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The Political Uses and Abuses of Civility and Incivility

Abstract

After exploring the challenges involved in defining incivility, this chapter addresses the evolution of the concept, notes the dispute over trend lines, and précises work on its psychological effects. It then outlines some functions that civility and incivility serve, such as the functions of differentiating and mobilizing, marginalizing the powerless, expressing, and deliberating. The use of calls for civility as a means of social control is discussed, and then the chapter flags questions worthy of additional attention.

Keywords

civility, incivility, effects of incivility, functions of civility, functions of incivility

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The Political Uses and Abuses of Civility and Incivility



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Civility is a social norm and a standard “of behavior... based on widely shared beliefs [about] how individual group members ought to behave in a given situation” (Fehr and Fischbacher, 2004, 185). Put differently, “A *norm of civility* defines the kinds of behavior that persons can rightfully expect from others” (Sinopoli, 1995, 613). Like other injunctive norms, civility “specif[ies] what people approve and disapprove within the culture and motivate[s] action by promising social sanctions for normative or counternormative conduct” (Reno et al., 1993, 104).

After exploring the challenges involved in defining incivility, this chapter addresses the evolution of the concept, notes the dispute over trend lines, *précises* work on its psychological effects, outlines some functions served by civility and incivility, and flags questions worthy of additional attention.

The Challenges of Definition

Scholars agree that providing a settled definition of civility is all but impossible because, as Benson notes, the “communicative, rhetorical practices” of civility and incivility “are always situational and contestable” (2011, 22). Put differently, “[c]ivility in discourse is a matter of socially secured agreements to conform to the local culture.... What is normal in public discussion in some places is rude in others; and (p. 206) what is considered a normal way of showing respect in some venues seems mannered and arid in others” (Ferree et al., 2002, 313–314). For that reason, among others, Sapiro observes, “It would take an advanced degree in alchemy, not political science, to draw a tidy but reasonably comprehensive definition out of the literature to which one must turn to learn about civility as it is understood today” (quoted in Herbst, 2010, 12).

What most definitions do share is the notion that civility connotes a discourse that does not silence or derogate alternative views but instead evinces respect. Often the object of respect is one’s interlocutor or fellows. So for Carter, civility involves “an attitude of respect, even love, for our fellow citizens” (1998, xii); for Shils, “respect for the dignity and the desire for dignity of other persons” (1997, 338); for Hayek, a “method of collaboration” (1976, 3); for Andersson and Pearson, “low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms of mutual respect” (1999, 457); and for Sobieraj and Berry, “political argumentation characterized by speakers who present themselves as reasonable and courteous, treating even those with whom they disagree as though they and their ideas are worthy of respect” (2011, 20). For Coe, Kenski, and Rains, incivility refers to “features of discussion that convey an unnecessarily disrespectful tone toward the discussion forum, its participants, or its topics” (2014, 660). However, for other scholars the object of respect or disrespect is broader. For example, Papacharissi (2004, 267) argues: “Civility is positive collective face; that is, deference to the social and democratic identity of an individual. Incivility can be defined as negative collective face; that is, disrespect for the collective traditions of democracy.” As scholars have shifted to a constructionist perspective, civility has been less likely to be defined in terms of use of specific words or practice and more likely to be cast as a mode of interaction and a perception. “Everyday incivility can be thought of as commonplace actions and interactions that are perceived to be rude or inconsiderate,” write Phillips and Smith (2003, 85).

Much contemporary theorizing about civility is tied to presuppositions about the nature of deliberation and to discussions of the appropriate forms that disagreement on moral matters should take in a political system such as ours. Political philosophers derive their sense of the role of civility in the public sphere from their concept of deliberation and the public good. For example, Rawls’s duty of civility not only entails a moral duty to explain how an advocated policy “can be supported by the political values of public reason,” but also “involves a willingness to listen to others and a fairmindedness in deciding when accommodations to their views should reasonably be made” (1996, 217).

The Political Uses and Abuses of Civility and Incivility

From earlier times to more recent ones, rudeness and civility have been cast as antonyms. Accordingly, Chaucer notes of the carpenter in *The Miller's Tale* (n.d., 119): "He knew nat Catoun [a Latin handbook on appropriate behavior], for his wit was rude," and in *The American Commonwealth* Lord Bryce observes, "Yet neither are they rude for to get on in American politics one must be civil and pleasant" (1921, Part 1, 148).

