

CIVILITY

Background Information for April 7th Unit Meeting

Civility and Politics

Incivility: "social behavior lacking in civic virtue or good manners...the word is derived from the Latin incivilis, meaning "not of a citizen."

Civility

The discussion of "civic virtue" is background to the concept of "civility." To understand the idea fully, it's important to place the concept of civility in its historic context (below).

The distinction between plain rudeness, and incivility as a threat, depends upon a personal and/or national definition of "civility," and upon the ideology that basic civility is structural to a vibrant society. Incivility that is worse than simple bad manners has become a contemporary political issue in a number of countries.

Civic Virtue

Civic virtue can be defined as the cultivation of habits of that are claimed to be important for the success of the community. Civic virtue is a fundamental principle of society and law.

The trouble with this definition is, who makes the civics rules? If a monarch or dictator is in power, then it is the monarch's virtues that influence civic decisions. When a broader class of people become the decision-makers, it is their virtues (or that of their majority) that characterize what decisions are made. But in so doing, what forces people to "behave?"

In the Classical Period, Aristotle viewed citizenship as consisting, not of political *rights*, but of political *duties*. The self was to be put aside in order to serve the state and the state's laws. Later Roman philosophers, who were dismayed at the collapse of the Roman republic, blamed the loss of liberty on the perceived lack of civic virtue in their peers and rulers.

During the Renaissance, scholars sought out these ancient classical documents so as to try to reinstate the ancient ideal of civic virtue through education. City living became important for the first time, which meant that people were forced to adopt certain means of co-existence that included civility. The proletarianization of peasants was difficult, as the elite found them hard to control. Religion changed as a result, becoming more focused upon individual behavior and important aspects of civic virtue, such as civic conversation (listening to others, trying to reach and agreement, keeping informed so as to make a relevant contribution to society, and civilized behavior (containing feelings and needs).

During the Enlightenment, the concept of civic virtue changed dramatically. Then as now, parental authority began to wane, and the concept of freedom became popular. The 18th century raised up a new class of citizens, the rich merchants. The merchant class emphasized the importance of work and the concept that all people should contribute to society. Education was now key, especially in the classicism and science.

Civic virtue also became a matter of great public interest and discussion in the latter part of the 18th century, in large part due to the American Revolution. Benjamin Franklin's famous quote ["Well, doctor, what have we got—a Republic or a Monarchy?" "A Republic, if you can keep it."] implies that republics can easily fall back into authoritarian rule if civic virtue and civility are not adhered to, just as in the Roman era. The Founders realized that in a republic, laws have to be obeyed for the sake of conscience, rather than fear of a monarch's anger; people must be persuaded to put aside their own interests to the greater good of the people and its government. They also realized that in the absence of this persuasion, the hard-won government would collapse.

This philosophy was reflective of the founding fathers' classical education with its focus on Greek and Roman philosophies. But these ancient philosophers had written their treatises as their republican world was fading away; the founders of America realized their own unique opportunity to bring these ancient ideas to life, not only in spirit, but in substance. So in very large part, the ancients' concepts kept the Revolution afire.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, several major ideologies came into being, each with its own ideas about the concept of civic virtue:

Conservatism—emphasized family values and civic obedience, with the concept of patriotism being a vitally important civic virtue.

Liberalism—combined republicanism with a belief in progress based on capitalism. Civic virtues focused on individual behavior and responsibility.

Socialism—many liberals became socialists at the turn of the two centuries. The civic virtue for socialists in this pre-communist era was an awareness of oppression within society, and that action should change the world for the good, so that everyone could become a valued modern citizen.

National Socialism—claimed to be a variant on socialism and advocated the creation of a classless society, with all members pulling together to improve the society.

Unfortunately, part of this dogma was that certain racial segments of society were incapable of civic virtue and should be oppressed.

