

Civil Political Discourse In A Democracy: The Contribution Of Psychology

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Abstract

The purposes of political discourse include (a) clarifying citizens' understanding of the issue, (b) helping citizens reach their best reasoned judgment as to which course of action will solve a problem, (c) increasing citizen participation in the political process, and (d) socializing the next generation into the procedures and attitudes they need to be active citizens. A responsibility of psychology within a democratic society is to provide the theory, research, and normative procedures needed to make political discourse constructive. Constructive controversy provides a theory, validated by research, which has been operationalized into a normative procedure. Constructive controversy exists when one person's ideas, information, conclusions, theories, and opinions are incompatible with those of another, and the two seek to reach an agreement. A political decision is reached through the following procedure. Citizens form advocacy groups and present the best case possible for the alternative course of action they prefer. An open discussion is held in which each citizens continue to advocate their position while trying to refute opposing positions and rebutting attacks on their position. Citizens then step back, try to view the issue from the other points of view, and then come to a joint decision based on the best reasoned judgment of all citizens. The theorizing about and validating research provides an empirical base for political discourse and guidelines for conducting political campaigns.

Political Discourse, Constructive Controversy, Citizenship, Democracy

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A continuing issue with political campaigns is how to engage in political persuasion. The procedures used will affect both the outcome of the elections and the ongoing health of American democracy and democracies (both mature and developing) throughout the world. In addition, the procedures used will model for the next generation how to engage in the political process and will affect their attitudes about doing so. This article is an outgrowth of the work to increase the constructiveness of political discourse through the application of psychological theory and research. In this article we discuss the nature of political discourse, its role in democratic decision making, the intentions of the founders of American democracy in placing political discourse at the center of civic life, the characteristics the founders and early American citizens gave to political discourse, the other forms of political persuasion, and the role of psychology (and other social sciences) in maintaining the health of democracy. A theory, program of research, and normative procedure for ensuring that political discourse is conducted in constructive ways are then described.

Nature Of Political Discourse

Thomas Jefferson, and the other founders of the American Republic, considered political discourse to be the heart of democracy. Jefferson believed that instead of the social rank within which a person was born, the basis of influence within society should be discourse in a free and open discussion characterized by conflict among ideas and opinions¹. He noted, “Differences of opinion lead to inquiry, and inquiry to truth.” According to Webster’s dictionary, the concept **discourse** has two major meanings: (a) formal communication of thoughts about a serious

¹ Unfortunately, Jefferson and his colleagues only included white males with property in the political community.

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subject through words (spoken or written) and (b) rationality or the ability to reason. **Political discourse** is the formal exchange of reasoned views as to which of several alternative courses of action should be taken to solve a societal problem. It is intended to involve all citizens in the making of the decision, persuade others (through valid information and logic), and clarify what course of action would be most effective in solving the societal problem.

Political discourse is a method of decision making in a democracy. A **decision** implies that some agreement prevails as to which of several courses of action is most desirable for achieving a goal (Johnson & F. Johnson, 2000). Making a decision is just one step in the more general **problem-solving process** of goal-directed groups. After defining a problem or issue, thinking over alternative courses of action, and weighing the advantages and disadvantages of each, a decision is made as to which course is the most desirable for them to implement. Typically, decisions are meant to be as effective as possible. The major characteristics of an **effective democratic decision** are:

1. The decision is of high quality, reflecting the best reasoned judgment of the citizens.
2. The process of making the decision increases the commitment of all citizens to (a) implement the decision (whether they agree with it or not) and (b) the democratic process.
3. The process of making the decision increases the cohesiveness of the society.
4. The rights of the political minority (those who disagree with the decision) are protected until the issue is reopened in the next election.
5. The decision-making and problem-solving capabilities of the democracy is enhanced, or at least not lessened.

Jefferson and the other founders of the United States democracy expected that the clash of opposing positions within political discourse would increase citizens' understanding of the issue and the quality of their collective decision making. Within political discourse, each alternative course of action was expected to (a) be strongly advocated, (b) receive a complete and fair hearing, and (c) be critically analyzed to reveal its strengths and weaknesses. James Madison,

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furthermore, described political discourse as (a) including open-minded consideration of other points of view (“*much is gained by a yielding and accommodating spirit*”) and (b) keeping conclusions tentative by realizing that one’s current knowledge is not the whole truth (no citizen is “*obligated to retain his opinions any longer than he is satisfied of their propriety and truth*”).

The views of political discourse of Jefferson, Madison, and their contemporaries were grounded in the philosophy and thought of the time. The philosopher Edmund Burke, for example, recommended conflict among ideas by stating “*He that wrestles with us strengthens our nerves, and sharpens our skill. Our antagonist is our helper.*” In 1748 Baron Charles de Montesquieu published, “**The Spirit of Laws**,” in which he explored the relationship between people and different forms of government. He concluded that while dictatorship survives on the fear of the people and monarchy survives on the loyalty of the people, a free republic (the most fragile of the three political systems) survives on the virtue of the people. Virtue is reflected in the way a person balances his or her own needs with the needs of the society as a whole. Motivation to be virtuous comes from “*a sense of belonging, a concern for the whole, a moral bond with the community whose life is at stake.*” This moral bond is cultivated by “*deliberating with fellow citizens about the common good and helping shape the destiny of the political community.*”

Establishing such a moral bond (to act to further the common good and shape the destiny of their society) requires (a) citizen participation in their own governance and (b) a common set of values. Participation involves both actively engaging in political discourse and seeking out and valuing the participation of all other citizens, especially when their views conflict with one’s own. The values underlying such participation were primarily spelled out in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution (e.g., equality, liberty, justice). De Tocqueville (1945), in the mid-19th Century, concluded that of the principal factors maintaining democracy in the United States (situation and context, law, and manners/customs of the people), the most important was the general principles about citizenship that Americans held in common. He called these manners and customs “*habits of the heart*” and defined them as including taking responsibility

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for the common good, trusting others to do the same, being honest, having self-discipline, and reciprocating good deeds. Much later, a panel of distinguished political theorists in the 1950s concluded that for democracy to exist, citizens must (a) be committed to fundamental values such as liberty and equality and (b) be in consensus on the procedural norms by which substantive decisions are made (Griffith et al., 1956).

