

# Can We Talk? An Argument for More Dialogues in Academia

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INTERDISCIPLINARY WORKSHOP ON REIMAGINING DEMOCRACY ESSAY SERIES



**HARVARD** Kennedy School

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As we enter a year that will be the theater to [more elections](#) than any other in history, concerns about the [erosion of democracy](#) become more acute. Harvard's [International Workshop on Reimagining Democracy 2023](#) reflected these apprehensions, as thinkers convened to discuss the myriad challenges facing democratic systems. While much attention is given to reinventing democracy for the broader public, I find myself pondering the state of democratic discourse within academia.

Growing up in France, I fantasized about studying in the United States. After completing undergraduate studies in mathematics in France, I was fortunate to join the MIT Institute for Data, Systems, and Society to pursue my master's and PhD. There, I encountered brilliant minds who led by example, questioning and bettering the world with humility and rigor. At the same time, I became fascinated by the trajectory of American democracy. As a result, I dedicated my thesis to studying notions of [diversity and expertise in representative democracies](#). (Yes, this is something one can research with mathematics!) I also became increasingly concerned about the political tensions and anger palpable [within](#) and [outside of](#) academia. When I read that academia, like other institutions, is suffering from a decline in trust ([two out of three Americans have "some" to "very little" trust in academia](#)), I recalled my mother's philosophy of handling conflict by first introspecting. So, I started reflecting on what we could do better.

Some have spent years making claims, sometimes bigoted and politically motivated, about cancel culture on university campuses. Recently, however, such claims have started coming from closer to home. Harvard's Professor Danielle Allen [discussed](#) a "culture of intimidation" on campuses that have "lost their ways." *The New York Times* ran [stories](#) about "radicalism on campuses," while *The Atlantic*, together with its "[If Trump Wins](#)" campaign addressing the risks of another Trump era, featured academics such as Professor Tyler Austin Harper [talking about](#) "ideological extremism."

The nonpartisan [Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression](#) reports that [deplatforming efforts](#) in academia—"the attempt to boycott a group or individual through removing the platform (such as speaking venues or websites) used to share information or ideas"—[doubled in 2017 and again in 2020](#), peaking at 223 incidents in 2021. What does this tell us about academia's conversation muscles?

Could it *both* be true that many attacks on academia are bigoted *and* that there are issues we should take seriously within our academic cultures? If so, is it possible to constructively investigate the challenges we face, not yielding to undue outside pressure but reaffirming the mission and values of higher education?

Unfortunately, there is limited empirical research on academic democratic life. [One study has documented signs of affective polarization](#) amongst academics: "[t]he more liberal the respondents, the more willing they [are] to discriminate against a conservative" and vice versa. In [another paper](#), Harvard Kennedy School's Professor Pippa Norris surveyed 2,500 political scientists from roughly 100 countries and found that "the cancel culture is not simply a rhetorical myth." She determined that "self-identified right-wing political scientists were most likely to report personal experience of a worsening cancel culture." Interestingly, the reverse is true in countries where the dominant academic culture leans right, such as Nigeria. In turn, cancel culture is deemed not as an unprecedented bug in the academic system, but rather as a manifestation of Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence thesis, according to which "mainstream values in any group gradually flourish to become the predominant culture, while, due to social pressures, dissenting minority voices become muted."

However, these works don't answer a pressing question: can censorship or self-censorship campaigns be legitimate? If you find this question absurd, remember Karl Popper's paradox of tolerance: to remain tolerant, a society should be intolerant toward intolerance. Consequently, we should ask whether silencing campaigns are directed at intolerable views.

I believe that any conversation happens within a zone of inquiry bounded by moral requirements and categorical imperatives. In particular, we should aspire for humans to be equal in the eyes of the law and unapologetically reject arbitrary discrimination based on race, gender, sex, religion, disability, or sexual orientation.

