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Disagreeing Without Being Disagreeable: Are We Capable of Civil Political Discourse?

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Submitted to the Program of Organizational Dynamics, College of Liberal and Professional Studies in the School of Arts and Sciences in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in Organizational Dynamics at the University of Pennsylvania
Advisor: Syd Havely

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Disagreeing Without Being Disagreeable: Are We Capable of Civil Political Discourse?

Abstract

Discourse surrounding American politics has grown increasingly uncivil, a pattern and practice that in many ways is undermining the effectiveness of our governing principles that allow our laws to be enacted and our tripartite branches of government to function harmoniously in service to the body politic. Current research has focused principally on the incivility between political elites, neglecting in most cases an examination of the general public. This study aims to determine through surveys of mid-career university graduate students the presence or absence of uncivil discourse among a highly educated and informed segment of the electorate. Data was collected using a Qualtrics survey of twenty questions: nine binary (yes/no; agree/disagree), three seven-point scale, three short answer and one multiple choice, in addition to demographic questions. The survey was disseminated among both current and former students of the Organizational Dynamics program within the University of Pennsylvania's College of Liberal and Professional Studies, and yielded a total of 150 responses over a two-week period. Additionally, an in-depth interview was conducted with a civic dialogue facilitator who founded and leads the well-known and respected organization, The Village Square, a non-partisan educational forum dedicated to maintaining factual accuracy in civic and political debate by practicing civil discourse on divisive issues, a return to one of the founding principles of our democracy. Survey results showed a significant change in the way we discuss politics, and a majority of respondents reported feeling unable to discuss their political opinions freely with others, for fear of being criticized. The survey found that most people will allow a person's politics to dictate whether or not to engage in a conversation with them, even though the likelihood that they will agree is very high. According to civic connector Liz Joyner and other experts, scholars, and practitioners, polarizing news media and particularly social media, rank highest among the amplifiers of uncivil dialogue. This phenomenon, however, remains slippery and, depending on the issue, the audience, and the demographic make-up of citizens so engaged, uncivil dialogue continues. Discussing politics isn't easy – it never has been. But something has happened in recent years to make it even harder.

Keywords

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CIVIL POLITICAL DISCOURSE?

by

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Submitted to the Program of Organizational Dynamics,
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in the School of Arts and Sciences
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CIVIL POLITICAL DISCOURSE?

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whether or not to engage in a conversation with them, even though the likelihood that they will agree is very high. According to civic connector Liz Joyner and other experts, scholars, and practitioners, polarizing news media and particularly social media, rank highest among the amplifiers of uncivil dialogue. This phenomenon, however, remains slippery and, depending on the issue, the audience, and the demographic make-up of citizens so engaged, uncivil dialogue continues. Discussing politics isn't easy – it never has been. But something has happened in recent years to make it even harder.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The current political state of affairs within the United States is both troublesome and precarious. The political climate has grown increasingly hostile, intolerant and unsuitable for cross-party collaboration and compromise. This emergence of uncivil dialogue presents a risk on three fronts—the way the American political system is set up to address and solve its problems, the risk of further dividing and tribalizing factions of Americans that lock in positions and prevent the search for consensus, and the potential to disrupt social cohesion—the willingness of the members of society to cooperate with each other in order to survive and prosper toward the well-being of all its members. Social cohesion fights exclusion and marginalization and creates a sense of belonging and fosters trust. Without trust, the American system of government cannot function.

I intend to use this capstone as an opportunity to study the prevalence of incivility amongst our electorate. I am interested to understand more comprehensively the effects of uncivil dialogue within our electorate and determine, through research, whether this may present a clear and present danger to the proper functioning of our system of government and whether this behavior has already taken a toll on our nation's future leaders, or if there is still hope for political collaboration and progress. The jury is still out, it appears, based on what pundits are heard from and what political and social frameworks are used in assessing the impact of uncivil dialogue on the general electorate.

