SYMPOSIUM

The Negative Consequences of Uncivil Political Discourse

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Congressman Alan West (R-FL) passed the incivility duck test when he described his fellow Floridian Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D) as "the most vile, unprofessional and despicable member of the House of Representatives." That read like incivility, sounded like incivility, and was universally interpreted to be uncivil, thus it probably was.

West, an African American Tea Party Republican is often thought to be somewhat out of the mainstream, at least in terms of his rhetoric. His attack on "the gentlewoman from Florida" was personal more than partisan. In a floor speech when he was not present, Wasserman had questioned West's policy position as not representing his constituents. Angered, West responded.

The problem, for those concerned with civility, was not the attack itself but the institutional response: there was none. Whereas decorum on the House floor and expressions of respect for one's colleagues were once enforced by the House's presiding officers and elder statesmen, there was no response to West's tirade. Well, not quite. Actually, Democrats used the attack as a fundraising tool virtually immediately—and their followers responded generously.

When Congressman Wilson (R-NC) interrupted President Obama during his health-care speech to Congress in September of 2009 by shouting "You lie!" a hush came over the House chamber, and the Speaker gaveled for order. Wilson soon apologized for his outburst, but there were no consequences. Well, again, not quite. Both Wilson and his 2010 opponent used the outburst to raise funds, bringing in more than a million dollars to what had looked like a noncompetitive race.

In his first week in office, Maine's Republican Tea Party-backed governor, Paul LePage, who during his campaign claimed he would tell President Obama to "go to Hell," responded to a reporter's question concerning his decision not to attend the NAACP's annual Martin Luther King Day breakfast by saying that if they did not like it, "Tell 'em to kiss my butt!" His supporters praised his forthright honesty.

These instances of uncivil public discourse might play well to some, but recent polling data show record low levels of approval for Congress as an institution. More than 90% disapprove of the job that the Congress is doing, in part, because of the increased partisan bickering that has been so much a part of recent attempts by Congress to deal with extending the federal debt and other items deemed essential for the nation's economic recovery.

It is easy to make the leap from observing Congress at work, from listening to or reading about the lack of civility that has characterized recent campaigns and congressional debates, to concluding that this lack of civility has led to the decline in citizen approval of and trust in our institutions of government. But that logical step requires further exploration.

This article examines the impact of the decline in civility by addressing two related questions. First, why do we think incivility per se is necessarily bad? What are the values expressed in requiring civil debate? And, on the other side, are some American values threatened by requiring conformity to a certain standard of civility?

Second, has the decline in faith in public institutions been caused by the lack of civility? Or by the lack of results? If one sees the lack of faith in public officials as a consequence of their inability to solve the nation's problems, has the decline in civility caused that decline in performance? Are the consequences of uncivil discourse so nefarious that they require an institutional response, or are we in an era when uncivil discourse reflects the divisive problems that face our nation and the equally divisive solutions proposed to address them?

DEFINING INCIVILITY

Eight Republican presidential candidates gathered in Ames, Iowa, on the eve of the quadrennial Iowa straw poll, one of the first tests of candidate strength to which the media pay (exaggerated) attention. The *New York Times* story on the debate led with the summary that "a withering critique of President Obama's handling of the economy was overshadowed by a burst of incivility among the Republican presidential candidates" (Zeleny and Parker 2011). The key example of uncivil behavior was former Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty's attack on his fellow Minnesotan, Congresswoman Michele Bachmann, assailing her weak legislative record and standing "directly at her side and accus[ing] her of 'making false statements' and having 'a record of misstatements'" (Zeleny and Parker 2011). Bachmann shot back with the cruelest insult of all, claiming that Pawlenty's record was "a lot . . . like Barack Obama, if you ask me" (Zeleny and Parker 2011). The *Times* characterization of the debate was typical of that found in newspapers from coast to coast, of that found on the television networks and in the blogosphere, and even in the *Saudi Gazette* (*Saudi Gazette* 2011).

Pawlenty did attack Bachmann—and it would not be hard to find factual evidence to back his claims. Bachmann did counter—and on some policies, like cap-and-trade, at some points Pawlenty did agree with the President. Why were these "attacks" deemed uncivil? Because the candidates were standing next to each other? Because they did not couch their

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criticism in nuanced language? Because they said forthrightly what others have said behind their backs for some time?

