

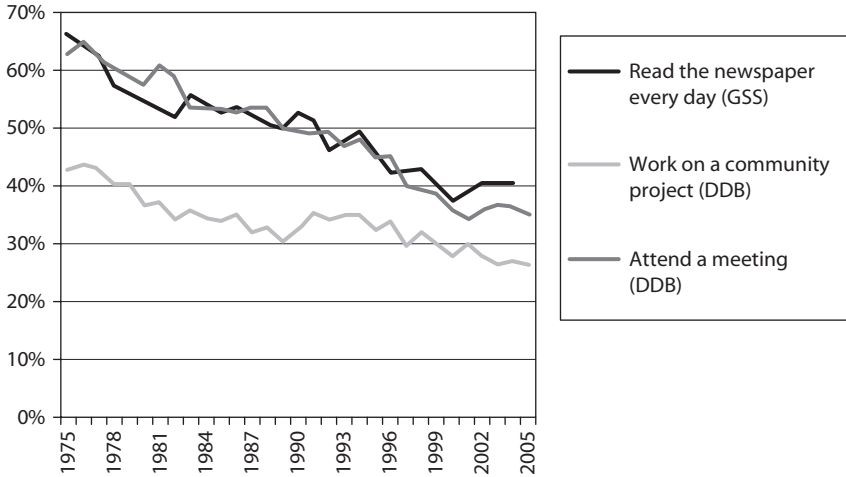
Incivility can obstruct constructive public discourse and problem solving. Restoring civility is a task for higher education, but it may require tradeoffs with other democratic values.

Teaching and Learning Civility

Peter Levine

Expressing concern over rampant incivility in public life is nothing new, but it seems to have exploded over the past ten to fifteen years. Pointing to a decline in national civility in 1996, Senator Sam Nunn and William J. Bennett, the former education secretary and drug czar, launched the National Commission on Civic Renewal. In his 1997 inaugural address, President Clinton called for “the politics of reconciliation.” Law professor Stephen Carter’s 1998 book *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy* became a best seller. Researchers track “the culture wars,” divisions and disagreements among Americans (or at least their elected officials) based on political affiliation, class, race, religious faiths, and special interests. Television and radio talk hosts feed ratings by fueling fear and tension. In recent months, Tea Party protesters depicted as angry and uncivil have captured the media’s fascinated attention. In May 2010, President Barack Obama told graduates at the University of Michigan, “The . . . way to keep our democracy healthy is to maintain a basic level of civility in our public debate.”

According to a 2010 Allegheny College national survey by Daniel Shea, 95 percent of Americans believe that civility is important in politics. Most perceive that civility has declined, especially if they listen to the radio and/or pay close attention to politics, and 50 percent believe that there has been a decline in the tone of politics since Barack Obama was elected. Incivility is also perceived as a major problem outside of politics. In a 2001 national survey conducted by Public Agenda (New York), 79 percent of respondents said that “a lack of respect and courtesy is a serious problem for our society and we should try to address it.” In the same poll, 88 percent said that they “often” or “sometimes” come across people who are rude and disrespectful; half as many said that they sometimes behaved that way (Farkas and Johnson, 2001). Political civility refers more specifically to norms of behavior among those who live in a democratic society. Political theorist John Rawls argues

Figure 1.1. Participation in Civic Activities.

GSS = General Social Survey; DDB = DDB Needham Life Style Survey. Analysis by The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement

that political legitimacy must be based on public reason. “The ideal of citizenship imposes a moral, not a legal duty—the duty of civility—to be able to explain to one another . . . the principles and policies they advocate and vote for” (Rawls, 1993, p. 217). It means compromising, curtailing one’s interests for the greater good. Defined this way, civility is a civic virtue. It is not the only civic virtue, and it can conflict with other virtues. It can also be defined in different ways by people of equally good will.

Civility itself is difficult to measure, but we know something about the frequency of public reason. Figure 1.1 shows the declining rates of attending meetings, reading newspapers, and participating in community projects in America.

As Robert Putnam (2000) has argued in his much discussed book, *Bowling Alone*, there has been a marked decline in almost every area of civic life, from political activism/engagement to the many forms of membership and local participation, such as parent–teacher organizations and neighborhood associations, activities that constitute the core of civil society. A major reason to be concerned about the state of such associations is the “normative concept of the deliberative public sphere understood as a core principle of civil society” (Cohen, 1999, p. 64). That is, statistics about the decline in associational life are troubling because we have a core value commitment to deliberation, and deliberation occurs primarily in associations.