Quotes

- "Candor, far from being the enemy of civility, is one of its preconditions." Robert George, McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence at Princeton University, May 29, 2009
- "There is a toxic nature to Washington that thrives on food fights and thrives on controversy and thrives on people not getting along." Matthew Dowd, Bush's pollster and chief strategist for the 2004 presidential campaign.
- "On both sides of any issue, I'd like to see us increasingly wage ideological battles with words and ideas and not with volume and antics." Mark DeMoss, NPR interview, August 12, 2009.
- "Civility costs nothing and buys everything." Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, 1689–1766
- "It's too much to expect in an academic setting that we should all agree, but it's not too much to expect discipline and unvarying civility." John Howard, Australian statesman
- "Teaching civility is an obligation of the family." Stephen Carter
- "The greatest challenge facing contemporary civilization is to bring some peace between our competitive spirit and our need for communal well-being." Benet Davetian

Movements and organizations promoting civility

- Dr. P.M. Forni, a professor at Johns Hopkins University, co-founded the Johns Hopkins Civility Project in 1997. An aggregation of academic and community outreach activities, the JHCP aimed at assessing the significance of civility, manners and politeness in contemporary society. The JHCP has been reconstituted as The Civility Initiative at Johns Hopkins, which Dr. Forni now directs. This Web site is designed to introduce Dr. Forni's work on civility and to offer links to related material (<http://sites.jhu.edu/civility/index.html>).
- The Civility Project is a voluntary, grassroots movement of people from diverse backgrounds who agree that, at this critical time in America's history, solutions to our most pressing problems will be found only through a more civil exchange of ideas. A web-based organization, CivilityProject.org hopes to promote more civility in public discourse. Mark DeMoss and long-time Clinton advisor Lanny Davis launched The Civility Project (<http://www.CivilityProject.org>) in 2009.
- Choose Civility is an ongoing community-wide initiative, led by Howard County Library, to position Howard County as a model of civility. The project intends to enhance respect, empathy, consideration and tolerance in Howard County (<http://www.choosecivility.org>).
- The National Civility Center is a not-for-profit organization established in 2000 to help people make their communities better places to live. They believe that a comprehensive approach to community improvement—one that engages all local stakeholders around shared ideas and a unified plan for action—can help community members and organizations become more effective at solving tough social issues (<http://www.civilitycenter.org>).
- The Institute for Civility believes there are two key threats to the effectiveness and efficiency of our governing process today. A nation experiencing both polarization and citizen apathy is a nation at risk. The institute works to reduce polarization in society by focusing on the very public civility (or lack of it!) in the governing process by facilitating dialogue, teaching respect, and building civility (<http://www.instituteforcivility.org/> and <http://www.civilityblog.org/>).
- “The Civility Institute” (<http://www.civilityinstitute.com>), founded by Dr. Benet Davetian (author of Civility-A Cultural History), conducts research on civility and provides consultations for institutions, schools, corporations. The goal of the institute is to offer beneficiaries with a practical understanding of the social psychology of civility and how civility can be increased without interfering with the mandates of a competitive society.

The above has been excerpted and distilled from:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civic_virtue

Recently in the Media

1. Excerpts from President Obama's May 2010 speech to the graduating class of the University of Michigan:

[A] student asked, "Are people being nice?" Well, if you turn on the news today – particularly one of the cable channels – you can see why even a kindergarten would ask this question. We've got politicians calling each other all sorts of unflattering names. Pundits and talking heads shout at each other. The media tends to play up every hint of conflict, because it makes for a sexier story - which means anyone interested in getting coverage feels compelled to make the most outrageous comments.

Now, some of this can be attributed to the incredibly difficult moment in which we find ourselves as a nation. When you leave here today, you will search for work in an economy that is still emerging from the worst crisis since the Great Depression. You live in a century where the speed with which jobs and industries move across the globe is forcing America to compete like never before. You will raise your children at a time when threats like terrorism and climate change aren't confined within the borders of any one country. And as our world grows smaller and more connected, you will live and work with more people who don't look like you or think like you or come from where you do.

These kinds of changes and challenges cause tension. They make people worry about the future and sometimes they get folks riled up.

In fact, this isn't a new phenomenon. Since the days of our founding, American politics has never been a particularly nice business - and it's always been a little less gentle during times of great change. A newspaper of the opposing party once editorialized that if Thomas Jefferson were elected, "Murder, robbery, rape, adultery, and incest will be openly taught and practiced." Not subtle. Opponents of Andrew Jackson often referred to his mother as a "common prostitute," which seems a bit over the top. Presidents from Teddy Roosevelt to Lyndon Johnson have been accused of promoting socialism, or worse. And we've had arguments between politicians that have been settled with actual duels. There was even a caning once on the floor of the United States Senate - which I'm happy to say didn't happen while I was there.