Incivility implies a rudeness or impoliteness that violates some agreed on standard of society. The problem for the current discussion is to agree on that standard. In politics, when two or more individuals are competing for the support of the electorate based in part at least on their fundamental disagreement on policy, the question becomes how can you convince the voters that your view is correct—and your opponents' are is wrong. Are critics saying that it is uncivil to make those claims in a straightforward and direct manner or to claim directly that your opponent is tooting his or her own horn when there is no horn to toot? If one candidate stretches the truth or makes false claims, is that person acting uncivilly, or is the opponent, who calls the candidate to task for these falsehoods, to be judged uncivil?

In the same Iowa debate, Byron York, a conservative columnist for the *Washington Examiner*, asked Bachmann what she meant when she vowed to be "submissive" to her husband. The audience jeered at the question and clearly showed that they felt York had stepped over a line of rudeness—he had suddenly injected a tone of incivility into the debate.

Bill Keller, former executive editor of the *New York Times* disagrees with those who feel that questions like York's are uncivil. He thinks all candidates should be asked pointed questions about how their religious beliefs will affect their governing. Keller, who has sent a questionnaire to each Republican candidate asking questions about the role of their faith in their lives, feels that such questions are warranted, perhaps most particularly because

> We have an unusually large number of candidates, including putative front-runners, who belong to churches that are mysterious or suspect to many Americans. Mitt Romney and Jon Huntsman are Mormons, a faith that many conservative Christians have been taught is a "cult" and that many others think is just weird. . . . Rick Perry, Michele Bachmann and Rick Santorum are all affiliated with fervid subsets of evangelical Christianity, which has raised concerns about their respect for the separation of church and state, not to mention the separation of fact and fiction (Keller 2011).

However, Keller acknowledges that it might well be a small step from asking candidates questions about their faith to exhibiting bigotry or paranoia about the role that faith would play in governing were those candidates elected. Can these questions be raised in a civil manner? If candidates appeal to the electorate, in part, based on their religious beliefs—and how those beliefs distinguish them from their opponents and put them in the same camp as those to whom they are appealing, as former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich and former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum surely have done—is it uncivil to question them about those beliefs?

In terms of civility, how can we navigate the steps from policy to the relationship between faith and policy, to the relationship between other aspects of a candidate's personal life and the policies he or she would pursue if elected? Does it overstep an agreed upon line if a reporter asks a candidate if there were any circumstances in which he or she would support a child who had been raped and decided to terminate the pregnancy that resulted from that forcible attack? If one feels that abortion is against God's law and that no candidate who supports a woman's right to choose should be elected—for that reason alone—how far can a candidate go in expressing those views; how graphic can a candidate's ad be before it is deemed uncivil? What was it about the words of Congressmen West or Wilson or of Governor LePage that made them uncivil? The words themselves? The person addressed? The forum in which these were spoken?

As a social scientist, I am uncomfortable with the duck theory of defining a concept: if it swims like a duck, waddles like a duck, and quacks like a duck, it is probably a duck. However, for years a definition like that has sufficed for the US Supreme Court. In the famous first amendment case, *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 378 U.S. 184 (1964), in a concurring opinion, Justice Potter Stewart said of hard-core pornography, "I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it . . ." (at 197). Perhaps today we must be satisfied with that kind of definition of incivility. Some acts are not civil; others, while perhaps objectionable to some, are. Incivility, however defined, has always played a role in American politics. Certainly something is different today. Before searching for direct negative consequences of incivility, let us examine whether political discourse that lacks civility is anathema to American democracy.

DOES INCREASED CIVILITY VIOLATE BASIC AMERICAN VALUES

How does civility or incivility intersect with traditional American values? Why are we so concerned? The answers are not clear, but the philosophical bases of American society that define whether civility is central to our values or not can be outlined.[1]

On one level, the great American experiment in democratic governing brings together a diverse people into a common whole. "We the people" of the United States form this union. To do so, we implicitly accept Rousseau's concept of the social contract. To pursue the common good, we accept that some of our individual desires must be restricted. Among those restrictions is the necessity to adhere to widely held conventions on social interactions. Thus, civic republicanism implies that those who participate as citizens in this nation, which has been granted (restricted) powers to pursue the common good, do so in a civil manner.

