SYMPOSIUM

Political Civility

Introduction to Political Civility

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The articles in this symposium are peppered with numerous recent incidents of political incivility ranging from physical scuffles at town hall meetings to the now-infamous accusation shouted at president Barack Obama during a nationally televised address before a joint session of Congress. Name calling and ad hominem attacks that were once associated with talk radio and cable television pundits have made their way into the halls of governing institutions, which no longer serve as sacred spaces one-step removed from bare-knuckled politics. Indeed, divisive views have even made inroads into "safe" topics for discussion—the weather and sports. Forget the intensity of debate over climate change. Democrats were actually 10% more likely to claim that the 2012 winter season was warmer than were their Republicans counterparts (Newport 2012). Sports no longer offers a neutral conversation starter, as 27% of Republicans view Tim Tebow as their favorite quarterback compared to only 9% of Democrats (Public Policy Polling 2011). Vitriol, combined with legislative gridlock and the uproar of protestors—not only in Washington, DC, but also in state capitals and prominent cities across the country—has shifted our discipline's attention to the role of political civility in sustaining a healthy democracy.

POLITICAL SCIENCE'S TRADITIONAL FOCUS ON CONFLICT

Pundits and political scientists alike fear that the American political system may have reached a tipping point. In his contribution to this symposium, L. Sandy Maisel concurs with Peggy Noonan, former Reagan speech writer (2010), noting that "surely something is different today." Yet as a discipline, we grapple with how to empirically assess the veracity of these claims. How do we know whether levels of political incivility are truly worse than in previous eras throughout American history? How do we assess the potential impact of this phenomenon on our ability to self-govern, even if such claims are accurate? This uncertainty stems from the historical focus of our scholarship. Conflict, rather than compromise, lies at the heart of the most prominent political science theories. We would not have much to study if society did not continually struggle over power and division. As James Madison argued in *Federalist 51*, "if men were angels, no government would be necessary." Humans, unlike Madison's angels, seem predisposed to form factions and seek out conflict in pursuit of our political agendas.

Political scientists readily acknowledge that negativity, which is usually accompanied by a fair share of incivility, is essential in a democracy (Geer 2006). Protest politics and social movements rely on violations of expected behavior, both to call norms of appropriate behavior into question and to widen the scope of political debate (Schattschneider 1960). Negativity is also implicit in the model of responsible party government and elections (APSA Report 1950; Epstein 1986; Ranney 1962; Schattschneider 1942) and in theories of realigning elections (Burnham 1970; Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1976; Key 1955; Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1976). The electorate cannot hold elected officials accountable or realign around a critical issue unless politicians not only have sharp disagreements, but also clearly communicate those differences to voters.

We also know that negativity plays a role in educating the public even during more mundane political eras (Geer 2006). Furthermore, our focus on conflict reveals that exposure to disagreement improves the ability to understand the other side of a political issue. Disagreement in interpersonal networks, for example, increases not only familiarity with political opponents' rationales, but the levels of political tolerance for those same opponents (Huckfeldt, Morehouse Mendez, and Osborn 2004; Mutz 2006).

Many of these beneficial by-products for democracy that we associate with conflict cannot occur unless people who disagree are willing to listen to one another, which can only be accomplished when disagreement is combined with civility (Mutz 2006). Hence, civility is especially valued by those who see deliberation as the cornerstone of successful democracy (Guttman and Thompson 2004; Macedo 1999; Mansbridge 1980).

THE UNDERSTUDIED ROLE OF POLITICAL CIVILITY

What precisely "counts" as civil or uncivil behavior? How do we differentiate between useful information relayed in a negative tone and the type of rudeness capable of undermining democracy altogether? As a discipline, we are predisposed against explaining how functional relationships within our governing institutions and among members of the electorate are sustained despite the inherent adversarial nature of

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American politics. Thus, civility has been an underdeveloped concept in political science, and its role in resolving political conflict has been undertheorized. The contributions to this symposium remedy this oversight, and we hope these serve as the building blocks for future endeavors. Collectively, these articles highlight the important working parts that play a role in contemporary political incivility and provide a framework for developing greater understanding of this phenomenon's causes and consequences.

