



Civil Discourse and the Legislative Process

Objectives

- Students will develop a shared definition of the concept of civil discourse.
- Students will analyze how civil discourse is modeled through the legislative process in the United States government.
- Students will investigate the importance of civil discourse to protecting democratic ideals.

Overview

In this activity, students will analyze the concept of civil discourse and investigate how civil discourse is modeled through the lawmaking process in the United States legislature. Using the guiding question, “How is civil discourse important to preserving the democratic ideals of the United States?” students will explore the importance of civil discourse and analyze how the United States government leverages the democratic process and models the concept of civil discourse through the lawmaking process.

Compelling Question

How is civil discourse important to preserving the democratic ideals of the United States?

Materials

- Pen/pencils
- Handout: *Civil Discourse*
- Handout: *The Legislative Process*
- Handout: *Proposed Classroom Law Part 1*
- Handout: *Proposed Classroom Law Part 2*

Teacher Preparation

- One of the goals of this activity is to highlight student agency and voice. While there are structured protocols for students to collaborate, share, and reflect, keep in mind additional strategies or routines that empower all students to have entry points into the content and opportunities to participate and be heard. These include encouraging students to participate in their home language and providing vocabulary and reading support based on the needs of your students.

- Teachers can supplement the resources provided through this activity with their own content knowledge. For example, the *SchoolHouse Rock!* “I’m Just a Bill” video is a useful supplement to the *Legislative Process* handout.
- The *Proposed Classroom Law* activity is structured to illustrate the connection between the lawmaking process and civil discourse within that process; it is not designed to be an exact model of the legislative process. However, teachers may provide additional structure to the *Proposed Classroom Law* activity to more directly reflect the legislative process, if desired. Examples may include subdividing students into larger groups of Senators and Representatives, or having the teacher play the role of President with the power to veto student legislation.

Procedure

1. Begin class by informing students that they will be studying the concept of civil discourse and its importance in the United States today. As a warm-up, provide each student with a copy of the *Civil Discourse* handout, and ask the students to use the *Civil Discourse* handout to develop their own definition of civil discourse that includes personal examples of what does and does not represent civil discourse.
2. Use this warm up activity to create a shared definition of civil discourse that students can use to guide their participation in the following activities. One way to do this is to provide students with an opportunity to share their *Civil Discourse* handout reflection with the whole class through a short whole-class discussion activity.
3. Next, lead a brief thinking exercise to practice the application of the shared definition of civil discourse.
 - a. Share with the students this quote from President Ronald Reagan, “Freedom is the right to question and change the established way of doing things. It is the continuing revolution of the marketplace. It is the understanding that allows us to recognize shortcomings and seek solutions.”
 - b. Ask students to reflect independently on at least two ways that this quote relates to the shared definition of civil discourse established during the warm-up.
 - c. Ask students to complete a quick turn-and-talk with a partner, sharing at least one of their examples of civil discourse from the quote.
 - d. Lead a brief discussion, providing students with the opportunity to share their thoughts regarding how civil discourse is reflected in the Ronald Reagan quote with the whole class. For example, ask students to connect the importance of “disagreeing without being disagreeable,” to the ideas presented in the Ronald Reagan quote and how those concepts relate to civil discourse.

4. After concluding the warm-up activity and thinking exercise, provide each student with their own copy of the *Legislative Process* handout.
5. Explain that they will begin by breaking down the individual steps of the Legislative Process using the *Legislative Process* handout, which contains a summary of the lawmaking process from the [United States House of Representatives](#) webpage.
 - a. As students work independently, circulate the room to support students in breaking down the steps of the Legislative Process on their *Legislative Process* handout and correct misconceptions as needed.
6. Once students have completed the *Legislative Process* handout to break down the individual steps of the lawmaking process in student-friendly language, explain that they will now transition into a partner activity to identify ways in which the legislative process provides opportunities for civil discourse.
7. Break students into partners (these can be the same partners from the earlier turn-and-talk, if preferred), and ask them to work with their partner to identify at least four points in the legislative process that create the opportunity for civil discourse.
8. When the partners have identified their four points, ask the students to highlight/annotate those points on their *Legislative Process* handout and write a quick note on their handout that explains why they believe that point creates the opportunity for civil discourse.
9. After students have been provided with enough time to make their notes, ask them to share their identified points and how those points represent civil discourse with the whole class.
 - a. For example, students might identify how debate about bills prior to a vote represents civil discourse, or how the President's power to veto legislation and/or the power of Congress to override a veto can also represent and/or create the opportunity for civil discourse.
10. Next, explain that students will apply what they have learned about the lawmaking process and how it creates the opportunity for civil discourse by using civil discourse to create, amend, and approve a proposed classroom law.
11. Begin by providing each student with a copy of the *Proposed Classroom Law Part 1* handout, and place students in "committees" (small groups of three to four students).
12. Students will begin by working in their committee to draft a proposed classroom law, and they will write the first draft of that law on their *Proposed Classroom Law Part 1* handout.