Background

The 2016 presidential election was one of the most heated, divisive and emotionally charged electoral processes in recent memory. At the onset of the 2016 election cycle, there were a larger number of candidates than usual, from both sides of the aisle. As the campaign cycle slowly but surely distilled, several major factions came into focus. Bernie Sanders emerged as the candidate for the extreme left faction. Hillary Clinton gained traction as the more moderate liberal option. From the right, Donald Trump – a political outsider – appealed to the more conservative base, while the remaining candidates represented a more centrist view. By the end of this distillation process, two distinct candidates remained: the presumptive, first-female president-to-be, Hillary Clinton, pitted against the political newcomer, NY real estate developer, Donald Trump.

The American public seemed to be at war with one another, divided into two clear camps – those who pledged their allegiance to Hillary Clinton, and those who were swept away by her rather unorthodox opponent, Donald Trump. Many Americans chose not to vote at all, rather than choose between these two candidates. Throughout that election, I found myself feeling rather uncomfortable in social situations, afraid to share my true opinions for fear of being berated by those around me. I would further venture to guess that I was not alone in feeling this way. This concerned me.

Civil discourse is a necessary requirement for the proper functioning of a working democracy. Our Founding Fathers knew this, and sought to structure an entire governing body around this premise, in order to protect the inalienable rights of each man. To begin

this discussion, I must first address my belief that there exists a growing misconception [amongst our citizenry] of what our government was designed to do. I believe U.S. senator Ben Sasse said it best in his 2018 book *Them: Why We Hate Each Other and How to Heal*, “The two indispensable insights of the American experiment are inextricably linked: each and every individual is created with dignity – and therefore government, because it is not the source of our rights, it is just a tool” (p. 138). The Founders believed that a government should exist only to protect our God-given rights – not to dictate them to us. We should not be looking to the government for direction on how to live our lives.

Our Founders also recognized – and accounted for, in their design – the most important concept of all: human fallibility. Human beings are fundamentally flawed, imperfect and selfish. James Madison understood this, along with the rest of our Founding Fathers. Sasse (2018) explains that, “Madison resists any naïve expectations about humanity’s ability to overcome pettiness and self-absorption. Instead, he looks for structural solutions that can temper and contain our selfishness...The key then,” as Sasse puts it, “is creating and preserving the right kind of government: a government that can constrain people who try to deprive us of our rights, but a government that is, itself, constrained, so that it doesn’t deprive us of our rights, either” (p. 141). And so our Founders created a system that had ‘checks and balances’, so that “power was dispersed among many groups and interests, and no one faction could seize the entire system” (Sasse, 2018, p. 141).

It is for these reasons that the Founders believed “wise republicans [all citizens of this new experiment in liberty] should be aiming to preserve space for peaceful argument

and thoughtful dissent” (Sasse, 2018, p. 142). James Madison maintained that a “zeal for different opinions concerning religion, concerning government, and many other points’ has always ‘divided mankind into parties, inflamed them with mutual animosity, and rendered them much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to cooperate for their common’ good” (Sasse, 2018, p. 140). He knew this about mankind, and yet he knew that it would never change. Therefore, Sasse (2018) explains,

Vigorous debate and real understanding are the only long-term antidotes to violence in any large nation. A healthy republic requires not just the legal freedom to debate, but a culture that welcomes debate and is open to understanding the perspectives of disenfranchised groups. That culture depends on habits of charity and empathy and respect. We’ll never understand why our opponents act the way they do if we refuse to listen – really listen – to their arguments. (p. 150)

This is what I fear is at stake right now in American politics.

I feel that we as a society are facing a critical breaking point. It seems now, more than ever, there is a glaring lack of civil discourse taking place within our society, which is doing more harm than we realize. Throughout the last presidential election, I felt confined to a small number of individuals with whom I could freely discuss my political viewpoints, because I believed most others wouldn’t tolerate them, much less discuss them. That concept alone was alarming to me: not so much the idea that most others did not share my views, but rather *because* my views were not shared, they were not tolerated.