(p. 207) The Evolution of the Concept of Incivility

Although lexically kin to the Roman's *civis* (citizen) and *civitas* (citizenship) (Simpson, 1960, 109), the word civility (*civilitas*) did not become fashionable (Gillingham, 2002, 281) until publication of Erasmus's sixteenth-century *De Civilitate Morum Puerilium* (Knox, 1995; Carter, 1998, 14). That work's ancestors include the twelfth-century *Liber Urbani* of Daniel of Beccles and the much older, third-century "commonplace secular morality" of the *Distichs of Cato* (Gillingham, 2002, 267). Widely circulated in the Middle Ages, the *Distichs of Cato* was published in the colonies by Benjamin Franklin.

In early modern England and Western Europe, "the terms 'civil' and 'civility' gradually displac[ed] 'courteous' and 'courtesy' as the fashionable terms denoting approved conduct" (Gillingham, 2002, 267), a transformation documented by Elias (2000), Becker (1988), and Bryson (1998), among others. In the process, "during the sixteenth century the term 'civility' began to take on some of the connotations of 'civilization' as the opposition between the 'civil' and the 'barbaric' implicit in classical writings was allegedly developed in response to the challenge presented by the discovery of the 'savage inhabitants of the New World, and then applied in a contrast between English civility and Irish barbarity" (Gillingham, 2002, 269).

Incivility Trends

Depending on how one defines the term, measures the phenomenon, and brackets the period of study, civility in general either is (Carter, 1998, xi) or is not on a downward slope (see Altschuler and Blumin, 2000). Similarly, comity in Congress either is (Uslaner, 1996) or is not on a downward path (Nickels, 1995; Jamieson and Falk, 2000). An alternative view is that congressional civility rises and falls with the changes driven by the interaction of individuals and events. The patterns revealed by a charting of both the requests to take down words in the House and of requests that led to a ruling indicates that 1946 and 1995 were high points of incivility and that "those who believe that incivility has been on an upward course since the Vietnam war are, by this measure, mistaken" (Jamieson and Falk, 2000, 108).

There is nonetheless general agreement that, whether or not twenty-four-hour-a-day cable talk, talk radio, and the Web have increased the amount of uncivil discourse, "the uncivil tendencies in American culture are more apparent and abundant thanks to pervasive media" (Herbst, 2010, 26). After examining ten weeks of data from political blogs, talk radio, and cable news analysis programs, Sobieraj and (p. 208) Berry found that outrage, a

specific kind of incivility that involves trying to provoke a visceral response from an audience, “punctuates speech and writing across formats” (2011, 26), and “89.6 percent of cases included in the sample contained at least one outrage incident.” Coe, Kenski, and Rains found that in the online discussions they analyzed from a newspaper website, “more than one out of every five comments were uncivil, and 55.5 percent of the article discussions contained at least some incivility” (2014, 673).

Incivility’s Psychological Effects

There is general agreement that uncivil discourse is emotionally arousing (Mutz, 2007). Moreover, being the target of uncivil remarks (including insults and rude behavior in public) can elicit strong responses (cf. Vasquez et al., 2013); reduce effective cognitive processing, productivity, and creativity (Porath and Erez, 2007, 2009; Rafaeli et al., 2012, 931); and elicit reciprocal aggression (Andersson and Pearson, 1999).

The effects of viewing uncivil behavior are less settled. In a study focused on exchanges on a talk show, Mutz and Reeves concluded that “political trust is adversely affected by levels of incivility” in televised political exchanges arguing that “the format of much political television effectively promotes viewer interest, but at the expense of political trust” (2005, 1). Anderson and colleagues found that “uncivil blog comments can polarize... along the lines of religiosity and issue support” (2014, 274) in their study on risk perceptions of emerging technologies. A burgeoning body of work on the nature, causes, and impact of online incivility has emerged and with it efforts to minimize both the behavior and its harmful effects (Gervais, 2015; Santana, 2014; Stroud et al., 2015).

By contrast, Brooks and Geer find: “While uncivil messages in general—and uncivil trait-based messages in particular—are usually seen by the public as being less fair, less informative, and less important than both their civil negative and positive counterparts, they are no more likely to lead to detrimental effects among the public. In fact, incivility appears to have some modest positive consequences for the political engagement of the electorate” (2007, 1).