Negative Political Persuasion

While political discourse is essential to a democracy, and informed decisions may be impossible unless political discourse occurs, elections can be conducted and decisions made in democracies without it. There are dangers when political discussion becomes destructive rather than illuminating. **Destructive political persuasion** exists when misleading, superficial, or irrelevant information is presented in ways that decreases citizens' understanding of the issue, results in an absence of thoughtful consideration of the issue, and decreases citizen participation in the political process. Discourse may be replaced by other means of persuasion, such as using deceit through misinformation, de-emphasizing and ignoring important issues, positioning, pandering to voters, and focusing on the candidates (not the issues) through commercials (imagery and slogans) or argumentum ad hominem. **Argumentum ad hominem** consists of directing arguments at the opponent rather than at his or her ideas and proposals (Johnson & Johnson, 1995). Ad hominem arguments can involve questioning the motives of the opponent, accusing the opponent of acting on personal interest, accusing the opponent of inconsistency, or accusing the opponent of past misconduct. In essence, ad-hominem arguments communicate that the opponent is "bad," and therefore must be wrong. By focusing attention on the candidates rather than the issues, such persuasive procedures may be markedly unhelpful in clarifying which course of action society should adopt. In addition, ad-hominem arguments weaken the moral bond underlying the democratic process, undermine tolerance (discouraging others from presenting opposing positions), undermine trust in the political system, and undermine the overall positive interdependence that holds society together. Negative persuasive procedures

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used under the guise of political discourse may discredit political discourse and disillusion citizens about the political process. Political discourse may then be ignored or rejected.

The power of the personal attack rather than discourse in campaigning is illustrated by the negativity effect. The **negativity effect** exists when a negative trait affects an impression more than a positive trait, everything else being equal (Vonk, 1993). There is evidence that individuals tend to pay special attention to negative information (Fiske, 1980; Pratto & John, 1991) and weigh negative information more heavily than positive information (Coovert & Reeder, 1990; Taylor, 1991), especially in regard to moral traits. In a wide variety of studies, ranging from forming impressions about other people to evaluating positive and negative information to reach a decision or judgment, negative information figured more prominently than positive information (Taylor, 1991). Capitalizing on the power of negativity, however, may be inherently dangerous to the health of a democracy. Adlai Stevenson (1952), for example, noted that it is the American *“tradition of critical inquiry and discussion that informs our entire civilization”* but critical inquiry only advances the general welfare when its purpose is honest. He notes that *“criticism, not as an instrument of inquiry and reform, but as an instrument of power, quickly degenerates into the techniques of deceit and smear.”*

What Stevenson and others point out is that when negative personal attacks are used as an instrument of power, they tend to (a) increase intolerance aimed at the other person and the views he or she represents (which is directly opposite to the values of democracy which emphasize tolerance of others even if they are promoting unpopular views), (b) undermine trust and other influences on political participation, and (c) undermine the overall positive interdependence and moral bonds that hold society together. The more widespread the use of negative personal attacks, the greater tends to be the disillusionment of citizens about the political process and a decrease in their participation.

Political Socialization

It is not enough for the founders of our country to be virtuous and committed to each other and our political system. It is not enough for the current political leaders to be virtuous and

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committed to each other and our democracy. Each generation has to develop a commitment to democracy and a moral bond with fellow citizens to engage in political discourse to enhance the common good and shape the destiny of the society. There is, however, some evidence that there is a crisis in political socialization. In a recent editorial in the Minneapolis, Tribune (**Back To College: The Frustration of Facing Blank Stares**, September 5, 1999) the editors noted that there is a growing passivity and detachment among college students. They attribute the cause of the detachment to students not knowing how to engage in polite, constructive arguments in the Socratic sense. The editors note that the disagreements most students experience on TV and in movies and music are laced with rage, profanity, cruel put-downs, and violence, and that students have learned from politics that an opponent is not only wrong, but “bad.” Consequently, students withdraw from class discussions and the examination of today’s great topics.

Over the last decade, political participation in the United States has declined. At the same time, democratic forms of government with an emphasis on equal rights have been spreading throughout the world. Despite the growing excitement about and faith in democracy in many parts of the world, in the United States apathy and cynicism about political processes have risen, as more and more citizens believe that politicians’ self-interest eclipses their public interest and apathy and ignorance have grown about the issues decided in elections that could deeply affect citizens’ lives (Damon, 1998). Young people especially seem disinterested. From the mid 1960s through 1986 in the United States, trend studies of high school seniors (Bachman, Johnston, & O’Malley, 1986) and first year college students (Astin, Green, & Kohn, 1987) point to a decline in commitment to the welfare of the broader community and an increase in materialist aspirations. Young citizens retreated from politics and civic concerns and chose occupations for financial remuneration rather than public service or self-fulfillment (Easterlin & Crimmins, 1991).

The focus of young adults on materialistic well-being is worrisome, as (a) contributing to the common good is overwhelmingly the reason why citizens become active in civic and political affairs (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995), (b) it breaks the moral bond that de Montesquieu

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described as the heart of democracy, and (c) developmental theorists such as Erikson, Lovinger, and Piaget posited that political commitment and the acquisition of a political ideology were key indicators of identity formation and cognitive growth. Erikson (1968), for example, warned that without meaningful institutional affiliations and connections to the community, adolescents may experience a lack of direction and purpose and disaffection from the political system. Our democracy and societal well-being depend on the renewing energy of young people who have the commitment and vision to help create a better world. When political elections and decisions are characterized by misleading statements, image management, and ad-hominem arguments, children, adolescents, and young adults may not learn how to engage in political discourse and may develop negative attitudes toward participating in the political process.

Responsibility Of Psychology

In a democratic society, psychology (and the other social sciences) has the responsibility of increasing the understanding of how to enhance the health of the democratic process and socialize new citizens into the attitudes and competencies they need to participate actively in political discourse. The founders of our country had a clear idea of how political discourse should work. Psychology's responsibility includes formulating a theory as to how political discourse operates, conducting a systematic program of research to validate the theory, and extrapolating a normative procedure that (a) citizens can use to engage in political discourse and (b) may be taught to each successive generation to enhance their participation in the political process. One of the goals of the Psychologists for Social Responsibility's Action Committee on Constructive Political Controversy is to call attention to what psychology has to offer in providing empirically validated theories and norms and guidelines for political discourse.

