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Rudeness and Rancor: Investigating Incivility in American Politics

Department *of* Political Science



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Submitted to the Department of Political Science of Allegheny College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts.

I hereby recognize and pledge to fulfill my responsibilities as defined in the Honor Code and to maintain the integrity of both myself and the College community as a whole.

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Acknowledgements

Nothing infuriates me more than when one of my peers tells me that he or she never intends to vote. How can they resist the chance to express their opinion on salient issues that will impact our futures? I have always been a firm believer in the power of the ballot box. If you do not choose to engage in the process, to inform yourself on political proceedings and exercise your right to share your opinion, then you have lost your right to complain or criticize the direction of politics.

But in the past few months, for the first time in my life, I can empathize with nonvoters. American politics has become so nasty and negative since the 2008 presidential election, it is no wonder that those who are not overly interested in politics choose to disengage. While I write in this project that American politics has always been plagued with incivility, and that our democracy cannot progress without a bit of insurrection and rancor, I agree with Peggy Noonan that there is something "raw and bitter and dangerous" in this particular political moment. Some sort of respectful balance and compromise needs to be achieved for the stability and health of American democracy

Thank you to Professor Daniel M. Shea and the Allegheny College Center for Political Participation for sparking my interest in the notion of political incivility and for providing me with the opportunity to dive into the fascinating realm of political science survey research. Brainstorming the survey topics and drafting the survey instrument itself with other Student Fellows was the most challenging yet fulfilling academic experience of my undergraduate career. The success and importance of our data is underscored by the attention it received from the national news media. As David Shribman of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* wrote, "Years from now, if we are lucky, we may recall that the big idea of the early 21st century came from Allegheny College in Meadville, Pa." I am so proud and grateful to be have been a part of "Nastiness, Name-calling, and Negativity," and am thrilled to be able to analyze the results of questions that I helped write in my Senior Project.

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I dedicate this project to those three people, and to a more respectful yet always contentious future for American politics.

-Katie Janocsko
November 15, 2010

Introduction

Political Incivility: Promoting Participation or Accentuating Apathy?

Class of 2010, I understand that one effect of today's poisonous political climate is to push people away from participation in public life. If all you see when you turn on the TV is name-calling, if all you hear about is how special interest lobbying and partisanship prevented Washington from getting something done, you might think to yourself, "What's the point of getting involved?" – President Barack Obama

In his "Commencement Address" to the 2010 graduates of the University of Michigan, President Barack Obama expressed concern with the recent nasty behavior that has gripped American politics. Scholars and pundits also have been troubled by this seemingly unprecedented rise in political incivility that appears to have gathered speed since Obama's election in November 2008 (Friedman 2009).

Intense political passion can be considered as something very healthy for a strong democracy. A system with clear policy alternatives and candidate options is more likely to get voters engaged in a range of electoral activities. In the few election cycles preceding 2008, a rekindled interest in the political process swept the nation, leading to increased voter turnout and indicating that people were once again engaged and invested in American democracy. Turnout levels for young voters in particular reached their pinnacle in 2008, with over 50 percent of 18- to 29-year olds turning out to the polls (Crotty 2009). It is believed that heightened levels of partisan identification in recent years revived the political system, once again carrying political issues to the forefront of countless conversations in homes and workplaces across America (Hunt 2010). Social scientists and pundits alike have noticed and praised how much more average Americans are debating political issues with their peers and are paying attention to legislative proceedings (Crotty 2009). No matter how progressive it is considered that citizens are

discussing the issues at all, this renewed attention to polarizing political topics also may quite possibly be responsible for the growing "civility crisis" in America (Mutz 2007).

The American people have witnessed countless breaches of standards of politeness as well as several ad hominem personal attacks in Washington since Barack Obama was elected President. The nastiness and mudslinging that was part of the debate over Obama's health care reform plan stunned the nation, making many people feel ashamed of the way that our elected officials behaved, regardless of whether they actually supported health care reform or not (Shea 2010). Racial slurs and epithets had never been so prevalent in American politics in recent memory. One congressman was spat on as he entered the Capitol chambers to cast his vote. A coffin, meant to signify the death of babies aborted due to pro-abortion provisions in the bill, was left at a legislator's doorstep (Sherman 2010). Making it even worse, recent technological advancements in online social networking such as YouTube and Facebook, as well as the 24-hour cable television news cycle, only have functioned to "stir the pot" on health care and other issues, replaying these offensive moments over and over again until the American people are desensitized to the incivility which they observe.

Considering all the rancor transfixing political proceedings, one is inclined to ask: is this all too much, too different, too harsh and harmful for America? Indeed, political commentators have lamented that all of these factors have combined to reduce patriotism, political compromise, and decent standards of behavior, resulting in a democratic process that is broken beyond repair (Thomas 2010).

Nastiness As Status Quo?

While spirited party politics and conflict first served to sharpen the debate of public issues and increased levels of citizen participation in politics, the tone of politics has gotten so dirty that

many Americans are disgusted and have turned off from participating in a broken system (Noonan 2010). This apathy, however, most likely only is temporary. When the nastiest public issues of the day are settled, Americans who have retreated from political participation will return to the system.

The divisive issues presently in play – health care reform, rising public debts, and environmental concerns, to name a few − will not be resolved easily. The most important political movements toward democratic progress in American history were fraught with bitterness and contention; the enfranchisement of minority voices after the Civil War and during the Civil Rights Movement come to mind as examples. Incivility as a strategic tool can be used to great effect to persuade people toward accepting political change (Herbst 2010). For this reason, it is important that politics possess the proper balance between incivility and respect. If civility and politeness are strictly defended as the only means to having a political discussion, the quality of those debates over public policy will surely suffer. Obsessive civility would promote complacency within the American public. Put in other words, in order to move toward a more perfect democracy, sometimes Americans must get a little dirty in the process.

Plan for the Project

This project strives to answer three basic questions in regard to political incivility in American politics: How did America get here, to such a high perceived level of incivility? What factors have led to recent incivility? How does the American public perceive it? Moreover, it will be argued that while political incivility has held a constant and valuable presence in American politics, recent evidence suggests that it has gone too far, damaging confidence in and perceptions of the American government's legitimacy and thus, the health of American

democracy. Consequently, contemporary politics is now at a crossroads: any more incivility could completely turn off the public from political proceedings.

Chapter One provides a historical overview of the shifting paradigm of American civility. Contrary to popular belief, incivility in politics has been a constant in American political life, increasing and decreasing based upon the issues of the day and changes in American culture. Further, some degree of rowdiness and partisanship is good for American democracy. It has led to the advancement of civil liberties as well as increased participation in American politics. History confirms that the "rulebook standard" for civility should be abandoned because standards of political decorum reflect the rancor within political debates at a particular time or point in history. In fact, the intensity of incivility during tumultuous times in American history produced some of the most monumental improvements in enfranchisement in American democracy. Moreover, civility can be better thought of as a strategic tool utilized by politicians and everyday Americans to call attention to the faults in the political system.

Chapter Two outlines scholarly perspectives and experimental research on the factors that have led to the hostility afflicting American politics today. While America has experienced numerous intervals of heightened incivility throughout its history, scholars posit that several factors - the narcissistic and self-entitled attitudes of the American people, the influence of the confrontation-obsessed media, the polarization of the political parties, and the negativity and mudslinging within political campaigns – have contributed to an exceptionally uncivil political atmosphere. These factors are detrimental to American politics not just because they perpetuate incivility, but because they also serve to cultivate cynicism and mistrust of political institutions within the public. In turn, this perceived lack of confidence in politics calls into question the legitimacy of the entire American system of democracy.

Chapter Three builds upon the scholarly perspectives and experimental research on the factors that have led to increasing incivility discussed in Chapter Two by presenting the findings of a survey commissioned by Allegheny College's Center for Political Participation in the spring of 2010. The results indicate that the factors laid out by scholars and examined by empirical testing do indeed impact Americans' perceptions of political incivility and the legitimacy of the system.

The project closes by posing the most significant question on the topic: Why should Americans care about civility? For the reasons discussed and analyzed in the coming chapters, Americans should take note of the tone of political discourse because it affects the efficacy and propensity for participation in the political process. While the contentiousness surrounding recent issues served to galvanize people into paying attention and participating in politics, the tone of debates may have recently crossed the line and become too extreme and vitriolic for most Americans' tastes. Consequently, Americans should be aware of the dangers associated with how incivility serves to turn off citizens from involvement or interest in the political process. The concluding appeal for civility rests on "the notion that Americans can be active, partisan and passionate without being rude, selfish, shortsighted and, finally, undemocratic" (Shea 2010, 6).

Chapter One

A History of Political Civility in the United States

Interrupting someone with whom you disagree in a public forum. Shouting over someone about a personal or contentious issue during an argument. Making personal attacks or questioning someone's patriotism because they hold views different from your own. Today's Americans consider these behaviors over the line or "against the rules" of civility in politics (Shea 2010). Public outcry against these types of behaviors currently dominates American political culture. Yet is politics really less civil than it was in past generations? Has the nature of politics actually taken a turn for the nasty, or is the state of political civility contingent on the issues of the day?

Political commentators continually blame the incivility in American politics on the polarization of our political parties and the reigning American mindset of self-entitlement, individualism, and cynicism (Herbst 2010; Thomas 2010). There often is nostalgia for the past, when politicians were cordial and refined, and Americans held their political deliberation to a higher standard of politeness (Skocpol and Fiorina 1999). Looking back, however, provides a very different picture from this idealized past. Norms of decorum and behavior have evolved throughout American history thanks to shifts in cultural and communicative practices, but our political history has always been marred by episodes of incivility (Noveck 2010).

This chapter will examine what it has meant to be a "polite American" throughout history (Carson 1966). The development of American standards of behavior, manners, and political action began with the notions of civility translated from Europe and implemented during the colonial period. Since then, those notions have been continually adapted to reflect the existing national mood or concerns. Whether it was vicious campaign mudslinging or destructive protest

riots, America has endured numerous episodes of incivility since its founding. Accordingly, selecting one prevailing benchmark on which behaviors can be judged as civil or uncivil in American politics is impossible. Civility is not an "ageless" paradigm, but rather depends upon the circumstances and societal conventions of the particular time period in question (Sapiro 1999). In addition, uncivil episodes in American political history – particularly during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – worked to strengthen democracy by expanding political enfranchisement and participation to those citizens who had previously been regarded as unworthy of having a voice in the system.

The Rise of *Civilité* in the Seventeenth Century

The origins of basic standards of American decorum can be traced back to the seventeenth-century Western European nobility that settled and colonized America. Civil society – the social embodiment allowing for cooperation whilst enabling individualism and capitalism – arrived in America as a result of certain European developments: namely, the removal of centralized power from the Catholic Church (the Protestant Reformation) and the decline in power of the English monarchy (Hefner 1998).

It is no secret that mass political action in early seventeenth-century Western Europe was fractious and violent (Sapiro 1999). After a long period of civil war, conspiracy, and political unrest, England experienced a period of stability between 1675 and 1725. Finally, "it suddenly began to make sense…to try to live together – the successful accomplishment of which then fostered a culture of civility" (Hefner 1998, 62). Around this time, the concept of *civilité* surged in noble society (Elias 1978).

Civilité was derived from a highly popular treatise *De civilitate morum puerilium* ("On Civility in Children") by Erasmus of Rotterdam that first appeared in 1530. This original treatise

on the behavior of people in society discussed how clean or refined "outward bodily propriety" reflected the most desirable and dignified qualities of the "inner man" (Elias 1978, 56).

Civilité embodied a new mental and emotional structure for the nobility's behavior. These ideals led to an overall softening into a genteel demeanor, which necessitated the control of violent or barbaric impulses in favor of a mindset of self-control over one's body and emotional state (Sapiro 1999). In a relatively short period, expressions of human behavior that were common for centuries – "loud conviviality, excessive crying, even uncontrolled physical occurrences such as burps or flatulence" – were completely abandoned (Herbst 2010). Practices of eating, conversation, and appearance were consciously regulated to bring about one's best self and to elevate the nobility from the working class. In later generations, the web of appropriate behavior grew so extensively that self-control became the automatic functioning apparatus for the dignitaries of Western society (Elias 1982).

Rather than reflecting natural phenomena and human development, *civilité* was clearly an ideal produced by "social embodiment and historical context" (Hefner 1998). Sociologist Norbert Elias (1978; 1982) discussed at length that the conscious effort to control all bodily excesses and natural processes was subject to the social and political construction of the period. With a disparaging class system in place to keep a small group of elites in political power, the upper class felt pressure to maintain the system by differentiating themselves from the vulgarity below them in the social sphere. Paranoia over table manners and speaking habits resulted in obsessive internal analysis of behavior so as to keep elites in "good taste" (301). The torment of self-restraint could have been avoided in favor of the comfortable yet seemingly animalistic habits of past generations, but Elias noted that self-control was adopted to sustain the distribution of power and force. Undoubtedly, when American colonists sought their independence from the

British Empire, many also felt a desire to rebel against this political power structure that suppressed human desires and democratic ideals.

Introducing *Civilité* to Colonial America

The emergence of self-restraint as the dominant form of decorum coincided with the colonization of North America. Religious communities such as the Puritans who made settlements in the New World valued the manners and morals that had taken hold of society: "The inhabitants of both Plymouth and the Bay Colony accepted the premise of a rigid society, the only kind they were acquainted with" (Carson 1966, 4). Throughout the settlements' struggles, the colonists developed a new and more practical identity that guided their decorum. Slowly, as the settlers' new environment modified traditional English codes of manners, "the Puritan slowly dissolved and the Yankee appeared" (Carson 1996, 6). The early colonists prized intelligence, good character, thrift, and property ownership. Entrepreneurs and speculators were able to gain high standing in society despite lacking noble blood. Nevertheless, manners and morals remained the bedrock of beginning civilized interactions in colonial America.

The quintessential Founding Father, George Washington, showed a deep commitment to proper behavior. This is seen in Washington's 110 numbered "Rules of Civility and Decent Behaviour in Company and Conversation." Many of the rules in the compilation stress the self-control needed in every situation:

> 5th: If You Cough, Sneeze, Sigh or Yawn, do it not Loud but Privately; and Speak not in your Yawning, but put your handkerchief or Hand before your face and turn it aside.

Other rules gave moral advice and an optimistic outlook, marking the beginnings of the American political experience and spirit:

> 110th: Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire called confidence.

Washington's "Rules of Civility and Decent Behaviour" implied that through sensitivity to social cues and self-respect, one had the ability to control his local environment (Herbst 2010). This sentiment that the people had power to impact their surroundings and social status inspired the rise of democratic politics after the American Revolution.

The American Revolution can be viewed as the first true instance of American political incivility. Disenchanted by injustices under British Rule, the colonists sought to establish their own identity. Patriot groups in the major colonies abandoned their English *civilité* and turned to revolutionary street politics and protests to get across their dissatisfaction with Royal Government (Beeman 2004). Notable yet politically groundbreaking events such as the Boston Tea Party were considered righteous acts of civil disobedience not only against the unjust British policies but also their stifling standards of decorum (Starr 1998). In turning to war, the colonists proved that their identification with the American ideals of self-respect and localized liberties was stronger than the stifling gentility of the Crown.

The American Revolution also exemplifies the idea of civility as a historical-social construct. Once the status quo of the old British *civilité* no longer served the colonists as the behavioral ideal, they abandoned it in favor of more equalized and democratic principles.

Political Civility in the New Nation

In the time leading up to the Revolution, each colonial settlement developed its own set of behavioral norms that were reminiscent, yet morally distinct, from British *civilité*. The elite planters of Virginia and the gentlemen of Massachusetts Bay valued education, liberty, and the ideology of classical republicanism (Beeman 2004). The colonial assemblies, in cooperation with Parliament and the King's governors, practiced politics similarly to traditional Englishmen.