The Opening Notes of this volume describe the promising new forms of democracy characterized by a high level of citizen (particularly youth) participation in productive, civil discourse. Recent deliberative experiments are not common or large enough to have reversed the national decline in civic

engagement, but they do represent a base of concerned and active citizens who have struggled to enhance civility. In 2007, the National Conference on Citizenship asked a national sample of Americans whether “within the last year,” they had “been involved in a meeting (either face-to-face or online) to determine ideas and solutions for problems” in their communities and whether that discussion included people who held views different from the respondent’s own. The combination of these two questions yielded a group—18 percent of the whole sample, or more than 39 million Americans—who were involved in practical discussions with people of diverse views (National Conference on Citizenship, 2007).

Value Tensions Related to Civility

Civility is not a self-evident or transcendent good. It can promote fair, responsible, participatory democracy, but it can also trade off against other democratic values. Civility is welcomed by, and likely to benefit, some citizens more than others, and is likely to help in some situations more than others.

We know that various groups of Americans express different levels of concern for civility. According to Shea, women are more likely than men to define current politics as uncivil and are more likely to favor compromise. Currently, liberals are more likely to want elected officials to compromise, and conservatives are more likely to want them to “stand firm” (Shea, 2010). The ethical question is how to think about civility if promoting it would have asymmetrical effects. Scholars have argued that citizens who are reasonably well off and satisfied with the status quo are likely to favor civility (and to back out of politics or community affairs when things become uncivil). In contrast, advocates for disadvantaged populations explicitly say that deliberation is a waste of their limited resources (Levine and Nierras, 2007). They note that just because people are invited to talk as equals, the discussion will not necessarily be fair. Participants who have more education, social status, and allies may wield disproportionate power (Sanders, 1997). Individuals and groups who are satisfied with the status quo have an advantage over those who want change because they can use the discussion to delay decisions. (They can “filibuster.”) Sometimes, the way the topic is defined can benefit one side over the other. If we meet to discuss the deficit, the conversation will favor fiscal conservatives, whereas if our topic is poverty, liberals will have an edge. When grievances are especially serious, it may be inappropriate to call for discussion among the opposing parties. For instance, the great African American anti-slavery campaigner Frederick Douglass simply refused to answer arguments in favor of slavery, understandably viewing the whole discussion as offensive (Sanders, 1997, p. 361). In the course of his nuanced and balanced study of civility as both an asset and a challenge to the Civil Rights Movement, William Chafe writes, “From a black point of view, of course, the ground rules, or ‘civilities,’ were often just a way of delaying action” (Chafe, 1981, p. 99).

Iris Marion Young lists some of the tactics that can be more effective than deliberation: “picketing, leafleting, guerilla theater, large and loud street demonstrations, sit-ins, and other forms of direct action, such as boycotts.” As she notes, activists may even choose to “make noises outside when deliberation is supposedly taking place on the inside. Sometimes activists invade the houses of deliberation and disrupt their business by unfurling banners, throwing stink bombs, or running and shouting through the aisles” (Young, 2003). Here the ethical question is whether (and perhaps when) civility works for some and against others.

Talking with people who hold different views can cause us to temper or censor our sincere views to avoid confrontation, and such self-editing reduces our passion and our motivation to act. Diana Mutz has found that people are more likely to engage in politics (e.g., by voting) if they belong to politically homogeneous networks. When they interact with people who disagree, the pressure to be polite may cause them to suppress their own strong views, which depresses engagement (Mutz, 2006). Social movements that oppose injustice seem most likely to arise when there is regular and intense communication among people who share the same opinions (McAdam, McCarthy, Mayer, and Zald, 1996, p. 9). On a larger scale, election years marked by sharp political disagreements (e.g., 1968, 2004, 2008) often see high turnout. These findings suggest that the virtue and benefits of civility may trade off against the advantages of active social participation.

People of different genders, generations, race, ethnicity, national origin, and geography might disagree on what is and is not civil behavior and communication. Formality, directness, how freely people express their emotions, tone, volume, and inflection—these have cultural dimensions. Although the United States is one of the most diverse nations in the world, Americans are not in the habit of exploring their cultural communication styles before engaging in public deliberation and collaborative problem solving.

A final problem is that incivility can be good for business (or generally, for major institutions) even though it alienates citizens from public life. Diana Mutz and Byron Reeves exposed people to videotaped debates (conducted by actors) that were identical in substance—point by point—but that differed in civility. Viewers of the uncivil debates expressed considerably less trust in politicians and government after watching. Physiological instruments showed that they were emotionally aroused by what they saw. Viewers of the civil debate were less aroused and more positive toward the political system. Because the uncivil exchanges were more arousing, they make for better ratings (Mutz and Reeves, 2005). In contrast, the level of civility can be very high in facilitated deliberations that involve randomly selected, diverse participants. However, these events draw little public attention.