CONTRIBUTORS' INSIGHTS INTO THE CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF POLITICAL INCIVILITY

Measuring the level of incivility present in society, however, is especially difficult because the specific behaviors defined as appropriate in one culture, or even in different settings within the same culture, can be inappropriate in others. Because civility is based on cultural norms of appropriate behavior, the definition of civil and uncivil behavior shifts over time and place. Maisel's article grapples with this dilemma, as he compares and contrasts an array of contemporary and historical incidents that have been labeled uncivil. In doing so, he encourages us to move beyond cavalier "if it quacks like a duck," or "I'll know it when I see it" approaches to defining this important concept. His historical overview suggests that, at its core, political civility includes rhetoric that facilitates an ongoing, functional relationship among people who disagree with one another, whereas incivility includes rhetoric apt to sever relationships. His emphasis on functional outcomes overlaps with studies of politeness in interpersonal communication. Polite acts facilitate communication between potentially aggressive parties by promoting "positive face"—the perception that one is likeable and appreciated—while minimizing threats to "negative face"—the perception that one is being controlled (Brown and Levinson 1987). In short, public civility and interpersonal politeness sustain social harmony and allow people who disagree with one another to maintain ongoing relationships.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Bruce Hardy's article builds on this understanding. From an interdisciplinary background in rhetoric and political communication the authors demonstrate the dramatic impact these rhetorical moves have on elite political actors' interactions. Their analysis of a debate between Senators John Kerry and John McCain, perhaps not surprisingly, demonstrates that reliance on ridicule and personal attack immediately leads to defensive, entrenched positions, and counterattacks. Of more interest, however, is how deftly these skilled politicians turn to comity to repair their relationship, and how quickly their overtures produce a willingness to engage in deliberation and exploratory talk.

Although we cannot apply this type of fine-grained rhetorical analysis to political communication across the broad sweep of American history, Daniel M. Shea and Alex Sproveri rely on an innovative content analysis to approximate politicians' reliance on political tactics that are perceived to be "mean," "bitter," "hateful," "filthy," or "nasty." They uncover patterns that support the suggestion that American politics is not always characterized by heightened levels of incivility. Their 200-plus year analyses show that American politics is characterized by periods of relative calm punctuated by historical spasms of incivility that roughly correspond to partisan realignments. (For historical accounts of partisan rhetoric during these time periods, see Altchuler and Blumin 2001; Ellis 2002; Riker 1996; Robertson 1995; Silbey 1999; Weisberger 2000.)

Given the strategic and functional roles civility plays in maintaining relationships (Brown and Levinson 1987) and incivility plays for strategic political advantage (Herbst 2010), this pattern makes sense. Strategic politicians in the minority always have the incentive to take a new angle at dismantling the majority party's coalition (Carmines and Stimson 1989). As Shea and Sproveri argue, realignments occur precisely because politicians feel so intensely about a particular issue (or set of issues) that they would rather force the electorate to pick a side than compromise with one another. Under these circumstances, demonizing political opponents to mobilize as many supporters as possible is a better political strategy, even if it means severing ties with former colleagues. Given that such disruptions are not simply par for the course and that they place our governing institutions under considerable duress, the steady increase in reports of political incivility since the 1980s is cause for concern but might reflect the secular realignments of the American South and Northeast.

What precisely "counts" as civil or uncivil behavior? How do we differentiate between useful information relayed in a negative tone and the type of rudeness capable of undermining democracy altogether?

More proximately, what accounts for this current protracted spasm of political invective? The last two contributions to this symposium provide valuable insight. As John Geer's article documents, the recent uptick in incivility began when political consultants fundamentally changed the way they used negative political advertisements in response to the way journalists covered them. In short, he reports that negative advertising has increased because the media's vigilant attentiveness to such ads now provides consultants, who want to drive up coverage, with additional incentives to produce and air them. Perhaps the permeable boundary between campaigning and governing simply cannot withstand the weight of this new assault. Yet political consultants also rely on negative political advertising because they are convinced of its effectiveness (Iyengar 2011).

Although this assessment is inaccurate when applied to the electorate as a whole, the final article by Wolf, Strachan, and Shea suggests that this assessment is partially correct. In the 2010 midterm election, a substantial portion of the electorate embraced intense partisan politics and principled stands

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rather than compromise. These voters, who reported that they were mobilized by the negative tone of the campaign, were also willing to lay the blame for heightened incivility squarely on the shoulders of their partisan opponents. Their rejection of compromise as a viable political option reflects a harsher layer of partisan polarization that compounds policy-based and ideological divisions and makes consensus even more difficult to achieve. The fact that the 2010 voters who preferred political compromise were demobilized by the negative-tone of the campaign only served to exacerbate the influence of this intense, vocal, and rather large minority.

Thus, civility has been an underdeveloped concept in political science, and its role in resolving political conflict has been undertheorized.

CONCLUSION

As Maisel notes, politicians will continue to rely on uncivil political tactics "until the disgust that the public expresses at the polls is reflected in the voting booth." We are left to wonder "how far off that day is." In the interim, the substantial stress incivility places on our political institutions make it a phenomenon worthy of further scholarly attention.

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