



## Does College Attendance Build Capacity for Constructive Political Discourse?

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During his 2021 Memorial Day remarks, President Joe Biden declared that the “soul of America is animated by the perennial battle between our worst instincts, which we’ve seen of late, and our better angels. Between ‘Me First’ and ‘We the People.’ Between greed and generosity, cruelty and kindness, captivity and freedom.” Biden concluded, “empathy is the fuel of democracy” and called on citizens to “see each other not as enemies ... even when we disagree” (Garcia, 2021).

Biden’s call for civility in public life mirrors recent essays on the diminishing capacity of Americans to debate across deep political differences peacefully and constructively (Wood, 2021). Indeed, the very notion of being “civil” is contentious, as some have argued that calls for civility ultimately suppress the sincere responses that motivate progressive social change (Newkirk, 2020). Acknowledging these ongoing tensions, colleges and universities have long claimed their role in preparing a diverse society for civic participation (AAC&U, 2012). Yet, little research has been conducted to investigate the impact of college on developing attitudes and dispositions for democratic consensus-building and problem solving. Put simply, does college attendance help build one’s capacity to engage constructively across political differences?

### Study Purpose

The purpose of this study is two-fold. First, we seek to identify constructs that represent capacity for constructive political discourse. Second, we aim to examine whether there is an association between capacity for constructive political deliberation and levels of educational attainment. Past studies have primarily focused on civic *behaviors* of college graduates rather than their beliefs and attitudes about engaging across ideological differences. For example, a wealth of studies has shown the impact of college attendance on voting behavior, volunteerism, and overall community involvement (Trostel, 2015). However, such studies have not assessed attitudinal or dispositional changes that may be associated with educational attainment. Addressing this gap in the literature, this study breaks new ground as it introduces new strategies to evaluate the impact of college on building one’s capacity for constructive political discourse.

### Literature and Conceptual Framework

Our conceptualization of constructive political discourse is anchored within Inazu’s (2015) legal scholarship on pluralism and democratic processes. Inazu proposes, “we can and must live with deep and irresolvable differences in our beliefs, values, identities, and groups. We can do so through “[a] confident pluralism that conduces to civil peace and advances democratic consensus-building” (p. 589). Among the core requirements for building confident pluralism are two interrelated factors: tolerance for differences in political viewpoints and humility in political discourse. According to Inazu, “The tolerance of a confident pluralism means a willingness to accept genuine differences, including profound moral disagreement. Tolerance also means moving beyond the platitudes of free speech to the more difficult questions posed by embodied ways of life” (p. 597). Regarding the concept of humility, Inazu explains, “The aspiration of humility requires even greater self-reflection and self-discipline than tolerance. Within a confident pluralism, humility leads both the Liberal Egalitarian and the Conservative Moralist to recognize that their own beliefs and intuitions depend upon tradition-dependent values that cannot be empirically proven or fully justified by forms of rationality external to particular traditions” (p. 599).



**Tolerance as an outcome of higher education.** As the nation becomes more politically polarized, some higher education experts have suggested that colleges and universities are critical to developing a more tolerant society. For example, in her 2017 blog entry for the American Council of Education (ACE), Dr. Lorelle Espinosa declared, “Higher education can lead the way to a more tolerant society; in fact, it may very well be the number one societal good higher education has to offer” (Espinosa, 2017). In developing this idea, Espinosa made the link between the diversity and tolerance, suggesting that diverse environments and classroom experiences could yield a more tolerant citizenry. She continues:

Of all the communities in the country, tolerance is perhaps most within the reach of colleges and universities. Not just because they are microcosms and perhaps thus a bit more manageable, but because they first and foremost provide an educational environment. The foundations of tolerance run deep in the college classroom, where students learn and confront new ideas, issues and experiences at times vastly different than their own.

Espinosa’s discussion rests on a broad array of studies showing that racially diverse campus environments and cross-racial interactions positively impact academic and intellectual development, students’ social-cognitive skills and personal development, and civic involvement (Taylor et al., 2016; Hall et al., 2011).

**Humility as an outcome of higher education.** Humility varies from the notion of tolerance in that it focuses on recognizing one’s own limitations, appreciating other perspectives, and avoiding the tendency to confirm prior beliefs (Zmigrod et al., 2019; Porter & Schumann, 2018). Scholarship focuses on how intellectual humility relates to cognitive flexibility. Among these studies, Stanovich and West (1997) found that the ability to evaluate arguments (flexible thinking) was independent of cognitive ability. Meanwhile, Zmigrod et al. (2019) found that intellectual humility was correlated with cognitive flexibility and intelligence but not educational attainment.

