women’s political involvement in Pennsylvania, the Center integrates disciplinary knowledge, civic education, and capacity building while examining the intersection of women and public policy. The Center conducts candidate and advocacy trainings, offers educational programs in applied politics, and provides timely analysis on women’s issues. The Center is also home to the University’s membership in Project Pericles – a select group of liberal arts colleges and universities that have made institutional commitments to promoting participatory citizenship and social responsibility.

The Pennsylvania Center for Women, Politics, and Public Policy was established in 1998 through the generosity of the Hillman Foundation, Inc. and the Maurice Falk Medical Foundation. It was then reconceived and endowed in 2003, by the Hillman Foundation.

### PCWP’s Signature Programs

- [NEW Leadership™ Pennsylvania](#)
- [Ready to Run™ Pennsylvania Campaign Training for Women](#)
- [Elsie Hillman Chair in Women and Politics](#)
- [PLEN: Public Leadership Education Network](#)

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## Overview

This toolkit is intended to provide resources and information on creating dialogue surrounding political differences and civil discourse.

### What is Civil Discourse?

In 2011 the [National Institute for Civil Discourse](#) at the University of Arizona held an executive session where they defined civil discourse as “robust, honest, frank and constructive dialogue and deliberation that seeks to advance the public interest.” (Brosseau, 2011). The group went on further to state that civil discourse must be founded on the participant’s willingness to share their views and to listen to another participant’s views.

[The American University Project on Civil Discourse](#) broke a definition down into these bullet point terms:

<b>Civil Discourse is</b>	<b>Civil Discourse is not</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Truthful</li><li>– Productive</li><li>– Audience-based</li><li>– About listening and talking</li><li>– Each Speaker's own responsibility</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Mere politeness</li><li>– An exercise in martyrdom</li><li>– About telling other people who they are</li><li>– Purely performative</li></ul>

Below features a list of the [Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy](#)'s Principles of Good Civic Discourse:

- Provide framework for dialogue (establish ground rules; framework should recognize any cultural differences)
- Provide all with voice (create safe rhetorical space; manage inequalities of access and power)
- Focus on issues. Invite/encourage a variety of perspectives (inclusiveness)
- Value evidence variety – testimony, statistical evidence, narrative story telling
- Seek common ground and consensus when possible
- Avoid personal attacks
- Resist relying on ideological sloganeering
- Seek to understand rather than to persuade

“Good civic discourse is an exercise in participatory democracy, engaging diverse citizens as well as elected officials in a shared exploration of policy, planning, or problem-solving issues.” (Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy & Kansas Campus Compact, n.d.)

The [Program on Intergroup Relations](#) at the University of Michigan went further on to explore the differences between [Discussion, Debate, and Dialogue](#) using this chart:

<b>Discussion</b>	<b>Debate</b>	<b>Dialogue</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Present ideas Broaden our own perspective</li> <li>– Seek answers and solutions</li> <li>– Persuade others</li> <li>– Enlist others</li> <li>– Share information</li> <li>– Solve our own and others’ problems</li> <li>– Give answers</li> <li>– Achieve preset goals</li> <li>– Acknowledge feelings, then discount them as inappropriate</li> <li>– Listen for places of disagreement</li> <li>– Avoid feelings</li> <li>– Avoid areas of strong conflict and difference</li> <li>– Retain relationships</li> <li>– Avoid silence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Succeed or win</li> <li>– Look for weakness</li> <li>– Stress disagreement</li> <li>– Defend our opinion</li> <li>– Focus on ‘right’ and ‘wrong’</li> <li>– Advocate one perspective or opinion</li> <li>– Search for flaws in logic</li> <li>– Judge other viewpoints as inferior, invalid or distorted</li> <li>– Deny other’s feelings</li> <li>– Listen with a view of countering</li> <li>– Discount the validity of feelings</li> <li>– Focus on conflict and difference as advantage</li> <li>– Disregard relationships</li> <li>– Use silence to gain advantage</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Broaden our own perspective</li> <li>– Look for shared meaning</li> <li>– Find places of agreement</li> <li>– Express paradox and ambiguity</li> <li>– Bring out areas of ambivalence</li> <li>– Allow for and invite differences of opinion and experience</li> <li>– Ask Questions and Invite Inquiry</li> <li>– Discover collective meaning</li> <li>– Challenge ourselves and other’s preconceived notions</li> <li>– Explore thoughts and feelings</li> <li>– Listen without judgment and with a view to understand</li> <li>– Validate other’s experiences and feelings</li> <li>– Articulate areas of conflict and difference</li> <li>– Build relationships</li> <li>– Honor silence</li> </ul>

