



Raising the Level of Political Discourse

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The three remaining candidates running for president all have reputations for being thoughtful people. That's why over the last few weeks it has been disappointing to see news stories indicating a real decline in political discourse. For example, John McCain was forced to respond to innuendos of infidelity, and an innocent photograph of Barack Obama in traditional African dress began circulating around the internet. Of course, this is no surprise: specious tactics are an expected part of democratic political life.

These tactics are sometimes referred to as "strategic discourse"—communication techniques aimed at altering or manipulating people's attitudes or behaviors. The moral problem with strategic discourse is that important issues at stake in this election, from war to health care to climate change, are deeply ethical. And, as one thinker said, "I hope it is evident to everyone that strategic discourse is never an appropriate response to an ethical issue."¹

While political discourse will doubtlessly always have strategic elements, it can move up and down in scale. During some election seasons, the quality of discussion is high; in others it sinks pretty lows. There are two points that I would like to make here. The first is that the voting public can affect of the quality of political discourse and push up its quality. The second is that our current culture focuses too much on adversarial debate, which makes those efforts to improve the quality of discourse even more difficult.

To develop these points I first want to make a distinction between debate and deliberation. On the one hand, the goal of a debate is to win. The opposing sides in a debate try to persuade a third party that their view is right, and their opponent's view is wrong. Each side enters the debate confident that their opinion is correct. On the other hand, the goal of deliberation is to select the most appropriate policy or best course of action. Participants examine alternative plans and work toward agreement. Unlike a debate, people enter deliberations unsure uncertain of the best choice.

Our election season is, in reality, one very long debate. Since the goal of debate is to win, competing sides use techniques that work. As we all know, distortions, personal attacks and the like are all too often part of political strategies. While candidates and their supporters have a responsibility to speak the truth, focus on the issues and refrain from spurious personal attacks, political competition is tough and both sides want to win. If strategic discourse helps achieve that goal, most seem willing to use it.

¹ (Thompson, 73)

But the good news is that if people refuse to be swayed by these techniques they will diminish. In other words, if voters are put off by strategic discourse and demand something better, such techniques will be dropped from the political strategists' playbooks—something most politicians would likely welcome. The quality of political campaigning can be raised, at least a bit, by identifying and rejecting the tactics of “strategic discourse.”

The problem is that these tactics frequently seem to work. Perhaps one reason is that our culture does not provide enough opportunity to practice careful, critical deliberation. Deliberative skills can help us to judge the quality of a candidate proposal and identify spurious tactics.

Much of our access to political discussions is through the media, and conflict, controversy, and scandal attract viewers and readers. This is evident by the large numbers of talk radio and television shows set up in a conflict-driven debate format, as opposed to shows where people speak calmly and carefully work through issues. It seems, strategic discourse is entertaining and thoughtful deliberation is maybe a bit boring. As a consequence, we simply aren't often exposed to the practice of deliberation.

In my field of ethics education, conflict and debate are also the dominant format. Perhaps the reason for this is that it is easier to get the students engaged. Many textbooks are set-up in a pro and con format. Students read articles for and against biotechnology, animal welfare, health care, and other social debates. It's not an uncommon practice to divide the class into two sides and debate the issue. While this gets students involved, it doesn't really create an opportunity to practice thoughtful deliberation. It also oversimplifies complex and difficult ethical issues. While students take sides, they don't necessarily work through the issues.

The problem with strategic discourse is that many of the important issues at stake in this election are deeply ethical. As the elections season heats up, we are likely to be exposed to a lot of personal attacks and political distortions. If we want to raise the quality of political discourse, then there needs to be more opportunities to practice deliberation. The problem is adversarial debate is entertaining and easy, while thoughtful deliberation is always a challenge.