

Calls for Civility: An Invitation to Deliberate or a Means of Political Control?

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It might seem ironic that many are worried about impassioned politics these days, given ongoing concerns about anemic levels of engagement. If we want an engaged public, a public that really cares about policy alternatives and the conduct of government, doesn't that imply heated debates and some tough rhetoric? As you will read in this chapter, norms of politeness have often stifled concerns and curtailed movements. By "knowing one's place," the political grievances are kept in check. But on the other hand, can society function without attention to respect and civility? This chapter confronts the precarious balance between robust activism and civility.

As the introduction to this work emphasizes, headlines make it clear that average citizens have recently indulged in rude and aggressive political behavior. Yet average citizens are not alone. Over the past several years, members of the political elite, ranging from incendiary media pundits to outraged elected officials, have also engaged in behavior that many consider not only inappropriate but also damaging to democratic governance. The perception that we live during an era of heightened incivility inevitably leads to concerns that Americans no longer have enough in common to pursue a shared agenda and that our long-running democratic experiment will falter. If Americans truly have lost their respect for a legitimate opposition, the ability to admit uncertainty, and the willingness to compromise, this concern is

warranted. Current levels of political incivility may be a warning sign that Americans are no longer inclined to peacefully negotiate solutions to collective problems—in which case, the ability to sustain a democracy is indeed at risk.

Yet the very roots of most political issues are grounded in conflict. As James Madison noted in the *Federalist Papers*, if people were angels, government would be unnecessary.¹ Similarly, when citizens agree about an issue, legislation to regulate behavior or fights over the allocation of scarce resources is not needed. When people whole-heartedly agree on a topic, it rarely becomes fodder for political campaigns. Instead, widespread agreement typically constitutes a self-policed cultural standard rather than a controversial political issue. For hundreds of years, for example, no one felt the need to pass a constitutional amendment defining the sexual identity of marriage partners, because social norms meant that only heterosexual couples were marriage partners. The issue only became political as some (but not all) people's notions of appropriate marriage partners began to change—leading both supporters and opponents of gay rights to push for legislative and judicial intervention.

In short, political controversy occurs when issues are gray rather than black and white—when the “right” decision about an issue of concern is debatable, open to interpretation, or simply unclear. Yet, when people's fundamental values and priorities, as well as their personal circumstances and experiences, lead them to dramatically different policy preferences—conflict inevitably occurs. Democratic political institutions were designed to channel this conflict into campaigns, elections, and legislative debates rather than violent confrontations. Perhaps highly contested elections in the United States have been described as “bloodless revolutions” for good reason. When conflict is successfully resolved through political channels, violent civil wars and military coups are avoided. But acknowledging the underpinning role of conflict and disagreement in politics suggests that a certain amount of incivility is inevitable. People who disagree with each other about important and emotional issues are not always very nice to one another. Those who prefer to live in a democracy must come to terms with this reality and develop a higher tolerance for a bit of rude behavior once in a while.

Further, when they are upset by incivility in public settings, Americans should consider why they find such acts so offensive. Norms of appropriate behavior almost always reflect differences in power and authority. Groups of people who lack access to power are often expected to defer politely—and without question—to those who wield authority over them.² Hence, when members of these groups purposefully choose to violate these expectations in order to criticize authority figures or to make demands of their own, their behavior is often perceived as rude and sometimes even scandalous. Yet violating expectations about what is and is not acceptable may draw attention to inequalities in a supposedly democratic society. Sometimes people are “rude” in public on purpose—to cause a controversy that will attract publicity and bring attention to their cause. In some cases, then, calls for

civility are really a mechanism of political control, intended to re-establish power over a formerly subservient and compliant group. Even now, after the substantial successes of the Civil Rights and Women's Movements, minorities and women are held to a higher standard of polite behavior than white men. So, it is especially important in a democracy that we also ask just who is being called to task for being impolite, and what exactly they are trying to accomplish through their so-called incivility.

WHY BE POLITE?

Thinking through what the current examples of incivility in American politics mean requires a basic understanding of why people ever bother being polite in the first place. Communication scholarship indicates that the purpose of being polite—whether it occurs in private, interpersonal interactions, or in broader political communication—is to enable people who disagree about something to maintain an ongoing and productive relationship. These efforts are accomplished by characterizing potential opponents as likeable and admirable, while at the same time limiting the perception that they have no free will.³ When people are portrayed as completely unlikeable and without any redeeming qualities, or an effort is made to undermine their autonomy, they are apt to abandon the relationship and to seek other ways to accomplish their agendas. In interpersonal relationships, for example, people dump friends who have insulted or controlled them one too many times.