Because the new American colonies lacked a visible present monarch or a hereditary class of nobles: “the more egalitarian, open-ended, and geographically mobile character of the American social order tended to muddle traditional assumptions about the relationship between political leadership and social hierarchy” (Beeman 2004, 25). This disjunction proved to be a source of both dynamism and instability in politics.

Meanwhile, the lower-class colonists and backcountry settlers in the South and West reflected an entirely different standard of conduct. Frontiersmen inherently distrusted government and scorned religious affiliation (Fitzgerald 2007). Their family and community structure was loosely based on ties of convenience for survival. Aggressive and threatening, these frontiersmen were more likely to resolve conflicts through violence than their wealthy counterparts, who depended upon deliberation in the face of political disagreement (Elias 1978). “Rough-and-tumble” fights were frequent; the Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina legislatures were forced to make it a felony to “cut out the Tongue or pull out the eyes…or bite off the nose” of another person (Kasson 1990, 15). When Englishmen visited the wilderness, they described the settlers as being “as rude as the Common Savages, and hardly a degree removed from them” (Beeman 2004, 164).

At the Constitutional Convention in 1787, the Founding Fathers chose to devise a bicameral legislature that could check the populist movements of these “savages.” They felt that relying solely on a House of Representatives, where proposed representatives held very short terms in office, would make the legislative branch too susceptible to the whims of popular opinion. The Framers thus created the Senate to contrast and oppress the ascension of factions and the volatility of popular will. Senators, who had longer terms in office and more opportunities for free-flowing deliberation on issues, could slow down the legislative process as

to delay impulsive policymaking (Loomis 2000). This rationale behind the Senate once again underscored the Founding Fathers' call for self-control and the ability to manage one's own surroundings through a representative democracy. After the convention, one Framer justified the importance of civil, reasoned debate in the proposed legislative structure within the pro-ratification Federalist Papers. Specifically, in the Federalist Papers #10 and #51, James Madison – the "Father of the Constitution" − warned against the rise of uncontrolled political factions that could seemingly take hold of the people's will.

The balance displayed at this time in early American history between the desire to limit the people's impact while also giving them a voice in government proceedings is characteristic of Norbert Elias's explanation of the historical framework that guides political civility and its continual renovations within societal structure.

> Two phases can be clearly distinguished: a phase of colonization or assimilation in which the lower and larger outsider class is still clearly inferior and governed by the example of the established upper group which, intentionally or unintentionally, permeates it with its own pattern of conduct, and a second phase of repulsion, differentiation or emancipation, in which the rising group gains perceptibly in social power and self confidence (1982, 311).

The Founding Fathers, representing the elite of American society, reflected the habitual *civilité* of high society in their attempt to check the public's influence on government. Many Founders expected for the elite to govern from on high as trustees responsible for the public welfare and for those who were not worthy of being directly involved in politics. Yet the new American principles of life, liberty, and equality immortalized in the Declaration of Independence slowly made room for the common man in the political sphere. Around the turn of the century and throughout the 1800's, as more citizens were given the opportunity to become involved in local politics, the norms of political decorum somewhat loosened toward resentment,

rancor, and rudeness. This shift toward what foreigners called the "rude republic" meant yet another contextually-based alteration to the civility paradigm (Altschuler and Blumin 2000).

The Representative Republic of the Nineteenth Century

Nineteenth-century America saw the first real divide between the manners of polite society and the norms of political behavior. While certain *civilité*-inspired norms of etiquette still guided social routines, particularly among the upper class, the rise of party politics, the development of the so-called "political machine," and the contentions surrounding the Civil War resulted in a far less civil political culture ruled by average citizens.

Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville's seminal text, *Democracy in America*, provided an analytical framework around which to discuss nineteenth century America. Tocqueville's accounts of the nation during his travels in 1831-32 offered poignant praise and critique of American political and social society (Kershner 1983). In France, Tocqueville lived in the last throes of European aristocratic political power. When he visited America, Tocqueville recognized the divergent emphasis on popular political participation in the United States: "The people reign over the American political world as God rules over the universe" (qtd. in Milkis 2008, 124). While basic economic disparities maintained some semblance of a class system in America, Tocqueville claimed that Americans' individualism, strong work ethic, and willingness to participate in voluntary associations (he saw America as a "nation of joiners") contributed to a classless society that enfranchised average citizens to express political opinions (Kershner 1983). This new attitude toward representative democracy allowed for its institutions to succeed in the new nation unlike anywhere else in the world.

With respect to social society, the persistence on values of gentility for the well-bred American elites continued to grow. "By the late nineteenth century the 'civilizing process' had

so advanced…that those who seriously contemplated daily life in colonial America increasingly felt themselves looking backward over a great divide to what was in significant respects a coarser age" (Kasson 1990). Economic stratification and the rank-order society allowed for more genteel Americans to carry on and further refine their behavior to contrast themselves from the lower classes.

Yet as Tocqueville noted, democracy made room for a thriving middle class of citizens who continually reached new levels of wealth from succeeding in business or trade (Kershner 1983). This newly established middle class longed to emulate the manners of affluent, aristocratic families. Technological improvements in printing and bookbinding resulted in a novel entity which prescribed the proper actions for the civil American: the etiquette manual (Herbst 2010).

In the pre-Civil War decades of the century, an average of three new etiquette manuals were published per year (Kasson 1990). With titles such as "Hand-Book of Etiquette," "Guide to True Politeness," "The Standard Book of Politeness," and "Genteel Behavior," the manuals were full of advice for nearly every social situation: "on housekeeping, medical care, letter writing, child raising, business and legal forms, lessons in elocution and public speaking, and miscellaneous matters" (Kasson 1990, 45). As the genre grew steadily in popularity, books were produced for different audiences, including those with more middle-class means who hoped to adopt the decorum of high society.

While etiquette writers mostly focused their manuals on private or personal etiquette, many felt drawn to comment on public and political issues (Kasson 1990). Since the writers were mainly European, they criticized Americans' lack of social traditions and assertions of egalitarian politics. In Europe, distinct classism kept the "rough and unwashed" out of the

shaping of politics (Kasson 1990). The political climate in nineteenth century America appeared grossly uncivil in contrast. Political rancor gripped the nation so soon after its founding that political scientist Richard Scher once quipped that political mudslinging is "as American as apple pie" (1997, 27).

Campaigns, the Civil War, and Political Machines

Much of the acrimony characterizing nineteenth century politics can be traced back to three developments: the rise of political parties, the conflict between the North and the South resulting in the Civil War, and the later development of urban political machines. Ideological factions, led by Founding Fathers Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, fatefully rose to guide the political system not long after George Washington warned against the "Spirit of Party" (Milkis 2008). Incivility thrived within the burgeoning party system of the nineteenth century: "The primacy of political parties was the dominant fact of this era" (Altschuler and Bulmin 2000, 47). Tocqueville noted that America's frequent democratic elections made for "ceaseless agitation…it is incontestable that people frequently conduct [elections] very badly." (qtd. in Kershner 1983, 16). Charles Dickens also observed that "as soon as the acrimony of the last election is over, the acrimony of the next begins" (qtd. in Shea 2010, 4). The intense party vitriol of the era is best characterized by analyzing several raucous presidential political campaigns, where partisan strategies were more malicious than at any other point in American history.

The first truly partisan showdown emerged in 1800 between John Adams and the Federalists and Thomas Jefferson and the Democratic-Republicans. Although it was only the nation's fourth presidential election, Scher characterized it as "one of the nastiest on record" (1997, 29). Adams's reputation as a brilliant statesman and defender of the Revolution was tarnished by an unsuccessful presidency fraught by the possibility of war with France and the

passage of the highly unpopular Alien and Sedition Acts. His vice president and political opponent, Thomas Jefferson, did everything in his power to sabotage Adams's administration, setting the stage for a contentious election. Sympathizers of each candidate chose to attack the opponents in published reports and partisan pamphlets. Democratic-Republicans attacked Adams, calling him a "fool, hypocrite, criminal, and tyrant" who sought to undo the great experiment of democracy. Adams's worst critics accused him of wanting to establish a monarchy and of having a string of mistresses sent over from England (Scher 1997).

The Federalists were no cleaner in their attacks of Jefferson:

> Thomas Jefferson is a mean-spirited, low-lived fellow, the son of a half-breed Indian squaw, sired by a Virginia mulatto father…raised wholly on hoe-cake made of coarse-ground Souther corn, bacon and hominy, with an occasional change of fricasseed bullfrog (qtd. in Swint 2006, 183).

While the Election of 1800 is most often remembered as the first peaceful transfer of power from one political party to another party (from the dying-out Federalists to the Democratic-Republicans), it set the precedent for partisan mudslinging that only grew worse with the presidential election in 1828.

The Election of 1828 is widely known as the "corrupt bargain," a four-year partisan struggle based on illegitimate political dealings and the desire for revenge (Milkis 2008). When none of the four 1824 presidential candidates – John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson, Henry Clay, and William Crawford − won a majority of the electoral college vote, the race was thrown into the House of Representatives as prescribed by the Constitution. Clay, the Speaker of the House at the time, covertly agreed to persuade representatives to support Adams's bid in exchange for a cabinet-level position in his administration. The deal resulted in Adams's election as President and the consequent appointment of Clay as Adams's Secretary of State.

Jackson, the popular vote winner and backcountry war hero known as “Old Hickory,” was livid about the deal and crafted his payback throughout Adams’s term.

During Old Hickory’s campaign for president in 1828, his popular appeal rested in his common upbringing and belief in transforming America into a democracy of the people. The campaign was the first to mobilize the popular political support through rallies, parades, and handbills that denounced Adams (Scher 1997). John Quincy Adams’s campaign retaliated against Jackson’s widespread support viciously. Several leaflets accused Jackson of being a cold-blooded murderer. His wife, Rachel, was attacked relentlessly by the partisan press and ridiculed by “polite” Washington society for being unfit to be First Lady. Jackson reacted with fury, dueling and fatally shooting a man who called Rachel an adulterer. Jackson later claimed that the depression that Rachel experienced from the constant snubbing and rumors led to her early death (Swint 2006).

Despite the appalling events surrounding his election, Jackson’s presidency is regarded as a triumph for American democracy because it promoted a spirit of equality of opportunity and represented the triumph of the common man over the wealthy (Carson 1966). The shadow of the old system of *civilité*, where privilege and stuffy decorum characterized politics, had been replaced in the American psyche with an unstoppable democratic spirit.

After twelve years of Jacksonian democracy (two terms under Jackson and one under his ally, Martin Van Buren), the Whigs vigorously sought political power in the 1840 Election. Calling it “less a contest than a circus,” Scher (1997, 35) designated the Election of 1840 as the first modern election because it relied on political organizing and popular media to sell the candidates’ image to the public. The Whigs deceived the American people when promoting their candidate: William Henry Harrison, a War of 1812 hero from the Battle of Tippecanoe. The

Whigs portrayed Harrison as a common, rough-and-tumble westerner who drank hard cider in a log cabin, when he was actually borne of a distinguished Virginian planting family. At rallies nationwide, Whig party supporters sang of "Tippiecanoe and Tyler, too," accepting the cider gimmick and rolling large balls of tin and paper to supposedly "get the ball rolling" for Harrison (Scher 1997). Whig political operatives were delighted at the success of their so-called "strategies;" but in reality, they utilized pure hucksterism, smokescreens, and deception.

The Democrats attempted vainly to fight back at the accusations against incumbent Van Buren's pompousness. They called Harrison a blasphemer and seducer of Indian women. Nevertheless, they could not defeat the Whig strategies. Harrison was elected president in a landslide of 264 electoral votes to Van Buren's 60. It was now apparent that both political parties could implement exaggerated image-making to garner support from common Americans for their candidates (Schner 1997). Thus, glorification of politics as a calling only for gentlemen was essentially abandoned.

While breaking down the walls of political participation solely for elites allowed for a government more representative of the public's desires, the nature of politics became much less civil. Suffrage levels as well as rising forms of mass media increased popular participation and resulted in election turnout rates rising to unprecedented levels. After 1840, voter turnout in nineteenth-century presidential races seldom slipped below eight of ten eligible voters casting ballots (Altschuler and Bulmin 2000). Nonetheless, as the system became more illustrative of national concerns, in the words of one early ex-patriot, "Civility cannot be purchased from them [Americans] on any terms; they seem to think that it is incompatible with freedom" (qtd. in Kasson 1990, 58). The 1840's saw more mobs, riots, and disorderly expressions of public opinion than at any other time in history (Sapiro 1999).

A second factor contributing to the increasing incivility of American politics in the nineteenth century was the rancorous debate over slavery and states' rights that ushered in the Civil War (Uslaner 1993). The discord over these divisive issues culminated in violence in the halls of Congress on May 22, 1856, when the South Carolina Democratic Congressman Preston S. Brooks struck Massachusetts Republican Charles Sumner on the Senate floor with several ferocious blows from a cane, only stopping when their colleagues intervened, thinking Sumner might be beaten to death (Hoffer 2010).

Even after the tumultuous period of Civil War Reconstruction, politics remained horrific. This was particularly evident in the South, where African Americans were persecuted and tormented despite gaining the rights of citizenship. Standards of civility and treatment of fellow Americans was based upon racist ideals (Sapiro 1999). Moreover, it was considered improper for a black man to demand a political voice as strong as a white man's during this time period.

A third and final contributing factor to political incivility in nineteenth century American politics was the advent of local political machines. With so much contention swirling through the political sphere, partisan acrimony escalated through the mechanisms of these political machines. The machines utilized smear tactics and political favors to great effect to ensure that the party bosses' favored candidates were elected. The most efficient machines ran out of metropolitan areas such as Chicago and New York. Party bosses in these areas often played dirty, taking advantage of the system for personal gain. One of the most famous bosses of the late-nineteenth century, George Washington Plunkett of Tammany Hall, New York, stated that he "seen his opportunities and took 'em" (see *Plunkett of Tammany Hall*). Working through a system he called "honest graft," Plunkett and similar bosses profited politically and financially through investing in land parcels and selling them back to the government at an inflated rate. Political

jobs and special treatment were reserved for rank-and-file party members who showed outstanding allegiance to the party platform or the boss's ideals.

With the exception of Chicago's Cook County Democratic Party (Swint 2006), most political machines had essentially vanished by the dawn of the twentieth century. However, during their heyday, they were a significant contributing reason for the decline in civility. When comparing scheming party bosses from the 1890's to America's Founding Fathers - the genteel political leaders who had reigned at the turn of the century – a transformative shift in political principles is apparent. Overall, politics had become a rougher game. But for all of the political machines' faults, their emergence signaled the beginning of a new era in American politics, where average citizens (not just the "old moneyed" elites) could actively participate in the shaping of a party's political agenda.

* * * *

Looking back upon the struggles that exemplify nineteenth century American politics, one can see the rise of incivility and rancor that forever changed the tone of American politics. Kerwin Swint remarked that this shift was a result of contextual phenomena. That is to say, it was the events and public opinions of the era that modified political behavior: "The raw politics of the [nineteenth century] were partly a product of the coarse and ill feelings surrounding…the public at the time" (2006, 233).

Furthermore, the violence and volatility of the periods of Jacksonian Democracy and Reconstruction served an important larger purpose: widening the realm of political influence and participation to more Americans. Through the political tumult, the benefits of representative democracy were extended to common men and to former slaves, who previously had no political

voice whatsoever. Although all citizens were not yet enfranchised by the end of the century, the rancor of the nineteenth century made it a definite period of political progress for America.

The Twentieth Century Situation

The fervor and acrimony characterizing nineteen-century politics quieted down in the wake of World War I. While partisanship remained a perennial issue impacting the civility of political discourse, members of both parties supported the war effort or, as President Woodrow Wilson called it, the fight "to make the world safe for democracy" (qtd. in Milkis 2008, 250). The nation's strong isolationist, anti-meddling sentiment led to a cool-down in overall political activity in the post-war era. The administration of President Calvin Coolidge, who "raised inactivity to an art," personified the public's general lack of enthusiasm for politics at the time (Milkis 2008). Historically, the American people have longed for heroic presidents who can overcome contention and political division to effectively lead the nation. While not heroic, "Silent Cal's" legislative restraint and passive approach to governing thus was appropriate political behavior in the context of the times.