Several political theorists have argued, in various ways, that civil society was a necessary precondition for effective democracy. Robert Putnam and others—almost all recalling de Tocqueville's fascination with the associational aspects of early American life—see social organizations as necessary to teach the traits needed to build the social capital required for an effective democracy (Putnam 2001; see also Barber 1999; Etzioni 1993. In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls (1996) concludes that our shared conception of justice is not a merging of the ideas of groups with different principles but rather an agreement to disagree on those principles and to do so civilly, within certain agreed on boundaries:

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> In particular, [Rawls argues] we are civil exactly when we limit the reasons we use to argue for political decisions only to those that are contained in the overlapping consensus on specifically political principles, and do not go beyond those by employing sectarian reasons from our own specific comprehensive doctrine. Public reason is then the proper idiom that fellow citizens are to limit themselves to when arguing with one another about political matters (Center for Civil Discourse 2011, 4).

Rawls's writing has led, directly or indirectly, to a body of work on the importance of "deliberative democracy," that is arriving at public policy through the process of rational, and by implication civil, debate (see Fishkin 2009; Gutmann and Thompson 1996, 2004; Habermas 1996; Sunstein 2009). These scholars share an insistence on what Habermas frequently refers to as the "unforced force of the better argument," an argument involving civil discourse.

Another aspect of the great American experiment in democracy deals with the Lockean guarantees of individual liberty. The compromise that led to the ratification of the Constitution included a guarantee that the Bill of Rights would be added at the earliest possible moment to assure that the government would not restrict basic individual liberties and that its power to constrain individual's action was limited.

Classic libertarians, of course, are suspicious of norms of behavior that require individuals to act in ways they otherwise would not act. Are individuals who are so restricted not giving up the basic rights they sought to have guaranteed by entering into the social contract? Must we all speak according to accepted norms? In a sense, the debate over civility is asking whether individuals have a right to engage in uncivil political discourse or whether the communitarian values of our nation should restrict that behavior.

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No one favors "uncivil" speech, any more than women's rights advocates argue in favor of abortion. Rather, their point is opposition to restrictions on one's rights. The challenge to a doctrinaire insistence on civil political discourse is philosophically an argument for individual rights. The argument is presented in two ways: first, insistence on civility when individuals are debating important matters on which they disagree in fundamental ways is unrealistic because people who feel passionately about political questions will resort to whatever tactics are necessary to win. Second, insistence on civility further marginalizes those who are already at the margins of society. Civil discourse is the discourse learned through and practiced by the establishment. It is the discourse of Wall Street and perhaps Main Street, but not of the poor, the underclasses of American society, the African American and Hispanic, or the immigrant and the powerless. It is not the discourse of Occupy Wall Street. It violates the basic tenets of our society to stipulate that political debate must be carried out with an upper-class voice. In *Rude Democracy*, Susan Herbst takes these arguments to their logical extreme. She argues that civility and incivility in today's political discourse should be seen not as virtues or vices but as strategies (Herbst 2010, Ch.1).

Civility has a place in the value structure of American democracy, but it is not an unchallenged place; civil discourse might be preferred, but it is not necessary for American democracy to flourish. If something is different about the nature of political discourse in our contemporary debates and there are clearly negative consequences for our democracy from uncivil discourse, we should be concerned, regardless of the arguments for or against discourse of that type. First, let us identify the negative consequences . To say that we do not prefer a certain kind of actions by individuals is insufficient; we must show that those actions thwart the common good.

WHAT ARE THE DISCERNIBLE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF INCIVIL DISCOURSE?

Two specific consequences affect the political process in predictable and negative ways.

Difficulty in Recruiting and Retaining Public Officials

Who enters the political arena? Are people deterred because political debate is often uncivil? Do they leave because of it? Anecdotal evidence abounds. During the run up to the 2012 presidential election, despite party leaders' entreaties to run for office, several strong Republican candidates resisted for "personal" reasons. Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels, for example, was worried about his wife's reticence to have their divorce and subsequent remarriage examined in the media. Although he would have been an instantaneous frontrunner, he decided against running.

Recruiters for the four congressional committees charged with finding the best candidates willing to run as their parties' nominees for the House and Senate claim that they have recruited the best candidates. Those who follow recruitment efforts, however, repeatedly point to potential candidates who resist pleas to run because they are not willing to face the kinds of personal attacks—not policy, but personal—that they would have to face if they were to run for office. The question often turns on not what would be said about a candidate, but rather whether the candidate's family will be publicly scrutinized.