Adapted by Tanya Kachwaha (2002) from Huang-Nissan (1999) and Consultant/Trainers Southwest (1992) from the National Intergroup Dialogue Institute | The Program on Intergroup Relations | University of Michigan.

## Engaging in Civil Discourse or Political Conversations

According to a PEW Research Center study in 2016, “38% of the public says they have had an argument about the election or its outcome” (Oliphant & Smith, 2016). When engaging in civil discourse it is important to be prepared for the conversation and to make the focus on hearing what the other participant is saying. Below are several tips and skills provided by different resources to strengthen your engagement.

The [Harvard Business Review](#) offered these four skills to share a political option with others. Their research shows these skills were effective in navigating these discussions in a way that did not alienate people:

- 1) **Focus on learning:** Frame your conversation as a chance to learn from each other not to change each other’s minds. Simply being curious about another’s position is sufficient motivation to engage. But, if you harbor a hope of converting the other person you’ll be tempted to become manipulative or coercive. For example: “I know what I think about immigration, but I’m curious about why you feel so differently. Would you be open to sharing your position with me?”
- 2) **Ask for permission:** After affirming your “focus on learning,” ask for permission to talk about the sensitive topic. That may sound like: “I’m not wanting a debate, and I’m not trying to change your mind. I just want to understand. I see this issue very differently. Would it be okay if I explained my perspective?”
- 3) **Show respect:** Respect is like air, if you take it away, it’s all people can think about. Others will not engage with you if they don’t feel you respect them. Set the stage by over-communicating your respect for the other person and his or her opinion: “I value you and your perspective. I want to hear from you. I don’t assume I’m right.”
- 4) **Focus on common ground:** Look for areas of agreement rather than disagreement. If or when the conversation takes a more dramatic turn, look for the greater principle governing both opinions and you’ll likely find a mutual purpose behind your convictions. Say things like: “I want to find the goals we share, and then look at the issue with those goals in mind.”

The [American Psychological Association](#) offers these helpful tips when in conversation about sensitive topics with those that might have different ideologies or beliefs than you:

- **Find areas where you agree.** You may disagree with someone but instead of strongly reacting, actively listen to the other person about what is important to them. For example, you might have different ideas about gun control but underneath you share the same concern for keeping your kids safe and healthy. You may find that by discussing shared viewpoints, areas of disagreement will feel less intense and your stress may decrease.
- **Be open and kind.** When having conversations, avoid polarizing language and personal attacks. Remember with whom you are having the conversation. It may be a family member

or someone important to you. Communicate effectively. Avoid having conversations on sensitive topics early in the morning or right before an important event. Try to be mindful of your words and tone and not let the conversation become hostile or combative, as that could have potential to negatively affect the relationship in the future.