I also hold that many views we find dissonant or uncomfortable are not intolerable but belong to a legitimate zone of inquiry, and that counterproductive trends, often bordering on intolerant, cheaply discard different views instead of engaging with them. Almost any side of a debate is characterized by bits of ideology and pieces of logical reasoning. Ideology alone may lead to outcomes that are correct in hindsight but rooted in incorrect (and unsustainable) reasoning. And reasonable views may also deliver a posteriori mistaken positions for having logically held onto defeated reasons.

Engaging with these nuances is what it means to have democratic conversations. First, because we should have the humility to realize that one rarely knows a priori what perspective will be celebrated, vilified, or ignored in the future. Second, because disregarding the other side of the aisle, deeming it irreducibly extreme, often backfires; it risks overshadowing ideological excesses, nudging moderates off the cliff toward more ideological polarization. And third, because we need to find a solution together, not against one another.

As reported in [various venues](#) by a [plurality of voices](#), parts of our campuses seem to suffer from a culture of silence. I have experienced this myself. Increasingly, I have struggled to navigate genuine debates; I have felt the urge to silently get up to speed with what is *taken for granted* in research settings and have grown afraid of asking clarifying questions. When I was told at a conference: “It is a law of society, like gravity is a law of nature, that only Republicans can believe in fake news,” I was afraid to ask whether this view could be resulting from an in-group bias. Resisting seemingly equivocal bounds on *what to think* has become difficult as some discourses have grown intolerant on both sides of the aisle. These have been localized experiences and, of course, personal experiences are subjective and anecdotal. To make sense of the like and question their systematic existence, magnitude, and potential consequences on our ability to improve democratic conversations, we need to be able to formulate hypotheses that may very well be refuted—isn’t that the beauty of science?

Asking such questions is considered risky and sometimes comes across as drawing false equivalences. If it disappoints that places committed to studying political disorders may be subject to similar disorders—from echo chambers to confirmation biases to minoritarian yet significant radicalism—it would not be an issue beyond repair. Would some argue that this is a hypothesis we should refuse to engage with? What good would avoidance do to the problems we care to solve? Isn’t it possible to both defend our institutions’ stellar achievements across so many dimensions *and* candidly introspect? Couldn’t it even represent an opportunity to dogfood changes by first benevolently understanding and mitigating the legitimate anger and fear and disappointment that may have shaped parts of our internal and external politics? For, due to our claim to knowledge, academics do have an asymmetrical responsibility toward objectivity, forbearance, and rigorous methods. To me, that is the job description.

Societies often need to use decision heuristics, making choices with high uncertainty and little hindsight. That requires certain skills—audacity, courage—and a level of understanding that academics have provided for centuries and keep delivering every day. Humanity is facing alarming climate change, terrible wars, powerful technology, and deep inequalities. In the face of these immense, unprecedented, and complex challenges, having the capacity to ask and answer the right questions is more than an academic exercise; it is the way through which we diagnose problems and develop proven tools.

But to achieve this, don’t we need to strengthen academia’s conversation muscles and assess their impact on the world we care to change? This way, we can define and protect moral requirements and, within the zone of inquiry, ferociously question assumptions, tirelessly build leverages for better worlds, relentlessly accept genuine debates (and the possibility of being proven wrong), and endlessly resist ideologies of any kind. After all, if we don’t, who will?

## **About the Author**

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## **About the Ash Center**

The Mission of the Roy and Lila Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation is to develop ideas and foster practices for equal and inclusive, multi-racial and multi-ethnic democracy and self-government.

## **About the Second Interdisciplinary Workshop on Reimagining Democracy**

This essay was adopted from a presentation given at the Second Interdisciplinary Workshop on Reimagining Democracy held on the campus of Harvard Kennedy School in December 2023. Convened with support from the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation and the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, the conference was intended to bring together a diverse set of thinkers and practitioners to talk about how democracy might be reimagined for the twenty-first century.

This essay is one in a series published by the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the John F. Kennedy School of Government or of Harvard University. The papers in this series are intended to elicit feedback and to encourage debate on important public policy challenges.

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