



# The Role of Critical Thinking in Promoting Civil Discourse

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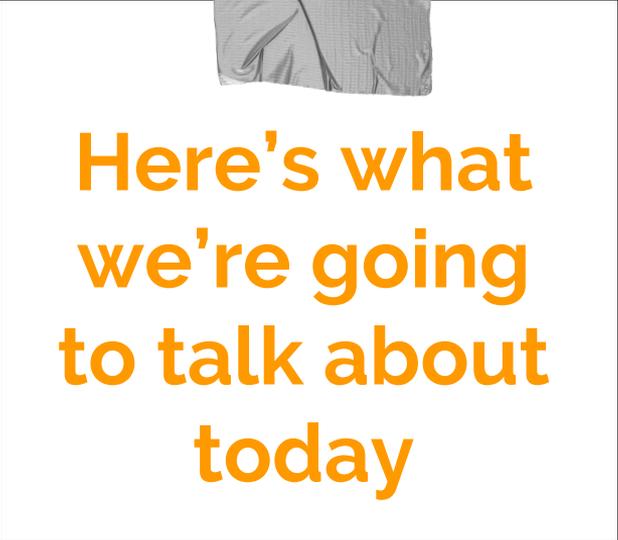
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[ProCon.org](http://ProCon.org)

# ProCon.org uses controversial issues to promote critical thinking

- Founded on July 12, 2004
- Over 25 million users annually
- Used in over 10,000 schools (in all 50 states and 90 countries)
- Cited thousands of times in the media
- All information is meticulously sourced

[www.ProCon.org](http://www.ProCon.org)



**Here's what  
we're going  
to talk about  
today**

**Partisanship  
today**

**How are  
political  
ideologies  
formed?**

**Can people's  
minds  
change?**

**What's the  
role of  
critical  
thinking?**

**Tools for  
engaging in  
civil  
discourse**

# The Partisan Divide:

According to Pew Research Center, there is now an average

**36-percentage-point gap**  
between Republicans and Democrats

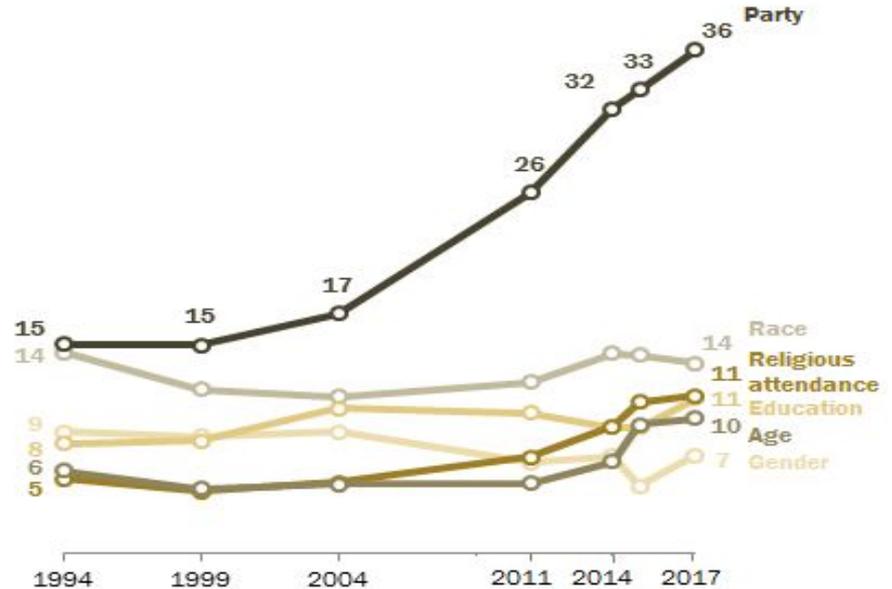
How much was the gap in 1994?

# Just 15%

The partisan gap is much higher than the differences in opinions between races, genders, age, education, and religion.