- **Keep calm when tensions rise.** Preparing for how you might react in advance of a conversation will increase your self-awareness and may give you more options if you want to de-escalate tension. If you find yourself quick to react in a heated conversation, it may benefit you to take a step back and remind yourself to be calm. Try taking deep breaths when you find yourself getting worked up or politely change the topic of conversation. Only you can control your emotions, and being aware of them will help you to lessen tension with others.
- **Have conversation goals.** Understanding your goals when it comes to communicating with others may be helpful to having productive conversations. Whether the conversation is on a sensitive topic, such as healthcare, or not, it's important to determine what you hope to achieve from the conversation. Is it that you want to change the person's mind or to simply hear and better understand their point of view? Establishing easy, attainable goals when communicating with others will help to ease tension in a conversation.
- **Accept that you may not change the other person's mind.** When in conversation, you may notice that the other person may not agree with your opinions or statements. Having conversations, specifically on sensitive topics, will not always be easy going. Recognize that you may not be able to change their viewpoints. Use the conversation as an opportunity to share views, not to convince anyone that your view is best.
- **Disagreeing with someone you care about is ok.** It is important to remember that you are not always going to agree with everyone. It is ok to agree to disagree. Your personal opinions and beliefs make you unique. It might be hard to accept that a loved one or friend may have opposing ideologies than you, but understanding their viewpoints will help contribute to healthy relationships.
- **Know when to end the conversation.** If the conversation has not come to a resolution, you may want to find an appropriate time to end the discussion peacefully. It may be that you change the topic of conversation or suggest another activity, but reinforce maintaining the relationship you have with the other person. Even though there wasn't an agreement, continue to participate in activities you enjoy together.
- **Be proactive.** If you are concerned about potentially difficult conversations at family gatherings, such as during the holidays, remember these events are about bringing people together, not driving them apart. Focus on good memories and what you and your family have in common. Plan activities that foster fun and laughter, such as playing a family game or looking through old photo albums.

The LARA method of dialogue was presented during the October 29th, 2020 Diversity Dialogue which was a special edition to discuss how to navigate political dialogue across differences. The following information comes from the [Program on Intergroup Relations](#) at the University of Michigan and was used during the Diversity Dialogue:

**LARA** is a method of nonviolent dialogue developed by the organization Love Makes a Family that has been adopted by many activists and organizations as a way to engage in conversations around difficult topics. LARA provides a tool for responding to comments or questions, especially the hostile or threatening ones. This is an important technique for allies to know because there are certain risks to being an ally. Sometimes allying yourself with the LGBT community will lead to conflict or a negative response and it is important to know how to communicate through such situations.

**LISTEN:** This is where you use those empathetic listening skills to understand what beliefs and feelings lie at the core of the question or statement

**AFFIRM:** Express the connection that you found when you listened, whether it's a feeling, an experience, or a principle you have in common with the other person

**RESPOND:** We often hear debaters or politicians avoid answering the question that was asked in order to stay in control of the situation. In LARA, one answers the question and responds to the issues that the person raised. By doing this, one conveys that the other person's question deserves to be taken seriously.

**ADD INFORMATION:** Once the first three steps are completed, the opportunity to share additional information is open. This is a good time to state resources or to add a personal anecdote.

**And/Or INQUIRE:** As an alternative or complement to Adding Information, ask the other person for more information about their perspective. This demonstrates that you are genuinely interested in an exchange of information, not just working to win your point. It also is the most likely way to deepen dialogue, as it sets a tone for you both to inquire together.

**LARA conversation example:**

**Statement:** *I think it would be fine for gay people to have civil unions, I just don't see why they have to call it marriage.*

**L:** *Exasperation, maybe this person feels that he is being reasonable but others are unwilling to compromise.*

**A:** *I'm glad you support civil unions. Those have been used in Vermont as an example of providing same-sex couples with some of the benefits of civil marriage.*

**R:** *My concern is that if we have civil marriages and civil unions and the only difference is the sex of the people involved, then it will make it seem like the defining characteristic of marriage is that there is a man and a woman. To me, marriage at its core is a commitment between two people to stay together and take care of each other.*

**A:** *Some people have suggested that we could call all state-performed ceremonies "civil unions" and leave the word "marriage" for religious ceremonies. What are your thoughts on that?*

**I:** *Could you tell me more about why you support civil unions? . . . How did you come to that perspective? What is important about it to you?*

Effective listening and empathy were presented alongside the LARA method. This chart contains information from the document given during the October 29th, 2020 Diversity Dialogue that detailed the LARA method:

**Effective listening** is one of the most important qualities of being an ally. This is a skill that does not necessarily come naturally. Being an effective listener is different from everyday conversation or speaking.