In politics, rude behavior itself can undermine political opponents' willingness to work together. Interactions characterized by challenges, name-calling, disagreements, and interruptions usually lead to entrenched positions rather than compromise. When opponents feel attacked, especially when those attacks are made in public, they respond by digging in to defend their own position rather than seeking out common ground. An especially nasty fight over one particularly divisive issue can even spill over to other topics that would otherwise have provided common ground. Rude behavior in politics can, in and of itself, result in intended or unintended gridlock.

President Barack Obama, in a May 2010 commencement speech, expressed concern that rude political tactics have had precisely this outcome on the ability to govern the United States. While acknowledging the rough and tumble of politics in a democracy, he cautioned against demonizing political opponents, worrying that efforts to vilify the other side—while always characterizing the rhetoric of ideological fringe—had crept into “the center of our discourse.”⁴ He went on to argue:

The problem is that this kind of vilification and over-the-top rhetoric closes the door to the possibility of compromise. It undermines democratic deliberation. It prevents learning—since after all, why should we listen to a “fascist” or a “socialist” or a “right wing nut” or a “left wing nut”? It makes it nearly impossible for people who have legitimate but bridgeable differences to sit down at the same table and hash things out.⁵

In short, Obama's speech underscores scholars' claims that being polite is the essential social lubricant needed to resolve interpersonal disagreements, but it is also necessary for seeking out bipartisan solutions to public policy concerns. Those like Obama, who see deliberation as an integral component of democratic decision-making, place a very high value on civility.⁶ After all, the occasions throughout history when one political party has been able to gain complete control over all three branches of government are few and far between, and they are usually short-lived. Americans seem to have internalized the framers' fear of tyranny of the majority, as our voting patterns tend to make majorities difficult to form. Consequently, solving public problems often involves working with the other side. Those who endorse deliberation believe that citizens and elected officials alike should be able to "agree to disagree" on intransigent issues, but still be able to collaborate toward common ends. Maintaining this type of relationship requires basic mutual respect—which is undermined by incivility.

WHY BE RUDE?

Yet rudeness can also be purposeful. At some point, former friends might decide that taking a principled stand is more important than maintaining a relationship. Similarly, being polite is no longer strategically important in politics when one side is rigidly committed to a policy agenda that conflicts with their opponents' political values. Rather than negotiating, politicians may focus on winning a solid majority of legislative seats in an upcoming election—in which case policy can be swept into place without the need for compromise. Or, if overwhelming electoral success is not possible, politicians may prefer to take no action at all—which simply requires blocking opponents' policy proposals rather than negotiating to find common ground. A troublesome cycle can result if elections become the means to policy ends, but policy pursuits become the means for credit claiming during an electoral campaign, with neither side willing to give an inch.

While maintaining a functional relationship so that legislators can undertake the task of shared governance is important, democratic politics also involves letting voters make choices among politicians who advocate distinct policy preferences. The electorate cannot embrace significant social and political change unless politicians not only have sharp disagreements with one another but also clearly communicate those differences to voters. On some highly salient issues, staking out a principled position might be more important to politicians than reaching a compromise, regardless of the consequences to their ability to negotiate over the long term. Perhaps this is why the most dramatic examples of nastiness in politics often occur at pivotal points in American history, when political factions have staked out dramatically different positions on important issues and have forced the electorate to pick a side. Examples of such debates include: whether to ratify the Constitution in the late 1700s, whether to abolish slavery in the 1800s,

and whether to regulate laissez-faire capitalism as well as how much to protect civil rights in the 1900s.

At first glance, it seems that over-the-top political tactics make an appearance during every historical era that precedes a realigning election. Party scholars believe these elections serve as critical junctures, where Americans make choices that fundamentally change the future direction of the country.⁷ Given the high stakes of these decisions, it is little wonder that the rhetoric of the day became incendiary and that politicians on opposing sides were willing to risk alienating one another.⁸ Incivility, in these cases, should be treated as an indicator of the intensity of the public's concerns about these pivotal issues rather than as a judgment of how well-behaved Americans were in a particular era. Yet despite the intensity of these decisions, only one—characterized by the refusal to enact further legislative compromises on the issue of slavery—devolved into a civil war. Yes, Americans' political behavior during these eras has been marked by unseemly tactics. But the fact that the United States has had a stable democracy and has largely avoided violent uprisings, civil wars, and military coups—even while periodically grappling with polarizing, intractable issues—may actually be a sign that our democratic institutions are working.