But when the country's economic system collapsed during the Great Depression, the public temperament dramatically and abruptly changed. Protests and anger over the government's inaction with respect to poverty and joblessness surged (Milkis 2010). Rage gripped the nation of tent communities known as "Hoovervilles." World War I veterans stormed upon Washington in 1932 to redeem the war bonuses guaranteed to them by the federal government. When the National Guard was ordered to turn to violence and tear gas to disperse the Veterans' Bonus March around the Capitol, it showed that politicians were not above uncivil behavior in the face of a crisis ("The Bonus Army March").

After public calm was somewhat restored by the economic recovery measures commenced by Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, the nation united in the face of World War II. Patriotism intensified throughout the war effort, resulting in higher levels of political participation and voter turnout levels approximating sixty percent (Shea 2010). Those Americans who lived through the experience of WWII, who unified around defeating common war enemies, were more inclined to civil behavior and sacrifice for the sake of the nation, garnering them the title of the "Golden Generation" (Carter 1998).

The optimistic 1950's saw a surge in associational and voluntary involvement in community and political affairs. Pressures for social conformity, in addition to the time-saving and family-oriented innovations of the suburban lifestyle, made community involvement a typical practice of the time. Membership in organizations such as parent-teacher associations and church-based charity organizations reached new highs. These memberships, which deepened social connectedness and satisfaction, were described by Robert Putnam as "social capital" (1995).

It is the rise in social capital, along with the general satisfaction that typified the period, that makes so many scholars and reporters look upon the fifties with fond nostalgia (Skocpol and Fiorina 1999). They often argue today that we should strive to return to the civility of the fifties (Herbst 2010). Nonetheless, although many people of the decade were happy with being civil, they were also politically complacent. If America was ever to progress toward a more perfect democracy, more shouting and rancor needed to infiltrate its way back into political culture. This is exactly what happened in the subsequent decade, the 1960's (Farber 1994).

The Volatile 1960's

According to Kenneth Cmiel (1994), "As the 1960's opened, civility was, quite literally, the law of the land" (263). But the new decade brought with it a new moral and political consciousness for the American people. Prior to this decade, many of the behaviors, words, and practices that are commonplace today were considered lewd or obscene, and unacceptable in civil society. The emergence of the issues of the civil rights movement and protests over America's involvement in the Vietnam War brought about renewed public outcry and political rancor.

During the sixties, Americans for the first time saw civil rights as more important than civility. When students and leaders began organizing in favor of greater equality for African Americans, they utilized nonviolent demonstrations to work within the accepted etiquette standards of the era. There was an inherent brutality in racial etiquette, particularly in the South, where the caste system demeaned blacks into stepping aside for white people on the street and using segregated facilities (West 1984). Rather than disrupting standards of acceptable decorum, nonviolent protesters from groups such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) undermined the prevailing racial etiquette in the South by using polite behavior to challenge social inequality (Cmiel 1994). Martin Luther King and other prominent activists used peaceful protest methods to illustrate the backwardness of the caste system:

> Rosa Parks, who refused to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama, the students integrating lunch counters in Greensboro, and the marchers at Selma were all not only acting with decorum, they were also all breaking the law, calling attention to the inadequacy of the present system, and violating long-standing white/black custom of the South…it

> was the protesters who displayed civility and the whites who did not (Cmiel 1998, 266-7).

While these nonviolent protests continued throughout the sixties, they faded from prominence and were replaced by a looser, less formal counterculture of protests and the threat of truly violent demonstrations. From the "filthy speech movement" at the University of California at Berkley to the hippies gatherings in parks, young people pushed against the constraints that directed societal decorum in search of a more liberated sense of self (Lipsitz 1994). Experimentation with sex and drugs within this counterculture became more prevalent and was scorned by polite society. Meanwhile, radical black activists split from the earlier civil rights movement in favor of more violent means of protest. Militant groups such as the Black Panthers, who threatened attacks or revenge at any moment, induced great fear in the American people (West 1998). While actual violence was rare, the talk of violence and intensification of protest rhetoric marked a lack of faith in civility in solving national issues.

In addition to the sixties' civil rights protests, a number of other political events provided the impetus for a shift in political civility. The assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Dr. Martin Luther King and Senator Robert Kennedy sobered and saddened the nation (Farber 1994). The inexplicable sadness of these events led to unrest and an urge for a hostile political reaction. The response came soon after in the form of violent political protests to the Vietnam War.

Today, King and other nonviolent protestors are admired and remembered for bringing about social change without violence (Carter 1998). In contrast to the peaceful civil rights protests of the early sixties, the anti-Vietnam War protests were much more contentious. The movement started among students and rose in popularity as the American public watched the war

unfold on television. Vietnam was the first war documented through television news media, and "some observers have faulted television for oversimplifying the complexities of Vietnam or for emphasizing spectacular, but horrifying scenes of combat that shocked viewers into opposing the war" (Pach 1994, 91). The impact of Vietnam on the American political sphere was widespread. Draft dodgers were identified as perpetrators of civil disobedience. President Lyndon Johnson, who was blamed by the public for escalating American involvement in the war, was the first sitting president not to run for reelection in decades (Milkis 2008). Hostility – this time both from protestors and Congress − reached a higher crescendo when President Nixon ordered the secret bombing of Vietnamese forces in Cambodia. While the Vietnam protests have been described as "destructive" and "vicious," they were a significant aspect of the sixties that illustrated average Americans' ability to impact political outcomes (Kennedy 1998).

* * * *

The 1960's are regarded by many scholars as a time of intense political change that resulted in the social deterioration of civility that plagues America today (Skocpol and Fiorina 1999; Herbst 2010). Carter opined that "Manners are dying in part as a consequence of the Second American Revolution that erupted in the 1960's" (qtd. in Kennedy 1998). "Virtuecrats" including Carter assert that the sit-ins, protests, "coarse" language, and general attitude of rebellion infected American culture with incivility and social disconnect to terrible consequences (Kennedy 1998). Carter (1998) has lamented that

> As the sixties swept into the seventies, leaving behind the wreckage of the illusion, there was nothing available to put in its place, no shared meanings no shared commitments, none of the social glue that that makes a people a people…Having abandoned the illusion of commonality, we have adopted an even more dangerous illusion: that social norms are not important and thus we can do as we like (38).

However, Frederic Jameson (1984) has maintained that when looking back at the sixties, the behaviors of Americans at the time can be explained as subject to "opportunities and failures that were inextricably intertwined, marked by the objective constraints and openings of the historical situation" – that is to say, the shifts in civil society can be rationalized as being shaped by the context of the period (178).

While some scholars bemoan that the sixties' volatility launched the "civility crisis" as we know it today, the decade produced a number of positive social changes that strengthened the representative nature of American democracy today. Similar to nineteenth century rancor, the incivility perceived within the sixties' social movements expanded political enfranchisement and civil rights to groups that were historically disenfranchised from political processes. These rights could not have been won without loud, raucous political protests. Thus, the incivility of the 1960's was not only poignant, but necessary for the expansion of American political participation and democracy.

Civility Is Contextual

A review of America's turbulent political milestones and the resulting changes in standards of politeness and behavior over the past two centuries demonstrates that politics has always had moments of incivility (Herbst 2010). Most importantly, the standards of civility are entirely based on context and circumstance: "civility is tied to both historically-shaped larger social formations on the one hand, and the inner working of human relations and personality on the other" (Sapiro 1999, 7). In other words, civility is the construct that shapes the appropriate standards of interaction among politicians, social classes, and different races and genders at

various times in American life. Successive shifts in interaction between these groups provide the framework for understanding political civility (Sapiro 1999).

When it comes to political behavior today, people tend to ask themselves, "Has it ever really been like this?" (Shea 2010). Americans seem to think that something has inherently changed within the political realm to allow for a decline in civility. Like in the past, American etiquette writers have even attempted to write rule books specifically for American political manners − a distinct set of guidelines that could function to lead society's political interactions (Kasson 1990). But by looking through a historical lens, the conclusion is that civility is not an ageless paradigm: "its rules shift over time…civility is, in fact, difficult to achieve in any setting in which people have differences of status, history, culture, or interests" (Sapiro 1999, 18). Instead of enforcing the "rulebook standard" of civil behavior in politics, civility and incivility can be better thought of as the agency or tool upon which Americans can impose political action (Herbst 2010). Essentially, civility depends on context, reflects contemporary social mores, and is manifested by the popular desire to participate in political life.

Furthermore, while it is important to maintain civility for the stability and productivity of political proceedings, history proves that sometimes, a bit of incivility is necessary to extend a political voice to citizens. Many of America's nineteenth- and twentieth- century triumphs that promoted popular participation in democracy depended on initial public outcry and a rough starting push toward positive change.

There is no question that over two centuries, America has experienced its share of rancor, mudslinging, and vitriol. Beginning in the 1980's, America entered another high period of political mudslinging and acrimony that continues to the present day (Swint 2006; Uslaner

1993). There has been an identifiable shift in certain political factors that have made our current political struggles the most uncivil in recent memory (Noveck 2010; Noonan 2010). The next chapter will examine contemporary phenomena or factors that contribute to the sense that today's political environment is less civil.

Chapter Two

Factors Producing Modern Political Incivility

It's a mistake not to see something new, something raw and bitter and dangerous, in the particular moment we're in. –Peggy Noonan

In a March 2010 article for *The Wall Street Journal*, former presidential speech writer and political commentator Peggy Noonan warned that while America has always had its moments of "hurly-burly debate," she had noticed a distinct and dangerous shift in the way Americans currently practice politics. The concerns she articulated reflect a genuine anxiety echoed by citizens nationwide. *What is it* that has made this present moment so incredibly uncivil?

In spite of viewing political civility as a shifting paradigm controlled by historical context, Americans need to decipher what has made this political moment uniquely volatile. An examination of the causes behind the decline in contemporary American political discourse and decorum decried by scholars, pundits, and normal citizens alike is in order.

Starting in the 1980's, noticeable political vitriol increasingly garnered the nation's attention: "the politics of the last twenty-five years are becoming known for a particularly rough, mean-spirited, win-at-all costs game of survival" (Swint 2006, 233). Subsequent to the presidential election of 2008, media reports of almost daily instances of political incivility have spawned numerous criticisms of an uncivil American political discourse and public decorum. Recent high-minded calls for civility from scholars and journalists bemoan that rudeness has become the standard within politics and broader popular culture (Herbst 2010). According to Mutz and Reeves (2005):

> Across America and increasingly around the world, from campuses to the halls of Congress, to talk radio and network TV, social and political

> life seem dominated today by incivility.... No one seems to question the premise that political debate has become too extreme, too confrontational, too coarse (1).

Social scientists have suggested that the uncivil tone of American politics can be attributed to a number of behavioral and societal trends that promote and perpetuate nastiness and mudslinging. These include: rising levels of narcissism and self-entitlement within the American public; the growing influence of the media; the intensification of party polarization and partisanship; and the negative nature of political campaigns. According to these social scientists, the prevalence of each of these trends has molded the political climate toward a context of incivility; therefore, every political issue that is debated or every political event that occurs is regarded with hostility and vitriol.

While speaking about the "urgent task" to repair incivility in politics, former President of the University of Pennsylvania Judith Rodin (1996) said that "We cannot moderate [incivility's] influence unless we have adequately diagnosed and understood the underlying disease." Citing scholarly perspectives and research data, this chapter will explain and evaluate the impact of each factor noted above that allegedly underlies incivility in American political life. Based upon the scholarly perspectives and research data, it can be contended that each phenomenon is partly to blame for the political incivility gripping the nation. Furthermore, incivility can be linked to the American public's increasing cynicism and mistrust in government and the political process.

"It's All About Me" Society: Dangers of Narcissism and Self-Entitlement

Americans have always considered themselves special and unique. Beginning with the powerfully patriotic American creation myth – that the Founding Fathers sought freedom from tyranny and liberty for all citizens – and throughout the development of the nation into a world power, the American public has enjoyed a sense of self-pride and entitlement toward achieving the best lifestyle possible. Since the 1980's, however, evidence suggests that this self-love and

individualism has taken on new levels, severely impairing social interactions and political processes. Moreover, while lamenting that the political system has become an "appalling spectacle," *Newsweek* writer Evan Thomas (2010) wrote that "The problem is not the system. It's us – our 'got mine' culture of entitlement."

Harold Barrett (1991) posited that there are two types of narcissism within our culture: favorable narcissism and unfavorable narcissism. Most people possess a strong or "favorable" level of inherent narcissism that serves to balance dedication to others with a vested self-interest or dedication to oneself (Barrett 1991, 34). A healthy sense of self-respect and appreciation is necessary for social adaptation. This means that every person needs to understand their own desires and personal goals in order to have successful relationships with others. However, some people take this healthy narcissism to an extreme level, such that it becomes adverse to good interactions, or "unfavorable." Barrett characterized people with unfavorable narcissism as "given to vivid imaginings of grandeur, remaining dependent, and vulnerable, suffering severely from criticism and slight" (1991, 38). It is this unfavorable type of narcissism that is partly to blame for incivility within American political discourse.

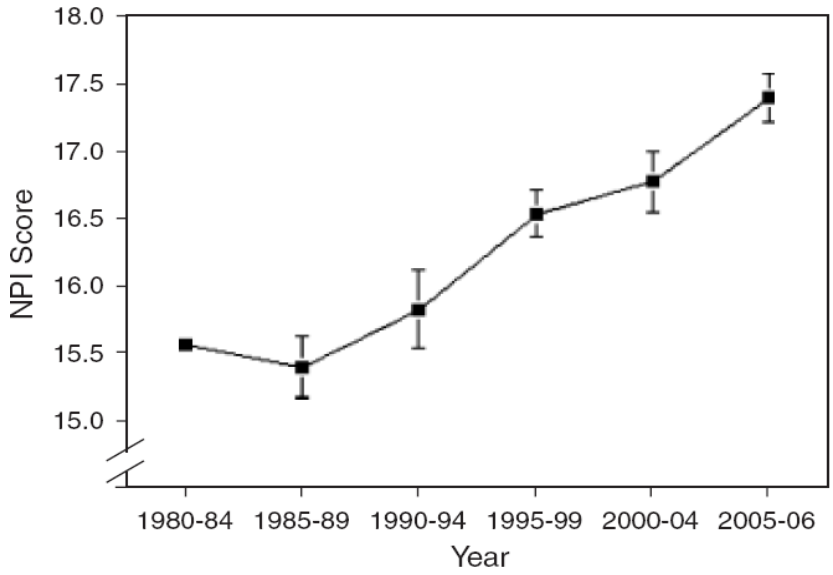
According to Jean Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, narcissism is as growing an epidemic among Americans as the alarming scope and widespread impact as obesity (2009). Narcissism implies more than just personal self-esteem. Twenge and Campbell suggested that narcissists display obsessive over-confidence, self-importance, pride, vanity, materialism, and an endless desire for attention and fame. American self-admiration similar to that which is seen today first rose during the sixties and seventies, when self-expression and individuality were promoted in popular culture (Twenge and Campbell 2009). The parents who grew up in this era passed sentiments of uniqueness and self-entitlement to their children. The middle-class youth and

young adult generations of today were overwhelmingly raised to have a high sense of self-worth. Narcissists borne of this era possess a strong sense of self-importance; they feel entitled to speak their mind on every issue. When they are denied the opportunity to speak, or if someone disagrees with their opinion, they view it as an oppression of their valuable speech rights (Fiorina 2009).