Other research has shown that when a news article was embedded in an uncivil blog post, the article’s perceived credibility increased (Thorson, Vraga, and Ekdale, 2010). Borah (2013) found that incivility increased perceptions of credibility of a news article, but it also decreased political trust and efficacy. In a study of online comments, Coe, Kenski, and Rains (2014) found that uncivil commenters were slightly more likely to include statistics as evidence; uncivil comments were also more likely to receive more reactions from readers in the form of thumbs-down ratings. Depending on one’s point of view, negative reactions to online posts could be considered harmful, but for others, the mere fact that people are responding at all could be considered beneficial to public discourse as a sign of increased participation.

(p. 209) **The Functions of Incivility and Civility**

Because civility and incivility are “strategic assets used by those pursuing specific interests, whether humanitarian efforts or far less admirable ones” (Herbst, 2010, 124), we parse the remainder of this chapter into sections on the various functions served by civility and incivility. In the process of so doing, we outline the differentiating, mobilizing, expressive, and silencing functions of incivility; the social and deliberative functions of civility; and the ways in which calls for civility can be used to disempower.

The Functions of Incivility

Incivility’s Differentiating and Mobilizing Functions

Insults and invective are a powerful means of differentiating an in-group from an out-group, an opponent from an ally. Since members of a group tend to exaggerate their differences with out-groups (Robbins and Krueger, 2005)—believing out-group members to be rather homogeneous and in-group members less so (Linville and Fischer, 1993), holding members of out-groups to be less human than those in the in-group (Leyens et al., 2003), and perceiving out-group attitudes to be more extreme than they actually are (Gawronski, Bodenhausen, and Banse, 2005; Jamieson and Cappella, 2008)—the fact that forms of attack such as *ad hominem* are employed against out-group members should be unsurprising.

Precisely because it evokes a strong emotional response, incivility is also a strategic tool in the arsenal of individuals seeking dramatic social or political change. Those carrying the flag for strategic incivility argue, as Schudson does, that “democracy may require withdrawal from civility itself.... We call the people who initiate such departures from civility [as social movements, strikes, demonstrations] driven, ambitious, unreasonable, self-serving, rude, hot-headed, self-absorbed—the likes of Newt Gingrich and Martin Luther King and William Lloyd Garrison” (1997, 308).

As the record of agitators such as Garrison confirms, invective can serve as an assertion of identity and power by those who are being marginalized by a majority community (Murray, 1983). It can also act as an expression of outrage against evils such as genocide or slavery, which exist on a scale and of a kind that rupture the assumptions of the social order (see Aminzade and McAdam, 2002; Gould, 2009).

“[O]ffering up an ‘enemy’... as the source of the problem” is a way of harnessing anger, an “emotion political organizers need to capture and channel” (Ost 2004, 229). As a result, invective has been a primary weapon of those arguing that an opponent is a heretic, a miscreant, or worse; unsurprisingly, such assaults elicit the kind of reciprocation in kind (p. 210) revealed by the psychological studies cited earlier. So, for example, Martin Luther attacked the “brainless and illiterate beast in papist form,” Thomas More called Luther both “an apostate and a pimp” (Furey, 2005, 469), and Thomas Cooper (1792) used invective

The Political Uses and Abuses of Civility and Incivility

tive against invective in his *Reply to Mr. Burke's Invective Against Mr. Cooper, and Mr. Watt*.¹

Incivility as a Means of Marginalizing the Powerless

Just as incivility can be a tool of insurrection, it can also be marshaled against those seeking power by those in control. Some argue that online flaming “is an expression of cyberspace machismo which is often practiced more often against women and women’s online groups as a kind of sexual harassment” (Vrooman, 2002, 53), a finding consistent with evidence from 2008 attacks on the Web posts by women objecting to sexist portrayals of the candidacy and person of Democratic presidential aspirant Hillary Clinton (Jamieson and Dunn, 2008).

Incivility’s Expressive Function

Whether incivility is to be lauded or lamented is answered differently by different theorists and variously in different times, places, and circumstances. Accordingly, in ancient Rome, what was appropriate in one venue was frowned upon in another. In that tradition, *vituperatio*, the speech of reproach, was as much a part of the curriculum as the speech of praise (*laus*) and as such treated in Cicero’s *De Inventione* (2:28–31, 177–178) and in the *Ad Herennium* (3:10–15). To disparage or blame, the rhetor attacked the target for lacking the positive attributes that are the focus of a speech of praise, for example achievements, desirable characteristics such as speed or health, and virtues. By Craig’s count there were “seventeen conventional *loci* of invective established in Greek and Roman practice by Cicero’s time” (2004, 4–5): embarrassing family origin; being unworthy of one’s family; physical appearance; eccentricity of dress; gluttony and drunkenness, possibly leading to acts of *crudelitas* and *libido*; hypocrisy for appearing virtuous; avarice, possibly linked with prodigality; taking bribes; pretentiousness; sexual misconduct; hostility to family; cowardice in war; squandering of one’s patrimony/financial embarrassment; aspiring to *regnum* or tyranny; cruelty to citizens and allies; plunder of private and public property; and oratorical ineptitude.