To push this claim a bit further, negativity plays an important role in educating the public even during more mundane political times. Many political scientists believe that American voters usually engage in retrospective voting—where they look back over the past several years to evaluate an incumbent politician's performance.⁹ Most Americans are also cognitive misers, which means that we do not want to spend too much time gathering and processing the information required to make this type of evaluation. Candidates who hope to unseat an incumbent must be willing to point out aggressively how their opponent has failed. Providing this type of information is useful, and some might even argue essential, if we are to effectively hold elected officials accountable for the choices they make as our public servants. Yet asking candidates to provide this critical, albeit important, information without at least occasionally slipping into incivility during the heat of a campaign seems unrealistic.¹⁰

POLITICAL LEADERS, CITIZENS, AND POWER: WHO IS ALLOWED TO BE RUDE?

Americans have always wrestled with notions of how civil our citizenry should be for a healthy democracy to exist. When the framers were crafting the U.S. Constitution, Thomas Jefferson wondered from Paris whether the new Constitution was a good thing. Part of his hesitation hinged on whether political leaders were overreacting to public distemper and uncivil (not to mention illegal) behavior at the time. In a letter to William Smith, he defended such actions with his now most-quoted line, which states: “The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and

tyrants. It is its natural manure.”¹¹ Political activists love to borrow this quote to evoke the imagery of patriot champions standing up to a powerful tyrant. Yet a closer reading of the letter reveals a conflicted Jefferson instructive to today’s tension over political incivility.

Far from promoting incivility or political violence, Jefferson suggested that the anarchy the framers feared—an armed uprising of Massachusetts farmers labeled Shay’s Rebellion—was founded on ignorance and misperception. Jefferson’s real remedy was to set these discontented citizens right on the facts—underscoring the notion that political leaders have an important role to play in educating and leading the public. Good leaders, Jefferson argued, should do more than merely respond to and play upon public passions. Clearly, many of today’s political leaders prefer to surf the wave of public frustration rather than follow Jefferson’s prescription “to set them right as to the facts, pardon and pacify them.”¹²

Rather than pacifying the public, many of today’s political leaders take advantage of the asymmetry of information and political knowledge to pump up opposition in the public. A media culture drawn to any whiff of conflict rewards such incitement. Recent rumors about President Obama illustrate these types of manipulations, as well as politicians’ potential reactions to them. Despite factual evidence to the contrary, critics of Obama continue to question both Obama’s religious affiliation and his citizenship. Ever since the 2008 presidential campaign, chain e-mails have circulated false rumors that Obama is a radical Muslim who was born overseas, attended an extreme fundamentalist religious school in Indonesia, and took his Senate oath on a Koran.¹³ How far should his Republican opponents go to reject these claims when embracing them will exacerbate core voters’ fears, increase their likelihood of turning out to vote, and enhance their willingness to block Obama’s policy initiatives? In 2008, John McCain chose to take the high ground, and he corrected an ill-informed supporter at a rally, reassured supporters that they need not be scared of an Obama presidency, and described him as “a citizen that I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues.”¹⁴ Yet false claims about Obama persist, especially the “birther” claim that his Hawaiian birth certificate is not authentic.¹⁵ While some prominent Republicans have overtly rejected this claim, others have embraced it, or at least coyly refused to use their visibility and credibility with conservative voters to dismiss it—with the media only too happy to cover any politician willing to advance controversial opinions.

Hence, rumors about Obama not only persist, but flourish. Throughout the early years of his presidency, the number of Americans who believed Barack Obama was a Muslim actually increased, especially among conservative Republicans.¹⁶ More recently, a 2011 poll indicated that about half of Republican primary voters did not believe that Obama was born in the United States.¹⁷ Given both the media’s and politicians’ inability to correct these inaccurate beliefs, is it any wonder these voters prefer gridlock to compromising with Obama?

Consequently, the danger to democracy may come, as Jefferson recognized, from failure to contain aggressive and uncivil political behavior through reasoned political leadership. On the other hand, Jefferson clearly was unfazed by such political incivility and even violence because he noted that it was so rare, but also because the spirit of resistance brought to life through incivility was important in its own right. It served as a warning to rulers that they could not trample important freedoms. Indeed, if upset citizens remained passive, Jefferson argued that lethargy would be the “fore-runner of death to the public liberty.”¹⁸ Thus, public distemper—even if driven by ignorance—is an important American political behavior because it motivates citizen participation and serves as an effective way to rein in political leaders. One wonders whether Jefferson would have reacted similarly if he had not been insulated by geographic distance from uprisings threatening the stability of his newly formed country. Further, would he have similar sympathy for contemporary citizen activists’ purposeful reliance on both violence and civil disobedience? Examples to ponder include pro-life activists’ aggressive efforts to shut down clinics that provide abortions, eco-terrorists’ willingness to damage property (like Hummers and sprawling Mc-Mansions) deemed a threat to the environment, gay rights activists’ embrace of civil disobedience to call attention to the AIDS crisis, or Occupy Wall Street protesters’ camping in public parks to publicize their concern about income inequality. How do contemporary citizens’ tactics and issues differ from those undertaken by bands of farmers upset over taxation and debt relief in the 1700s?

