

Carnegie Council Lesson Plan for Illiberal Narratives and the Ethics of Democracy in Global Affairs (60 minutes)

Overview

The goal of this lesson plan is to enable students to recognize illiberal narratives and to better understand how they seek to transform ethical language on democracy, sovereignty, freedom, security, and peace into tools that weaken pluralism, truth, and human dignity. It builds on prior classroom resources on disinformation while shifting the focus toward illiberal narratives as broader ethical and political challenges to Carnegie Council's four core principles: democracy, international cooperation, fidelity to truth, and humanitarianism.

Core Objectives

1. Define illiberal narratives and distinguish them from misinformation and disinformation.
2. Explain how illiberal narratives challenge democracy, international cooperation, fidelity to truth, and humanitarianism.
3. Apply Carnegie Council resources to evaluate ethical responses to illiberal politics.

Carnegie Council principles that the lesson addresses:

- **The commitment to international cooperation** is a moral proposition because it goes to the essence of ethics—recognizing what is common for all, while managing the intrinsic and inevitable differences between and among people.
- **The defense of democracy in the U.S. and globally** requires confronting autocrats who discriminate based on ethnicity, gender, and religion, and who deny basic freedoms to their citizens.
- **Fidelity** means honesty, integrity, and a good-faith effort at serving the truth. Rhetoric certainly matters, and in an age of disinformation, leaders must fight against lies, willful deception, and deliberate misrepresentation of facts.
- **The humanitarian imperative** is the duty to save lives and alleviate suffering through humane and equal treatment. As violence and cruelty abound in conflict zones around the world, mounting effective humanitarian responses remains the essential moral imperative of our time.

Core Framing

Illiberal narratives are not merely forms of bad information. They are political stories that normalize authoritarianism, exclusion of minorities and other vulnerable groups, transactional power politics, and distrust of democratic institutions. These narratives challenge liberal-democratic norms by portraying democracy, pluralism, international cooperation, and defense of human rights as weak, hypocritical, decadent, or dangerous ideas.

1. Opening Ethical Provocation (7 minutes)

Prompt: If a leader is elected democratically but uses power to weaken courts, media, minorities, and opposition parties, should other democracies treat that leader as legitimate?

- Divide students in groups of two, ask them to discuss this question with a partner.
- Call on a few students randomly to report the key points discussed.

2. Conceptual Foundations (10 minutes)

Further explain the four Carnegie Council moral principles at the beginning of this lesson plan while elaborating and providing examples. Define illiberalism, illiberal narratives, and post-liberal power. Discuss how narratives reshape moral and political life.

- **Illiberalism:** A political orientation that may accept elections but rejects or weakens liberal-democratic constraints such as minority rights, independent courts, free media, pluralism, and limits on executive power.
- **Illiberal narrative:** A strategic story that portrays liberal democracy as weak, corrupt, hypocritical, foreign-imposed, or unable to protect “the real people.”
- **Post-liberal power:** A worldview in which power, sovereignty, hierarchy, and transactional interests displace older commitments to liberal internationalism, rights, aid, and multilateral cooperation. Carnegie Council’s “[Post-Liberal American Power](#)” event is directly useful here because it asks whether recent U.S. foreign policy shifts signal a post-liberal turn, especially through cuts to soft-power institutions, foreign aid, and a notable increase in transactional diplomacy.

3. Carnegie Council Resources Mini-Case (13 minutes)

Use *Illiberal Narratives and Shifting Values* (the whole report) and “[Leadership on the Line](#)” (either the whole article or just pages 303-304, providing specific examples of gaslighting around the world) as the main readings and pair them with a short excerpt from “[Unlocking Cooperation: Open Societies](#)” (to be determined by the instructor).

Guiding questions:

- What are examples of illiberal narratives?
- What democratic values are being challenged?
- Do the narratives attack democracy directly, or do they seek to define democratic values?
- What ethical principle is most at stake?

4. Group Activity (15 minutes)

Students analyze different forms of illiberal narratives using the decoding grid.

Narrative Decoding Grid

<i>Narrative Element</i>	<i>Guiding Question</i>
Hero	Who is presented as the defender of order or truth?
Villain	Who is blamed: elites, migrants, minorities, NGOs, foreign powers, liberals?
Crisis	What problem/danger is said to require strong action?
Moral Claim	What value is being redefined: democracy, sovereignty, peace, truth, freedom, etc.?

Optional: In addition to using the Narrative Decoding Grid above, the instructor could break up the students into groups and ask each group to identify one of the following kinds of narratives in the materials analyzed:

- *Authoritarian or “Strongman” order narrative:* Democracy is chaos; only a decisive leader can restore order.
- *Civilizational threat narrative:* Outsiders, minorities, or “globalists” are destroying our nation.
- *Sovereignty under threat narrative:* International institutions are harming our nation.
- *Democracies are hypocritical narrative:* Democracies have no moral authority because they are hypocritical.
- *Gaslighting narrative:* Leaders invert reality and accuse critics of causing the very harm the leader produces.

5. Ethical Response Discussion (10 minutes)

Discuss ethical responses to illiberal narratives that preserve democratic values without becoming propaganda.

6. Closing Reflection (5 minutes)

When illiberal narratives become politically successful, which democratic value is usually weakened first: truth, pluralism, accountability, rights, or cooperation?

- How and why is that value weakened first?
- Is sacrificing values ever justified?
- How can democracies defend themselves without weakening those same values?