13. The teacher will then randomly select one committee to “sponsor” the proposed classroom law. The selected committee will be given 3 minutes to give an opening statement in support of their proposed classroom law, which will then be discussed amongst students in the class to model the same civil discourse demonstrated through the legislative process.
- a. After the selected sponsor committee presents their proposed law through their 3-minute opening statement, each committee in the class will individually study, discuss, and create proposed changes to the newly proposed law.
 - i. Teacher Note: The goal of these student discussions is to provide students with the opportunity to use civil discourse to ultimately create a proposed classroom law that is stronger and more accurately reflects the diverse interests shared by multiple student groups throughout the process.
 - b. Provide each committee with the opportunity to share their feedback and proposed changes.
 - i. Each committee will be provided with 2 minutes total to share their feedback: 1 minute to share the strengths they identified in the proposed classroom law, and 1 minute to share proposed changes they wish to see incorporated into the proposed classroom law.
 - c. Conclude by providing the sponsor committee with 3 minutes to decide what proposed changes to implement, then share the revised version of the proposed classroom law with the class.
 - d. Conclude by allowing students to hold a class vote on the proposed law.
 - i. If the law passes, instruct students to continue and complete the reflection portion on the *Proposed Classroom Law Part 2* handout.
 - ii. If the law does not pass, provide one additional opportunity for the sponsor committee to hear proposed revisions and make changes to the proposed law, then hold a final vote. After the final vote, instruct students to continue and complete the reflection portion on the *Proposed Classroom Law Part 2* handout.
14. As students finalize their reflections on the *Proposed Classroom Law Part 2* handout, ask students to think closely about Reflection Prompt 3, Reflection Prompt 4, and the Final Reflection Prompt:
- a. How will understanding elements of civil discourse help you communicate with others in your school or community, especially when you disagree?
 - b. How is civil discourse important to preserving the democratic ideals of the United States?
 - c. Why is it important to work with others (even those who disagree with us) to help us make change in society?
15. Provide students with a final opportunity to collaborate with others in the class through turn-and-talks, small group discussions, and/or whole-class discussions to allow students to share thoughts and reflections related to the importance of civil discourse in their life, community, and nation.

Frameworks and Standards

Educating for American Democracy

- What are the responsibilities and opportunities of citizenship and civic agency in America’s constitutional democracy?
 - What is the virtue or value of civil disagreement?
- How has our geographic, political, social, and economic landscape changed over time?
 - What principles and values do Americans invoke in our debates about these issues?
- Who are “We the people of the United States” and how has the nation’s population changed over time?
 - Why does constitutional democracy depend on the idea of “the people”?

The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework

D2.Civ.10.6–8: Explain the relevance of personal interests and perspectives, civic virtues, and democratic principles when people address issues and problems in government and civil society.

D2.Civ.10.9–12: Analyze the impact and the appropriate roles of personal interest and perspectives on the application of civic virtues, democratic principles, constitutional rights, and human rights.

D2.Civ.14.9–12: Analyze historical, contemporary, and emerging means of changing societies, promoting the common good, and protecting rights.

Common Core English Language Arts

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.5: Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Directions: Begin by reading the following excerpt about civil discourse, then respond to the reflection points below.

“One of the most important educational, political, and social issues of today is how best to have a civil conversation in a democratic society. Our past, present, and future depend on this essential process: citizens gather, listen to each other, debate, make up their minds, and determine a course of action.

