

Title: “Civil Discourse in an Age of Distrust: Youth, Democracy, and the Courage to Find Middle Ground”

Opening frame:

This isn’t a talk about being “nice” or avoiding conflict. It’s about whether democracy can survive when people stop believing each other is acting in good faith.

I. Personal Entry Point: “Pick a Side or Lose” (0:30–2:00)

Story:

- Share Emiliano’s quote verbatim:

“If you ever want to hold office, you need to pick a side...”

- Briefly describe the moment of internal doubt.
- Pivot to your response: *“If I must fit into a mold, I’d rather make my own.”*

School Board example:

- LGBTQ History item
- Hours of backlash
- Remaining impartial while centering student voices
- Key insight: *Neutrality isn’t cowardice — it’s often the hardest posture.*

Transition line:

“That experience taught me something unsettling: our political culture increasingly punishes people who refuse to dehumanize the other side.”

II. The Crisis of Trust Among Young Americans (2:00–4:00)

Introduce the Harvard Youth Poll

- Brief credibility note: *you’re part of this work*

Key findings:

- Only **35%** believe people with opposing views want what’s best for the country
- **Nearly half** avoid political conversations out of fear
- **One-third** feel judged for sharing views — *especially Republicans*

Interpretation:

- This isn’t apathy — it’s **self-protection**

- Political conversation now feels **socially dangerous**
- Social media trains us to:
 - perform outrage
 - assume bad faith
 - attack before listening

Bridge sentence:

“When trust collapses, civil discourse doesn’t just become harder — it becomes risky.”

III. Democracy Feels Fragile — Especially to the Young (4:00–5:30)

Key poll insight:

- **64%** say U.S. democracy is *in trouble or has failed*
- Yet **72%** still say democracy matters

Your interpretation:

- Young people haven’t rejected democracy
- They’ve lost faith in **how it’s practiced**
- Institutions feel distant, performative, or hostile

Connect to violence & escalation:

- When discourse disappears, **conflict doesn’t**
- Political violence grows when people believe:
 - “No one hears me”
 - “The system is rigged”
 - “The other side is evil”

IV. John Courtney Murray, SJ: The Moral Framework (5:30–7:00)

Start with Murray’s core insight:

- In *We Hold These Truths*, Murray argues:
 - Democracy depends on a **shared moral commitment**
 - Not agreement — but **mutual legitimacy**

- Civil discourse is not optional — it's a **moral obligation**

Key Murray idea (plain language):

A pluralistic society only works if citizens believe disagreement is legitimate — not dangerous.

Important pivot:

- Murray wrote before social media, before algorithmic outrage
- But his insight is *more relevant now than ever*

Transition line:

“Murray reminds us that democracy doesn't collapse first at the ballot box — it collapses in conversation.”

V. From Theory to Practice: My Work & Virtutem Populo (7:00–8:30)

Your lived synthesis:

- Work with politicians from *both parties*
- Civic engagement without ideological purity tests
- Virtutem Populo's emphasis on:
 - character
 - virtue
 - leadership across difference

School Board lesson (return to it):

- Holding space ≠ endorsing every position
- Listening ≠ surrender
- Leadership sometimes means **absorbing anger so others don't have to**

Key insight:

Civil discourse isn't about winning arguments — it's about preserving the relationships democracy needs to function.

VI. The Possibility of Civil Discourse for Youth (8:30–9:30)

- Civil discourse is harder now than in Murray's time
- Social incentives reward cruelty, not courage

But also hopeful:

- Young people still value democracy
- They crave authenticity over performance
- They respond to leaders who model:
 - restraint
 - curiosity
 - moral seriousness

My core claim:

The future of democracy depends less on who young people vote for — and more on whether they believe political disagreement is survivable.

VII. Closing: The Courage to Stay (9:30–10:00)

Final message:

Civil discourse doesn't mean standing above the fray.
It means standing *in* it — without surrendering your humanity.

Tie back to opening quote:

- You don't have to pick a side to belong
- You don't have to attack to lead
- Sometimes the most radical act in American democracy is refusing to hate

End line (strong closer):

“If democracy is going to endure, it will be because a generation chose courage over contempt — and conversation over collapse.”