In any case, events in his own historical era led Jefferson to worry that the new Constitution might be an overreaction and might go too far in protecting government officials against citizens’ resistance. Keeping Jefferson’s concerns in mind, those attempting to assess contemporary political tactics should recognize that calls for civility have always been used to suppress political dissent. Good manners are a potent form of social control, as differences in power affect the level of politeness a speaker is expected to use—with those lacking authority expected to be more polite to their superiors.¹⁹ Not surprisingly, democratic theorists have cautioned against overly polite manners, pointing out that they may suppress the intensity of average people’s preferences and help to sustain the status quo. John Stewart Mill in particular questioned the role of aristocratic manners in a democracy, arguing that the “despotism of custom” encouraged individuals to moderate their demands and to “desire nothing strongly.” In short, commoners were socialized to accept their social station in life without complaint, and many could not fathom questioning their “betters.” The few who did were deemed rude and inappropriate—not only by the lords and ladies who were accustomed to such deference, but also by their own peers. In response, Mill advocated rejecting these social niceties, in favor of criticism and conflict playing an essential role in a lively marketplace of ideas.²⁰

Yet overcoming deeply engrained notions of appropriate behavior is harder than Mill’s commentary might suggest. Even when people develop

group consciousness and recognize that they are being oppressed by society's expectations, they typically must convince others both within and beyond their immediate demographic group to agree. One way of doing this is to purposefully violate society's expectations. But those who do so will be perceived as rude, offensive, or scandalous, and they will be penalized in one way or another by those who think that their behavior is inappropriate. In the first wave of the Women's Movement, for example, women began wearing bloomers in an effort to demonstrate that even the clothing they were expected to wear was physically restraining—and prevented them from fully participating in public life outside the home. Their efforts resulted in a major social battle over the propriety of such attire. Similarly, suffragist Susan B. Anthony was arrested and fined for casting a ballot in a national election. The judge was so offended by her act that he refused to allow her to take the witness stand in her own defense, and he declared her guilty without even giving the jury time to deliberate. More recent examples can be found in the Civil Rights Movement, where African Americans were physically attacked for using White-only public facilities, or for having the gall to attempt to register to vote.

Yet all of these examples—once considered not only rude but offensive—eventually became commonplace and acceptable behavior. Americans fought a revolution, in part, to free ourselves from a monarchy that bestowed privileges based on birthright rather than individual merit. Now, no one bats an eye when women wear pants and vote in elections, and few people look back fondly on Jim Crow restrictions in the American South.

Recognizing the way current calls for civility may be linked to contemporary social hierarchies, however, is much more difficult than identifying examples from the past. While women and minorities are no longer legally prevented from voting and participating in politics, norms of appropriate behavior still hold both to different standards than white men. And these expectations may help to explain why both are still less likely than white men to participate in political acts that require discussion and persuasion.²¹ Recall, for example, how pundits over the past four years have both praised and criticized Barack Obama for his restrained, analytical, and (some claim) aloof demeanor. Yet this style of political communication was surely more effective for Obama than fiery political rhetoric would have been—because African-American men are judged differently—if not more harshly—when they are openly defiant and angry in public settings.

Similarly, research shows that women are still socialized to be more polite than men. Examples include the fact that women are expected to smile and cooperate more readily than men, to facilitate others' agendas rather than to promote their own, and to refrain from interrupting others or from using intense adjectives and profane language. Of course, not all women modify their behavior to meet these expectations, but those who fail to conform are described as less likeable and, as a result, are less capable of influencing others' decisions.²² Hence women's political engagement is limited by the way social norms of politeness restrict their expression of strong preferences.

Echoing John Stuart Mill's concerns that British commoners could not fully recognize their own self-interests, some feminist scholars believe that many women internalize society's expectation that they be overly polite. They fear that by embracing this role, women may be prevented from even identifying, let alone voicing, the intensity of their true political concerns.²³ If this is so, then women are functionally denied access to an entire spectrum of political behavior that remains open to men.