The Role of Scholarship and Teaching

The preceding section suggests that a society faces difficult strategic, ethical, and practical choices if it is concerned with the quality of public discourse and problem solving. Civility is one value that matters, but it is not the only value. It is important to understand the tradeoffs and tensions. One way for higher education to contribute is to provide research relevant to those strategic, ethical, and practical questions.

Some important research should come from the social sciences. For instance, we need more studies of the processes and conditions that promote civility, and the effects of civility on other aspects of democratic participation.

The humanities can also nourish deliberative democracy. They are the disciplines that most directly address contested questions of values, the same questions that animate public debates and divide citizens and their elected representatives. As scholarly disciplines, the humanities address these questions with a degree of detachment, reflection, open-mindedness, and collegiality—hallmarks of civility. The humanities first arose as the *studia humanitatis*, a curriculum designed for public life, and to prepare students for constructive participation in rhetoric and debate, not for contemplative lives (Levine, 1995, pp. 4–10; Levine, 1998, pp. 179–204; Levine, 2009, pp. 197–206). Yet the humanities have become relatively detached from public debates in recent decades and have not notably improved the quality of public dialogue. In a positivistic, science-oriented culture, questions of value are often understood as strictly empirical matters that ought to be resolved with data. Therefore, the scholars to whom citizens and policymakers turn for guidance are natural or social scientists, not humanists. However, empirical matters are usually inseparable from values questions, and failing to address values leaves them unexamined.

The humanities need a different relationship to public life before they can help to define and solve problems with our public discourse. Nevertheless, their potential is great and their preservation is essential for educating democratic citizens (e.g., Nussbaum, 2010).

Democratic education is most effective when students are asked to discuss controversial issues and conflicting values. Through an examination of civility, the humanities and social sciences offer students an opportunity for self-reflection and for living what Socrates called “the examined life.” Students can learn to think critically about their habits, choices, and beliefs. They can practice reasoning together and navigating the inevitable conflicts over values that emerge in democratic life. They can develop understanding and empathy for those whose lives are differently or less privileged.

Civility and Local Engagement

It is important to understand institutions of higher education as more than gatherings of professors and students. They are also powerful organizations

with political and financial assets, distributed fairly evenly across our nation. The business of colleges and universities is the production and dissemination of knowledge both for and with citizens as well as the promotion of dialogue and debate. They provide an impressive infrastructure for those purposes.

Part of their responsibility is to provide literal spaces in which citizens can meet and talk. Campuses are often well positioned to host issue forums and to convene diverse community partners, with members of the campus community, for community problem solving. In doing so, they can serve as neutral facilitators who establish the tone for collaborative problem solving. It is in the context of setting that tone, in establishing guidelines for how people will engage with each other, that matters of civility, including intercultural perspectives and values tradeoffs, can become central to a public discussion. Campuses can organize ongoing community dialogues on the state of public discourse locally and nationally. They can host dialogues using already existing discussion guides, such as New England Center for Civic Life's guide (2008), *Responding to Hurtful Graffiti & Verbal Slurs: What Should We Do?* or Everyday Democracy's *Facing Racism in a Diverse Nation* (2008), both available through Everyday Democracy's Issue Guide Exchange.

Another appropriate role for local universities is to provide adult civic education. They can offer courses in the humanities and social sciences in which members of the community can engage in the same inquiries identified above. They can offer courses in technology, particularly social networking, blogs, and online political engagement, in which participants discuss how anonymity affects the quality of online engagement. They can study Constitutional principles, and balancing free speech and civility.

Colleges and universities can also provide professional development opportunities to teachers, particularly those who are interested in engaging their own students in discussions of the state of public discourse and whether civility for some is good for all. They can help teachers create their own political, but not partisan, spaces for democratic deliberation and learning.

The point of this chapter is *not* to denounce incivility or make the case for some universal code of behavior and speech. I am, however, advocating for more dialogue on the state of public discourse and on what civility is, who gets to define it, and whether it matters. I do believe that students should graduate with an understanding of what it means to challenge ideas strenuously without attacking people as individuals or as a member of a group. Learning and dialogue about civility is a learning tool, a means to an end, the end being more reasoned public engagement, a more inclusive and respectful public square, and a stronger democracy.

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