Polarization of opinions, coupled with the speed and access of the digital age have made it more difficult to keep our conversations civil in America today. From shouting matches, to opinionated blog posts, to rhetoric-filled political debates, we are confronted every day with uncivil conversation.

Civil Discourse is

- Truthful
- Productive
- Audience-based
- About listening and talking
- Each speaker’s own responsibility

Civil Discourse is not

- Mere politeness
- An exercise in martyrdom
- About telling other people who they are
- Purely performative”

American University, Washington DC: What is Civil Discourse?

<https://www.american.edu/spa/civildiscourse/what-is-civil-discourse.cfm>

Reflect:

1. What is *discourse*?
2. What does it mean to be *civil*?
3. How do you define *civil discourse*?
4. Review the examples of what civil discourse “is” and “is not” from the excerpt above.
 - a. What are at least two real-life examples from your community/school/nation that represent what civil discourse *IS*?
 - b. What are at least two real-life examples from your community/school/nation that represent what civil discourse *IS NOT*?

Directions: The following excerpt contains a summary of the legislative process from the United States House of Representatives. Using the summary as a guide, break down the legislative process into ten clear steps, written in your own words.

“Laws begin as ideas. First, a representative sponsors a bill. The bill is then assigned to a committee for study. If released by the committee, the bill is put on a calendar to be voted on, debated or amended. If the bill passes by simple majority (218 of 435), the bill moves to the Senate. In the Senate, the bill is assigned to another committee and, if released, debated and voted on. Again, a simple majority (51 of 100) passes the bill. Finally, a conference committee made of House and Senate members works out any differences between the House and Senate versions of the bill. The resulting bill returns to the House and Senate for final approval. The Government Printing Office prints the revised bill in a process called enrolling. The President has 10 days to sign or veto the enrolled bill.”

United States House of Representatives

Washington, D.C. 20515

<https://www.house.gov/the-house-explained/the-legislative-process>

<i>Steps of the Legislative Process</i>	<i>Provide your summary of each step in the space below</i>
Step 1	
Step 2	
Step 3	
Step 4	
Step 5	
Step 6	
Step 7	
Step 8	
Step 9	
Step 10	

Directions: Work with the other students in your assigned committee to complete the following steps.

Your Proposed Classroom Law

With your assigned committee, create a proposed classroom law that you feel is important for this class. Record that proposed classroom law in the space below.

Selected Proposed Classroom Law

One committee in the classroom will be selected to share their proposed classroom law with the whole class for discourse and a vote. Record the selected proposed classroom law in the space below.

Note: if your group is selected, you may leave this section blank as the proposed law is the same as above.

Initial Discussion Notes

In the space to the right, record any notes or points you would like to raise regarding the proposed classroom law. These questions can help you form these ideas:

Do you approve of the proposed law as is?

- *What revisions would you prefer to see to the proposed law?*

Do you think the proposed law is specific enough?

What questions do you have about the proposed law?

What changes would it take for you to be willing to vote yes for this proposed law?

Your Initial Vote

In the space to the right, record whether you voted yes or no on the proposed law and explain why.

Revised Version of the Proposed Classroom Law

If the proposed classroom law does not pass the first vote, it will need to be revised by the sponsoring committee. Once that committee has revised the proposed law, record their newly revised version of the proposed law in the space below.

Your Final Vote

In the space to the right, record whether you voted yes or no to the revised version of the proposed law and explain why.

Directions: Wait to complete this reflection activity until instructed to do so by your teacher. Once your teacher has instructed you to complete this reflection, complete the following reflection prompts individually.

<p>Reflection Prompt 1: How is civil discourse modeled through the legislative process of the United States government?</p>	
<p>Reflection Prompt 2: How was civil discourse important to the proposed classroom law activity? Do you believe that civil discourse helped the class to create a more improved version of the proposed classroom law? Why or why not?</p>	
<p>Reflection Prompt 3: How will understanding elements of civil discourse help you communicate with others in your school or community, especially when you disagree?</p>	
<p>Reflection Prompt 4: How is civil discourse important to preserving the democratic ideals of the United States?</p>	
<p>Final Reflection Prompt: Why is it important to work with others (even those who disagree with us) to help us make change in society?</p>	