The point is, politics has never been for the thin-skinned or the faint-of-heart, and if you enter the arena, you should expect to get roughed up.

Moreover, democracy in a nation of more than three hundred million people is inherently difficult. It has always been noisy and messy, contentious and complicated. We have been fighting about the proper size and role of government since the day the Framers gathered in Philadelphia. We have battled over the meaning of individual freedom and equality since the Bill of Rights was drafted. As our economy has shifted emphasis from agriculture to industry to information

and technology, we have argued and struggled at each and every juncture over the best way to ensure that all of our citizens have a shot at opportunity.

So before we get too down on the current state of our politics, we need to remember our history. The great debates of the past all stirred great passion. They all made some angry. What is amazing is that despite all the conflict; despite all its flaws and frustrations, our experiment in democracy has worked better than any other form of government on Earth.

...The second way to keep our democracy healthy is to maintain a basic level of **civility** in our public debate. These arguments we're having over government and health care and war and taxes are serious arguments. They should arouse people's passions, and it's important for everyone to join in the debate, with all the rigor that a free people require.

But we cannot expect to solve our problems if all we do is tear each other down. You can disagree with a certain policy without demonizing the person who espouses it. You can question someone's views and their judgment without questioning their motives or their patriotism. Throwing around phrases like "socialist" and "Soviet-style takeover;" "fascist" and "right-wing nut" may grab headlines, but it also has the effect of comparing our government, or our political opponents, to authoritarian, and even murderous regimes.

Again, we have seen this kind of politics in the past. It's been practiced by both fringes of the ideological spectrum, by the left and the right, since our nation's birth.

The problem with it is not the hurt feelings or the bruised egos of the public officials who are criticized. The problem is that this kind of vilification and over-the-top rhetoric closes the door to the possibility of compromise. It undermines democratic deliberation. It prevents learning - since after all, why should we listen to a "fascist" or "socialist" or "right wing nut?" It makes it nearly impossible for people who have legitimate but bridgeable differences to sit down at the same table and hash things out. It robs us of a rational and serious debate that we need to have about the very real and very big challenges facing this nation. It coarsens our culture, and at its worst, it can send signals to the most extreme elements of our society that perhaps violence is a justifiable response.

So what can we do about this?

As I've found out after a year in the White House, changing this type of slash and burn politics isn't easy. And part of what civility requires is that we recall the simple lesson most of us learned from our parents: treat others as you would like to be treated, with courtesy and respect.

But civility in this age also requires something more.

Today's twenty-four-seven echo chamber amplifies the most inflammatory soundbites louder and faster than ever before. It has also, however, given us

unprecedented choice. Whereas most of America used to get their news from the same three networks over dinner or a few influential papers on Sunday morning, we now have the option to get our information from any number of blogs or websites or cable news shows.

This development can be both good and bad for democracy. For if we choose only to expose ourselves to opinions and viewpoints that are in line with our own, studies suggest that we will become more polarized and set in our ways. And that will only reinforce and even deepen the political divides in this country. But if we choose to actively seek out information that challenges our assumptions and our beliefs, perhaps we can begin to understand where the people who disagree with us are coming from.

This of course requires that we all agree on a certain set of facts to debate from, and that is why we need a vibrant and thriving news business that is separate from opinion makers and talking heads. As Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan famously said, "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts."

Still, if you're someone who only reads the editorial page of The New York Times, try glancing at the page of The Wall Street Journal once in awhile. If you're a fan of Glenn Beck or Rush Limbaugh, try reading a few columns on the Huffington Post website. It may make your blood boil; your mind may not often be changed. But the practice of listening to opposing views is essential for effective citizenship.

... The point is, when we don't pay close attention to the decisions made by our leaders; when we fail to educate ourselves about the major issues of the day; when we choose not to make our voices and opinions heard, that's when democracy breaks down. That's when power is abused. That's when the most extreme voices in our society fill the void that we leave. That's when powerful interests and their lobbyists are most able to buy access and influence in the corridors of Washington - because none of us are there to speak up and stop them.