One such theory focuses on constructive controversy. Political discourse is a type of conflict known as controversy. The following sections focus on the nature and theory of constructive controversy, the process by which constructive controversy works, and the outcomes of engaging in the process.

Constructive Controversy

Constructive controversy exists when one person's ideas, information, conclusions, theories, and opinions are incompatible with those of another, and the two seek to reach an agreement (Johnson & Johnson, 1979, 1989, 1995). Constructive controversy involves what Aristotle called **deliberate discourse** (i.e., the discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of proposed actions) aimed at synthesizing novel solutions (i.e., **creative problem solving**).

Constructive controversy is most commonly contrasted with concurrence seeking, debate, and individualistic decisions. **Concurrence seeking** occurs when members of a group inhibit discussion to avoid any disagreement or argument, emphasize agreement, and avoid realistic appraisal of alternative ideas and courses of action. Concurrence seeking is close to Janis' (1982) concept of **groupthink** (i.e., members of a decision-making group set aside their doubts and misgivings about whatever policy is favored by the emerging consensus so as to be able to concur with the other members and thereby preserve the harmonious atmosphere of the group).

Debate exists when two or more individuals argue positions that are incompatible with one another and a judge declares a winner on the basis of who presented their position the best.

Individualistic decisions exist when individuals consider the issue alone while perceiving their goals to be unrelated and independent from the goals of others (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1998).

Constructive controversy is aimed at enhancing high quality decision making by ensuring that (a) each alternative course of action receives a complete and fair hearing, (b) each alternative course of action is critically analyzed to reveal its strengths and weaknesses, and (c) all participants are involved in ways that increase their commitment to implement the decision, whether or not they agree with it. In order to make reasoned decisions in ways that maximize citizen commitment to implement the decisions, the following constructive controversy procedure may be implemented (Johnson & F. Johnson, 2000). Citizens:

1. **Have the opportunity to propose courses of action that they believe will solve the problem under consideration:** When a decision is to be made, the alternative courses of action that will potentially solve the problem need to be identified.

2. **Form advocacy groups:** To ensure that each course of action receives a fair and complete hearing, advocates organize and present the best case possible for their position. The advocacy takes place within the cooperative framework of making the best decision possible (goal interdependence) and noting that a high-quality decision cannot be made without considering the information organized by advocates of opposing positions (resource interdependence).
3. **Research their position and prepare a persuasive presentation to convince all others of the position's validity.** The advocacy teams research their alternative course of action and find all the supporting evidence available. They organize what is known into a coherent and reasoned argument. A persuasive argument consists of (a) a thesis statement or claim, (b) a rationale (consisting of information logically organized to lead to a conclusion), and (c) a conclusion (that is the same as the thesis statement). Advocates plan how to present their case so that all citizens understand thoroughly the advocacy group's position, give it a fair and complete hearing, and are convinced of its soundness.
4. **Present the best case possible for its alternative course of action to the entire society.** Other advocacy groups listen carefully and strive to learn the information provided and understand the reasoning underlying the position so they may gain insights into the position's strengths and weaknesses.
5. **Engage in an open discussion characterized by advocacy, refutation, and rebuttal.** The advocacy groups give opposing positions a "trial by fire" by attempting to refute them by challenging the validity of their information and logic. They probe and push each other's conclusions. They rebut attacks on their own position while continuing to attempt to persuade other citizens of its validity. Citizens continue to attempt to learn thoroughly the opposing positions.
6. **Reverse perspectives and positions by presenting one of the opposing positions sincerely and forcefully.** Citizens strive to see the issue from all perspectives

simultaneously and demonstrate their understanding by summarizing accurately and completely the opposing positions. This ensures that the advocates of the opposing positions believe they have been heard and understood.

- 7. Strive to create a synthesis that subsumes the various positions being advocated, or at the very least integrate the best information and reasoning from all points of view, and a vote is taken in which the majority rules.** The political minority helps implement the decision because they know (a) they had a fair chance to influence others' opinions, (b) they will have another chance to advocate their position in a set number of years (two, four, or six), and (c) their rights will be protected in the meantime.

In comparison, the process of debate is based on decision making in a context of competition and conflict. Two sides prepare their positions, they present the best case possible, listen carefully to the opposing position, attempt to refute it, rebut the opponent's attempts to refute their position, and wait for the judges to declare the winner. The process of concurrence seeking is based on decision making within a context of cooperation and the avoidance of conflict. Two sides prepare their positions, present the best case possible, experience uncertainty once they realize there is disagreement, but immediately seek to avoid and suppress all conflict by finding a compromise position that ends all discussion, become apprehensive about the disagreement, and then seek a quick compromise to suppress the conflict. In individualistic decision making, individuals consider both sides of the issue without interacting with others.

Over the past 35 years the authors have developed a theory of controversy and conducted over 20 experimental and field-experimental research studies to test and refine the theory. Our work represents the majority of the research directly focused on controversy. There are, however, numerous related studies validating parts of the theory.

Theory Of Constructive Controversy

"There is no more certain sign of a narrow mind, of stupidity, and of arrogance, than to stand aloof from those who think differently from us."

Walter Savage Landor

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Beginning with the theorizing of developmental (Hunt, 1964; Kohlberg, 1969; Piaget, 1948, 1950), cognitive (Berlyne, 1966; Hammond, 1965, 1973), social (Janis, 1982; Johnson, 1970; Johnson & Johnson, 1979; Johnson, Johnson, & Johnson, 1976), and organizational (Maier, 1970) psychologists, the process through which constructive controversy creates positive outcomes involves the following theoretical assumptions (Johnson & Johnson, 1979, 1989, 1995) (see Figure 1):

