



CATHERINE IBEN
Civic and Economic
Thought and Leadership

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF CIVIL DISCOURSE AND FREE SPEECH?

In the words of James Baldwin, “I love America more than any other country in the world and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.” The true importance and beauty of civil discourse and free speech lies in the fact that criticism and debate about our country are encouraged through the pillars of our founding. Civil discourse and free speech make America, American.

Acknowledging that these values of the American government are important, one can also easily see that it has been increasingly harder to view free speech as a unifying concept, rather than a polarizing one. Because of this, civil discourse has been harder to come by. Through Facebook, family dinners, or even in Congress itself - discourse has become discourteous, spreading misinformation, offensive terms, and “cancel culture” by both the left and the right. Without these essential parts of government, America has fallen victim to factions and the downfalls of the two-party system.

One of the most recent and profound examples of this was the 2020 election. Beginning with a childish debate that made people all over the world “cringe” for both parties and ending with an attack on the United States Capitol Building and claims of election fraud, it was chaos. It seemed as if the only thing the American people enjoyed with a bipartisan spirit was the Bernie Sanders mitten memes and the fly on Mike Pence’s head.

Today, we’re shocked when a House Representative or Senator dares to vote against party lines. We call blaspheme when two members of separate parties decide to agree. So how do we combat this phenomenon? How do we restore pure freedom of speech and flip discourteous discourse back to civil discourse all the time?

The answer is more simple than most believe. It lies in good ‘ol civic education and meme culture. The expansion of unbiased civic education is essential. Teaching ALL students about the foundations of democracy and how to debate fairly will eliminate small-mindedness. In addition, it will facilitate a space for free speech, and encourage students to realize the importance of practicing civic virtue on both a local and federal level. However, there is nothing the American population can agree on more than meme culture. It’s important to make light of serious situations. Meme culture gives people a forum of comedy and political discourse with a smaller chance of offending other people.

In the eyes of James Madison in Federalist 51, “What is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections of human nature?” When the American people begin to learn to not condemn free speech or civil discourse, the government will follow close behind.