As it turns out, I was not alone in feeling this way. Just two years prior, a student on Smith College campus described a similar experience:

During my first days at Smith, I witnessed countless conversations that consisted of one person telling the other that their opinion was wrong. The word “offensive” was almost always included in the reasoning. Within a few short weeks, members of my freshman class had quickly assimilated to this new way of non-thinking. They could soon detect a politically incorrect view and call the person out on their

“mistake.” I began to voice my opinion less often to avoid being berated and judged by a community that claims to represent the free expression of ideas. I learned, along with every other student, to walk on eggshells for fear that I may say something “offensive.” That is the social norm here. (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018, p. 72)

This single, yet telling experience captures what has now become a regular phenomenon found on college campuses, as described by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt.

Lukianoff is a First Amendment lawyer who first noticed this trend throughout many of his cases. He sought the advice of Haidt, a prominent social psychologist, who also took note of this behavior during his years as a professor at New York University’s Stern School of Business. Together, they (2018) found,

Reports from around the country are remarkably similar: students at many colleges today are walking on eggshells, afraid of saying the wrong thing, liking the wrong post, or coming to the defense of someone whom they know to be innocent, out of fear that they themselves will be called out by a mob on social media. (p. 72)

It seems a more escalated form of this behavior has made its way onto the campus of The University of Pennsylvania, on which this very paper was written. Penn’s Perry World House, a center for teaching and research into some of the world’s most pressing global issues, hosted former United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Director, Thomas Homan. Before he could speak, however, he was met with relentless student protestors and was escorted off the stage by event organizers (Singh, 2019).

Our Founders deliberately tried to guard against this very phenomenon. They built a democratic government as a new alternative to monarchy, explicitly designed with a commitment to ‘anti-majoritarianism’ (Sasse, 2018, 142). They knew that, “the worst form of democracy – mob rule – is always a danger against which we must be on guard. If we fail to preserve our anti-majoritarian guardrails against the mob, we will end up

subjected to the capricious will of a populist, self-certain, unreflective majority” (Sasse, 2018, p. 142). To guard against this, the Founders encourage us to protect ourselves, and those around us, against the majority that says might makes right (Sasse, 2018, p. 142). In essence, we strive “not only to guard the society against the oppression of its rulers, but to guard one part of the society against the injustice of the other part”, as outlined in our infamous Federalist Papers (Sasse, 2018, p.142).

All members of the citizenry should therefore share this concern for the integrity of our Republic. “Throughout our history,” Sasse (2018) reminds us, “our wisest statesmen have warned that America’s greatest risk has never been attack from abroad but rot from within” (p. 137). Upon his departure as our first president, George Washington warned his fellow countrymen “not to descend into partisan acrimony. He said that the abandonment of shared principles would be the most likely way America would come apart” (Sasse, 2018, p. 145). In his exact words, Washington stated, “The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge natural to party dissention is itself a frightful despotism” (Sasse, 2018, p. 145).

It is Ben Sasse’s (2018) belief, a current U.S. Senator, that:

Our unsatisfying politics is not the cause of our deformed discourse; the ugliness of our public square is only one more effect of our civic neglect. A government of, by, and for the people puts extra pressure on *the people* to live in a manner consistent with self-government – crucially, even when we vigorously disagree on matters of mere policy. (p.138)

I, too, share in this belief, and worry that we as citizens have begun to abandon our once shared civic principles. Simultaneously, I feel a sense of urgency that our current practices are in need of correcting, which is a sentiment I often hear from others as well – regardless of their political views. I find this feeling to be unanimous.

In an effort to further investigate this experience, I have decided to focus my attention on the electorate. Have we, as a group, been overly exposed to and negatively affected by the divisive and destructive discourse surrounding politics? I wonder if our exposure to this behavior has had a direct impact on our own behavior, and our outlook on American politics. Have we, as a result, adopted this practice of uncivil discourse? Is this healthy? Is it sustainable? Is anything actually getting done in the meantime? Through further study, I will be looking for signs of either civil or uncivil discourse amongst the electorate, and determining whether the current practices are in need of a serious makeover.