**Effective listening includes:**

- Setting aside your own agenda while someone else is speaking
- Hearing what people mean, not just what they say
- Responding to a speaker's feelings

**Empathy** is an important component of effective listening.

**Empathy versus Sympathy:**

- Empathy: Perceiving and responding to the feelings of another person while remaining in touch with your own feelings.
- Sympathy: Losing touch with the feelings of the other person by reacting to your own feelings. Sympathy is something you feel.



Empathy also involves **Reflective Listening**. You listen for a feeling, relate to that feeling, and then reflect or restate that feeling back. Reflective statements consist of three parts: the **prefix**, the **feeling word**, and the **source of the feeling**.

**1. The prefix** is a phrase that communicates the listener's impression or interpretation of what the speaker is feeling. For example:

*It sounds like you feel...*

*I'm wondering if...*

*I sense that you feel...*

*I hear what you're saying...*

*What I hear you saying is...*

*It seems like you feel...*

**2. The feelings** are usually the reason the person is approaching you. Sometimes it will not be certain what he or she is feeling, but he or she knows that it is causing them distress or anxiety.

**Keys to naming feelings:**

- Be precise.
- Do not back away from stating a feeling.
- Do not use minimizers or maximizers (For example, a little angry, kind of mad). People either have feelings or they don't.
- Trust your perceptions.
- Incorporate the word "feeling" before you state the feeling word. (For example, "It sounds like you are feeling angry".)

**3. The source** completes the empathetic response. Whatever the problem may be, some part of the problem is in the source of the feeling. Always focus on the person, not a third person. For example:

- It seems to me that you're feeling betrayed by your friend.
- It sounds like you're feeling confused about what to do next.
- You sound like you're feeling really angry about the situation with your mother.
- I'm hearing that you're feeling disappointed about the situation with your brother.

(Adapted from Ozone House, Inc. 2005)

## Additional Reading and Resources

### [National Institute for Civil Discourse](#)

A non-partisan organization based at the University of Arizona that promotes healthy and civil political debate.

### [Promoting Civil Discourse in Troubling Times](#): American University

Provides suggestions for bringing civil discourse to campus classrooms.

### [Difficult Dialogues](#): Vanderbilt University

A guide for teachers in leading difficult dialogues.

### [Difficult Conversations](#): Teaching Tolerance

A toolkit for facilitating difficult conversations.

### [How to Talk Politics at Work Without Alienating People](#): Harvard Business Review

Provides skills for sharing your political opinion.

### [Teaching Tolerance](#): a project of the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#)

Provides free resources that help create civil and inclusive school communities.

### [Techniques for Leading Group Discussions](#): University of Kansas

How to effectively conduct a critical conversation with participation from all.

### [Post-Election Campus Resources and Response Guide](#): Students Learn Students Vote

How to prepare to support campus stakeholders in responding to a post-election season.

### [Election Day + Post-Election Guide](#): Civic Alliance

Useful resources to help strengthen democracy and inspire others to participate in civic life.

### [Preparing to Teach About the 2020 Election \(and After\)](#): University of Michigan's Center for Research on Learning & Teaching

Outlines strategies and resources for instructors to plan, frame, and facilitate conversation

### [Free Speech & Academic Freedom](#): Tufts University's Institute for Democracy & Higher Education

Resources on Free Speech and Academic Freedom

### [Teaching around the Election](#): James Madison Center for Civic Engagement

Teaching toolbox for preparing to teach around the upcoming election

### [Engagement Streams Framework](#): National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation

Framework to help navigate the range of dialogue and deliberation approaches

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