1. When individuals are presented with a problem or decision, they have an initial conclusion based on categorizing and organizing incomplete information, their limited experiences, and their specific perspective. They have a high degree of confidence in their conclusions (they freeze the epistemic process).
2. When individuals present their conclusion and its rationale to others, they engage in cognitive rehearsal, deepen their understanding of their position, and use higher-level reasoning strategies. The more they attempt to persuade others to agree with them, the more committed they may become to their position.
3. When individuals are confronted with different conclusions based on other people's information, experiences, and perspectives, they become uncertain as to the correctness of their views and a state of conceptual conflict or disequilibrium is aroused. They unfreeze their epistemic process.
4. Uncertainty, conceptual conflict, or disequilibrium motivates **epistemic curiosity**, an active search for (a) more information and new experiences (increased specific content) and (b) a more adequate cognitive perspective and reasoning process (increased validity) in hopes of resolving the uncertainty.
5. By adapting their cognitive perspective and reasoning through understanding and accommodating the perspective and reasoning of others, individuals derive a new, reconceptualized, and reorganized conclusion. Novel solutions and decisions that, on balance, are qualitatively better are detected. The positive feelings and commitment individuals feel in creating a solution to the problem together is extended to each other

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and interpersonal attraction increases. Their competencies in managing conflicts constructively tend to improve. The process may begin again at this point or it may be terminated by freezing the current conclusion and resolving any dissonance by increasing confidence in the validity of the conclusion.

The process that results, therefore, involves having an initial conclusion as to what course of action should be adopted to solve the problem, presenting a persuasive case for that conclusion while listening to persuasive presentations of opposing positions, feeling uncertain about the correctness of one's position, engaging in a search for better information and reconceptualizing one's views on the decision, and then coming to a new conclusion about what course of action should be adopted. Each time a person goes through this process his or her conclusions may be closer and closer approximations of the "truth."

Conditions Determining the Constructiveness of Controversy

Although controversies can operate in a beneficial way, they will not do so under all conditions. Whether controversy results in positive or negative consequences depends on the conditions under which it occurs and the way in which it is managed. These conditions include the context within which the controversy takes place and the level of participants' social skills (Johnson & Johnson, 1979, 1989, 1995).

Cooperative Goal Structure

Deutsch (1973) emphasizes that the context in which conflicts occur has important effects on whether the conflict turns out to be constructive or destructive. There are two possible contexts for controversy: cooperative and competitive. In a **cooperative situation**, individuals perceive that they can achieve their goal if and only if the other group members achieve theirs; in a **competitive situation**, individuals perceive that they can achieve their goal if and only if all others with whom they are competitively linked fail to achieve their goals (Deutsch, 1973). Within a cooperative (as opposed to a competitive) context, constructive controversy induces more complete and accurate communication, more accurate understanding of the opponent's position, greater utilization of others' information, greater understanding of what others are

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feeling and why they are feeling that way, feelings of comfort, pleasure, and helpfulness in discussing opposing positions, more open-minded listening to the opposing positions, greater motivation to hear more about the opponent's arguments, more frequently seeking out individuals with opposing opinions to test the validity of their ideas, greater trust, and the reaching of more integrated positions where both one's own and one's opponent's conclusions and reasoning are synthesized into a final position. (Johnson, 1971, 1974, 1975a, 1975b; Tjosvold, 1982; Tjosvold & Deemer, 1980; Tjosvold & Johnson, 1978; Van Blerkom & Tjosvold, 1981). Cooperation provides a more supportive climate for disclosing and exploring differences than competition (Johnson & Johnson, 1991). Generally, controversy within a competitive context tends to promote closed-minded disinterest in and rejection of the opponent's ideas and information and of the opponent as a person. Lowin (1969) and Kleinhesselink and Edwards (1975) found that when individuals were unsure of the correctness of their position, they selected to be exposed to disconfirming information when it could easily be refuted, presumably because such refutation could affirm their own beliefs.

Skilled Disagreement

For controversies to be managed constructively, participants need collaborative and conflict-management skills (Johnson, 2000; Johnson & F. Johnson, 2000). Our research has focused on two skills. The first is disagreeing with each other's ideas while confirming each other's personal competence. Disagreeing with others, and at the same time imputing that they are incompetent, tends to increase their commitment to their own ideas and their rejection of one's information and reasoning (Tjosvold, 1974; Tjosvold, Johnson, & Fabrey, 1980; Tjosvold, Johnson, & Lerner, 1981). The amount of defensiveness generated influenced the degree to which individuals incorporated the opponent's information and reasoning into their position, even when they understood accurately their opponent's position. Disagreeing with others while simultaneously confirming their personal competence, however, results in being better liked and in the opponents being less critical of one's ideas, more interested in learning more about one's ideas,

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and more willing to incorporate one's information and reasoning into their own analysis of the problem (Tjosvold, Johnson, & Fabrey, 1980; Tjosvold, Johnson, & Lerner, 1981).

The second skill is perspective-taking (Johnson, 1971; Johnson & Johnson, 1989). A series of studies demonstrated that more information, both personal and impersonal, is disclosed when one is interacting with a person who is engaging in perspective-taking behaviors (such as paraphrasing), messages are phrased so that they are easily understood by others, others' messages are more accurately comprehended, there is greater understanding and retention of the opponent's information and perspective, and there is greater friendliness during the information exchange process (Johnson, 1971). The occurrence of controversy tends to promote greater understanding of another person's cognitive perspective (Tjosvold & Johnson, 1977, 1978; Tjosvold, Johnson, & Fabrey, 1980). Individuals engaging in a controversy were better able subsequently to predict what line of reasoning their opponent would use in solving a future problem than were persons who interacted without any controversy. Smith, Johnson, and Johnson (1981) found that individuals engaged in a controversy were more accurate in understanding their opponents' perspective than were persons involved in concurrence-seeking discussions or individualistic efforts. Johnson, Johnson, Pierson, and Lyons (1985) found that individuals in the controversy condition were better able to take the opposing perspective than were individuals participating in concurrence-seeking discussions. Engaging in perspective taking in conflict situations tends to increase understanding and retention of the opponent's information and perspective; facilitate the achievement of creative, high quality problem solving; and promote more positive perceptions of the information-exchange process, fellow group members, and the group's work (Falk & Johnson, 1977; Johnson, 1971, 1977). The greater the clarity of group members' understanding of all sides of the issues and the more accurate the assessment of their validity and relative merits, the more creative the synthesis of all positions in a controversy tends to be. Finally, perspective-taking promotes more positive perceptions of the information-exchange process, of fellow group members, and of the group's work (Johnson, 1971).