In 2006, Twenge and Campbell used the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) test to assess levels of narcissism among college students. The test, developed in the 1990's at the University of California at Berkeley, presented respondents with forty pairs of statements and asked them to choose which statement out of each pair best described him or her. One statement of each pair was considered narcissistic and the other was considered not to be narcissistic (Narcissistic statements included "If I would rule the world it would be a much better place," and "I will usually show off if I get the chance"). The respondents were not told that the test assessed their level of narcissism.

In comparing 85 samples of 16,275 college students who filled out the NIP between 1979 and 2006, Twenge and Campbell found that narcissism increased among college-age respondents over time, suggesting that each generation of students that pursues higher education is more narcissistic than the last. Furthermore, the largest acceleration in narcissism levels occurred in the most recent years of their study, from 2000 to 2006. Their results are recorded in the graph below:

College Students' Narcissistic Personality Inventory Scores, 1982-2006, from 31 Campuses Across the U.S.



Source: Twenge, J.M., Konrath, S., Foster, J.D., Campbell, W.K., and Bushman, B.J. (2008). Egos inflating over time: A cross-temporal meta-analysis of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory. *Journal of Personality,* 875-901.

According to Twenge and Campbell, the acceleration in already increasing levels of narcissism in the past decade is most likely a product of the rise of online social networking and current celebrity culture. People often associate with peers through online networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and the worldwide blogosphere, in which they can document even the most minute musings and events of their lives for the universe to view. When other users respond to a post, it provides the poster with a sense of importance and a need to broadcast more life details. Blogs and chat rooms not only allow people to express any opinion they may have, but also provide them with a shield to make insensitive comments or rude remarks that they would not dare express in face-to-face or telephone conversation: "Incivility has become shamelessly common, nowhere more than on the Internet…Much of this is driven by the anonymity of the Internet, yet these vitriolic comments display an unmistakable narcissism (Twenge and Campbell 2009, 201).

Meanwhile, in recent years, Americans have become obsessed with the media hype surrounding narcissistic celebrities and reality television manufactured by the entertainment industries. Fans of actors or musicians used to only be able to appreciate their favorite personalities' movies or records; now, thanks to celebrity news tickers online and the maddening presence of the paparazzi, celebrities' private lives are documented for the world's viewing pleasure.

What is most problematic is the fact that the most outrageous and rude celebrity antics receive the most media attention. It does not matter to a narcissist if he is being criticized; it only matters that people pay attention to him and that his notoriety expands (Twenge and Campbell 2009). Rapper Kanye West's outburst during the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards was criticized worldwide, yet he received extensive press coverage in the following weeks. Professional tennis player Serena Williams's blow-up at a referee at last year's U.S. Open was replayed on numerous media outlets. Additionally, the narcissism in reality television has become "a platform for the dangerous and a showcase for the disgusting" (Civitillo 2001). For years now, *American Idol* judge Simon Cowell has ridiculed aspiring singers to tears on television for viewer enjoyment. Any given reality television star will engage in out-of-control behavior - from cursing and excessive drug use to full-fledged onscreen brawls - if it means more time on camera in the next episode.[1]

Twenge and Campbell have referred to this internal reward that narcissists receive from attention to bad behavior as "the quest for infamy and the rise of incivility" (2009, Chapter 12). This suggests that the more consideration we give to attention-seeking narcissists (whether they are celebrities or simply self-absorbed average citizens), the more uncivil their behavior will

[1] Coverage of West, Williams, and others can be found in "Social Media, Reality TV causing lack of civility?" at http://msnbc.msn.com/id/21134540/vp/39948650#39948650.

become to attract further interest. Twenge and Campbell have offered some suggestions to combat narcissism, such as reforming parenting techniques and encouraging humility through volunteering in the local community. But the bottom line remains that narcissism is a real problem impacting the tone of political discourse and public decorum that will most likely continue with the rise of popular technology and celebrity coverage.

Incivility Perpetuated by An "Attack Dog" Media

It is the exposure that well-known narcissists receive for their uncivil antics from the mass media that affirms and perpetuates misbehavior in our culture. This media cycle of reporting on controversial actions goes beyond the world of popular culture and severely influences political behavior. The rise of profit-based mass media conglomerates, particularly through the development in recent decades of 24-hour cable news networks and the internet, has awarded attention-seeking politicians with a platform to gain notoriety through hostile and outlandish conduct. Stephen Carter (1998) has contended that "the television provides the nasty politician with positive reinforcement: he says something outrageous or vicious, he gets free television time, and…he learns to repeat his behavior" (130).

In recent times, particularly in relation to the debate surrounding President Barack Obama's controversial health care legislation, the media has exposed Americans to outbursts from numerous politicians who, without their nasty comments, would deserve little popular attention. The most notorious episode was South Carolina Representative Joe Wilson's shout of "You lie!" toward President Obama during a joint session of Congress in September 2009 (Herbst 2010). Incidents related to the recent health care reform debate included racial and homophobic epithets being leveled at congressmen by protestors and a shout of "baby killer!" within the Congressional chamber itself (Herbert 2010; Shea 2010).

These incidents demonstrate that the nature of political press coverage today certainly contributes to incivility among political actors. Moreover, it encourages ordinary American citizens to discuss politics in a similarly nasty fashion. Judith Rodin (1996) stated it clearly when she said: "…in terms of looking for root causes [of incivility], many people blame the advent of electronic mass media. They surmise that the numbing isolation of television, the anonymity of talk radio have fostered a generation of thoughtless, inattentive, violence-prone video junkies" (8). The media's spin and sensationalized coverage of political spats warps the public's vision of the tone of politics and disillusions peoples' perceptions of government affairs (Wayne 2007).

In previous generations, reporters enjoyed congenial relationships with political officials. Specific journalists were assigned to report on the actions of specific political leaders. These journalists often traveled with that official to recount their speeches and appearances, and developed close friendships with the officials that they were covering. One memorable instance of politician-reporter camaraderie was the bond between President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his press corps (Lomazow and Fettmann 2009). President Roosevelt was able to hide his frailty and use of a wheelchair from the American public due in large part to selective reporting from his media followers. In fact, it was often the reporters who lifted Roosevelt out of his automobile and placed him at a podium to speak, only taking their photos when Roosevelt was firmly rooted in a standing position. The press corps was fiercely dedicated to keeping President Roosevelt's health issues private: "By and large, the press was wholly cooperative. Indeed, on the rare occasion when someone would try to sneak a photo of FDR in his wheelchair, other lensmen would 'accidentally' block the shot or knock the camera to the ground" (Lomazow and Fettmann 2009, 59). Journalists' respect for the President and restraint against reporting on his disability

enabled FDR to maintain an image of vitality and strength throughout the New Deal's implementation and World War II.

The media continued to remain deferential to politicians for decades, particularly with the rise of the "personal presidency" (Milkis 2008). President John F. Kennedy in particular used his personal charm and charisma with the press to influence media coverage and gain popularity and influence among the American people (Milkis 2008). Two devastating events during the early 1970's, however, tainted the relationship between the media and public officials forever: the Watergate scandal and the Vietnam War.

When members of President Nixon's White House re-election investigation unit were discovered trying to bug the Democrats' telephones at the Watergate Hotel, journalists reported every detail, creating an atmosphere so sour with disgust and disillusionment that it threatened the basic civility on which the government depends (Milkis 2008). In addition, the press broadcasted gruesome images from the battles in Vietnam into Americans' living rooms, horrifying the public and galvanizing support for the antiwar movement (Tannen 1998).

According to political scientist Thomas Patterson (2002), "This moment marked a turning point in the relationship between the press and politicians. Journalists believed they had let the country down by taking politicians at their word, and they vowed not to let it happen again" (66). The idea of interpretive journalism emerged from these events. Now, in addition to describing an event to the audience, reporters were expected to analyze the event's repercussions. Interpretive reporting brought about the adversarial relationship that thrives today between the press and government actors (Loomis 2000). Political scientist Larry Sabato traced the historical shifts in the relationship between the press and politicians with the following analogy:

> During the Kennedy administration, the press was like a lapdog, taking government press releases at face value. During Vietnam and Watergate,

> it was like a watchdog, scrutinizing the public behavior of public officials. But the press today is like an attack dog, "constantly chomping at the ankles of public officials every day about everything" (qtd. in Tannen 1998, 54).

Media Spin and Sensationalism

In large part, the rise of interpretive journalism - wherein reporters had the opportunity to interpret as well as report on the news stories– contributed to the uncivil and attack dog techniques perpetuated by the political press. Following the groundbreaking reporting on Watergate and the Vietnam War, journalists felt free to criticize politicians and government proceedings (Patterson 2002; Wayne 2007).

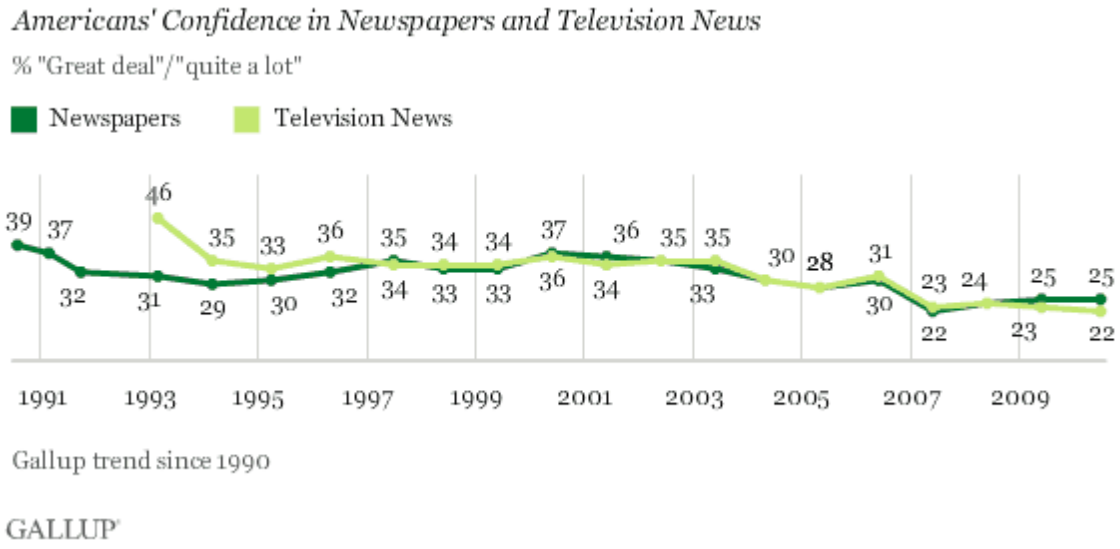
Investigative journalists have discovered that critical or controversial news pieces will garner the most attention from viewers. In order to keep interest up in their stories, reporters tend to create or exaggerate conflict within the political sphere – that is to say, they "sensationalize" or put a "spin" on their story to make ordinary political proceedings seem more interesting and dramatic to average citizens (Patterson 1993). Oftentimes, when a politician did something newsworthy, journalists would flock to his adversary for a quote to tear down the act or the actor. In short, they found conflict "not by careful investigation of whether a politician was sincere or a proposal was sound, but by inserting a contrary opinion" (Patterson 2002).

Additionally, as press corps continually grew, journalists strove to find a way to make their version of the story stand out to the public. This "pack journalism" encouraged reporters to further sensationalize and build hyper-conflict within every story; the old saying goes that "if it bleeds, it leads" (Wayne 2007; Patterson 2002).

Media sensationalism in the coverage of political news and events has had the detrimental effect of perpetuating incivility in American political life. Further, such

sensationalism has tarnished the reputations of politicians and the media alike in the eyes of the American public. According to Thomas Patterson (2002), years of journalists choosing to tell their audiences that their leaders were self-interested, dishonest, and dismissive of the public good had a predictably negative effect on Americans' beliefs about their leaders and institutions. Patterson's Vanishing Voter Project, in which 1,000 Americans were interviewed leading up to the 2000 presidential election, provided evidence that the more that the press exaggerated political conflict in the minds of viewers, the more negative public perception became of both the government and media institutions (2002, 85).

Stephen Wayne (2007) also reported that Pew Research surveys found a drop of 16 percent in respondents who expressed a great deal or some confidence in the press between 1990 (74 percent) and 2000 (58 percent). "Put simply, people today find the press less believable, less accurate, and more biased than they did in the past" (Wayne 2007, 121). Furthermore, Gallup polls from August 2010 indicated that perceptions of television and newspaper coverage are near record lows, with no more than 25 percent of Americans stating that they had a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in either:



Source: Morales, Lymari. (2010). "In U.S., Confidence in Newspapers, TV News Remains a Rarity." *Gallup*. Retrieved from < http://www.gallup.com/poll/142133/Confidence-Newspapers-News-Remains-Rarity.aspx>.

Many Americans have expressed disappointment in an obvious lack of objectivity in political news coverage (Tannen 1998). It has become journalistic practice that even when an issue is one-sided, reporters invent another side to create a slant toward conflict. However, the "troubling trap laid by the two-sides-to-every-issue approach is that sometimes there is no other side; there is only one side: truth" (Tannen 1998, 37). Patterson (1993) has called this practice the press's "game schema," the strategy in which reporters deliver political coverage by focusing on opposition and vitriol. Structuring coverage as a game, where two sides battle for dominance, frames politics and government as entertainment rather than as a steadfast policymaking institution (Tannen 1998).

Furthermore, with the rise of 24-hour cable news networks and internet reporting, where a new story or commentary needs broadcasted every few hours in order to keep the reporting fresh, journalists are encouraged to create more two-sided political drama to fill up the endless space (Wayne 2007). New media technology has contributed to incivility by altering the context and medium for how American receive their news (Graf 2008). Journalists have always reported on uncivil antics; "the difference is that now we hear about every shocking outburst again and again, on 24-hour cable news, on YouTube, on Twitter and on blogs too numerous to count" (Noveck 2010).

Still, as Americans complain about the incivility perpetuated by media news attacks, they continue consuming and discussing the conflict and rudeness portrayed in media reports. This works to only perpetuate the media's game schema. As long as Americans continue to consume news through this framework that brings profit to media conglomerates, they will continue to present political coverage in the current uncivil fashion (Patterson 2002).

For these reasons, the news media can be considered as a factor in contributing to the current political climate of incivility. Ironically, reporters and editors bemoan the lack of civility in their own writings (Herbert 2010; Friedman 2010), but seemingly forget that they are somewhat responsible for maintaining this status quo.

Case Study: Media Reporting on Sarah Palin

There were several instances of aggressive and uncivil media coverage during the 2008 presidential campaign. The death threats and racist slurs hurled at Democratic candidate Barack Obama were a sad signal that America had not yet triumphed over racism (Bahnot 2007). An alarming number of Americans still believe that Obama, a devout Christian, is a practicing Muslim and has ties to Islamic extremists (Begley 2010). But according to Susan Herbst (2010), none compare to the wildly negative and sexist attacks aimed at Republican Vice Presidential nominee Sarah Palin.

A Washington outsider whose brief resume included two years as governor of Alaska, six years as mayor of the 7,000-strong town of Wasilla, and being a self-described "hockey mom," Palin's nomination as John McCain's running mate brought about a media firestorm from supporters of both political parties (Spitzer 2009, 158).

At first, media analysts were impressed by the support that Palin mustered for the Republican ticket in her early rally appearances. They took notice of the warmth, passion, and fresh perspective that she brought to the campaign. Herbst (2010) opined that at rallies, Palin chose to use strategic incivility to engage supporters to an emotional fever pitch. Her attacks on Democratic presidential candidate Obama, calling him a "socialist" and "friend of terrorists" resulted in strong media reactions and brought even greater attention to her candidacy (Herbst 2010).

Soon, the press' view of Palin abruptly changed. The media attacked Palin with the same intensity that she used when speaking out against Obama. Reports focused solely on the anti-Obama mob mentality at her rallies, much to her detriment in the public eye: "Palin's crowds were characterized by the media as frightening, whether they were in fact dangerous or not. And with perceived danger comes journalistic excitement and carelessness in reporting" (Herbst 2010, 38).