Clearly, a decline in civility in politics is not the only reason that potential candidates decide not to run (Maestas et al. 2006; Maisel, Maestas, and Stone 2005; Stone and Maisel 2003). Potential candidates cite the competitive disadvantages that stack the deck against challengers to incumbents, district lines drawn to favor one party or the other, difficulty in raising

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money or a distaste for having to do so, their conclusion that more "good" can be accomplished in other arenas than in public life, and a host of other reasons.

One reason is that they do not want to be considered "one of those politicians," and the tone of political discourse and, as a result, how politicians are viewed by the public makes running for office unattractive. This is not new. In *The American Commonwealth*, James Bryce wrote, "It may however be alleged that I have omitted one significant ground for the distaste of 'the best people' for public life, viz. the bad company they would have to keep, the general vulgarity of tone in politics, the exposure to invective or ribaldry by hostile speakers and a reckless press" (Bryce 1919, 73). If the reasons related to incivility were bad a century ago, they are clearly worse today. Enough has changed about how campaigns are run, how political communication is disseminated, and how our government institutions function—certainly in the area of civility of discourse—that many of "the best and the brightest," committed to doing their part to improve the lives of those around them, no longer see public service, and certainly not elective office, as a means to that end.

In announcing her decision not to seek a fourth term in the Senate, Maine's Olympia Snowe commented:

> I do find it frustrating, however, that an atmosphere of polarization and "my way or the highway" ideologies has become pervasive in campaigns and in our governing institutions. Unfortunately, I do not realistically expect the partisanship of recent years in the Senate to change over the short term. So at this stage of my tenure in public service, I have concluded that I am not prepared to commit myself to an additional six years in the Senate.

Some people choose not to enter public life partly because of the uncivil nature of political discourse. Others, choose to leave public life rather than to fight to change the nature of debate.

Inability to Govern

The second area in which the negative impact of the decline in civility is apparent relates directly to one of the reasons that potential candidates give for not seeking elective office: incivility leads to an inability to govern and, therefore, more can be done in other arenas. The frustration expressed by Tea Party activists on the Right and by the Wall Street Occupiers on the Left—frustrations often expressed in ways deemed to be uncivil—centers on the lack of results. The gridlock in Washington and in many state capitals is partly caused by partisan one-upsmanship often expressed in ways that do not show respect for those with differing views.

In a *New York* magazine profile of House Majority Leader Erik Cantor (R-VA), Jason Zengerle quoted Cantor: "'I try to be deferential,' Cantor said in his buttery southern accent. 'I mean, I'm a lawyer, I was raised in the sort of schooling, if you will, of deference to someone on the bench—and certainly to the president.'" But Zengerle also concluded

> No one in Washington has done more to disrupt Obama's first term—and threaten his chance at a second—than Cantor.... But Cantor has realized that, in Washington these days, being liked is not a substantial advantage. Much better to be deemed so unreasonable that your opponents ultimately feel no choice but to bend to your will (Zengerle 2011).

And, if your will is to prevent legislation from passing, to prevent the president's agenda from moving forward, to work the system to your political advantage, then lack of civility works. The public lack of respect for and general disapproval of the Congress is not a deterrent to the kind of actions we have seen in Washington—because the kinds of actions we have seen in Washington recently seem to work for political purposes. According to an *NBC News-Wall Street Journal* poll conducted in the fall of 2011, more than four out of five voters felt that the Congress's decisions on the debt ceiling were decisions made for partisan political advantage.

In her resignation speech, Senator Snowe also commented that "what we've been witnessing is dysfunction and political paralysis in Washington." Her views are the same as those of others who are leaving Washington after this term. In writing about the dissatisfaction that retiring senators and congressmen have about their inability to govern, *Politico*'s Jonathan Allen quotes Senator Joe Lieberman (I-CT): "Why would you spend all the time raising money, run for office, and go through the nastiness that's part of a general modern political campaign to come here and be involved in gridlock?" (Allen 2012).

Furthermore, no one talks about the common good. The lack of civility and the increased partisanship that we have seen in recent decision making and campaigning is detrimental to the body politic. As a nation we are worse off because partisanship, not concern for the public good, motivates congressional (and in many cases state legislative) decisions. Politicians engaged in such actions will not respond to these claims until the disgust that the public expresses in the polls is reflected in the voting booth. We are left to wonder how far off that day is.

HAS THE DECLINE IN CIVILITY HURT THE POLITICAL PROCESS?