In the following chapters, I will make the case for the severity of this issue. I will review our country's founding, and discuss the need for civil discourse in a working, functioning democracy. I will also provide a brief synopsis on the literature surrounding civil discourse, and attempt to paint an accurate depiction of the current state of affairs in the United States. Next I will survey the masses to either find support or refutation for this claim. Afterwards I will consult with a professional who can offer examples of healthy discourse in other organizations and communities, which can be used as a guide. Finally, I will conclude by outlining my suggestions for a better, brighter, and healthier political future for our nation.

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The overwhelming majority of research surrounding political civil discourse focuses on the discourse between political leaders themselves, and/or their interactions with various news journalists throughout the media. There is also an exceptional amount of research on the discourse found on TV – namely between political talk show hosts and their guests. The main question to be answered is whether the increasingly uncivil political discourse is negatively affecting the conversations taking place between friends, family members and colleagues.

What is Incivility?

Before one can begin to evaluate the civility of discourse, it must first be defined. Researchers have been struggling to define what constitutes civility versus incivility. Ashley Muddiman’s study, *Personal and Public Levels of Political Incivility*, attempted to further define such a concept. According to Muddiman (2017), there is still “no consensus model scholars can use to study the concept [of incivility]”. In her study, Muddiman (2017) acknowledged that previous findings, however, have led to two major “camps: studies that define incivility as violations of interpersonal politeness norms (personal-level incivility) and studies that define incivility as violations of political process and deliberative norms (public-level incivility)”.

Muddiman began her study by utilizing Amazon’s online technology, MTurk.com. MTurk.com is known as Amazon’s “marketplace for work”, where

researchers can post links to online studies and gather anonymous participants. Her participants were asked to read through 24 statements depicting various political scenarios and then rate whether they were civil, uncivil, or somewhere in between. Each participant then answered demographic questions and was compensated for their participation. Muddiman (2017) concluded three major findings:

- (a) personal-level and public-level incivility are distinct concepts even when rating political opponents, (b) personal-level incivility is perceived as more uncivil than public-level incivility, and (c) political and media figures from a person's own political party are perceived as less uncivil than others.

Muddiman's study also successfully identified behaviors that indicate both personal-level and public-level incivility. Individuals perceive insults, impoliteness and negative campaigns as personal-level incivility (Muddiman, 2017). Meanwhile, situations related to lack of compromise and refusing to work with an opposing political party indicates public-level incivility (Muddiman, 2017).

Like several researchers before her, Muddiman recognized a gap in the literature. She identified a need for a consensus model by which to study the concept of incivility, and set out to provide one. By way of her research, Muddiman provided both theoretical and empirical evidence for a two-dimensional approach (personal-level and public-level incivility), thus aiding future researchers with an agreed-upon definition.

Additionally, Muddiman set out to identify some indicators of incivility. Generally speaking, incivility has been accepted as a violation of social norms (Ben-Porath, 2010; Borah, 2014; Jamieson & Hardy, 2012; Papacharissi, 2004). By further identifying which behaviors could be perceived as personal-level vs. public-level incivility, Muddiman provided a more concrete understanding of this concept. I found this study to be particularly helpful because it provides definition to a concept that has

historically proven rather vague. By defining these conditions, it is easier to understand what is implied by ‘incivility’, when discussing the discourse between members of the electorate.

Viewing Uncivil Discourse

Other studies look at the issue of political civil discourse, but from a slightly different perspective. The focus of Diana C. Mutz’s study, *Effects of “In-Your-Face” Television Discourse on Perceptions of a Legitimate Opposition*, examines the effects of exposure to civil and uncivil discourse on the electorate. More specifically she is concerned with the perceptions one can develop regarding members of the opposing political party after viewing their discourse with political pundits on television.