Exemplifying what many would define as invective, in his widely praised attack on Piso, Cicero called his adversary a monster, a butcher, a scoundrel, and a gelded pig (Arena, 2007, 152). What was rhetorically appropriate when condemning an enemy was less so when addressing friends. So, for example, in *De Officiis* (Book 1, 49–51), “What one can observe in human society as a whole is fundamental. The bond of that society is reason and speech; they reconcile men to each other and join them in a sort of natural community by teaching, by learning, by communicating, by discussing, by judging.”

The Function of Civility in Deliberation

If the public sphere is to be inclusive, productive, and deliberative, it requires norms of interpersonal exchange. Unsurprisingly then, in his *Manual of Parliamentary Practice*, (p. 211) Thomas Jefferson observed, “It is very material that order, decency, and regularity be preserved in a dignified public body” (1868, 14). Adopted on April 7, 1789, the House of Representatives’ rules of decorum specified, among other things, that a member “shall

The Political Uses and Abuses of Civility and Incivility

confine himself to the question under debate, avoiding personality” (Jefferson, 1868, 38). In short, a member should not arraign or impugn the motive of another member.

Spaces predicated on cooperative engagement commonly adopt similar rules. For example, *Wikipedia* proclaims: “Civility is part of Wikipedia’s code of conduct and one of Wikipedia’s five pillars. The civility policy is a standard of conduct that sets out how Wikipedia editors should interact. Stated simply, editors should always treat each other with consideration and respect.... Someone may *very well* be an idiot. But *telling them so* is neither going to increase their intelligence nor improve your ability to communicate with them” (Civility, n.d.).

Codes such as Jefferson’s and *Wikipedia*’s are consistent with political theorists’ notion, expressed by Gutmann and Thompson, that mutual respect “lies at the core of reciprocity and deliberation in a democracy” (1996, 79; see also Darwall, 1977). Democracies cannot, in Lynch’s (2011) phrase, be “spaces of reasons” unless we are able “to find common currency with those with whom we must discuss practical matters.” Because “civility... is really the very glue that keeps an organized society from flying apart” (Burger, 1975), “it makes practical sense to embrace civility as a norm... in the rhetorical exchanges that occur between those in an ongoing relationship, and... those who have come together as a community to address problems” (Jamieson, 2000, 4–5). For some, this means that deliberative civility focuses not on “what is communicated, whether these be reasons, arguments, propositions, or whatever..., [but rather on] *how* I address you and *how* I interpret and respond to your claims and arguments” (Bohman and Richardson, 2009, 272), with the “point of civility” being “to engage the other as possessing practical intelligence, and so as capable of revising goals in the light of new understandings of one’s circumstances and of reaching new understandings of one’s circumstances in the light of newly accepted goals” (271).

The Negative Functions of Calls for Civility

Silencing or Subjugating a Marginalized Group

Just as incivility itself can be used to silence a minority view, condemnations of the “incivility” of those holding such views can function as a silencing mechanism or means of harassing a feared or subordinated group. The notion that calls for civility can be a means of social control (Strachan and Wolf, 2012, 47) is a long-lived one. In *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill opined:

With regard to what is commonly meant by intemperate discussion, namely invective, sarcasm, personality, and the like, the denunciation of these weapons would deserve more sympathy if it were ever proposed to interdict them equally to both sides; but it is only desired to restrain the employment of them against the prevailing opinion: against the unprevailing they may not only be used without general (p. 212) disapproval, but will be likely to obtain for him who uses them the praise of honest zeal and righteous indignation.