## As partisan divides over political values widen, other gaps remain more modest

Average gap in the share taking a conservative position across 10 political values, by key demographics

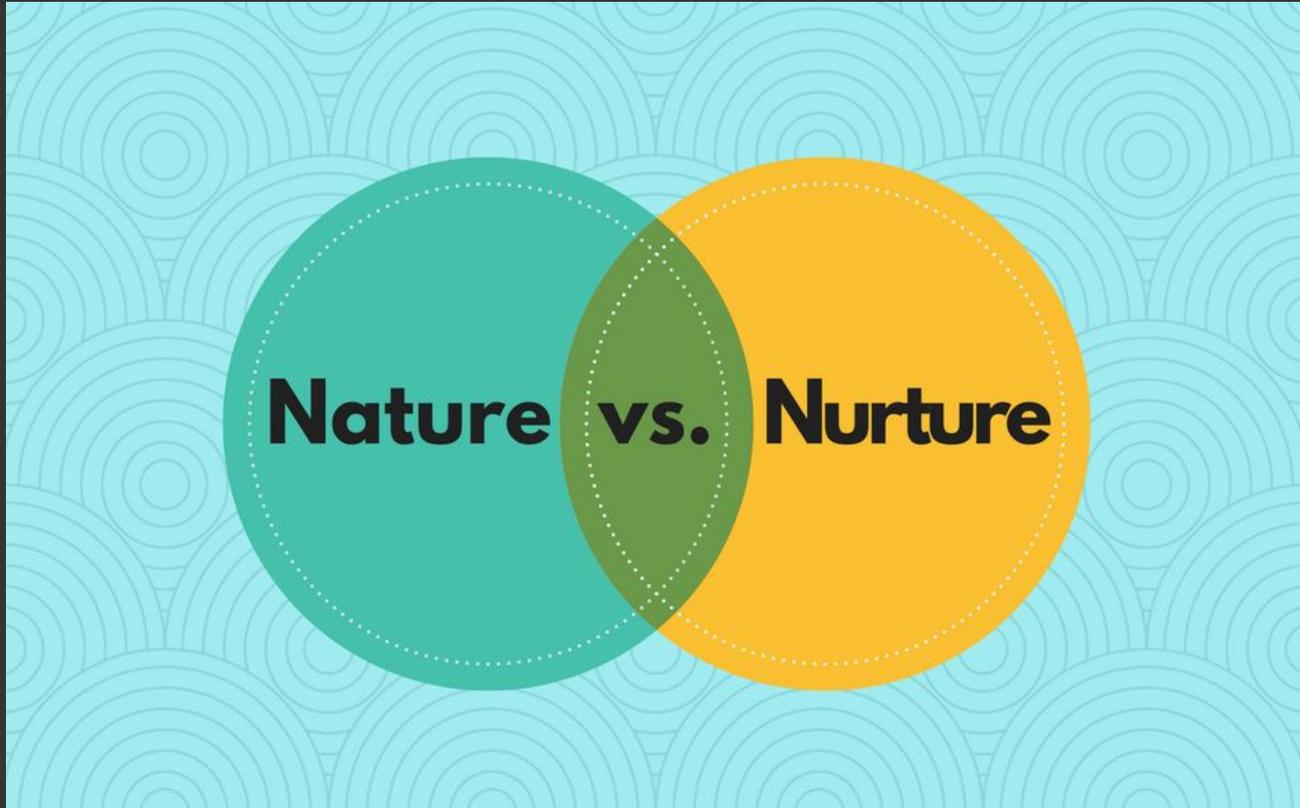


Notes: Indicates average gap between the share of two groups taking the conservative position across 10 values items. Party=difference between Rep/Lean Rep and Dem/Lean Dem. Race=white non-Hispanic/black non-Hispanic. Education=college grad/non-college grad. Age=18-49/50+. Religion=weekly+ religious service attenders/less often. Source: Survey conducted June 8-18 and June 27-July 9, 2017.