2. From Politico: "Don't Expect Civility," by Mark DeMoss on January 17, 2011

A nation that debates tax policy or foreign policy is now focusing on civility. The terrible Jan. 8 shooting spree in Tucson has added new fuel to the fire of both liberals and conservatives.

The debate over which political side is most uncivil has dwarfed our nation's crucial discussion of public safety, mental illness and the right to bear arms. I pray that six people, including a sweet young girl, did not die so we could stage a playground fight over which side threw the first stone or said the meanest things.

President Barack Obama, in his Tucson speech on Wednesday, talked about our need to be more civil. “If this tragedy prompts reflection and debate—as it should,” Obama said, “let’s make sure it’s worthy of those we have lost. Let’s make sure it’s not on the usual plane of politics and point-scoring and pettiness.” Obama expressed the hope that “their death helps usher in more civility in our public discourse.”

Yet, there seems little chance of change unless more political leaders begin sounding the same clarion call. Which looks unlikely. Sadly, every member of Congress – except three — and every governor [declined to sign a civility pledge](#) I mailed out last May.

The bar couldn’t have been lower. Here is what they were asked to sign: I will be civil in my public discourse and behavior; I will be respectful of others whether or not I agree with them; and I will stand against incivility when I see it.

I launched The Civility Project on the eve of Obama’s inauguration. Since I am a conservative Republican and evangelical, I asked Lanny Davis, a liberal Democrat and a Jew, to work with me. I didn’t want to lecture the left on incivility, for there’s plenty of that on the right.

Given how low we set the bar, we expected many leaders to sign. But we were dreaming. Despite a recent poll revealing that 83 percent of Americans say, “People should not vote for candidates and politicians who are uncivil,” only Sen. Joe Lieberman (I-Conn.), Rep. Frank Wolf (R-Va.) and Rep. Sue Myrick (R-N.C.) signed the pledge.

So, after two years, I have decided to dissolve it. I told the three signers in a Jan. 3 letter. Though the Tucson tragedy and current political debate prompted me to reconsider, I’m now hopeful that a growing chorus calling for a more civil nation will be heard.

I haven’t lost my passion for increased civility. I’m just not going to continue operating a project deserving more time and resources.

I’ve thought long and hard about the lack of interest among our leaders. I can only conclude: too many people equate civility in public life with unilateral disarmament.

Fox News’ Bill O’Reilly summed this up on his show. “I wouldn’t sign it if I were in Congress,” he told Davis, “I’d be afraid that if my opponent attacked me I wouldn’t be able to attack him back.”

Most of the email from Republicans about this has complained that the Democrats started the incivility — and are meaner. Like this, from a self-identified “Real Republican: “Grow up boys and girls. The left started slinging this mud and you should give as good as you get.” He went on to call House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) , Sen. Harry Reid (D-

Nev.) and Obama “communists.”

There is some hope: Thousands signed this pledge. I've received hundreds of emails from the left and the right, thanking us for speaking out and urging us to continue.

I have also been encouraged by the words and disposition of our president—a man I did not vote for and disagree with on almost every policy issue. Still, I would defend him as a man I believe loves his family and his country, and wakes up each day desiring to do what he believes is best for both. In fact, his pending 2008 election was one factor that prompted me to form this civility project.

Obama has been consistent in calling for a more civil tone. Wednesday he again tried to bring the temperature down on both sides. “But at a time when our discourse has become so sharply polarized,” the consoler in chief said, “at a time when we are far too eager to lay blame for all that ails the world at the feet of those who think differently that we do—it’s important for us to pause for a moment and make sure that we are talking with each other in a way that heals, not a way that wounds.”

If you don't like Obama's words, try these, taken from the greatest textbook of wisdom and civility ever written—the Bible. “But with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself (Philippians 2:3).”

That verse alone, if taken to heart, would make America unrecognizable — and beautiful.

Mark DeMoss is co-founder of the CivilityProject.org and president of The DeMoss Group, a public relations firm. He is author of “The Little Red Book of Wisdom.”

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