The Political Uses and Abuses of Civility and Incivility

Yet whatever mischief arises from their use is greatest when they are employed against the comparatively defenceless. (1910, 150)

Mill's observation is consistent with Lendler's claim that "inevitably, an appeal for enforced 'civility' becomes an argument for a specific side in a conflict" (2004, 424) and with concerns that condemnations of incivility can act "against a fully democratic order and in support of special interests, institutions of privilege, and structures of domination" (Kasson 1990, 3), by functioning "discursively to restrict content and participation though the limits they place on acceptable style" (Ferree et al., 2002, 313-314). For this reason, DeMott argues that the "'new incivility' needs to be recognized, in short, for what it is: a flat-out, justified rejection of the leader-class claims to respect, a demand that leader-class types start looking hard at themselves" (1996, 14). "The civility movement," argues Kennedy (1998) "is deeply at odds with what an invigorated liberalism requires: intellectual clarity; an insistence upon grappling with the substance of controversies; and a willingness to fight loudly, openly, militantly, even rudely for policies and values that will increase freedom, equality, and happiness in America and around the world."

Unanswered Questions and Areas Requiring Future Research

Synthesizing scholarly work on the effects of incivility is complicated by the fact that operationalizations of the term differ widely. In Mutz and Reeves's experiments (2005, 5) the "uncivil" conditions included statements such as "You're really missing the point here, Neil" and "What Bob is *completely* overlooking is"; "The candidates also raised their voices and never apologized for interrupting one another, nonverbal cues such as rolling of the eyes and rueful shaking of the head from side to side were also used to suggest lack of respect." By contrast, Brooks and Geer include explicit direct ad hominem attacks (e.g., "my unprincipled opponent," "my cowardly opponent," "my gutless opponent") on an opponent in the ads used in their experiments. Note, however, that consistent with our earlier point, the two projects do share the notion that incivility shows lack of respect for the views of another.

Those attempting to assess changes in civility across time within an institution or across media face other challenges. Reliably tracking behavior within the House of Representatives, for example, is complicated by the fact that before the 104th Congress changed the procedure, members were able to clean up their floor remarks before they were memorialized in the *Congressional Record* (Jamieson and Falk, 2000, 105). Moreover, those trying to determine whether the level of civility on cable talk shows differs from one time to another must deal with the facts that the networks differ in the number of shows whose transcripts they release, some programs are repeated multiple (p. 213) times with slight alterations from airing to airing, and many programs are short lived. For example, four of the nine hosts whose shows Sobieraj and Berry (2011, 24-25) examined over a ten-week period in 2009 no longer have a home on the studied network.

The Political Uses and Abuses of Civility and Incivility

We close with the problem raised at the beginning of this chapter. The meaning attached to the concept of civility differs from one period to another and from one theorist to the next. One way to determine what the culture means by incivility at a given point in time is to ask what sorts of behaviors are awarded that label by dissimilar individuals commenting on the same body of discourse. Following that lead, Weitz, Volinsky, Jamieson (Jamieson 2012), and a team of coders at the Annenberg Public Policy Center found agreement among hosts on Fox, MSNBC, and CNN that the following classes of acts were uncivil:

- analogizing an opponent to Hitler or the Nazis
- extreme characterizations of opponents (e.g., as “barbarians” or a “mob”)
- use of the language of violence (including Governor Perry’s mock threat to get “ugly” with Fed chair Ben Bernanke if he were to go to Texas after pursuing loose monetary policy and Teamster leader Jimmy Hoffa’s call to “take these sons of bitches out”)
- extreme characterizations of legislation (including the notion that senior citizens would die under the opposing side’s health plan)
- allegations that the president of an opposing party had lied (Rep. Wilson’s “You lie” and statements by Democrats on the floor of the House alleging that President George W. Bush had done the same)
- dismissive or demeaning references to the president (i.e., calling President George W. Bush a “loser” and President Obama “kind of a dick”)
- dismissive or demeaning references to others (e.g., labeling a female lobbyist a “K street whore” and a female senator a “hooker”)

The study also explained why conservatives and progressive viewers enclaved within Fox or MSNBC programming might be disposed to consider incivility a problem plaguing only those on the other side of the aisle. Whereas Obama-Hitler analogies were more likely to be decried on MSNBC and CNN, Nazi analogies applied to Republican governor Walker were more often criticized on Fox. Whereas a FOX viewer was more likely to learn that Democrat Alan Grayson had labeled an advisor to Federal Reserve chairman Bernanke a “K Street whore,” the viewer tuned to MSNBC was more likely to hear that conservative Glenn Beck had characterized Democratic senator Mary Landrieu as a hooker. The differences between FOX and MSNBC were significant and could be predicted by knowing the ideology of the transgressor.

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Notes:

(1.) For the definitive treatment of invective in ancient Rome, see Koster (1980). For a sophisticated treatment of Cicero's use of invective, see Craig (2004, 187-213).

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