**Our political identities are more divisive than our positions on the issues!**



# How are ideologies formed?

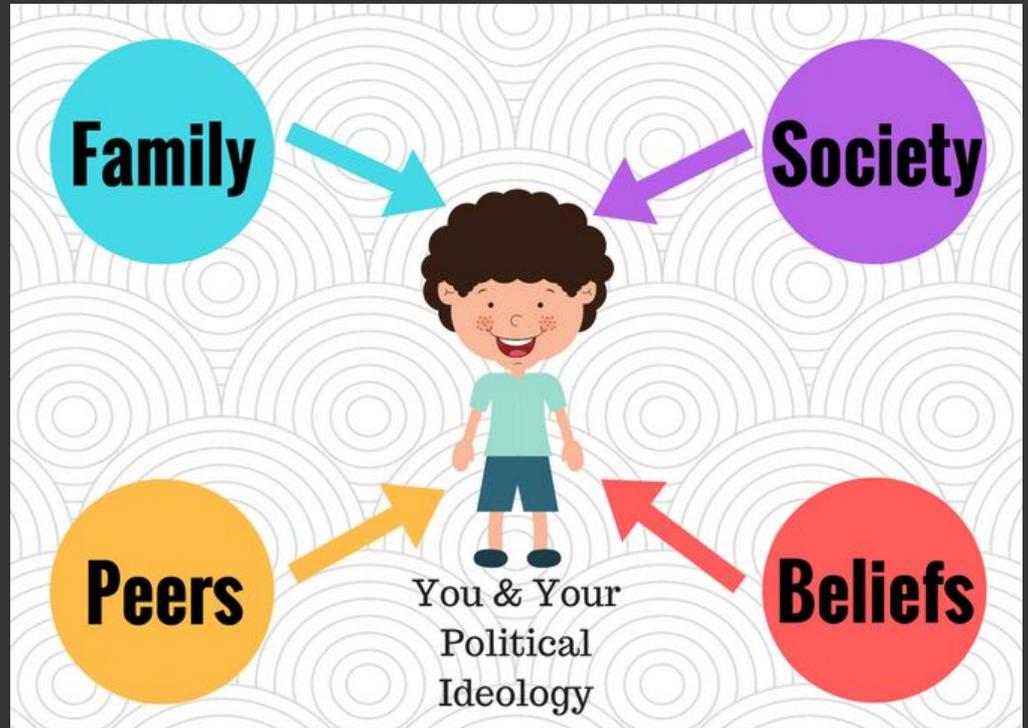


# Learned (aka Nurture)

“The children of politically engaged parents tend to become politically engaged adults.”

*Why Does the Apple Fall Far from the Tree? How Early Political Socialization Prompts Parent-Child Dissimilarity*