Is it possible to draw a conclusion on the impact of the decline in civility on the political process that will satisfy a social scientist's desire for a verifiable conclusion? The answer must, revolve around how success in the political process is defined. The *NBC News-Wall Street Journal* poll finds that a shocking 54% of the respondents would vote to replace the entire Congress if they had an opportunity to do so. This is cause for concern. Although support for individual representatives has not fallen to a level that would cause them to change the tone of political discourse, the level of public dissatisfaction, expressed in polls, in street demonstrations, and in public meetings, has risen to an alarmingly high level. A polity is not healthy if a majority of the people wants to replace all of those in office. It is a short step from there to dissatisfaction with the entire system of government. The lack of civility in public discourse clearly contributes to this decline.

What is it about the lack of civility in the current political scene that distinguishes today's politics from those of other eras? Anyone reading the campaign literature or the personal letters from the Adams-Jefferson campaign would

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characterize those exchanges as uncivil (see, for example, Dawson 2000). The tone of congressional debate in the decades preceding the Civil War reached a critical level of incivility. In fact, at one critical juncture, to the point of physical violence on the Senate floor, when Senator Preston Brooks caned Senator Charles Sumner after Sumner had insulted Brooks' cousin. Civility in political life during the McCarthy era set new standards for base behavior (Rovere 1959). Why is today's situation so different?

The easy answer is the 24–7 news cycle, the unfiltered nature of much of the news that reaches the public over the Internet, and the increase in public awareness about how politicians view each other. The highly partisan cable news outlets, radio talk shows, blogs, and Internet sites serve as a huge echo chamber. Whereas an attack on a candidate, an exaggerated claim, or a personal insult might have been seen by a small audience and perhaps repeated on the "inside the Beltway" rumor mill, today repetition after repetition means that we as a public see and hear much more of the incivility in politics than was the case ever before. Because of that, politicians are much more likely to use these tactics purposively.

Yet, there are deeper, systemic answers. In the early years following our nation's birth, although the country's leaders disagreed vehemently on the critical issues of the day, they also had been allies in the greatest struggle of their time: the fight for independence. Their dislike for one another was often personal, and each knew the personal foibles of the other. But they also knew that each was a patriot, that they had different views of the nation's future, but those were not so fundamental that they had forgotten what bound them together.

During the run-up to the Civil War, however, one could not make that claim. Then, the incivility in the political process reflected a far deeper divide in the nation. Those people on the "losing side" in that great debate felt so strongly enough about their position that they were willing to secede from the nation; they were brought back to the union only by force. The Civil War was the tangible recognition that the political process had failed.

By the post-World War II period, service in government had become a full-time occupation (Polsby 1970). Republicans and Democrats, and their families, lived together in Washington. Although partisan differences abounded, and rhetoric was often quite heated, at the end of the day legislators retreated to their families where their wives and children were often interacting with the wives and children of those with whom they had been debating vigorously on Capitol Hill. The result was a strident, but cordial partisanship. Enter McCarthy—with a blatant distain for the truth and total disregard for the personal lives he was ruining. His claims, although based only tangentially in fact, were cause for alarm. For a time, the nation was cowed. Then sanity returned—symbolized by two moments. First, was "The Declaration of Conscience" of Margaret Chase Smith (R-ME) in which she said, in part, "Freedom of speech is not what it used to be in America. It has been so abused by some that it is not exercised by others"; and second, the defense of a young lawyer, Fred Fisher, by Joseph Welch, a Boston Brahmin lawyer, who responded to Senator McCarthy's most vituperative attack with, "At long last, Senator McCarthy, have you no decency?" Senator Smith refused to be cowed. Welch refused to listen to McCarthy any longer. At the end, McCarthy was left ranting to an empty chair, as everyone left the room.

These examples provide lessons and contrast with today's context. The politicians of the Federalist period were united in a cause—their unity overrode their differences so that they could progress with the business of the nation. During the Civil War period, the division was so deep and so fundamental that the political process failed and the nation was torn apart. During the McCarthy era, although the concern over a threat from the Soviet Communists was real, our nation's leaders also understood that they were in a common enterprise and that the common experience they shared in governing required adherence to some rules. Among those rules were to treat others involved in the enterprise—those who agreed with you and those who did not—with respect and civility, and ultimately to rely on truth to win the day.

