DO SOMETHING ABOUT INCIVILITY

What is incivility?

Incivility in its basic form is a person's unwillingness to treat another person with respect and courtesy.[1]

Often the term is used to describe the inability of people to listen to and act appropriately and respectfully toward others with differing views on matters of importance in our civic affairs. In the context of politics, incivility refers to the unwillingness of people belonging to different political parties or associating with particular philosophies or public policies to listen to each other or treat each other with respect and courtesy.[2]

Sometimes, incivility is expressed as disrespectful thought or action by citizens towards the government generally or to our elected or appointed officials specifically. In this context, citizens disagree with the government as an institution or with public policy makers on the role of government, public policy matters, and/or citizenship responsibilities, and express such disagreement by generalizing the people or officials with whom they disagree as "enemies" or "opponents". This hostility is counterproductive because civil conversation, compromise, and progress are ultimately stymied.

How widespread is incivility in the United States?

Incivility in civic affairs is commonplace in the United States. A 2012 study showed that 40% of partisans would be upset if their child married the other side, 42% view the other side as evil, and 20% think that the country would be better off if a large number of the opposite side died.[3] Further, incivility is highly visible as media gives coverage to uncivil behavior. Incivility is likely the origin for the civic disengagement of many Americans from their government. This disengagement occurs because many people do not like to put themselves in situations in which they would be disrespected or challenged. Accordingly, it feels safer to withdraw from or avoid engagement. Paired with a resistance to compromise, incivility has proven to be detrimental to public policy making specifically and to population cohesion generally.

[1] *Incivility*. (2021). Dictionary.com. Retrieved from https://www.dictionary.com/browse/incivility.

[2] Jamieson, K. H., Volinsky, A., Weitz, I., & Kenski, K. (2017, August 24). *The Political Uses and Abuses of Civility and Incivility*. Oxford Handbooks Online. Retrieved from https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199793471.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199793471-e-79.

[3] Wolf, M. R., Strachan, J. C., & Shea, D. M. (2012, July). *Incivility and Standing Firm: A Second Layer of Partisan Division*. ProQuest. Retrieved from https://www.proquest.com/openview/10bbe3d7b17487b05f7ea3e5c51d25d0/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=34676.

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Some of the factors that lead to widespread incivility include the following:
- Media debates between politicians or political commentators garner followers, perpetuating the cycle of uplifting uncivil debates as a form of media entertainment.[4]
- Politicians making personal attacks against one another, stoking the political divide and stifling compromise and political progress.[5]
- Social media enabling attacks between citizens who are able to hide behind anonymity.[6]

What culture changes and public policies are necessary for preventing incivility?

Much of the polarization in civic affairs between groups of people in the United States can be attributed to incivility. As incivility becomes normative, more people slip into the behavior. To progress as a nation and a society, each American must reimplement civil behavior.

Some elected officials, media commentators, and public figures believe that acting with incivility is acceptable and practice incivility accordingly. These public figures often do so without any backlash, or temporary backlash. Citizens should demand that people in the public policy, political, and media sector treat those with different philosophies or positions with respect. Without a sea change in the tone of political discourse, it will be virtually impossible to close the partisan gap that is present in American policy today. Uniting people behind common purposes requires compromise, and compromise is best achieved when civility is practiced.

What practical solutions are effective for preventing incivility?

Implementation of practical peaceful solutions such as civic dialogue and dialogue and deliberation groups are effective for preventing or reducing incivility. These methods create structured processes for people with differing perspectives to listen to each other and have their perspectives considered.[7] Structured dialogues allow for interpersonal communication, which humanize the interaction and cause the communicating parties to more fully consider what they are saying and how it will impact each other. See our Peaceful Practices Inventory for further information about these solutions.

What can *I* do to prevent or stop incivility?

- Communicate Civilly—Incivility is easy to practice on social media, but so is civility! Monitor your own contributions to social media and learn how to engage with civility.

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[4] Gervais, B. T. (2014, October 16). *Following the News? Reception of Uncivil Partisan Media and the Use of Incivility in Political Expression*. Taylor & Francis. Retrieved from https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10584609.2013.852640?scroll=top&needAccess=true.

[5] Wolf, M. R., Strachan, J. C., & Shea, D. M. (2012, October 19). *Forget the Good of the Game: Political Incivility and Lack of Compromise as a Second Layer of Party Polarization*. SAGE Journals. Retrieved from https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0002764212463355?casa_token=HOUhJl5KO54AAAAA%3Aia-P263NftTInbyIB_68NTadpRgVs-EjxvIfB7qX9ygImgWCtIDMxXOpDLsmiz2XIyfRcWp5gOdgVw.

[6] Rains, S. A., Kenski, K., Coe, K., & Harwood, J. (2017, July 17). *Incivility and Political Identity on the Internet: Intergroup Factors as Predictors of Incivility in Discussions of News Online*. OUP Academic. Retrieved from https://academic.oup.com/jcmc/article/22/4/163/4665715.

[7] Pattani, R., Ginsburg, S., Mascarenhas Johnson, A., Moore, J. E., Jassemi, S., & Straus, S. E. (2018, October). *Organizational Factors Contributing to Incivility at an Academic Medical Center and Systems-Based Solutions: A Qualitative Study*. Academic Medicine: Journal of the Association of American Medical Colleges. Retrieved from https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6159691/.

- Speak Up—When you hear someone speak to another in an uncivil manner, interject civilly. You might ask the aggressor to be respectful and courteous. The victim may not feel comfortable defending themselves, so if you can stand up for them in a respectful manner, then you should. This does not have to be done in front of others; you can step aside with the aggressor afterwards and have a conversation with them about why what they said was an act of incivility. Suggest civil communication alternatives to make one's point.
- Join or Start a Dialogue—Joining a civic dialogue or a dialogue and deliberation group will allow you to engage with people different from yourself. Starting a dialogue will allow you to facilitate meaningful conversations that may be uncomfortable and hone your own skills as a civility practitioner.
- Mediate/or use a Mediator—When one is going to have a difficult conversation with someone of opposing beliefs, a mediator can be a helpful tool. The mediator would provide a third-party perspective that would make both parties consider things that they might not have otherwise. Also, this mediator would ensure that both parties are carrying out the conversation with civility. For more information on mediation, visit http://cruinstitute.org/.
- In Case of Emergency—If you are experiencing or witnessing an emergency, such as a violent crime motivated by incivility, call 911 or try to get to a location where others can observe your distress and intervene.

Where can I find statistics about incivility?
- For data and statistics about incivility, go to Walk the Ridge.

Where else might I go to learn more about incivility?
- Harvard Business Review explores what incivility can be like for parties involved. It also explores different ways to combat it through behavioral action. Recognizing that it is virtually impossible for a supervisor or an organization to keep a check on every act of incivility, Harvard Business Review includes methods that can be implemented oneself.

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