British Journal of Political Science, Oct. 2014

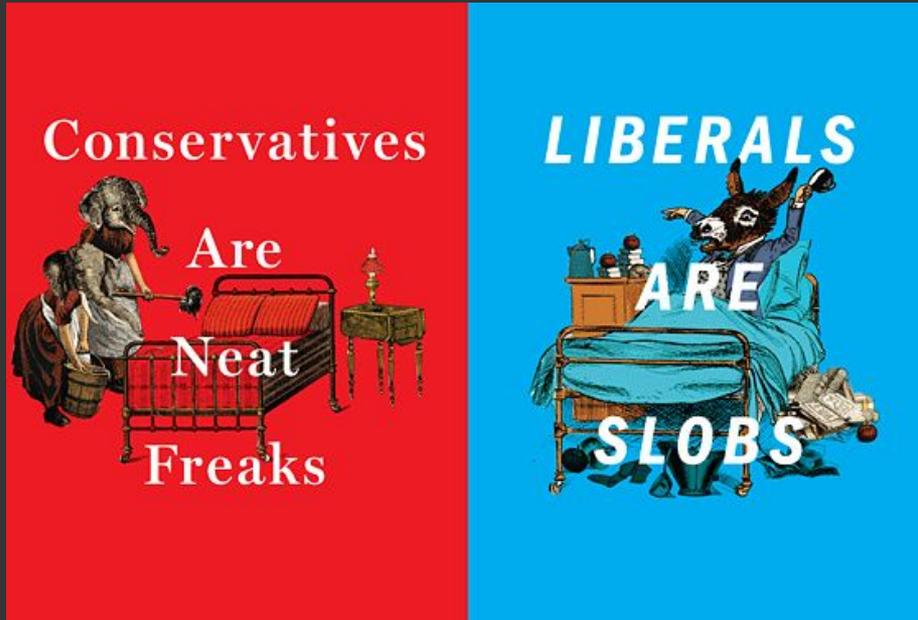


# Hardwired (aka Nature)

Scientists have linked basic character traits to liberalism and conservatism, and identified specific genes they say hard-wire those ideologies.

## Examples from Our Brains Chart

- Liberals are more open-minded and creative; conservatives are more orderly and better organized.
- Conservatism is focused on preventing negative outcomes; liberalism is focused on advancing positive outcomes.
- Conservatives sleep more soundly and have more mundane dreams; liberals sleep more restlessly and have a more bizarre, active dream life.



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and **entrenched ideologies**,  
is it possible for people to **engage civilly** on  
or even **change their minds** about  
controversial issues?

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**YES!**

**(I've seen it happen with my own eyes)**

# What Is the Role of Critical Thinking?

John Dewey, American philosopher, in his 1910 work,  
*How We Think*:

“Active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends, constitutes reflective thought.”

# What Is the Role of Critical Thinking?

## Critical thinking:

1. Improves our ability to reason and generate strong arguments
2. Improves our ability to assess the strength of the arguments used by others

# What Is Civil Discourse?

**“Robust, honest, frank and constructive dialogue and deliberation that seeks to advance the public interest.”**

**The foundations of civil discourse are:**

- 1. A willingness to explain one's views and reasons**
- 2. A commitment to listen carefully to the other side's reasons and views**

# Case Study 1: Santa Monica Pier Debates



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Our debate series was designed to stimulate critical thinking and civil discourse on current issues.

We brought in prominent experts from both sides of the issues and neutral moderators to facilitate the conversations.

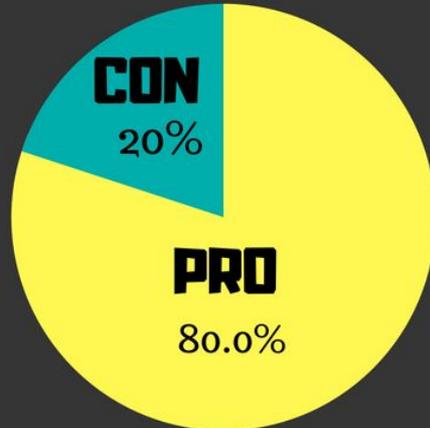
- 
- Free and open to the public
  - **Ground rules:** Disagree without being disagreeable
  - **Goal:** Model civil discourse

# Case Study 1: Santa Monica Pier Debates

Is public education broken in  
Los Angeles?



**Before**



**After**

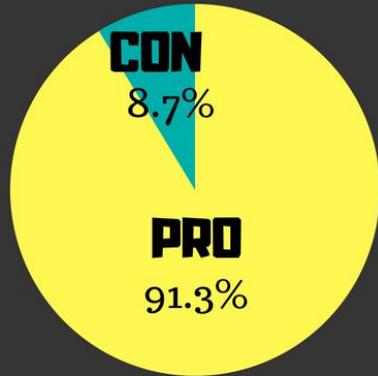
Relative change

Pro: -13.9%

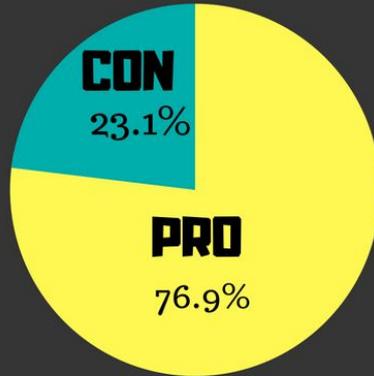
Con: 181.7%

# Case Study 2: Pro/Con at USC

Is public education broken in  
Los Angeles?