Almost as quickly as she swept onto the national political scene, Palin's candidacy was devalued by media reports to the status of a political joke. Investigations reported on several scandals from her Alaskan political career, including her firing of the state public safety commissioner for refusing to fire a state trooper who had gone through a nasty divorce from Palin's sister, and for her record of hiring her high school friends to cushy jobs in state government (Spitzer 2009). Her modest educational background and political credentials, coupled by her attractiveness and supposed reluctance to prepare for interviews, earned her the nicknames in the media as "Caribou Barbie" and the "Wasilla hillbilly" (Spitzer 2009).

Interestingly, the harshest criticisms of Palin came from fellow Republicans. These party insiders wrote that she was "clearly out of her league" and "a fatal cancer to the Republican Party." In an NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll two weeks prior to the election, 55 percent of respondents considered her unqualified to be vice president, with 47 percent viewing her negatively (Spitzer 2009, 159).

Palin's candidacy may have played out very differently if the media had not attacked her so viciously. Her strategic use of incivility on the campaign trail backfired disastrously and enabled over-the-top media critiques that most likely swayed the outcome of the election out of her ticket's favor (Herbst 2010). The negative rhetoric surrounding Sarah Palin's Vice Presidential

campaign demonstrated the power of the news media to formulate public opinion and perpetuate conflict in order to increase news viewership.

Experiments: The Effects of Televised Incivility on the Public

In addition to studying particular episodes where the media perpetuated incivility, political scientists have produced experimental research on the influence that uncivil media coverage plays played in forming public opinion. In these cases, the effects of televised incivility – similar to those seen on 24-hour cable news networks – were examined.

A study conducted by University of Pennsylvania professor Diana Mutz and Stanford University professor Byron Reeves (2005) theorized that when people were exposed to televised political disagreements that violated social norms of civility and polite expression, it adversely affected their trust in government. The study conducted three laboratory experiments as a basis for its findings. The variable element in these experiments was the extent to which politicians exchanged political viewpoints in a manner that violated the typical norms of face-to-face conflict.

Subjects in the Mutz/Reeves study were exposed to systematically different versions of four different political disagreements, with varying degrees of civility and politeness, in these expressions of political difference. The results of the experiments suggested that televised political differences of opinion do not harm subjects' attitudes toward politics and politicians, but the levels of incivility they portray do indeed decrease trust in government. Thus, the study found that subjects were not bothered by political disagreement they saw, but rather by the uncivil way in which disagreement was expressed.

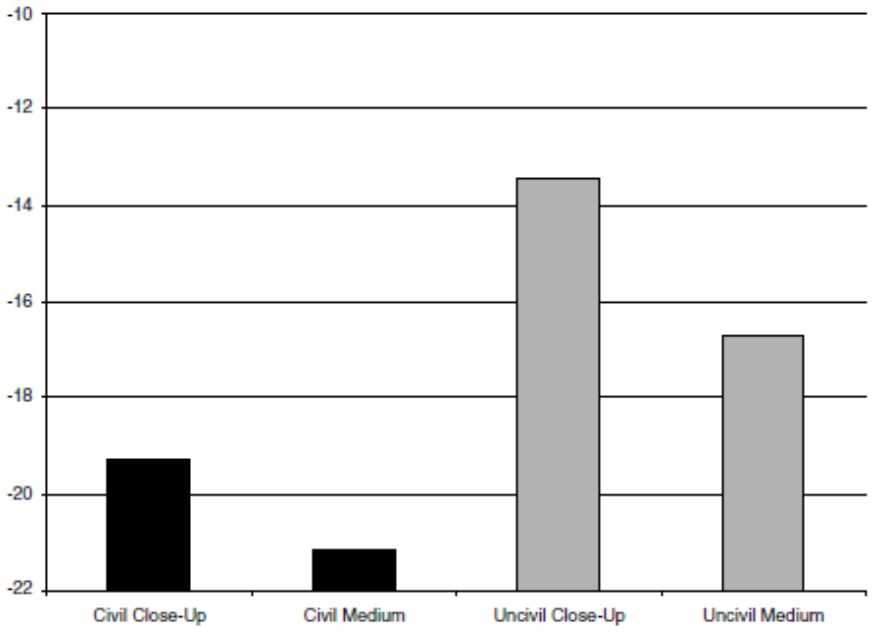
Building from Mutz and Reeves' findings, Mutz (2007) created another study on televised political discourse which focused on its implications for how citizens perceive political

opposition. The study recognized that televised political discourse is unusually uncivil relative to everyday conversations because it creates an up-close, visual impression that, quite literally, puts the political speakers "in your face." Thus, the study sought to find what political television's tendency to violate everyday norms of civility and personal space said about its ability to serve as a source of information about a legitimate opposition.

Using an experimental design that presented subjects with political discourses that ranged in levels of civility/politeness as well as in camera perspective, the pattern of findings suggested that uncivil discourse on television routinely damaged perceptions of the candidates and issue arguments that subjects were already prone to dislike.

By attaching electrodes to subjects' palms and measuring the skin conductance level (SCL), Mutz was able to measure the emotional arousal or irritation that viewing uncivil discourse produced in the subjects and compare it to the effect of civil discourse. The graph of Mutz's findings below depicts that when viewing uncivil political arguments, especially when the camera perspective was "close-up" or "in your face," subjects experienced much stronger physiological side effects, confirming that TV journalists' focus on incivility harms viewers perceptions of politics.

FIGURE 1. Emotional Arousal by Civility and Camera Perspective (Experiment 1)



Note: Dependent variable was measured using skin conductance. A repeated measures analysis of variance indicated that uncivil discourse was significantly more arousing to viewers than a civil version of the same political discussion ($t = 14.38$; $df = 1,299$; $p < .001$). The close-up camera perspectives was significantly more arousing to viewers than the same event shown using a medium camera perspective ($t = 28.90$; $df = 1,299$; $p < .001$).

Source: Mutz, Diana. (2007).Effects of "In-Your-Face" Television Discourse on Perceptions of a Legitimate Position. *American Political Science Review*, 101(4), 621-635. Retrieved from <http://apsanet.org/imgtest/APSRNov07Mutz.pdf>.

It is clear that the experimental designs in both studies (Mutz and Reeves 2005; Mutz 2007) were limited in their findings and oversimplified results. The typical problem facing experiments for any political study involves their external validity because the artificial setting of a laboratory often cannot be reproduced. This problem is further compounded in both studies by poor data sampling which contained only undergraduate subjects and did not reflect a nationally representative sample. Mutz and Reeves acknowledged these problems with the validity and reliability of their study, stating that most subjects could not accurately report levels of exposure specifically linked to televised incivility, which is often beyond most people's capacities (2005, 12). Furthermore, subjects who were more inclined to distrust government and American politics

may have provided inaccurate and biased measurements for detecting uncivil television content. If so, the possibility of reverse causation or spurious relationships could have resulted merely from the subjects' salient distrust of politicians while watching television. Nevertheless, these experiments provide quantitative evidence that media coverage certainly plays a role in public perceptions of the current political climate of constant incivility.

The Polarization of Political Parties

As noted earlier, the media often contributes to political rancor and incivility by converting every political issue or opinion into a heated and contentious two-sided conflict. The two-party system in America also provides the ideal backdrop for conflict of this sort. Increased ideological distance between the parties and higher levels of party identification among voters are among the major factors that contribute to political incivility.

America has witnessed many eras of political intensity and partisan acrimony (Shea 2010). Many scholars accept that the two major parties undergo cycles in which they gain and lose adherents. Party allegiances wane, electoral coalitions shift toward split-ticket or Independent voting and enthusiasm for politics decreases. When the parties rebuild or grow in scope, loyalties intensify along ideological lines (Wayne 2007).

This partisan cycle has run its course throughout recent decades. With the notable exception of prominent political scientist Morris Fiorina (2009), who believes that most Americans today are relatively moderate in their beliefs, most scholars believe that the American party system is experiencing a resurgence, thus impacting levels of party identification and the civility of political proceedings (Saunders and Abramowitz 2007; Kimball and Gross 2007). In fact, partisan intensity may seem particularly high today because America is coming out of a period of "subdued political engagement": party identification and interest in politics was

extremely high post-World War II; waned from the 1960's to its lowest levels in history in the 1990's; and has resurged in the twenty-first century (Patterson 2002; Shea 2010). Princeton political scientist Nolan McCarty has stated that, "party polarization is at the highest level ever under the Democratic/Republican party system going back to the Civil War" (qtd. in Hunt 2010). Furthermore, data from recent National Election Studies suggests that there is a growing gap between Republicans and Democrats in terms of ideological identification, with Republicans becoming more conservative and Democrats more liberal (Saunders and Abramowitz 2007).

Many political scientists welcome the resurgence of a strong party system because it increases voter turnout in elections and provides the public with the clear policy alternatives, candidate options, and another check on the party in power (Wayne 2007). Major concerns, however, have arisen from amid the political system that partisanship has grown far too extreme and hostile, to the point that it has deterred all possibility for effective collaboration in governance. According to *New York Times* columnist Albert Hunt (2010), "Washington doesn't work these days; on that there is a rare bipartisan consensus." Similarly, his colleague Thomas Friedman (2010) opined that the partisan gridlock and attacks on political leaders that characterize our national discourse threaten the legitimacy of American democracy.

Declining Comity in Congress

The incivility in American politics due to intense polarization and party politics perhaps is best exemplified by the nation's "deliberative body": Congress (Loomis 2000). A general consensus has grown among scholars that interpersonal relationships between members of Congress have become nastier in current sessions as compared to the so-called "Golden Years" of the 1950's-60's, when courteous and honorable decorum set the tone for discourse and deliberation in the United States House of Representatives and Senate (Uslaner 1993). Indeed, it

is difficult to imagine a contemporary congressional leader bragging as did Republican chief Joe Martin in the 1950's about how his "long and close friendship" with Democratic Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn "enabled [him] to obtain for our side more patronage, such as jobs around the Capitol, than we [Republicans] as the minority, ever would have got otherwise" (qtd. in Uslaner 2000, 46).

While congressional relationships have become more professional and diplomatic since the Rayburn Era, a period when congressional dealings took place over brandy in smoke-filled offices, congressional scholars and even today's representatives themselves mourn the decline of comity and compromise in Congress and how the current partisan climate has impaired the development of friendships from "across the aisle (Uslaner 1993). Long time Senator and current Vice President Joe Biden lamented the shift in behavior, remarking that in the 1980's, "there's much less civility than when I came here ten years ago. There aren't as many nice people as there were before" (qtd. in Ahuja 2008, 9). In regard to the recent debate over health care reform, "many senators said the current vitriol was unlike anything they had seen. 'It has gotten so much more partisan," said Senator John D. Rockefeller IV, Democrat of West Virginia. 'This was so wicked. This was so venal'" (Herszenhorn 2009).

Overall, decreasing levels of cordiality, common courtesy, reciprocity in political dealings, and compromise among members of the opposing parties has moved Congress in a negative direction (Uslaner 1993). In his book, *Congress Behaving Badly* (2008), Sunil Ahuja (2008) encapsulated the disconcerting trend:

> The primary fact is that the U.S. Congress has become a bitter place. The last few decades have seen an enormous rise in hostility and confrontation. Many in the new crop of members, from both sides of the aisle, are intensely partisan in their political orientation, who often engage in acrimonious and uncivil behavior and readily question the motives of their colleagues (xiii).

Ahuja and Uslaner (1993; 2002) have both conducted survey research and extensive analysis on what factors are behind the rise in congressional partisanship and incivility. They cited varied reasons ranging from institutional factors such as the redistricting or gerrymandering of congressional districts and divided control of the executive and legislative branches, to more social and cultural issues, such as the rise of political individualism and the impact of the adversarial news media.

Moreover, partisan gridlock and the lack of congressional efficacy have led to plummeting levels of public support and confidence in Congress as an institution (Ahuja 2008). Through opinion polling, John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse (1995) have identified "Congress as public enemy" in the minds of average citizens. Dismal public attitudes toward Congress were further exacerbated by the partisan vitriol broadcast during the recent debate on health care reform (Noveck 2010). This is confirmation of the observation made in Chapter One that incivility thrives in historical moments fraught with social concerns and attempted political reforms. This particular moment - burdened with hyper-partisanship in addition to a serious economic recession, an energy crisis, and health care reform - will only calm when the rancor subsides to make way for consensus-building and compromise once more (Herbst 2010).

The Nasty Nature of Campaigns: Negative Advertising

Another factor in the perceived increase in political incivility in America is the increasing nasty conduct of political campaigns. The most damaging and incendiary comments that the political parties make about one another occur along the campaign trail. To draw public and media attention away from themselves and onto their opponents' faults, many candidates choose to "go negative" (Wayne 2007). This strategy of going negative entails a candidate making personal- and issue-based attacks on why his opponent should *not* be elected, making himself

appear to be the better, more responsible option by default (Devine 2008). Plenty of candidates have gone negative or employed "mudslinging" throughout American history to great success, making it a classic and influential tool to use on the electorate (see Chapter One). But since politics today is already so intensely divided along partisan and ideological lines, going negative presents dangerous threats to civility.

Using hyper-partisan imagery and stereotyping today enflames passions in ways not seen in previous campaigns (Wayne 2007). As Stephen Carter (1998) wrote, "What has changed in America, making these political battles more dangerous and thus helping to create our incivility crisis, is not the tenor of our politics. What has changed is *everything* else" (126).

The shifts that have been most significant to the continued usage of negative advertising techniques in political campaigns are technological advancements in broadcasting and reaching voters. While the press often plays the role of "middle man," reporting on candidates' negativity and mudslinging, campaigns also now have the opportunity to send their message directly to certain voters by purchasing time on television or through internet appeals. Ever since the infamous "Daisy Girl" ad that President Lyndon Johnson's campaign team ran in 1964 – claimed by many observers as the dirtiest political ad ever − effective televised attack ads are renowned for causing a stir among the public, even if they are aired only once [2] (Geer 2006; Swint 2006; Carter 1998).

As John Geer had predicted in 2007, negativity was central to the 2008 presidential election. The rise of "e-politics," or campaign attacks waged online, provided a new medium for the nasty tone (Frantzich 2009). While the candidates (more so Barack Obama) benefitted from online grassroots organizing and internet donations, the online networks and blogosphere proved to be hazardous breeding grounds for vicious partisan mudslinging. Furthermore, thanks

to the internet, "there is no such thing as 'off the record' on the campaign trail anymore" (Frantzich 2009, 140). Candidates are only one quick YouTube clip upload away from seeing an offhandedly insensitive comment go viral for viewing by a limitless audience of viewers. While some voters were disgusted by all the campaign incivility displayed online, many often felt that it gave a better and more realistic gauge of each candidates' character (Frantzich 2009).

There are two scholarly perspectives on the role negative ads play in campaigns. First, as mentioned in relation to internet incivility, many political scientists believe that negativity has the detrimental effects on the electorate of reinforcing hyper-partisanship and partisan stereotyping, turning off voters, and disengaging them from the political sphere (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995). According to Thomas Patterson's Vanishing Voter Survey, seventy-five percent of the public thought that "candidates [were] more concerned with fighting each other than solving the nation's problems" (2002, 51). In a 2000 Gallup poll, nineteen percent of respondents felt that negative advertisements had a place in campaigns, and the vast majority did not think one could learn anything of value from negative ads (Geer 2006). Additionally, the personal attacks that are common in negative advertising take the focus off of the most significant component of electoral politics: the issues at hand (Scher 1997). In this view, campaign negativity certainly is a factor in perpetuating incivility and reducing public faith and interest in the political system: "Negative politics appears to wear some people down to the point where they simply want less of politics" (Patterson 2002, 51).