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When controversy takes place in a competitive context among unskilled individuals who make personal attacks and have an egocentric view of the issue, it will not be constructive. Constructive controversy requires that cooperation dominates the context and individuals have the skills to use the controversy procedure effectively. At the very least, individuals have to be able to criticize another person's ideas while confirming his or her competence and worth and see the issue from all perspectives.

Research Results

He that wrestles with us strengthens our nerves, and sharpens our skill. Our antagonist is our helper.

Edmund Burke, **Reflection on the Revolution in France**

The research on constructive controversy has been conducted in the last 30 years by several different researchers in a variety of settings using many different participant populations and many different tasks within an experimental and field-experimental format (see Table 1). For a detailed listing of all the supporting studies, see Johnson and Johnson (1979, 1989, 1995). All studies randomly assigned participants to conditions. The studies have all been published in journals (except for one dissertation), have high internal validity, and have lasted from one to sixty hours. The studies have been conducted on elementary, intermediate, and college students. Taken together, their results have considerable validity and generalizability.

-----Insert Tables 1 And 2 About Here-----

The research on constructive controversy has primarily focused on five sets of dependent variables. The first is the quality of decision making and problem solving that includes higher-level reasoning, accurate understanding of all perspectives, creative thinking, and openness to influence (i.e., attitude change). The second is the continuing motivation to learn more about the issue being considered. The greater the continuing motivation to learn about the issue, the higher the quality of reasoned judgments about what the decision should be. The third is valuing engaging in controversy (political discourse) and the decision making process. The more positive the attitudes toward the procedures and task, the greater the commitment to implement

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the decision may be. The fourth is the relationships among the advocates of opposing positions. The more positive the relationships resulting from participating in the procedure, the greater the commitment to continue to participate and the greater the long-term health of the group (i.e., society). The fifth is how participants in a controversy feel about themselves. The more positive participants feel about themselves as a result of participating in the process, the greater their commitment to continue to participate and the greater the long-term health of the group (i.e., society).

Quality Of Decision Making And Problem Solving

Thomas Jefferson's faith that conflict among ideas results in clearer understanding of the "truth" is corroborated by the research on constructive controversy. Compared with concurrence-seeking (ES = 0.68), debate (ES = 0.40), and individualistic efforts (ES = 0.87), constructive controversy tends to result in higher-quality decisions (including decisions that involve ethical dilemmas) and higher-quality solutions to complex problems for which different viewpoints can plausibly be developed. Skillful participation in a constructive controversy tends to result in (a) significantly greater ability to recall the information and reasoning contained in own and others' positions, (b) more skillfully transferring of this learning to new situations, and (c) greater generalization of principles learned to a wider variety of situations than do concurrence-seeking, debate, or individualistic efforts (Johnson, Johnson, Pierson, & Lyons, 1985; R. Johnson, Brooker, Stutzman, Hultman, & Johnson, 1985; Lowry & Johnson, 1981; Pellegrini, 1984; Smith, Johnson, & Johnson, 1981). Conflict tends to increase the quality of decision making even when initial conclusions are erroneous. Ames and Murray (1982) found that when two individuals, both with incorrect but different conclusions, had to come to an agreement, they frequently found the correct solution to the problem. Nemeth and Wachtler (1983) found that individuals exposed to a credible minority view generated more solutions to a problem and more correct solutions than did individuals exposed to a consistent single view, even if the minority view was incorrect. Thus conflict **qua** conflict is not only cognitively

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motivating, but the resolution of the conflict is likely to be in the direction of correct problem-solving.

Cognitive Reasoning

When a decision is to represent the best reasoned judgment of the participants, higher-level reasoning strategies are advisable. Controversy tends to promote more frequent use of higher-level reasoning strategies than do concurrence seeking (ES = 0.62), debate (ES = 1.35) or individualistic efforts (ES = 0.90). A number of studies on cognitive reasoning have focused on the ways in which nonconserving, cognitively immature children can be influenced to gain the critical insights into conservation. Constructive controversy has been compared with modeling and nonsocial presentation of information and found to generate more frequent understanding of conservation (Cook & Murray, 1973; Doise, Mugny, & Perret-Clermont, 1976; Murray, 1972). Finally, the evidence suggests that in classrooms where students are free to dissent and are also expected to listen to different perspectives, they are more aware of and able to think critically about civic issues (Newmann, 1990), know more about international affairs (Torney-Purta & Lansdale, 1986), are more tolerant of conflicting views, and are more aware and critical of simplistic appeals to patriotism as a motivator of action (Torney-Purta, 1991).

Perspective Taking

If the decision is to represent the best reasoned judgment of all participants and all participants must help implement the decision, it is important that all perspectives are understood and considered. Constructive controversy tends to promote more accurate and complete understanding of opposing perspectives than do concurrence seeking (ES = 0.91), debate (ES = 0.22), and individualistic efforts (ES = 0.86). The presence of controversy tends to result in greater understanding of another person's cognitive perspective than the absence of controversy (Tjosvold & Johnson, 1977, 1978; Tjosvold, Johnson, & Fabrey, 1978). Individuals engaged in a controversy were better able subsequently to predict what line of reasoning their opponent would use in solving a future problem than were individuals who interacted without any controversy. Smith, Johnson, and Johnson (1981) and Johnson, Johnson, Pierson, and Lyons (1985) found that

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high-, medium-, and low-achieving students engaged in a controversy were more accurate in understanding their opponents' perspective than were students involved in concurrence-seeking discussions or individualistic efforts.

Creativity

High-quality decisions that subsume conflicting positions and perspectives often require creative thought. In constructive controversies, participants tend to invent more creative solutions to problems, be more original in their thinking, generate and utilize a greater number of ideas, generate more higher quality ideas, analyze problems at a deeper level, raise more issues, have greater feelings of stimulation and enjoyment, become more emotionally involved in and committed to solving the problem, and are more satisfied with the resulting decision (Johnson & Johnson, 1979, 1989, 1995). Being confronted with credible alternative views, furthermore, has resulted in the generation of more novel solutions (Nemeth & Wachtler, 1983), varied strategies (Nemeth & Kwan, 1987), and original ideas (Nemeth & Kwan, 1985).