Using paid actors and a professional studio talk show set, Mutz’s (2007) study recreated the political discourse often seen on television. Participants in the study witnessed what they believed to be two congressional candidates, representing opposing viewpoints, engaging in an open dialogue. There were four different versions of the ‘televised’ discourse, each varying in camera angle/perspective and the extent to which civility/politeness was expressed by the ‘candidates’, despite political differences. The actors followed their assigned scripts throughout each version, only deviating to exaggerate levels of civility (eg. calm demeanor, politeness) and incivility (eg. rolling of the eyes, raising voices and interrupting). Mutz’s study found that viewers’ education on the oppositional arguments did in fact increase overall, despite high levels of incivility. However, the combination of excessively uncivil dialogue and close-up camera angles had negative effects on viewers’ evaluations of the opposition. From this, Mutz (2007)

concluded the “‘in-your-face’ intimacy of uncivil political discourse on television discourages the kind of mutual respect that might sustain perceptions of a *legitimate* opposition” (p. 633).

Mutz’s work is important because it analyzes the effects of the heated, uncivil discourse we see on television. I believe the educational benefits afforded by this type of broadcast are valid; the platform allows for viewers to gain further insight into the reasoning behind oppositional viewpoints. I was not at all surprised, however, by Mutz’ (2007) other conclusion:

The close-up perspectives on uncivil discourse routinely damage perceptions of the candidates and issue arguments that subjects are already prone to dislike; that is, attitudes towards the *least*-liked candidate, and the perceived legitimacy of rationales for *opposing* issue positions (p. 633).

This conclusion coincides with the findings of Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Bruce Hardy (2012), which suggests,

Partisan media insulate their audiences from alternative media sources by branding them untrustworthy and also protect their audiences from influence from opposing views by balkanizing and polarizing their perceptions of those with whom they disagree (p. 413).

Important studies in addition to Mutz’s underlie the change in how citizens now respond to political candidates, since the introduction of televised politics. Mutz notes that most political pundits agree “that television has changed American politics in some fundamental way” (2007, p.633). However, scholars have struggled to determine exactly how television is different from other media sources in its delivery of political content. Mutz acknowledges that most initial research found that television’s content largely matched that of lead pieces in newspapers, further challenging the claim that the television truly had changed political media. However, Mutz (2007) contends, “The

content of television is consistently more than merely the words spoken” (p. 633). This distinction stuck with me. Mutz (2007) maintains, “Visual intimacy and the arousal it brings with it serve to intensify preexisting feelings” (p.633).

I have also wondered if continued exposure to uncivil discourse could have other effects as well. If in fact our discourse with one another has grown increasingly uncivil over time, I would venture to guess that these “in-your-face” televised exchanges could be a contributing factor. It would not be a stretch to suggest that perhaps the uncivil, disrespectful exchange we see on television – however educational – has influenced the way we speak to one another. Perhaps it has led to a learned behavior, which we have adopted and therefore deemed acceptable to replicate.

I did appreciate Mutz’ acknowledgement of the limitations of her study. Mutz noted that the levels of attention and retention would be considerably higher within the confines of her laboratory setting, versus the real-world application. She also conceded that both civil and uncivil programs would likely not draw audiences of equal-size; uncivil exchanges are more arousing for viewers to watch and would therefore draw larger audiences. That said, the uncivil programs would have the potential to educate more viewers about oppositional views.

Negative Effects of Incivility – A Real Concern?

Another equally compelling study on the effects of incivility on the electorate yielded some interesting results. Deborah Jordan Brooks and John G. Geer sought out to determine whether the largely publicized concerns regarding the detrimental effects of negative political messages on the electorate are well founded. In their 2007 study,

Beyond Negativity: The Effects of Incivility on the Electorate, Brooks and Geer attempted to answer questions like, ‘Do uncivil attacks interfere with important democratic values like political learning, voter turnout, political trust and/or political efficacy?’ and ‘Is incivility something that we should really worry about and strive to curtail?’, among others.