Overall, past literature suggests humility may be independent of educational attainment and more related to one’s innate cognitive abilities. In fact, scholars have pointed to concerns that as college students accumulate new knowledge, they become prone to cognitive inflexibility. Specifically, confirmation bias is a threat to flexibility and refers to the tendency to engage with evidence that only supports one’s own beliefs on an issue. This type of bias may be accentuated when new knowledge becomes intertwined with students’ identities and associated political ideologies (McAdams, 2013; Van Dorn, 2021). More research is needed to understand how humility (intellectual, political, ideological) is cultivated or thwarted as educational attainment increases.

## Methodology

**Data source and sample.** Our study utilizes data from the National Survey of American Civic Health housed at Southeastern University in Lakeland, FL. The National Survey was constructed in spring 2021 for the purposes of understanding the beliefs, practices, and life experiences of Americans that vary in their overall levels of civic literacy (basic knowledge of the Constitution and political processes), civic engagement (voting, political advocacy, volunteerism) and capacity for constructive political deliberation (tolerance and humility in political discourse).

The data for the current analysis relies on pilot data that was collected in April 2021. The survey was fielded by Dynata, Inc, an international marketing research firm that specializes in assembling customized survey panels. Dynata constructed panels for the National Survey based on U.S. Census statistics by age, race, ethnicity, gender, educational attainment, and employment status. To perform diagnostic tests such as item response analysis, the survey oversampled respondents with postsecondary education credentials (associate degrees, baccalaureate degrees and graduate/professional degrees (see Table 1). The total sample of the survey is 1,610.



**TABLE 1: Educational Levels of Study Sample**

| Highest level of education   | Frequency    | Percent       | Cum.   |
|------------------------------|--------------|---------------|--------|
| High school or less          | 231          | 14.35         | 14.35  |
| Some college                 | 165          | 10.25         | 24.60  |
| Associates degree            | 491          | 30.5          | 55.09  |
| Bachelor's degree            | 377          | 23.42         | 78.51  |
| Graduate/professional degree | 346          | 21.49         | 100.00 |
| <b>Total</b>                 | <b>1,610</b> | <b>100.00</b> |        |

**Measures and Scales.** This study's conceptualization of capacity for constructive political discourse is informed by Inazu's (2015) legal scholarship focusing on tolerance and humility as key ingredients facilitate democratic consensus-building. Table 2 presents the 9 survey items that we developed to appraise constructive political discourse. Our items were modified from past studies germane to our focus on humility and tolerance in political discourse (see Hoyle et al., 2016; Porter & Schumann, 2018; Teven et al., 1998).

**TABLE 2: Capacity for Constructive Political Deliberation**

Scale: (1) Strongly Disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Undecided, (4) Agree, 5) Strongly Agree

| Construct                                      | Survey Items   |
|--|--|
| <b>Humility in Political Discourse</b>         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I am willing to admit it if I don't know something related to a political issue that is important to me.</li> <li>• I am open to new information on a topic that might change my mind on a political issue.</li> <li>• I can respect other political viewpoints without losing confidence in my own.</li> <li>• There are a lot of ways to look at a political issue.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Tolerance for Different Political Views</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I enjoy having meaningful discussions with people with different political perspectives than my own.</li> <li>• Engaging with people who have different political beliefs than I do is very important to me.</li> <li>• I prefer being in groups where there are a range of political beliefs and perspectives.</li> <li>• I welcome the chance to talk with people who I think will disagree with me on politics.</li> <li>• I would prefer to work collaboratively with people who disagree with me politically rather than working independently.</li> </ul> |

**Analytical Method.** Our first research question asks: "What is the underlying structure of the construct, Capacity for Constructive Political Discourse?" To answer this question, we conducted exploratory factor analysis to understand 1) whether our 9 items represent a reliable measure of political discourse; and, 2) whether the resulting dimensions are independent from one another. We relied on the principal solution with Varimax rotation.



Our second research question asks, “Is there an association between educational attainment and capacity for constructive political discourse?” To address this question, we relied on ANOVA followed by Bonferroni tests among means. Among several methods to examine comparisons among means, the Bonferroni correction has the advantage of reducing the possibility of finding significant differences by chance, also known as type I error (Castaneda, et al., 1993). We note that our results should be interpreted as an exploratory portrayal of differences between five educational groups. ANOVA and Bonferroni are most effective when the samples are balanced, a condition that is not met in our data due to the specifications required for the pilot study. The sample of individuals with some college is the smallest (n = 165) among the five educational groups under study.