Attitude Change About The Issue

Open-minded consideration of all points of view is critical for deriving well reasoned decisions that integrate the best information and thought from a variety of positions. Johnson, Johnson, and Tiffany (1984) found that participants in a controversy reevaluated their attitudes about the issue and incorporated opponent's arguments into their own attitudes. LeCount, Maruyama, Petersen, and Basset (1991) demonstrated that participating in a controversy resulted in attitude change beyond that what occurs when individuals read about the issue. LeCount, Evens, and Maruyama (1992) found that participating in a controversy resulted in a shift of attitudes on gender issues that maintained over a period of one week after the controversy ended, thus indicating that the attitude change is relatively stable and not merely a response to the controversy experience itself.

Motivation To Improve Understanding

Most decisions will be reconsidered at some future date. Continuing motivation to learn about an issue is critical for the quality of long-term decision making. Participants in a

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controversy tend to have more continuing motivation to learn about the issue and come to the best reasoned judgment possible than do participants in concurrence seeking ($ES = .75$), debate (0.45), and individualistic efforts ($ES = 0.64$). Participants in a controversy tend to search for (a) more information and new experiences (increased specific content) and (b) a more adequate perspective and reasoning process (increased validity) in hopes of resolving the uncertainty (Johnson & Johnson, 1985; Johnson, Johnson, & Tiffany, 1984; Johnson, Brooker, Stutzman, Hultman, & Johnson, 1985; Lowry & Johnson, 1981; Smith, Johnson, & Johnson, 1981). There is also an active interest in learning the others' positions and developing an understanding and appreciation of them (Tjosvold & Johnson, 1977, 1978; Tjosvold, Johnson, & Fabrey, 1980; Tjosvold, Johnson, & Lerner, 1981). Lowry and Johnson (1981), for example, found that students involved in a controversy, compared with students involved in concurrence seeking, read more library materials, reviewed more classroom materials, more frequently watched an optional movie shown during recess, and more frequently requested information from others.

Attitudes Toward Controversy (Discourse)

If participants are to be committed to implement the decision and participate in future decision making, they must react favorably to the way the decision was made. Individuals involved in controversy liked the procedure better than did individuals working individualistically (Johnson & Johnson, 1985), and participating in a controversy consistently promoted more positive attitudes toward the experience than did participating in a debate, concurrence-seeking discussions, or individualistic decisions (Johnson, Johnson, Pierson, & Lyons, 1985; Johnson, Johnson & Tiffany, 1984; R. Johnson, Brooker, Stutzman, Hultman, & Johnson, 1985; Lowry & Johnson, 1981; Smith, Johnson, & Johnson, 1981, 1984). Controversy experiences promoted stronger beliefs that controversy is valid and valuable (Johnson, Johnson, & Scott, 1978; Lowry & Johnson, 1981; Smith, Johnson, & Johnson, 1981). The more positive the attitudes toward the process of making the decision, the more committed participants may feel to implement the decision.

Attitudes Toward Decision Making

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If participants are to be committed to implement the decision and participate in future decision making, they must consider the decision worth making. Individuals who engaged in controversies tended to like the decision making task better than did individuals who engaged in concurrence-seeking discussions (ES = 0.63).

Interpersonal Attraction And Support Among Participants

Decision making, to be effective, must be conducted in ways that bring individuals together, not create ill-will and divisiveness. Within controversy there is disagreement, argumentation, and rebuttal that could create difficulties in establishing good relationships. Constructive controversy, however, has been found to promote greater liking among participants than did debate (ES = 0.72), concurrence-seeking (ES = 0.24), or individualistic efforts (ES = 0.81). Debate tended to promote greater interpersonal attraction among participants than did individualistic efforts (ES = 0.46). In addition, constructive controversy tends to promote greater social support among participants than does debate (ES = 0.92), concurrence-seeking (ES = 0.32), or individualistic efforts (ES = 1.52). Debate tended to promote greater social support among participants than did individualistic efforts (ES = 0.85).

Self-Esteem

Participation in future decision making is enhanced when participants feel good about themselves as a result of helping make the current decision, whether or not they agree with it. Constructive controversy tends to promote higher self-esteem than does concurrence-seeking (ES = 0.39), debate (ES = 0.51), or individualistic efforts (ES = 0.85). Debate tends to promote higher self-esteem than does individualistic efforts (ES = 0.45).

Implications For Political Discourse

Historian David M. Kennedy, in an editorial in the **Los Angeles Times** ("The Unfunny Joke That Is U.S. Politics," reprinted in the **Minneapolis Tribune** on September 6, 1999), notes that in American politics, "*foolishness is relentlessly driving out seriousness*" thereby corrupting American democracy. He laments that until recently, American politics involved a robust engagement with the great public issues of the day: states' rights, the New Deal, World War II,

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the war against poverty, civil rights, and the Cold War. Kennedy states that during the last decade America has “*nurtured a ferociously acquisitive individualism and unhinged an entire generation from any sense of common purpose...genuine argument has been banished from the public square, impoverishing us all.*” One of the great questions of our time, therefore, may be, “*How can we reestablish political discourse on the topics concerning the public interest?*” To do so, there must be general agreement on the procedures used to regulate and guide political discourse. The procedures should provide clear guidelines for engaging in political discourse and be based on a theory validated by research. Constructive controversy is an example of such a combination of theory, research, and normative procedure.

An example of the use of the constructive controversy procedure for political discourse is as follows. An issue facing the American public is to decide whether to use the budget surplus to reduce taxes or pay off some of the national debt. To decide, advocates of each side:

1. Organize what they know about the advantages of the alternative they favor into a coherent and reasoned position.
2. Present the best case possible for their position in the form of a persuasive argument (thesis, rationale, conclusion).
3. Critically analyze the opposing position and attempt to refute it by pointing out its weaknesses in information and logic (while communicating respect for the opposing advocates and appreciation for their willingness to engage in political discourse) and rebut attacks on their information and logic.
4. Step back and view the issue from both perspectives while communicating to the other side that it has been heard and understood.
5. Drop all advocacy and strive to achieve consensus on the best reasoned course of action that synthesizes both positions or at least incorporates the best reasoning from all sides.