The second view, advanced most prominently by John Geer (2006), is that negative advertising is actually beneficial to the democratic system. In his of study of negative advertising in presidential campaigns from 1960 to 2004 entitled *In Defense of Negativity*, Geer posited that "negativity plays an important and underappreciated role in democracies. In

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[2] The "Daisy Girl" ad can be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExjDzDsgbww.

fact…the process of democracy *requires* negativity by candidates (2006, 6). After examining the characteristics of 795 advertisements from presidential campaigns, Geer asserted that attack ads are far more likely than positive ads to focus on salient political issues, rather than politicians' personal information.

Although Geer makes a strong case for the educational value of negative ads, the majority of American voters nevertheless frown upon their usage in a campaign. Oftentimes, going negative can be viewed as a desperate, last-ditch effort to sway public opinion, de-legitimizing the entirety of the campaign and political proceedings as a whole (Patterson 2002). Because it is this public perception of going negative that matters most for its establishment as a worrisome issue in the political atmosphere, negative advertisements most certainly serve as a contributing factor to our contextual climate of dangerous partisanship and incivility.

Experiments: Incivility in the Negative Campaign

Teams of political scientists have conducted experiments focused on declining civility in politics resulting from negative campaigning. These studies have been lead by Deborah Brooks and John Geer (2007) and Kim Fridkin and Patrick Kenney (2008).

In short, the purpose of the study conducted by Brooks and Geer was to determine whether such incivility in campaigns actually undermines our electoral process. Through their findings, Brooks and Geer hoped to achieve a more nuanced view of campaign negativity and incivility than is typically assumed by scholars, because as Mutz and Reeves had noted in the study mentioned earlier, "there has been little effort to confirm empirically the negative consequences of incivility" (2005, 1).

At the beginning of their study, Brooks and Geer admitted that a casual look at political discourse suggests that attacks today often go beyond "informative" exchanges. They note, "We

are now talking about *incivility*: attacks that go beyond facts and differences, and move instead towards name-calling, contempt, and derision of the opposition" (Brooks and Geer, 2007, 1).

In an effort to operationalize (or categorize the concept of) incivility[3], Brooks and Geer defined campaign statements as uncivil if they were "inflammatory and superfluous." This definition, in turn, raises further questions of how to determine whether a claim is, in fact, inflammatory and superfluous. Brooks and Geer offered the following clarification: If a candidate were to say, "My opponent has not told the truth to the American people," his or her statement would not qualify as political incivility. If the candidate instead had said, "My *unethical* and *deceitful* opponent has not told the truth to the American people," that statement would be categorically uncivil (2007, 5).

The difference between stating that one's opponent does not tell the truth and stating that the opponent is unethical and deceitful for not telling the truth may strike some as the meaningful, qualitative difference between civility and incivility. Others, on the other hand, might very well disagree, arguing that Brooks and Geer's definition is inherently flawed. Their methodological approach to measuring incivility leaves considerable room for subjectivity in categorization and measurement. Therefore, attributes of superfluous and inflammatory rhetoric cannot be qualitatively valued and are meaningless. In the absence of explicitly objective criteria, determinations of incivility ultimately rest on individual judgments found in scholarly literature (Sigelman and Park 2007).

Brooks and Geer undertook an empirical test to assess the impact of incivility on a large national sample. Their study's research design categorized political campaign attacks into three separate dimensions that they argued are central to understanding both the perceptions and

[3] In social science experiments, "operationalization" is the practice of defining that concept or variable so that it can be expressed quantitatively (Neuman 2007).

effects of different types of campaign messages, especially those that are deemed to be uncivil. These dimensions include: tone (negative versus positive); focus (issue versus trait-based message content); and civility (civil versus uncivil) (2007, 4). The actual messages that they presented to their respondents were typical statements that appear during a campaign, and exhibit different aspects of the separate dimensions. After viewing these messages, the respondents of their study filled out various survey questions about the perceptions of these messages. The respondents whom they surveyed constituted a nationally representative sample, with each of their experimental message conditions averaging 292 respondents.

As mentioned earlier, while Brooks and Geer's operationalization of civility remained somewhat unclear, their descriptions of other factors were much more straightforward. The first dimension concerning the "tone" of a statement distinguished campaign messages based on whether they focused on the *positive* attributes of the sponsor or the *negative* aspects of the opponent. This dichotomy was consistent with much of the literature around campaign tone and advertising (Brooks and Geer 2007, 4).

Likewise, the second dimension Brooks and Geer explored – issue- versus trait- based messages − was also widely accepted (Brooks and Geer 2007, 4). "Trait-based" attacks focus on the personal characteristics (or shortcomings) of an opponent, while issue-based attacks focus on their policy matters. As Brooks and Geer note, this was not a new dimension of analysis; however, prior work in the field has neglected to differentiate between *personal* messages and *uncivil* messages.

Third, in the discussion of incivility, the Brooks and Geer study attempted to establish how uncivil negative messages contrast with both civil negative messages and positive messages. In Brooks and Geer's operationalization of the concepts for the experiment, the civil version of a

negative message would be a straightforward, opponent-focused message (i.e., non-superfluous, non-inflammatory) while the uncivil version adds a pointed insult to the mix (i.e., superfluous, inflammatory). Specifically, they operationalized uncivil messages by adding two strong, pointed words ("dishonest," "stupid," "cowardly," etc.) to an otherwise civil negative message to tackle this key distinction.

After testing hundreds of respondents' perceptions of a campaign message's political civility and its effect on political engagement, Brooks and Geer offered a perspective that contradicted earlier findings. They found that despite what other scholars have suggested (Mutz and Reeves 2005; Mutz 2007), it is not all political incivility that offends people, but it is specifically campaign incivility directed at candidates' personal traits (rather than political positions) that offends viewers. This finding furthers the notion that candidate attacks are responsible for the current public perception of political incivility.

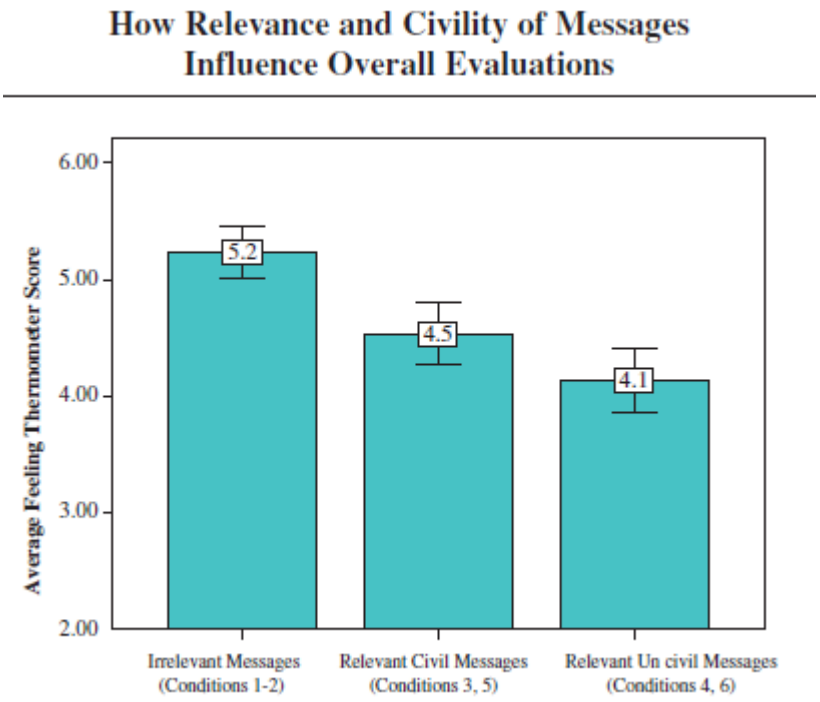
Similar to the theoretical work of Brooks and Geer, Fridkin and Kenney (2008) considered the distinction between civility and negativity in campaign messages. The central question of their research was whether citizens' views about the relevance and civility of negative messages influence how they evaluate candidates. The Fridkin and Kenney study relied on an experimental research design embedded in a public opinion survey examining people's reactions to negative commercials. The survey featured television storyboards based on ads aired during the 2004 election.

In interviewing a national sample of nearly 700 respondents, Fridkin and Kenney found that citizens differentiate between various types of negative advertisements in meaningful and consistent ways. The civility and relevance of the negative commercials significantly influenced their respondents' evaluations of the targeted candidates in several ways, including trait, affect,

and issue evaluations.

This theoretical basis created for "relevance and civility" by Fridkin and Kenney is most interesting and nuanced aspect of their study (2008, 699). In exploring the impact of negative messages, they claimed that it is essential to consider the civility of negative messages in conjunction with the relevance of the messages that they expect to influence evaluations of the candidates. In particular, Fridkin and Kenney hypothesized how negative messages will influence evaluations of the candidates, with the relevance of the message being paramount because they believed that prospective voters are interested only in hearing criticisms and critiques that provide information directly relevant to their lives.

In their study, Fridkin and Kenney found that both the civility and relevance of messages altered the impact that negative messages have on citizens' impressions of candidates. Their experiment asked respondents to give their thoughts on ads commenting negatively on a candidate's divorce (a personal issue seemingly irrelevant to their campaign) and a candidate's questionable business record (a trait that is relevant to his campaign). The findings validated their hypothesis and suggested that relevant and uncivil campaign messages produced the most negative evaluations of the targeted candidates; that is to say, viewers care more about a candidate's business record than his divorce and private affairs. As shown in the graph below, uncivil and relevant messages were most effective in lowering citizens' impressions of a candidate, while "irrelevant" messages were least effective in maintaining a positive impression (Fridkin and Kenney 2008, 708).



Source: Fridkin, K. L., and Kenney, P. J. (2008). The Dimensions of Negative Messages. *American Politics Research*, 36(5): 694-723. Retrieved from < http://apr.sagepub.com/content/36/5/694.full.pdf+html>.

Overall, the experiments by Brooks and Geer (2007) and Fridkin and Kenney (2008) prove that negative campaign ads that attack candidates' personal traits are disliked yet effective in persuading the American voting public. Since these "negative political advertisements are here to stay," it is imperative to understand their role within America's contextual climate of incivility (Fridkin and Kenney 2008, 711). If they are continued despite citizens' recognition of their irrelevance, attack ads only will serve to perpetuate political mudslinging in American culture.

Cynicism and Mistrust

This chapter has examined the scholarly perspectives and experimental research regarding current political and societal trends contributing to America's climate of political incivility: the rising levels of narcissism and self-entitlement within the American public; the growing influence of the media; the intensification of party polarization and partisanship; and the negativity of political campaigns. In addition to fostering incivility, these factors contribute to

another alarming trend: the rise of public cynicism and the lack of trust or confidence in American democratic institutions.

According to Jeffrey Goldfarb (1991), the incivility produced by the factors mentioned above naturally desensitizes citizens' optimism and hope for any political improvements or societal progress. The bitterness of this particular political moment makes cynicism not just a tolerable response to political proceedings, but a reasonable reaction as well:

> Cynicism, in a certain sense, is an understandable and rational response to our present-day circumstances. Television…is saturated with lies and manipulations. Our political leaders are more concerned with reelection than political accomplishment. Social justice…is more distant than ever. For many, proclamations of the American Dream accomplished seem simply to cover up a wide range of American nightmares…For those who look closely and critically at the America way of life, there is much about which to be cynical (13).

Although approaching this political moment with cynicism is a sensible response, it is certainly not favorable sentiment for the wellbeing of American government. Stephen Carter (1998) contended that "Cynicism is the enemy of civility: it suggests a deep distrust" (67). Thus, the more cynical an American becomes from exposure to the uncivil tone of politics, the less trust he will place in the government and political leaders to govern effectively.

The impact of political incivility and the extent of public cynicism can be measured by reviewing polling data on Americans' levels of trust in government. The decline in the tone of political discourse has been matched by a subsequent decline in levels of trust; survey results from the past decade have stated that only about one-fourth of Americans expressed confidence and satisfaction with government institutions (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001; Jones 2008).

In addition to dampening national morale, these disparaging attitudes have a substantial influence on the legitimacy and efficacy of government institutions. When the political process

is perceived as illegitimate by the American people, institutional progress is inhibited. "Public negativity…can affect who runs for, and who stays in, public office, the extent to which new policy initiatives are undertaken by those in office, and even the extent to which people comply with the output emanating from those in office" (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001, 1).

* * * *

American politics has always been contentious, but recently, the tone has reached an unparalleled level of incivility. This chapter identified the developments in America's current political moment that have made it exceptionally "raw and bitter and dangerous" (Noonan 2010). Current vitriol has had the effect of producing a population of cynics who perceive the government as illegitimate and incapable of progress. In the next chapter, the discussion will examine the survey data collected by Allegheny College to test the proposition that all of the above cited contextual trends affecting civility in politics not only shape public opinion but also call into question the legitimacy of the American political process.

Chapter Three

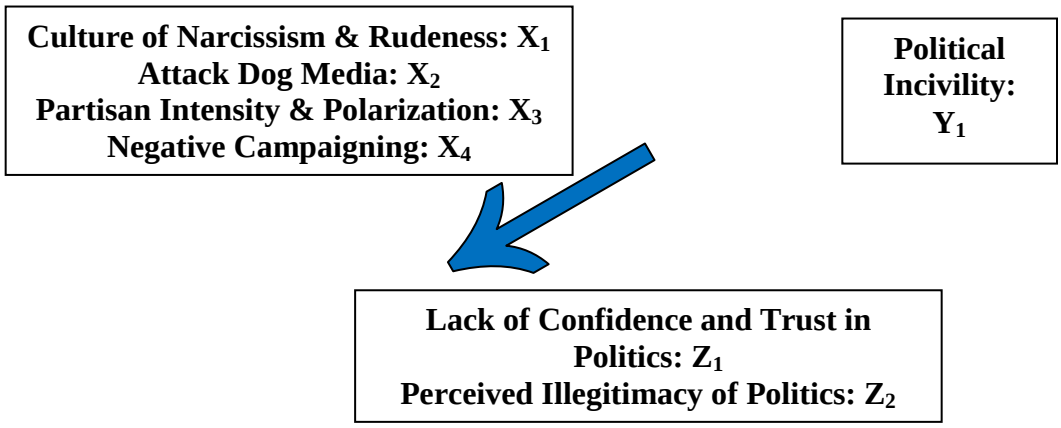
Survey Analysis: Americans' Perceptions of Political Incivility

Many scholars and pundits recently have commented on the shockingly rude behavior, attack dog media, partisan vitriol, and campaign negativity that seemingly have become the norm in American politics. Although their research, experimental findings and perceptions undoubtedly are significant in considering the political incivility, contemplating solely their insights excludes one critical component from the discussion: the perceptions of average Americans. It is the views and observations of the American people – not those of scholars and pundits − that truly establish the legitimacy and influence of the political system and government institutions. Thus, it is important to ask: How do regular citizens feel about the current political climate? Who or what do they feel might be to blame for uncivil political conduct? Are they concerned by the raw and nasty tone of politics, or do they perceive it as just "business as usual" in Washington?

The Allegheny College Center for Political Participation conducted survey research in the spring of 2010 aiming to answer these questions and discern whether the American public has taken notice of the current context of incivility. The data suggests that like political scientists and pundits, Americans are not only aware of the alignment toward incivility, but they are also concerned by how it deters political compromise. In addition, citizens are largely disgusted and turned off by the malicious banter of the political parties and their campaigns as well as the media's inclination to broadcast and perpetuate this vitriol.

This chapter will report specific findings from the survey, which indicates that Americans blame incivility on the same factors laid out by scholarly perspectives in Chapter Two - rising levels of rudeness and narcissism within the American public; the growing influence of the

media; the intensification of party polarization and partisanship; and the negative nature of political campaigns. The survey analysis demonstrates that while these factors contribute to political incivility, incivility itself is responsible for the public's distrust of political institutions. In addition to this lack of confidence, incivility serves to delegitimize the actions of the political system (see chart below). Based upon this finding, it then can be generally asserted that the perpetuation of political incivility, as it is being used now, will have dire consequences for American democracy.