## Results and Discussion

Table 3 presents the results of the exploratory factor analysis in relationship to our first research question. Results suggest that two factors underscore constructive political discourse. Altogether, these two factors account for nearly 68% of the correlation among the items. Each of these two factors offers a unique insight on Inazu’s capacity for constructive political discourse. The first factor grouped together items accentuating humility in approaching political issues. We consequently labeled it *humility in political discourse*. Each of its 4 items displays loadings well above the 0.5 threshold recommended by Brown’s (2015). The alpha reliability associated with this factor is also high (0.812). The second factor grouped together items whose main stem reflects willingness to engage with people holding different political perspectives. Thus, we labeled it *tolerance for different political views*. All of its five items have high loadings ranging from .77 and .84. The alpha reliability of this factor is 0.892.

**TABLE 3: Results of Exploratory Factor Analysis**

| Items  | Humility in Political Discourse | Tolerance for Different Political Views |
|--|---------------------------------|---|
| I am willing to admit it if I don’t know something related to a political issue that is important to me.               | <b>0.8207</b>                   | 0.1014                                  |
| I am open to new information on a topic that might change my mind on a political issue.                                | <b>0.7946</b>                   | 0.2469                                  |
| I can respect other political viewpoints without losing confidence in my own   | <b>0.7385</b>                   | 0.2905                                  |
| There are a lot of ways to look at a political issue   | <b>0.6717</b>                   | 0.3480                                  |
| I enjoy having meaningful discussions with people with different political perspectives than my own.                   | 0.2913                          | <b>0.7796</b>                           |
| Engaging with people who have different political beliefs than I do is very important to me.                           | 0.2039                          | <b>0.8336</b>                           |
| I prefer being in groups where there are a range of political beliefs and perspectives.                                | 0.2652                          | <b>0.7926</b>                           |
| I welcome the chance to talk with people who I think will disagree with me on politics.                                | 0.1690                          | <b>0.8351</b>                           |
| I would prefer to work collaboratively with people who disagree with me politically rather than working independently. | 0.1599                          | <b>0.7860</b>                           |
| <i>Proportion of variance explained by the factor</i>  | 28.4                            | 39.1                                    |
| <i>Reliability of the scale</i>  | 0.812                           | 0.892                                   |



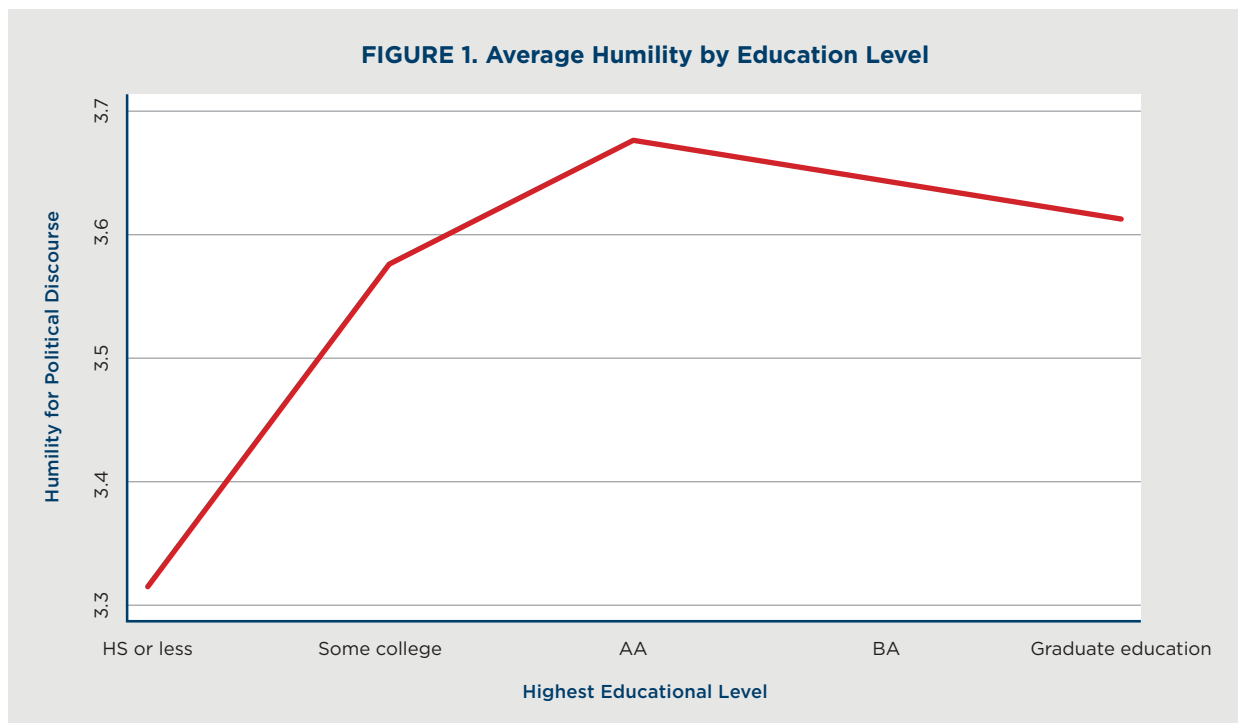
Table 4 reports the means of humility and tolerance across educational levels, their corresponding standard deviations and the overall *F*-tests. The last column reports the Bonferroni mean comparisons. ANOVA test results suggest that there is no association between tolerance for different political viewpoints and educational attainment. The *p*-value associated with the ANOVA test was greater than 0.50. Furthermore, the Bonferroni test revealed no statistically significant mean differences in tolerance across educational levels. On the other hand, there is a significant association between humility in political discourse and educational attainment. The *F*-test is statistically significant at  $p < .001$ . The Bonferroni test suggests a linear trend between education and humility beyond high school education (see last column in Table 4). On average, individuals with some college education are 10.4 percentile units higher in humility towards political discourse than those with some high school. The gap is more pronounced for individuals who have an associate degree. They are, on average, 14.0 percentile units higher than those with a high school diploma. The advantage of education levels off after the attainment of a baccalaureate degree (see Figure 1). BA recipients and individuals with a graduate degree are 12.4 and 11.5 percentile points higher, respectively, than those with a high school diploma or less.

