

Understanding the “Civility Crisis”

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Essay

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Hollering “You lie!” in the middle of President Obama’s speech to Congress last September, Joe Wilson of South Carolina clearly broke the bounds of civil political behavior. Although Wilson quickly apologized, his outburst became a prime example of what many see as the “civility crisis” that confronts American democracy. A *New York Times* [editorial](#) lamented “So much for civility” while the *Chicago Tribune* asked “Whatever happened to that quaint relic called civility?” Indeed, calls for greater civility are now a regular feature in discussions about American politics. President Obama addressed the question directly during his commencement speech at Notre Dame in May. Outside the auditorium at which he spoke, the president passed a crowd of protestors who sported guns and placards of Obama in painted joker face. Inside Obama mused that we must find a way to make our political debate less angry and more civil. Public commentators from the political left, right, and center—from Steven Carter to Dinesh D’Souza to Gertrude Himmelfarb and Deborah Tannen—have recently written books that warn of the consequences for American democracy of declining civility. Civility is even on Facebook, where the Civility Project, started by Professor P.M. Forni at Johns Hopkins University, maintains a website.

Is there a civility crisis in the United States? A recent survey by Rasmussen Reports found that an overwhelming majority of Americans (75 percent) think so, and anecdotal evidence of the coarsening of our public debate abounds. From the public exploitation of lurid details in the Monica Lewinsky scandal, to the burning of effigies of George Bush by protesters of the invasion of Iraq, to outbursts at town-hall meetings over healthcare reform, to the regular rants of radio and cable television talk show hosts, it appears that political debate in the United States has become angry, bitter, and... well... uncivil! Consider the fact that according to transcripts of Glenn Beck’s show on Fox News, over an 18-month period President Obama and Democrats were compared to Hitler or Nazis nearly 350 times. Wilson’s outburst, in response to the president’s assertion that health care reform legislation would not cover illegal immigrants was not only rude but also wrong. The reform plan that passed Congress did nothing to change benefits for illegal immigrants. But facts matter little in the shouting matches that now pass for political debate.

Yet if political debate today is polarized and often lacks common courtesy, it is not clear whether this is part of a general decline in civility or how it will impact American democracy. Indeed this is not the first time that American politics has been marked by raucous and unruly behavior. During the election campaign of 1800 the political supporters of both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson printed ugly lies and half-truths about their opponents in party controlled newspapers. In the years before the Civil War it was not uncommon for political arguments to devolve into fist-fights or even deadly duels. In 1865 Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts was brutally attacked on the Senate floor by a cane-wielding Preston Brooks of South Carolina for giving a speech against the fugitive slave act. The women suffragettes in the early part of the twentieth century were accused of offending the manners of civilized

society, as were African Americans who sought to change the political structures of the South during the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, the predecessor of today's bombastic radio talk shows was Father Charles Coughlin, who used radio appearances in the 1930s to stoke anti-Semitism and inveigh against President Franklin Roosevelt as a socialist tyrant.

Uncivil political behavior is also popular and profitable. There is a reason why rude and loutish political talk shows dominate the airwaves—they attract huge audience ratings and advertising dollars. Rush Limbaugh's show is the highest rated program on radio, attracting 15 million listeners a week. Joe Wilson, after publicly apologizing for his behavior, instantly became a hero to many Americans; within days of his misdeed more than a million dollars poured into his re-election campaign, "You lie!" T-shirts and bumper-stickers appeared, and Wilson became a sought-after speaker at conservative political rallies. Far from suffering for his display of incivility, Joe Wilson capitalized on it.

But is rude behavior good for democracy? The quality of democratic decision-making depends on the quality of public debate, and there may be good reasons to argue for a more civil tone in our public discourse today. Before jumping on the civility bandwagon, however, we might want to examine more carefully the ways in which civility and democracy are related. Research in the social sciences indicates that this relationship is more complicated, and frankly more interesting, than much of the current discussion suggests. Consider just three aspects of this relationship. First, in a fascinating book entitled *Rudeness and Civility*, cultural historian John Kasson points out that what passes for "civil" or "polite" behavior is neither fixed nor universal. The idea itself is merely a set of culturally and historically defined practices. Thus, what passes for polite conduct in one culture or time period may not be so in a different place or time. A common gesture, such as flipping one's fingers under the chin for example, would be considered highly offensive in a conversation with an Italian but may go entirely unnoticed in conversations elsewhere. Political behavior is especially sensitive to specific institutionalized norms and practices. Interrupting the president's speech by yelling an insult clearly violated the norms of decorum and behavior in the United States Congress, but a similar outburst would probably raise few eyebrows during question time in the British Parliament where booing and hissing of opposition speakers, including the prime minister, is common practice—Order! Order!