How does civility or incivility intersect with traditional American values? Why are we so concerned? The answers are not clear, but the philosophical bases of American society that define whether civility is central to our values or not can be outlined.

And today? While we may have difficulty identifying exactly what aspects of political discourse we find uncivil and worrisome, two aspects stand out. The first is the lack of regard for other individuals in the process. Too often the strategy is to demonize those with whom you disagree, with the ultimate goal political victory. In an interview with the *National Journal* in October 2010, Kentucky Senator Mitch McConnell, the Republican leader in the Senate, compared the GOP's situation in 2010 with that in 1996. "The single most important thing we want to achieve is for President Obama to be a one-term president." According to McConnell's analysis, his party's goal should be to work against the Democrats and deride all of their proposals. Possible policy agreements are less important than political gain.

Why do politicians feel that victory is so essential? We know about the polarized political scene in Washington and some state capitals. But what is less known is the reason for this polarization. When citizens despair about the future of our nation, when some see the United States's global standing decline, when the economy is stagnating at a level with unacceptably high unemployment, Democrats and Republicans differ on the most fundamental issue: the role that the federal government should play in countering these trends. It is not merely that they disagree, but rather that also that they

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think if their opponents prevail, everything that they hold dear will be destroyed. In that context, incivility is a small cost if the gain is winning the ultimate battle. The reason that politicians do not "respectfully disagree" is that they do not in fact respect the views of their opponents; they see those views as dangerous. It is unclear that the public sees the stakes as that high—they merely want politicians to find solutions to the pressing problems—but political leaders do.

These views are exacerbated because those in government do not really know their opponents. When the legislative work week is over, they leave Washington and return to their political homes to discuss the terrible views of the opposition with those whose opinions mirror their own. It is far easier to demonize those whom you barely know than it is to do so with your children's friends' fathers. The rhetoric of campaigns leads to characterizing political opponents as enemies; life in Washington does little to change that image. No Margaret Chase Smiths are standing up to those who degrade the political process; those who might do so fear personal attacks, even within their own party, at home.

This lack of personal regard for fellow elected officials is compounded by the second evident aspect of today's political incivility, a lack of regard for the truth. Politicians say what they need to say—about themselves and about those running against them—to win elections. Television networks on the Right and on the Left repeat these falsehoods and give them credibility because networks have discovered that outlandish claims lead to bigger audiences. The same is true of radio talk shows. Polling data show that most citizens gather news from outlets with whose position they agree. Conservatives listen to Fox News; liberals to MSNBC. Competition for viewers and listeners drives coverage and opinion. Too often efforts to rein in untruthful claims are lost is the cacophony of partisan repetition.

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A new local-national dynamic regarding how incivility is viewed by the public may be at work in the electoral process. The general public is fed up with the tone of political debate; most of us, including most mainline political commentators, are troubled by the lack of civility in our political discourse. But recall the examples I raised earlier in this article. The supporters of Congressmen West and Wilson and of Governor LePage cheered on their attacks. If candidates can appeal to extreme elements to win primary elections—and many general election constituencies lean heavily to one party or the other—we may be witnessing a corollary of Fenno's paradox, that we as a nation are fed up with uncivil discourse and the extent to which it prevents public officials from focusing on solving problems, from seeking the common good, but we love our own heroes when they behave in such a manner, demonizing those who do not agree with their preferred solutions.

In the 112th Congress, Republican House Speaker John Boehner of Ohio attempted to compromise with President Obama on issues regarding the budget and the debt ceiling. The Tea Party members of Boehner's conference, however, would not allow him to compromise in their names; they felt he was selling out their principles—and said so in very clear terms. Democrats in the House felt the same way about President Obama (for the opposite reasons), and they were only slightly more restrained in their criticisms (Stone, Maisel, and Lowman 2012). The result was a raucous policy deadlock, insults thrown across the partisan aisle, and general recognition that the policy process had failed. Those who "stood on their principles" and caused the deadlock drew support from their true believer followers—on the Left and Right.

It is important to separate the aspects of political discourse—including the language or tactics used and even attacks on aspects of candidates' personal lives that *do* impact on their ability to govern—that are legitimate from those that undermine the system. Our system requires more than colorless, timid discourse. People in public life should vigorously debate the pressing issues of the day on which they disagree. The polity loses and is threatened when personal disregard for fellow politicians overcomes a basic sense of communitarian values and when regard for accurate portrayal of the truth is lost in an effort to press a partisan advantage.

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