Before



After

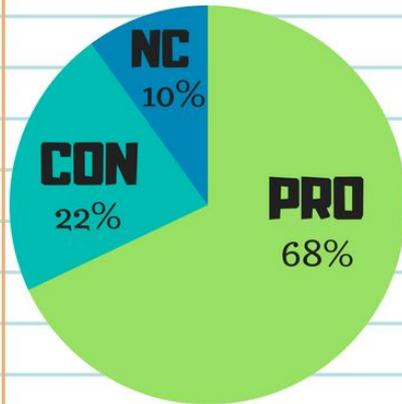
Relative change

Pro: -15.8% Con: 165.5%

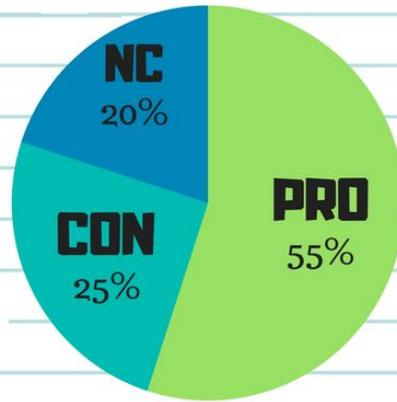


# Case Study 3: JSA Critical Thinking Seminars

**Are social networking sites  
good for society?**



**Before**



**After**

JSA: Junior State of America (a student-run leadership program for high school students)

Each summer, ProCon.org holds a 90-minute critical thinking seminar for 120 JSA students at UCLA.

We teach them how to think critically about an issue and lead them in civil discussion.

# Five Tips to Promote Civil Discourse



1. **Put your own feelings aside. It's not about you.**
2. **Step out of your echo chamber to figure out what the other person cares about.**
3. **Empathy can be a key emotion for convincing someone of a different political position.**
4. **Focus on connecting a person's values to a political issue, not changing the person.**
5. **Don't be rude.**

Advice from Robb Willer, professor of sociology at Stanford University, and Scott Wunn, executive director of the National Speech and Debate Association

**If you want to change someone's mind about a moral or political issues,  
speak to their emotion and intuition first.**

"If you ask people to believe something that violates their intuitions, they will devote their efforts to finding an escape hatch - a reason to doubt your argument of conclusion.  
They will almost always succeed."

Jonathan Haidt, social psychologist at the NYU-Stern School of Business, in  
*The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*

# Civil Discourse Toolkit

- 
- Be comfortable with incongruity
  - Be intellectually curious
  - Seek to Understand
  - Have an open mind
  - Talk in a way that heals, not wounds

- 
- Practice active listening
  - Be aware of your own assumptions
  - Slow down
  - It's not about "winning" the conversation
  - Look for common ground

A black and white photograph of a city skyline, viewed from a low angle looking up at several skyscrapers. A large, solid black circle is superimposed in the center of the image, containing a quote in white text. The background shows the architectural details of the buildings, including windows and structural elements, under a cloudy sky.

"If there is any one secret of success, it lies in the ability to get the other person's point of view and see things from that person's angle as well as from your own."

Henry Ford

# The basics:

**Partisan  
differences are  
wider today  
than in the past**

**Nature and  
nurture play a  
role in political  
ideologies**

**Political  
opinions CAN  
be changed**

**Critical  
thinking is  
essential to  
civil discourse**