**TABLE 4. Differences in Humility for Political Discourse and Tolerance for Different Political Views Across Educational Levels**

| Variable  | HS or less (HS)<br>n = 231 |      | Some College (SC)<br>n = 165 |      | AA (AA)<br>n = 491 |      | BA (BA)<br>n = 377 |      | Grad Educ (GE)<br>n = 346 |      | <i>F</i> -test | <i>p</i> -value | Significant Mean Comparisons (Bonferroni)  |
|-----------|----------------------------|------|------------------------------|------|--------------------|------|--------------------|------|---------------------------|------|----------------|-----------------|--|
|           | Mean                       | Std. | Mean                         | Std. | Mean               | Std. | Mean               | Std. | Mean                      | Std. |                |                 |  |
| Humility  | 3.32                       | 0.96 | 3.58                         | 0.81 | 3.68               | 0.75 | 3.64               | 0.76 | 3.61                      | 0.80 | 8.64           | 0.01            | SC > HS**, AA > HS**, BA > HS**, GE > HS** |
| Tolerance | 2.96                       | 1.05 | 2.97                         | 1.01 | 2.90               | 0.92 | 3.02               | 0.99 | 2.98                      | 0.99 | 0.77           | 0.55            |  |

Notes: \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

**FIGURE 1. Average Humility by Education Level**





## Conclusion and Significance

The results of this pilot data break new ground in two important ways. First, exploratory factor analysis suggests that there are two dimensions underscoring the broad construct of “Capacity for Constructive Political Discourse.” Inazu’s (2015) framework proved valuable to articulating tolerance and humility as the key elements within the construct. This work is significant for future researchers that could employ our scales to validate Inazu’s construct in large-scale studies. Second, our study supports the connection between educational attainment and humility. However, our study does not support Espinosa’s (2017) claim about the connection between tolerance and college attendance. Furthermore, our study stands in contrast to Zmigrod et al. (2019) who found no connection between intellectual humility and educational attainment. On the contrary, our study illustrates that educational attainment is associated with higher self-reported scores on humility in political discourse in a linear fashion. Substantial differences in humility in political discourse take place among individuals with postsecondary education relative to individuals with a high school diploma or less. While this finding offers unique insights about the potential impact of college on developing humility, we caution against inferring causality given the cross sectional nature of our research design. Yet, the value of this study is that it prompts a line of unanswered questions that are important to pose in the fields of education and civic studies. For example, “What educational experiences are associated with individuals who have high capacity for constructive political deliberation? What kind of curriculum and out-of-class experiences support the development of students that are tolerant of political differences and humble in political discourse?” We call for additional research that takes on these important questions.



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