Research Design

In March 2010, Allegheny College's Center for Political Participation commissioned Zogby International to conduct a telephone survey of 1,000 adult Americans. The survey instrument was formulated to systematically gauge public perception of the tone and civility of contemporary politics. Respondents were asked a series of approximately 45 questions which inquired about the respondents' opinions on a number of issues, including the causes of incivility, politicians' willingness to find a middle ground on contentious issues, and the upcoming 2010 Primary and General Elections.

Zogby International employed specific and methodical sampling strategies to acquire a survey sample that was proportional and reflective of the entire American population. A randomly drawn list of numbers to call was produced from a published set of household telephone numbers using American Association for Public Opinion Research-approved methodologies. Zogby's strategy weighted the respondents by region, party, age, education, race, marital status, religion, and gender to make the sample clearly representative of the nation.

Zogby International officially conducted the survey between March 24 and March 29, 2010. The survey had a margin of error of +/- 3.2 percentage points. Professional interviewers conducted the survey with a computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) computer system. In addition to providing a simple system of data entry for the interviewers, CATI's sample management module gave all prospective households in the national telephone list an equal chance of being selected to join the survey sample.

In general, a survey is a useful tool to conduct quantitative research because it measures many variables, tests multiple hypotheses, and infers temporal order from questions about past behavior, experiences, or characteristics (Neuman 2007). The scope and expansiveness of this particular survey presented a unique opportunity to gauge attitudes on and assessments of civility in American politics. "This study, one of the first of its kind, is designed to move beyond anecdotal evidence and punditry to get at the heart of public perceptions regarding the tone of contemporary politics" (Shea 2010, 6). The sections that follow will quantify and provide measures of association of Americans' opinions of the factors that have led to this era of political incivility.

Citizens' Belief in Civility Remains Strong Despite Increasing Rudeness of American Politics

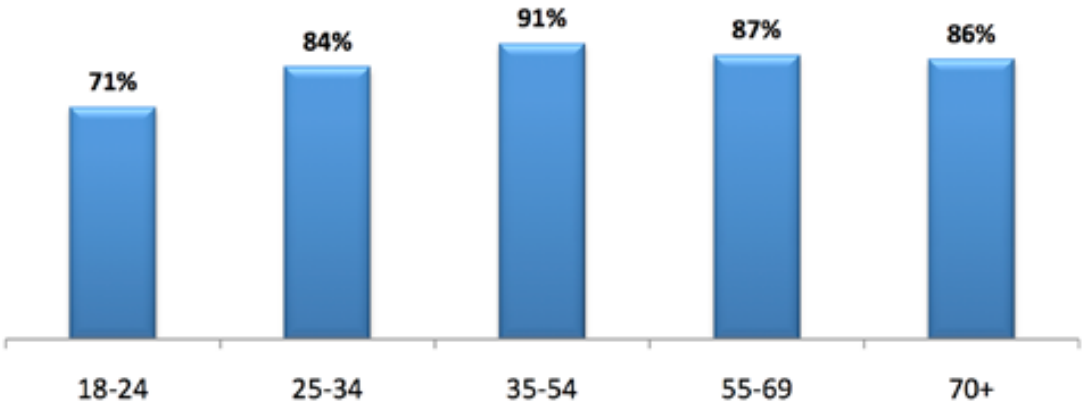
It is one thing for high-minded scholars to comment that the American public has become narcissistic and rude. But it is another for Americans themselves to self-diagnose their more shameful character traits. The results suggested that while Americans recognize that politics has become more contentious and rude than ever before - nearly half of respondents felt that there has been a decline in political civility since Barack Obama's election in 2008 - they still understand the importance of respectful discourse for the betterment of democracy.

The largest majority of the survey resulted when slightly more than 95 percent of respondents answered that civility is important for a healthy democracy. This proves that despite statements from pundits and journalists that something has shifted in political discourse, the American people feel that the basic guiding principle of that discourse should be civility. Similarly strong findings were produced when respondents were asked whether they felt it is possible for people to disagree on political issues respectfully, or they thought if nasty exchanges are unavoidable. Wholly 85 percent felt that respectful disagreement is feasible. These figures give hope that the current political climate has not left Americans completely bitter and faithless about the state of contemporary American politics.

One revealing finding on this topic occurred when the respondent's age was controlled for the question. Young Americans, aged 18-24, were the least likely respondents to see respectful politics as possible in today's atmosphere of contentiousness (Lambda = 0.022). All subsequent age groups were at least 15 percent more likely to say Americans can achieve polite politics (see figure below).

While some might expect the "optimism of youth" to cause college-aged individuals to think people can disagree without vitriol, the youngest generation of adults has had more exposure to the rudeness of popular culture today and has the highest propensity toward narcissism and self-entitlement (Twenge and Campbell 2009). Young people have grown up with the vulgarity of reality television, the brashness of internet blogs and postings, and with parents who promote feelings that they are each special and unique. It appears that some respondents of this generation, being so self-absorbed in their own opinions and importance, could see nasty, defensive exchanges as impossible to avoid when someone questions their personal political positions.

Figure 6. Possible to Disagree Respectfully by Age



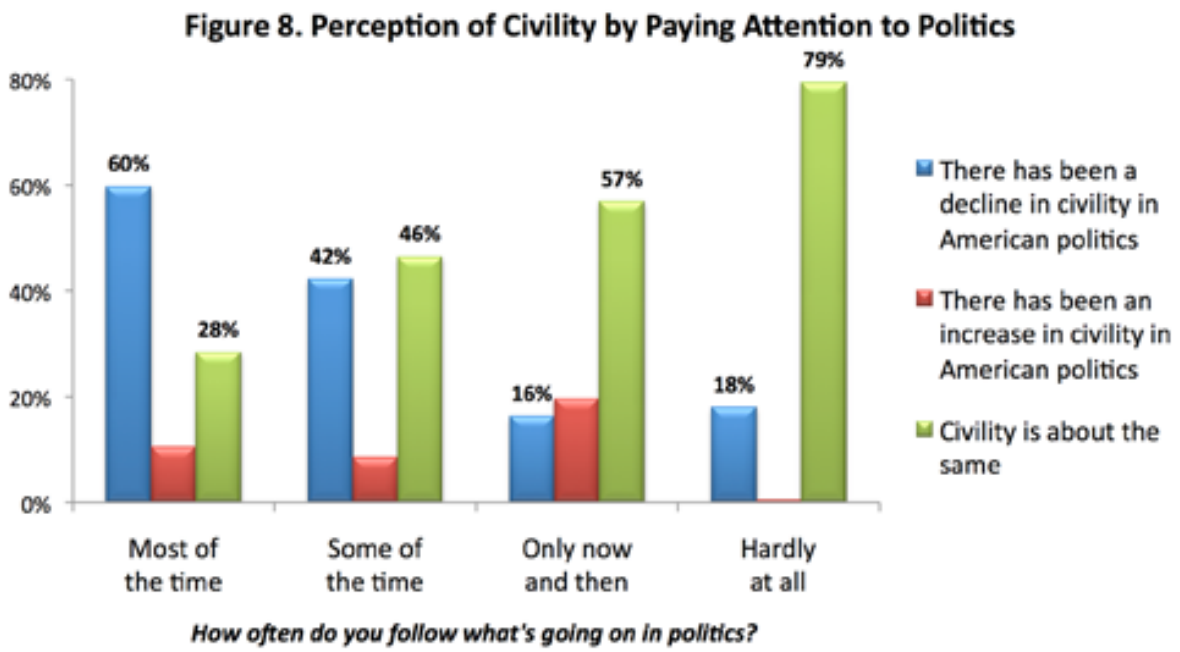
** Respondents were asked if it is it is possible for people to disagree respectfully, or are nasty exchanges unavoidable?*

The Impact of the Attack Dog Media

As noted previously in Chapter Two, scholars have posited that the nature of media reporting of politics has magnified the subsistence of political incivility in the minds of

Americans. The media's growing tendency to produce sensationalized coverage that frames any discussion as a contentious, two-sided battle alters Americans' perceptions of the amount of contention actually existing within a given political event. Thus, it follows that those who pay the most attention to politics by consuming media coverage were most likely to report that they felt the level of civility in politics had declined since Barack Obama's election as President in 2008 (see figure below). It was expected that Americans who choose to inform themselves on the daily partisan and issue-based attacks happening in Washington would report a decline. For example, an American who followed a recent contentious debate, such as the one surrounding the passage of President Obama's health care reform bill, would most certainly have sensed a decline in civility. The media hype seen in reports of racial slurs being leveled at congressmen and montages of the vitriol spewed at town hall meetings nationwide about health care would make any news-follower feel that the nature of the debate had crossed a line.

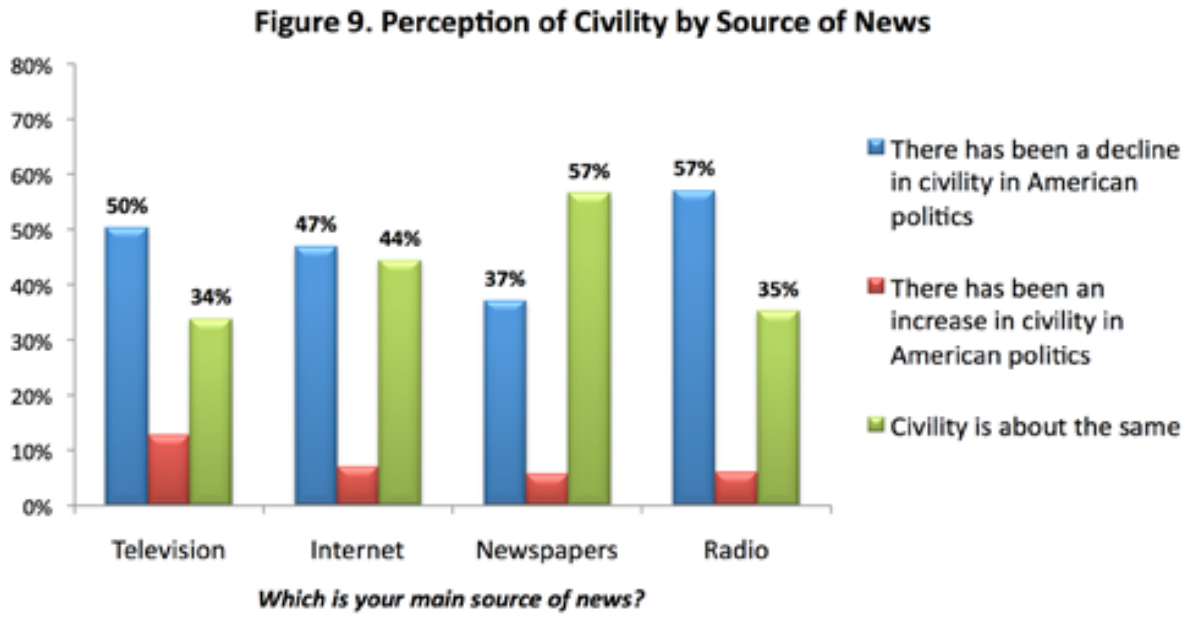
Conversely, those that admitted that they pay attention to politics "only now and then" or "hardly at all" more likely were to simply guess that levels of civility were the same and that the current times were simply "business as usual" (Lambda = 0.169). Those who follow politics know otherwise. This proves the impact that exposure to media sensationalism has on one's perception of the nastiness in political proceedings. The findings are presented below:



Furthermore, since there are a variety of media institutions from which Americans receive information and diverging interpretations of political events, the perceptions of civility based on one's news source can signify which outlets are most to blame for perpetuating the nasty tone. Tellingly, those institutions pointed to most frequently by scholars for causing a heightened perception of incivility in politics – television and radio – had the highest proportion of viewers stating that things have gotten worse (see figure below). 57 percent of respondents who listen to radio as their main source of news and 50 percent of respondents who view television as their main source of news reported that "there has been a decline in civility in American politics" (Lambda = 0.050).

According to Deborah Tannen (1998), viewers turn to radio punditry and cable news networks for their entertainment value because they are most likely to feature "talking heads" that instigate arguments purely to add drama to the issues, thus gaining them more attention and more viewers. This finding supports the view that media institutions are responsible for warping

public perception toward the negative, thus calling to question the legitimacy and efficacy of political institutions in the American psyche.



Partisan Intensity and Polarization

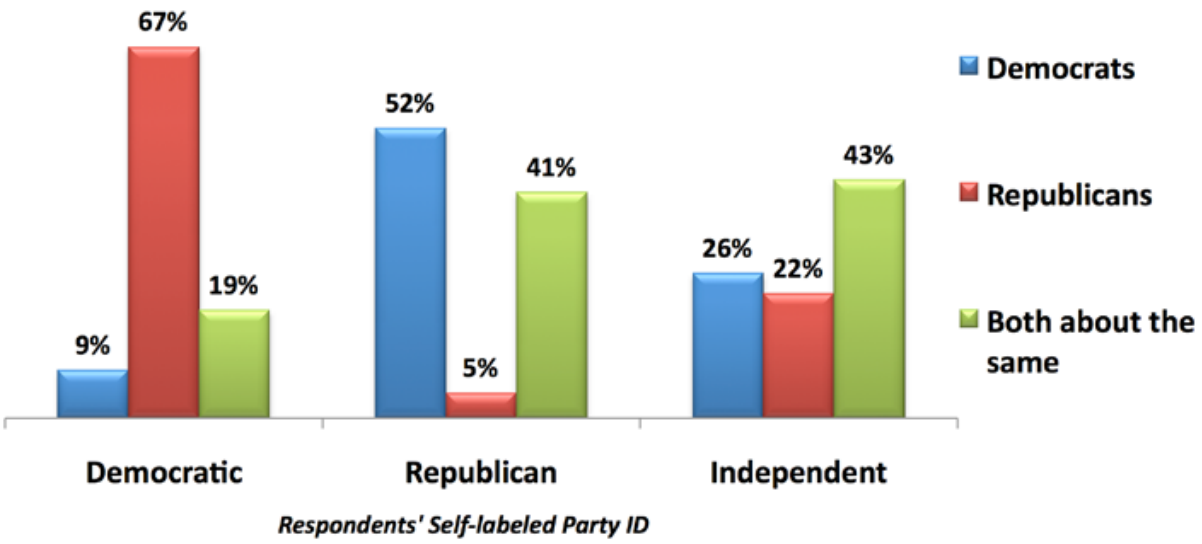
As previously mentioned, the unprecedented rise in uncivil behavior is happening in conjunction with a sharp rise in partisan polarization. Political discussion has become almost completely two-sided, and Americans often feel hard-pressed to decide on which side they belong. Despite the push toward highly partisan identification as presented by the media's coverage of political issues, Americans are not satisfied with the resultant effect that partisanship puts on civility.

First, 77 percent of total survey respondents either strongly or somewhat agreed that "Right now, Washington is broken," suggesting that they feel the tension and divide between the two parties. Second, party identifiers clearly had different perceptions of the progress of the current administration. When asked if things in this country are headed in the right direction or

off on the wrong track, 61.2 percent of Democrats said that America was headed in the right direction, while 87.1 percent of Republicans said the nation are really on the wrong track (Lambda = 0.283). Finally, nearly two-thirds of the members of each political party evenly felt that Republicans and Democrats have been opposing one another more than usual (Chi-square = 37.621). Given the explicit findings from the data collected in the survey, one can opine with some degree of confidence that hyper-partisanship is a source of the incivility plaguing the nation.

Just because Americans were aware that the parties are a source of rancor, however, did not mean that they were any less susceptible to exacerbating the perceived hostile partisan divide. Even though Americans agreed that increased partisan opposition and contention on issues had "broken" the political system, party identifiers surveyed were nonetheless willing to attribute the opposing political party with the sole blame for the acrimony of the present moment. The survey found that a strong measure of association results from controlling for whom the respondent thinks is more to blame for the decline in civility by the respondent's own party identification: 67 percent of Democrats feel that Republicans are to blame, while 52.1 percent of Republicans feel that Democrats are to blame, giving a Lambda value of 0.34 (see figure below).