This discussion of minorities and women raises one final concern about the potential impact of heightened incivility in the public sphere. If angry voters are the driving force behind elected officials' incivility, they might expect politicians to give angry speeches, to call one another names, or to engage in other over-the-top rude behavior. If these types of candidates are the ones embraced by the electorate, it may become even more difficult than it already is to recruit minority and female candidates to run for elected office.²⁴ Women and minorities often intuitively know that they are sanctioned for public displays of aggression. Hence they may find it hard to envision themselves as highly visible and inevitably aggressive public figures. The possibility that increasingly rude politics may squelch their political ambitions should at least be considered.

One approach to leveling this linguistic playing field would be to upgrade our expectations for politeness and hold everyone to the same high standards that currently constrain women and minorities. Doing so, however, would run the risk of undercutting political dissent and bolstering support for an otherwise unsatisfactory status quo. Another approach would be to relax our overall expectations for civility, allowing women and minorities the same freedom to aggressively pursue political agendas as white men. Yet if norms of civility are relaxed too much, Americans risk damaging their ability to undertake the most fundamental task of shared governance—deliberation.

BALANCING DELIBERATION AND DISSENT

Ironically, American democracy relies on two deeply rooted traditions to stimulate public debate and resolve public problems. The first and most celebrated tradition is civility, which enables us to work through disagreement and to find consensus. The consensual New England Town Meeting exemplifies the American romance with this tradition. Another, however, is rude disruption to force new issues onto the political agenda or to gain a seat at the table. Overreliance on civility runs the risk of suppressing dissent, especially by those with limited access to power and resources. The classic movie *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* provides an example of this outcome. Overreliance on disruption, however, runs the risk of shutting down deliberation—and thus problem solving—altogether. Given the choice between these two outcomes, one can see why rude behavior is often seen as the greater threat, and why calls for political civility have such strong appeal. If we are to err, some might say, let it be on the side of civility and stability. After all, isn't an imperfect democracy better than none at all?

Overarching calls for civility—bemoaning why we can't all just get along—may simply be naïve. Americans tend to mistakenly believe that most other people share our basic values, priorities, and lifestyles. As a result we underestimate the level of disagreement that exists in society, and we think that little negotiation or compromise should be required before making binding, collective decisions. Yet some scholars contend that we disagree with one another often, and maybe even more often than we realize.²⁵ Our political process provides a way to manage the conflicts that occur when our political preferences inevitably clash. The natural by-products of conflict resolution will be a certain amount of criticism, negativity, and perhaps even rudeness. Moreover, calls for a return to civility can, at their worst, be undemocratic. A preference for civility can disguise a vested interest in maintaining the status quo—even (or especially?) if the status quo denies some people equal access to the political process.

So how can we tell the difference? Unfortunately, Americans have not developed a precise way to measure the optimal level of civility in a democratic society. Citizens are left to develop their own criteria, assess the current political climate, and make this judgment for themselves. Some key questions remain as one considers the proper relationship between civility and democratic citizenship:

- Should different types of political actors be held to unique standards of civility? Is it more important, for example, that average citizens be civil to one another when they discuss political issues? Or should public officials' behavior be subject to more scrutiny? Among public officials, should there be uniform expectations for executives, legislators, judges, and bureaucrats? Or do the different functions that they fulfill require some to be more polite than others? What about lobbyists, media pundits, or protesters?
- Are reactions to rude behavior based on preconceived notions of appropriate behavior that only apply to certain demographic groups? Do we allow men, women, and minorities the same linguistic freedom to influence political issues?
- Should Americans have varying expectations for civility in different types of political settings? Is a slip into rude behavior on the floor of the legislature or during a presidential address more or less troubling than mudslinging during a campaign for office?
- What is the nature of the issue being debated? Is taking a principled stand on this issue worth turning potential collaborators into opponents? Would it be better to be polite and allow potential opponents to save face—so that a compromise can be negotiated not only on this particular issue, but in the future as well? Or does the issue really require polarizing the electorate and forcing people to pick a side?
- What is the underlying reason why a particular behavior or comment is seen as rude? Is it because the behavior is likely to undermine Americans' ability to deliberate and resolve issues of public concern? Is

it because Americans are thin skinned and cannot tolerate any hint of disagreement or criticism? Or is it because those engaging in the behavior are no longer willing to be deferential and are instead attempting to exercise their full political rights in a democracy?

Contemplating and answering these types of questions will produce the criteria needed to identify the appropriate level of civility in politics—criteria that should be applied as objectively as possible not only to others' actions but also to our own political contributions. Civility matters—but determining why and how requires balancing a democratic society's need for deliberation with a tolerance for disruption.

Endnotes

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