Questions about acceptable political behavior are also tied in important ways to deeper questions of political power and democratic equality. Those who hold power are able to press their claims and protect their interests within the accepted channels of political conduct, but those without power may often be excluded from making claims in a "civil" way. The political scientist Virginia Sapiro, for example, has noted that for most of American history women violated the norms of civility by simply engaging in public political debate. Women were not supposed to speak openly on such matters and they were literally banned from most spaces where politics took place. For instance, when the reformer Fanny Wright became the first woman to speak at Tammany Hall in 1836, she was shouted down by men who saw her very presence there as improper. Other groups seeking inclusion in American democracy—African Americans, labor organizers, Native Americans, and gay Americans, among others—have historically faced similar dilemmas; either they could wait patiently for others to press their rights within the existing frameworks of "civil behavior" or they could seek democratic reform themselves by confronting and challenging those frameworks. So while some forms of civil behavior may be essential to democratic deliberation, acts of "incivility" and contestation may also be an important part of broadening democracy and empowering excluded groups.

Finally, styles of political discourse are never far removed from the actual cleavages and substantive issues that divide the public. During historical periods when there exists a general consensus about the scope and purposes of government (immediately following WWII in the United States, for example), political debate tends to focus on narrow questions of policy and government efficiency, on how best to achieve agreed upon ends. Political debate can be conducted in civil and courteous ways during such periods precisely because political opponents do not question each other's fundamental values or motives. However, during periods of deeper political disagreement (such as prior to the Civil War in the 19th century, the New Deal in the 1930s, or the so-called counter-culture era of the late-1960s), political discourse will necessarily move beyond technical questions of policy and efficiency to focus on more fundamental values such as the meaning of freedom or equality, raising deep questions about political identity and citizenship or what it means to be an "American." These are critical periods for democratic self-governance, but they

will also understandably provoke a more emotional, even violent style of political discourse.

These and other factors are undoubtedly shaping today's politics and the attendant concern that there is a civility deficit. A more respectful and reasoned public discourse undoubtedly would enhance democratic decision-making and make ordinary citizens less cynical about government and those who aspire to public service. The country, however, is undergoing important economic, social, and demographic changes that raise fundamental questions about American values and our national identity. Previously excluded groups, such as new immigrants and gay Americans, are pressing rights claims. New media—the Internet, YouTube, the blogosphere, 24-hour cable news networks, social media such as Facebook and Twitter—has also radically changed the way Americans communicate with each other, altering the norms of discourse. A better appreciation of these factors may help us to understand what lies behind the seeming anger and bitterness in some of today's political discourse. Placing today's raucous political behavior into a broader historical context may also help us realize that it is neither unique nor part of a general decline in manners and civility, but is part of a more cyclical process in democratic governance.

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“Civility does not mean the mere outward gentleness of speech cultivated for the occasion, but an inborn gentleness and desire to do the opponent good. Mahatma Gandhi. INTRODUCTION. Weber Shandwick and Powell Tate, in partnership with KRC Research, have conducted Civility in America: A Nationwide Survey annually since 2010. In this latest installment, we find Americans continuing to report a severe civility deficit in our nation, one that shows no signs of letting up. The belief that the U.S. has a major civility problem has even reached a record high (69%). Three-quarters of Americans believe Understanding 9/11. Spirituality & Religion Sports Videos Television Videogame Videos Vlogs Youth Media. Featured. audio All audio latest This Just In Grateful Dead Netlabels Old Time Radio 78 RPMs and Cylinder Recordings. Live Music Archive. Top. Audio Books & Poetry Community Audio Computers, Technology and Science Music, Arts & Culture News & Public Affairs Non-English Audio Spirituality & Religion. “A Crisis of Civility? is vital to our national dialogue on the exigency of civility in our society. In these pages, a network of prominent scholars make a compelling case for civility as the one essential mechanism for distilling the vast diversity of ideologies and opinions in America, so that we can arrive at solutions to our most pressing challenges. Today’s forces of division and proliferation of sensationalism have combined as virulent enemies of civility. “How should the fractious state of politics be understood? And what can be done about it? With contributions from an impressive array of scholars, A Crisis in Civility? surveys public perceptions of civility, details contemporary examples of incivility, and mines the past for practical solutions.