At the onset of their study, Brooks and Geer (2007) made an important point: they noted that,

The public generally does not mind when candidates attack on issues, but expresses dissatisfaction about personal attacks. But even then, the negative reaction is not uniform, which suggests that some citizens do not view personal attacks as negative or unfair” (p. 4).

This general finding, supported by research previously conducted by Brooks, suggests that “the public distinguishes between issue-based negativity and personal negativity” (Brooks & Geer, 2007). From this, Brooks and Geer (2007) go on to further speculate, “If we were to add on a different manner of delivery (i.e. civility) for each type of message, we would almost certainly see further differences in public reaction” (p.4). It was therefore imperative that they examine all of these various features of candidate exchanges simultaneously “by sorting attacks into separate dimensions concerning policy and personal traits while controlling for both the tone and civility of the attack,” (Brooks & Geer, 2007, p. 4). This approach helped them to better understand how the public reacts to both the substance of the message and the manner in which it is delivered (Brooks & Geer, 2007, p. 4).

Brooks and Geer (2007) carried out their study by showing participants three different statements, presumably made by the same candidate running for public office in an upcoming election. The three various statements were representative of the three

different dimensions of a campaign message, which Brooks and Geer (2007) wanted to evaluate: 'negative/positive' (whether the statement was generally positive, or negative and focusing on an opponent), 'issue/trait focused' (targeted at a situational concern rather than a character flaw of the opponent) and finally 'civil negative/uncivil negative' (whether a negative remark was constructively critical or inflammatory and superfluous). The respondents were then asked a series of questions to evaluate their reactions to the statements of varying content and tone.

When asked whether they "thought the candidate was campaigning in a fair manner", respondents exposed to positive messages were far more likely to agree than those who were exposed to both negative and civil messages, as well as negative and uncivil messages (Brooks & Geer, 2007, p. 7). Not surprisingly, the messages deemed "least fair" were negative uncivil trait-based messages (Brooks & Geer, 2007, p. 7).

Participants were then asked whether the candidate had "raised important concerns" via their campaign messages. The purpose of this question was to evaluate whether incivility (especially in the form of uncivil, trait-based messages) trivialized the informational value of a campaign message (Brooks & Geer, 2007, p. 8). According to Brooks and Geer (2007), the results were mixed:

For example, there is no significant or substantively important difference in agreement between those who viewed positive messages and those who viewed civil negative messages. People shown the uncivil negative messages, however, were significantly less likely to agree that the candidate was raising important concerns. While that difference between civil negative and uncivil negative is relatively modest...the interaction between tone and the trait versus issue dimension obscures a more substantial difference. Overall, people are far more likely to judge issue-based messages than trait-based messages as raising important concerns. (p. 8)

That said, Brooks and Geer (2007) also noted that depending on the delivery of trait-based messages, the results were quite different.

Civil negative messages are actually most likely to be seen as important, while uncivil negative messages are least likely, and positive messages fall in between. This suggests that people are more likely to see a civil negative trait-based message as being more important than the same substantive message framed in a positive light. But as soon as a couple of uncivil words are added to the civil negative message, perceptions of its importance plummet. (p. 9)

Finally, Brooks and Geer (2007) tried to better understand the public's "perceived informational value" of each message. They acknowledged the "general expectation is that negative messages – especially uncivil negative messages – will be seen as less informative than positive appeals, even when the informational content of the message is *exactly* the same" (Brooks & Geer, 2007, p. 9). "This relationship," Brooks & Geer (2007) continued, "will be most marked for trait messages, since uncivil personal attacks will be perceived by the public to be the least informative" (p. 9). Their results, however, did not confirm that theory.

With regards to the stated question, "I found the candidate's statements to be informative", both positive and civil negative messages yielded similar results (Brooks & Geer, 2007). Conversely, uncivil negative messages were perceived to be significantly less informative (Brooks & Geer, 2007). Consequently, Brooks & Geer concluded that "incivility – but not just negativity alone – seems to be interfering to a modest degree with perceptions of informational value" (2007).