-----Insert Table 3 About Here-----

The relevance of constructive controversy for political discourse may be seen in Table 3. The first purpose of political discourse is to promote high-quality decision-making reflecting

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citizen's best reasoned judgment. Constructive controversy has been found to result in high-quality decisions characterized by higher-level reasoning, understanding of all relevant perspectives, creative thinking, openness to influence, and continuing motivation to learn more about the issue. The second purpose is to increase citizens' commitment to implement the decision (even if they do not agree with it) and participate in future decision making.

Constructive controversy creates positive attitudes toward the decision made and the controversy procedure. Political discourse is aimed at improving the cohesiveness of the democracy.

Constructive controversy creates positive attitudes toward the advocates of opposing positions.

Political discourse is based on the premise that the rights of the political minority (those whose position is not adopted) will be protected until the decision is reopened. Constructive controversy, by promoting positive attitudes toward procedure, the advocates of opposing positions, and oneself create the atmosphere in which protection of minority rights is valued and protected. Engaging in political discourse should increase the ability of citizens to do so even more skillfully in the future. Participation in a constructive controversy increases participants' experience and skills in doing so; in addition, it promotes positive attitudes toward the procedure, the advocates of opposing positions, and oneself and thereby increase participants' willingness to engage in the procedure in the future. The health of both mature and developing democracies may be increased when participating in political discourse increases citizens' attitudes toward the procedure, the decision made, advocates of opposing positions, and themselves. Constructive controversy, therefore, provides a normative procedure based on a theory validated by research on which political discourse may be based.

Socializing New Generations Into Political Discourse

The constructive controversy procedure has been applied in two settings. The first is decision-making (Johnson & F. Johnson, 2000; Tjosvold, 1998). The second is educational situations (Johnson & Johnson, 1979, 1995; Johnson, Johnson, & Johnson, 1976). The founders of American democracy were firmly convinced that schools could and should bring democracy to life. Schools were to inculcate in students the conviction that democracy involves intelligent,

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collaborative participation in society. Through political discourse and decision making, creative individuality was to be balanced with concern for the common good and the welfare of others. The nature and value of political discourse was to be taught through both the curriculum and the pedagogical methods. Constructive controversy is such a pedagogical method.

Constructive controversy has been used from first grade through graduate school. For the past 30 years, we have trained teachers and professors throughout North America and numerous other countries in the use of constructive controversy to increase the quantity and quality of learning and socialize students into the procedure for political discourse in a democracy. In addition, we have developed curriculum units based on constructive controversy in a wide variety of subject areas. To conduct a controversy, teachers choose an issue, define it in terms of pro and con positions, assign students to cooperative learning groups of four, divide the group into two pairs, randomly assign one pair to the pro position and the other pair to the con position, and conduct the controversy procedure. The teacher then leads students through the five steps of the constructive controversy procedure (Johnson & Johnson, 1979, 1989, 1995).

Step one is for each pair to prepare the best case possible for its assigned position by (a) researching the assigned position and learning all relevant information, (b) organizing the information into a persuasive argument that contains a thesis statement or claim (“*George Washington was a more effective President than Abraham Lincoln*”), the rationale supporting the thesis (“*He accomplished a, b, and c*”), and a logical conclusion that is the same as the thesis (“*Therefore, George Washington was a more effective President than Abraham Lincoln*”), and (c) planning how to advocate the assigned position effectively to ensure it receives a fair and complete hearing.

Step two is for students to present the best case for their assigned position to ensure it gets a fair and complete hearing. They need to be forceful, persuasive, and convincing advocates in doing so. Ideally, more than one media will be used. Students are to listen carefully to and learn the opposing position, taking notes and clarifying anything they do not understand.

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In step three students engage in an open and free discussion of the issue. Students argue forcefully and persuasively for their position (presenting as many facts as they can to support their point of view). They critically analyze the opposing position (its evidence and reasoning), ask for data to support assertions, and refute the opposing position by pointing out the inadequacies in the information and reasoning. While doing so students thoroughly learn the opposing position and give it a “trial by fire” while following the rules for constructive controversy. Finally, students are to rebut attacks on their position.

Step four involves students reversing perspectives and presenting the best case possible for the opposing position. Students should be sincere and forceful and use their notes and add new facts. Students should strive to see the issue from both perspectives simultaneously.

In step five students drop all advocacy and strive to find a synthesis to which they can all agree. Students summarize the best evidence and reasoning from both sides and integrate it into a new and unique joint position. Students write a group report on the synthesis including the supporting evidence and rationale, individually take a test on both positions, process how well the group functioned, and celebrate the group’s success and members’ hard work.

While students engage in the procedure, teachers monitor their behavior and assess the quantity and quality of their learning. Ideally, students will participate in constructive controversies from the first through the twelfth grade. Such experiences will socialize students into the skills and attitudes necessary to engage in political discourse and be an active citizen.

Guidelines For Political Campaigns

When winning an election or gaining political power becomes more important than the democratic system itself, democracy is in danger (see Table 4). When methods of political persuasion (such as ad-hominem arguments and image control) other than discourse are used, democracy is in danger. When a political minority refuses to help implement the will of the majority, or when the majority does not protect the rights of the political minority, democracy is in danger. Within political decision making, there must first and foremost be a concern to

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strengthen American democracy through political discourse and model appropriate behavior for the next generation.

Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and their colleagues had a deep faith in the power of conflict, harnessed through political discourse, in moving society toward optimal decisions about the course of action to adopt. Conflict, however, while potentially very constructive, also may be destructive when managed inappropriately. When political discourse is ignored, for example, and negative means of political persuasion are used, the destructiveness of the conflict undermines democracy. The constructive use of political discourse is dependent on having a normative procedure that is truly effective. Constructive controversy provides such a procedure that is grounded in validated theory.