Figure 18. Who's to Blame by Respondents' Party ID

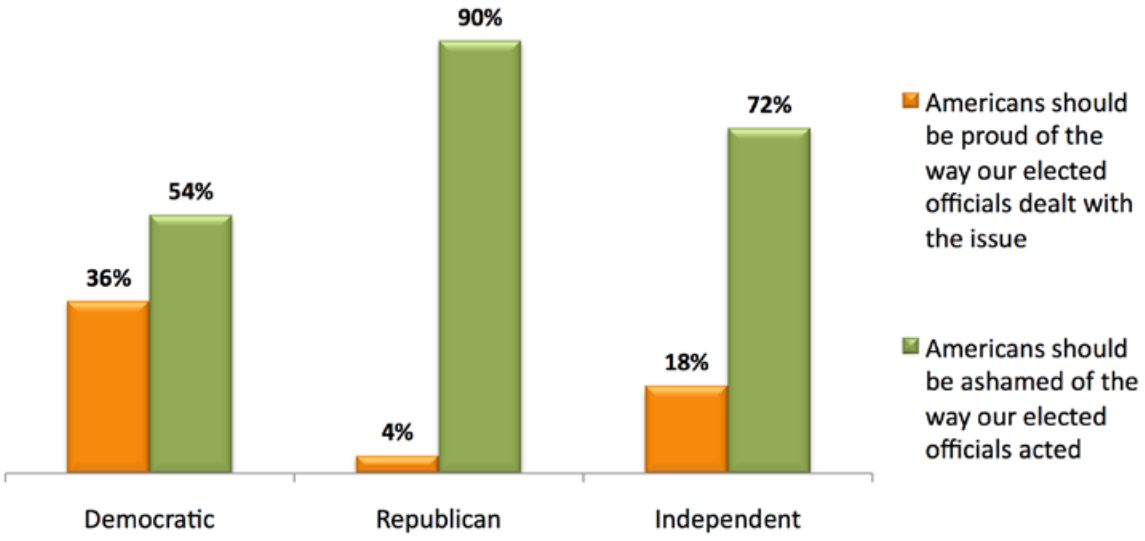


Accordingly, with party identifiers so strongly pointing to the other party as the source of the nation's problems, it can be stated with some certainty that the vitriol about the opposition to which partisans are exposed (from their own party's elites) negates the legitimacy of those with an opposing stance on the issue, which in turn impacts partisans' perceptions of the debate depended upon for a healthily functioning democratic system.

Along with the blame factor, looking at the relationship between incivility and hyper-partisanship also is quite telling when looking at recent political news, such as the rise of the so-called "Tea Party Movement" and the passage of the Obama health care reform bill. Members of the two parties were split on opinions of the civility of the Tea Party. 62 percent of Republicans found their efforts to be completely civil, compared to only 22 percent of Democrats (Lambda = 0.174). Even more telling is the wedge between respondents on health care. The frequency of respondents reporting that they supported President Obama's health care bill was nearly equal to the amount who said they opposed it - 45.2 percent and 45.9 percent respectively (Lambda = 0.270). When asked whether Americans should be proud or ashamed of the way that our elected

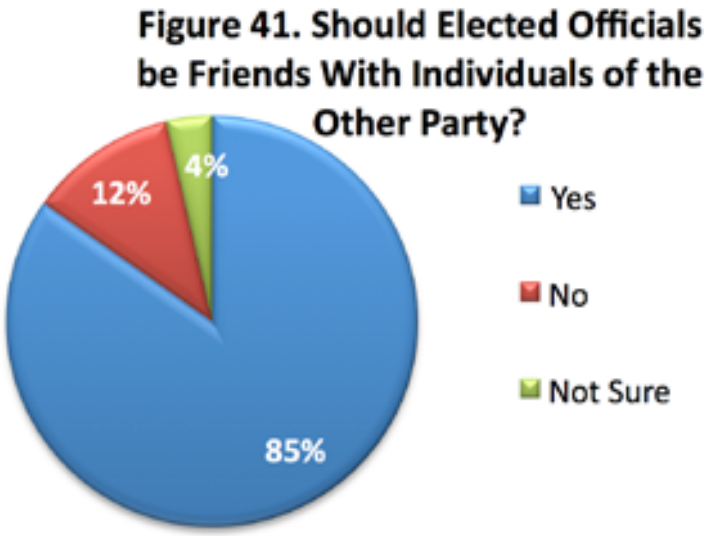
officials acted throughout the health care debate, a whopping 90 percent of Republicans stated that Americans should feel ashamed, as opposed to only a little over half (54 percent) of Democrats (Lambda = 0.120).

Figure 12. Perception of Recent Health Care Debate by Partisanship



These figures all suggest that intense partisanship has completely shaped public perceptions of American politics. While they may not favor it, Americans have subscribed to the partisan system and view the incivility that that the system projects as an unavoidable byproduct. Putting it in terms of opinions concerning the recent health care debate, as pictured above, the survey shows that while Americans were overwhelmingly "ashamed of the way our elected officials acted," they still cannot view the debate outside of partisan terms. Interestingly, while respondents tended to cast blame and shame onto the entire partisan system, they have apparently not lost faith in the notion of bipartisanship and cooperation in government proceedings. While recent years have certainly seen a decline in institutional comity and

friendships between congressmen from “across the aisle” (Ahuja 2008; Uslaner 1993), Americans still believe in the possibility and importance of these types of relationships and believe that they are conducive to successful policymaking. Altogether, 85 percent of respondents – regardless of party identification – felt that elected officials should continue to strive to be friends with individuals of the other party. Thus, the American public believes that its elected officials should fight for their respective positions, but remain friendly relations with one another once the public debate is over.



Nasty and Negative Campaigns

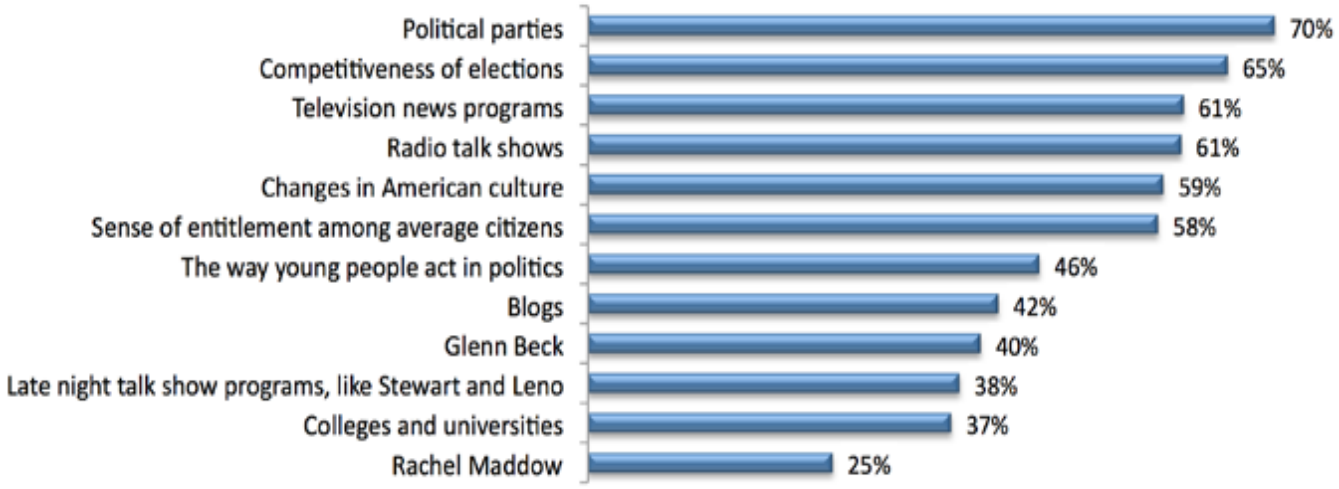
Working in tandem with intensified partisanship to produce the climate of political incivility is the factor of increasingly nasty and negative political campaigns. While some political scientists have argued the negative campaigning does have the beneficial effects of increasing public attention to issues and sharpening the debate about public policy issues (Geer 2006), this survey strongly suggests an opposite conclusion: that negativity in political campaigns has a detrimental effect on public perception of electoral politics.

Oftentimes, it is issue-based advocacy groups that contribute the harshest attacks into elections (Skocpol and Fiorina 1999). These organizations, who strive to either promote or oppose the enactment of specific policies or legislation, face less government regulation and use their donor-supported treasuries to broadcast televised election ads into certain areas where the organization is not even located. A solid 66 percent of survey respondents opposed this negativity-producing practice. This response shows that Americans are not supportive of campaign negativity, particularly when the negativity is introduced by some anonymous or little known advocacy group having a special interest agenda.

Incivility Leads to Illegitimacy

By examining the answers to specific questions posed by the Allegheny College civility survey, one plainly can see that the American people have opinions about civility in American politics that is remarkably similar to those of various scholars. Like political scientists, average citizens too have recognized that the extreme rancor and vitriol currently within the political system have produced a perceptible decline in the tone of American politics. When introduced to a "rather lengthy list of potential culprits" (Shea 2010), respondents reported that the same factors designated by scholars are most responsible, those being, the rising levels of narcissism and self-entitlement within the American public; the growing influence of the media – particularly, two-sided sensationalism provided by cable news networks and radio talk shows; the intensification of party polarization and partisanship; and the negative nature of political campaigns (see figure below). Most significantly, respondents to the survey identified the political parties and their competitive elections as the highest contributors to incivility because it is these institutions that have the greatest ability to change the way politics is "done" in American democracy.

Figure 21. Who or What Has Pushed Politics To Become Less Civil?



While this survey was very useful for the investigation of causes of incivility within current the political context, it would be useful for future surveys to operationalize or calculate incivility into one pure indicator that can be qualitatively and quantitatively applied, as opposed posing questions around a set of behaviors or blame factors, which can be construed as consisting of subjective values.

* * * *

The civility survey findings presented in this chapter offered strong and substantial evidence of the factors producing cynicism and pessimism regarding the decline in tone in contemporary American politics. To add more data on the impact of incivility during the 2010 campaign season, Allegheny College's Center for Political Participation, in conjunction with Indiana University – Purdue University Fort Wayne, commissioned SurveyUSA Market Research to conduct a second poll of 1,200 Americans in September 2010. These results provide even starker figures that suggest that in the past year alone, Americans' perceptions of the tone

of politics has have grown still more negative and pessimistic: compared to the March poll, a higher percentage of respondents in the September 2010 poll opined that politics is less civil than ever before, and that the nasty rhetoric surrounding elections hurts the democratic system.

The results of both studies also have suggested broader implications for the perceived legitimacy of American democracy. The hostile attitudes and words found within today's system of incivility bring about the disconcerting "turn-off effect" described in Chapter Two, driving citizens avoid future discussions and participation in the political sphere. Being "turned off" implies that these citizens have lost all faith and confidence in the efficacy of our institutions, calling into question their legitimacy in producing democratic progress for the nation. In turn, this lack of legitimacy fundamentally undermines the principles of American democracy, which were historically based in the values of public deliberation, mutual understanding, and engagement (Carter 1998).

Like scholars, Americans have acknowledged that something is different and inherently wrong in today's political climate. It is now up to politicians and average citizens alike to decide whether the nation will continue toward further incivility, which will only serve to delegitimize our entire body politic, or to achieve some sort of balance between polite discourse and impassioned debate.

Conclusion

Why Does Political Incivility Matter?

Chapter One observed that raucous political debate is a constant in American history. It also contended that raucous political debate has proven beneficial to the nation, producing landmark advancements in civil rights and liberties and increasing popular participation in the political process. But one cannot ignore the fact that something seems unrefined and distinct about the vitriol tainting the American political system today. Deciphering how and why things have gotten this way was the central focus of this project. It was argued that all the evidence suggests that despite its longstanding presence within political discourse, dimensions of incivility have gone too far. Public perceptions of incivility, and thus the government's illegitimacy, are severely inhibiting attempts at political progress toward a more perfect American democracy.

After witnessing the rancor of the 2009 national debate on health care reform, Thomas Friedman reflected on the decline in civility of American democracy. Writing in *The New York Times,* Friedman made an eloquent case that incivility poses a real danger to the American political system:

> The American political system was, as the saying goes, "designed by geniuses so it could be run by idiots." But a cocktail of political and technological trends have converged in the last decade that are making it possible for the idiots of all political stripes to overwhelm and paralyze the genius of our system. […]
> I would argue that together these changes add up to a difference of degree that is a difference in kind — a different kind of American political scene that makes me wonder whether we can seriously discuss serious issues any longer and make decisions on the basis of the national interest.

The rise of individual narcissism, media sensationalism, partisan intensity, and campaign mudslinging as discussed in Chapter Two are the factors that have led to the rawness of this particular political moment (Noonan 2010). While these factors certainly bring more awareness

of political proceedings to the American people, their impact on the national mood has been overwhelmingly negative. Side effects of this extreme incivility in the American psyche include disgust within the system, a lack of confidence, trust, and legitimacy in American political institutions, and a turn-off effect that works to discourage citizens from active and sustained participation in the political process.

Chapter Three reviewed the empirical study done by Allegheny College to determine how incivility was impacting attitudes about politics. The survey results concluded that disheartened Americans acknowledge the increased presence of incivility in political discourse and attribute the blame for the vitriol of the moment to the same factors as scholars do. These perceptions of ordinary Americans are most telling for the future of our political institutions – when citizens become cynical and unconfident in the ability of government institutions, it calls into question the legitimacy of the political sphere for producing effective and democratic change.

* * * *

Bearing in mind all of the scholarly analysis and public perceptions of political incivility thus far, two questions still remain: Can Americans properly "do" politics anymore? And does this even matter to the health of American democracy?

No scholar will be able to answer these questions unequivocally for some time. But the fact remains that no transformative effort has been achieved in American democracy without hardship or contention. Things have to get a little nasty in the process of formulating a progressive solution or compromise to a political problem. Thus, political incivility can be thought of as a necessary evil to building a more perfect democracy. President Obama articulated

this notion in his “Commencement Address” to the 2010 graduates of the University of Michigan:

> The point is, politics has never been for the thin-skinned or the faint-of-heart. […] It's always been noisy and messy, contentious, complicated. We've been fighting about the proper size and role of government since the day the Framers gathered in Philadelphia. We've battled over the meaning of individual freedom and equality since the Bill of Rights was drafted. […] So before we get too depressed about the current state of our politics, let's remember our history. The great debates of the past all stirred great passions. They all made somebody angry, and at least once led to a terrible war. What is amazing is that despite all the conflict, despite all its flaws and its frustrations, our experiment in democracy has worked better than any form of government on Earth.

There is no mistaking that America is currently fraught with a number of political issues: an economy coming out of a sustained and deep recession, a controversial debate over health care, and a growing energy crisis, to name a few. In debating these issues, Americans are still “doing” politics today, but with an intensified fervor that historically leads to great enhancements to the democratic system. For this reason, recent political incivility, for all its pessimistic overtones, can still be quite beneficial in enabling political progress. It encourages citizens to observe political debates, inform themselves on the issues, and formulate their own opinions on which direction is best for the nation.

The question now is whether the current incivility in American political life has gone too far and will have the effect of turning off participants. The reigning consensus between scholars, journalists, and the American people is that it has. America is now at a political crossroads: if the tone of politics becomes even more uncivil in the coming years, incivility will work against the system, making it appear to be broken once and for all. Future political discourse certainly can be partisan and passionate without being rude, mean-spirited or shortsighted.

If politicians and citizens can learn to cool down the vitriol without sacrificing their passion, to foster contentious debates without losing respect or the ability to listen, and to use incivility strategically to achieve political progress, American politics will be healthier, more spirited, and more reflective of our national ideals of liberty and equality.

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