----Insert Table 4 About Here----

For the past several decades, negative political persuasion has increased while political discourse has decreased. It is not enough to say, “Don’t make personal attacks,” or “Be civil in discussing issues.” It is time to reestablish healthy disagreement and conflict in political campaigns. To do so we need a procedure and a set of norms for candidates for office to follow. These guidelines should be based on validated psychological theory. In engaging in constructive political discourse the following guidelines should be adhered to:

1. The purpose of political discourse is to create consensus among citizens as to which course of action will best solve a problem (such as poverty, crime, drug abuse, America’s economic health, racism). Engaging in political discourse involves both long-term and short-term positive interdependence. The short-term positive interdependence is the immediate creation of consensus among citizens as to which course of action will best solve the problem. The long-term interdependence is the improvement of the political process and the maintenance of the health of our democracy. Both the short- and long-term good of the nation has to be more important to candidates than winning an election.
2. Destructive forms of political persuasion should be avoided as they (a) divert time and energy from the real need of citizens to engage in political discourse and (b) damage both

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the short- and long-term health of our democracy. Negative political persuasion results in those in power viewing political minorities as “threats” and results in political minorities seething with resentment and refusing to help implement the will of the majority.

Negative political persuasion also models destructive behavior for new generations of citizens and undermines their motivation to participate in the political process.

3. In presenting a position to the electorate, candidates should prepare well-reasoned and thoughtful positions characterized by valid information and logic. The best case possible should be advocated for the candidate’s position in the form of a reasoned argument (thesis, rationale, conclusion).
4. The positions presented should be given a “trial-by-fire” through a critical analysis while at the same time their advocates should be given respect, encouragement, and admiration for having the courage and skills to present their views and engage in political discourse. Advocates should have the chance to rebut attempts to refute their position and clarify points that may have been misunderstood.
5. Citizens should step back and view the issue from all perspectives.
6. A consensus should be sought that synthesizes the various positions or at least integrates the best information and reasoning from all sides. While the decision is made by majority vote, the political minorities commit themselves to implementing the decision.
7. The rights of political minorities should be rigorously protected, as all citizens will be part of a political minority at some time.

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Table 1: General Characteristics Of Studies

Characteristic	Number	Percent
1970-1979	12	43
1980-1989	16	57
Random Assigned Subjects	22	79
No Random Assignment	6	21
Grades 1 – 3	7	25
Grades 4 – 6	7	25
Grades 10 – 12	2	7
College	10	36
Adult	2	7
Published In Journals	27	96
Dissertations	1	4
1 Session	12	43
2-9 Sessions	6	21
10-20 Sessions	8	29
20+ Sessions	2	7

Table 2: Meta-Analysis Of Controversy Studies: Average Effect Size

Dependent Variable	Mean	sd	n
Quality Of Decision Making			
Controversy / Concurrence Seeking	0.68	0.41	15
Controversy / Debate	0.40	0.43	6
Controversy / Individualistic Efforts	0.87	0.47	19
Cognitive Reasoning			
Controversy / Concurrence Seeking	0.62	0.44	2
Controversy / Debate	1.35	0.00	1
Controversy / Individualistic Efforts	0.90	0.48	15
Perspective-Taking			
Controversy / Concurrence Seeking	0.91	0.28	9
Controversy / Debate	0.22	0.42	2
Controversy / Individualistic Efforts	0.86	0.00	1
Motivation			
Controversy / Concurrence Seeking	0.75	0.46	12
Controversy / Debate	0.45	0.44	5
Controversy / Individualistic Efforts	0.71	0.21	4
Attitudes			
Controversy / Concurrence Seeking	0.58	0.29	5
Controversy / Debate	0.81	0.00	1
Controversy / Individualistic Efforts	0.64	0.00	1
Interpersonal Attraction			
Controversy / Concurrence Seeking	0.24	0.44	8
Controversy / Debate	0.72	0.25	6

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Controversy / Individualistic Efforts	0.81	0.11	3
Debate / Individualistic Efforts	0.46	0.13	2

Social Support

Controversy / Concurrence Seeking	0.32	0.44	8
Controversy / Debate	0.92	0.42	6
Controversy / Individualistic Efforts	1.52	0.29	3
Debate / Individualistic Efforts	0.85	0.01	2

Self-Esteem

Controversy / Concurrence Seeking	0.39	0.15	4
Controversy / Debate	0.51	0.09	2
Controversy / Individualistic Efforts	0.85	0.04	3
Debate / Individualistic Efforts	0.45	0.17	2

Note: For a more complete analysis, see Johnson & Johnson (1995).

Table 3: Relationship Between Political Discourse And Constructive Controversy

Effective Democratic Decision Making	Constructive Controversy
The decision is of high quality, reflecting the best reasoned judgment of the citizens.	High-Quality Decisions Characterized By Higher-Level Reasoning, Perspective-Taking, Creativity, Openness To Influence, Continuing Motivation To Learn About Issue
Citizens are committed to implement the decision (whether they agree with it or not) and to the democratic process.	Positive Attitudes Toward Procedure And Task
Improve the cohesiveness of the society.	Positive Attitudes Towards Others
The rights of the political minority (those who disagree with the decision) are protected until the issue is reopened in the next election.	Positive Attitudes Toward Procedure, Others, And Self
The decision-making and problem-solving capabilities of the democracy is enhanced, or at least not lessened.	Participation Improves Skills; Positive Attitudes Toward Procedure, Decision, Others, & Self Increases Desire To Participate Again

Table 4 Legitimate Vs. Illegitimate Practices In Political Discourse

Legitimate	Illegitimate
Focus On Working Together To Achieve Best Reasoned Decision Possible	Focus On Winning
Present Reasoned Arguments	Present Images, Argumentum Ad Hominem
Critical Analysis Of Opposing Positions	Rejection And Disparagement Of Opposing Positions
Respect For Advocates Of Opposing Positions	Personal Attacks On Opponents
Viewing Issue From All Perspectives	Egocentric Fixation On Own Point Of View
Positions Are Modified To Achieve Consensus And Integrate The Best Reasoning From All Sides	Rigid Adherence To Own Point Of View Regardless Of Weaknesses In Information And Logic
Political Minorities Accept Will Of The Majority And Help Implement Decision	Political Minorities Resist And Undermine Implementation Of Will Of Majority
Rights Of Political Minorities Are Rigorously Protected	Majority Solidifies Power By Ignoring Or Attacking Minority Rights
Long-Term Focus On Improving Quality Of Political Discourse And Socializing New Citizens Into Discourse Procedure	Short-Term Focus On Self-Interest Regardless Of The Damage To Society's Health

Figure 1 Process Of Constructive Controversy, Debate, And Concurrence Seeking