Along that same vein, Brooks & Geer (2007) also noted that both issue and trait messages are only moderately different. But when both are tested alongside the negativity/incivility dimensions, issue-based messages are almost indistinguishable from one another whereas trait-based messages show much more substantial contrasts,

depending on the tone in which it was delivered (Brooks & Geer, 2007). To that end, “incivility interferes with whether people think they learned something from the message, but only for trait-based messages” (Brooks & Geer, 2007, p. 9).

In light of these findings, Brooks & Geer (2007) came to the following conclusions:

Negativity per se is not perceived by the public as being a problem, and even uncivil attacks on issues do not provoke concern on the part of the public. The problem lies with the personal attacks, especially of the uncivil variety. Even when the substantive content of a message is *exactly* the same, the public views personal, uncivil messages as being significantly less valuable than alternative forms of communication...Uncivil attacks per se are not the problem; it is when it gets personal. (p. 9)

This is an important distinction, and a conclusion found in other similar studies as well. Both Brooks & Geer (2007) and Mutz (2007) arrived at the same conclusion: the public, in general, is more receptive to even uncivil critiques on the *issues* – not the *people*. This finding gave me hope that there is still a relative consensus on public decorum, and any violation of that only further discredits the speaker.

Brooks & Geer also traced the effects these messages had on the electorate’s engagement in politics. To measure this, Brooks & Geer (2007) asked an additional series of questions to better gauge their general interest in American politics. First, participants were asked, “How likely is it that you will vote in the next presidential election?” Brooks & Geer (2007) found that “uncivil messages (both trait and issue based) generate reasonably strong interest in voting.” (p. 10). Next, Brooks & Geer (2007) wanted to know whether negativity – and incivility in particular – had any effect on political interest. To test this, they asked, “Generally speaking, how interested are you in politics

and elections?” Their results were seemingly mixed. In sum, Brooks & Geer (2007) concluded:

Thus, we find little validation for concerns that viewing negative, uncivil and/or trait-based messages will turn people off to politics overall. And, in fact, we find some evidence that suggests the most reviled of campaign messages – uncivil trait-based messages – may slightly increase political interest as compared to some other types of messages. (p. 11)

From these findings, one could even venture to suggest that the political media – driven by viewership and ratings to be click-based in nature, and sometimes uncivil in their reporting – is actually doing a bit of good for our country, by keeping our electorate engaged. Additionally, Brooks & Geer also inquired into the respondents’ assessments of trust in elected officials as well as their efficacy (2007). Once again, their data suggested “no evidence of a relationship between incivility on either political trust or efficacy (Brooks & Geer, 2007, p. 12).

Overall, Brooks & Geer (2007) found “no evidence that even the most despised of candidate messages – negative, uncivil, trait-based messages – are harmful to the democratic engagement of the polity” (p. 12). What’s more, their data “suggest that the public will not melt in response to harsh exchanges – even those that are uncivil – and might even modestly profit from them in some cases” (Brooks & Geer, 2007, p. 12).

Limitations

Through their study, Brooks and Geer hoped to provide additional research and data to an area of study, which has admittedly been underserved. They referenced the consensus by Diana Mutz and Byron Reeves in their 2005 study, *The New Videomalaise: Effects of Televised Incivility on Political Trust*, that “to date, there has been little effort

to confirm empirically the negative consequences of incivility” (p. 1). By way of this research, Brooks and Geer were able to add to the framework of defining incivility. More importantly, however, they were able to compare the effects of an uncivil message versus a civil one, which had never before been done in an empirical study. These findings were therefore relevant to this capstone’s topic, in that they provided a better understanding of the true effects of incivility on the American public.

Moving forward, I plan on asking similar questions of my survey respondents to determine whether this trend exists elsewhere. I hope to use this study’s findings as a guidebook on the supposed threats that uncivil dialogue may pose on our functioning democracy.

CHAPTER 3

THE CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS

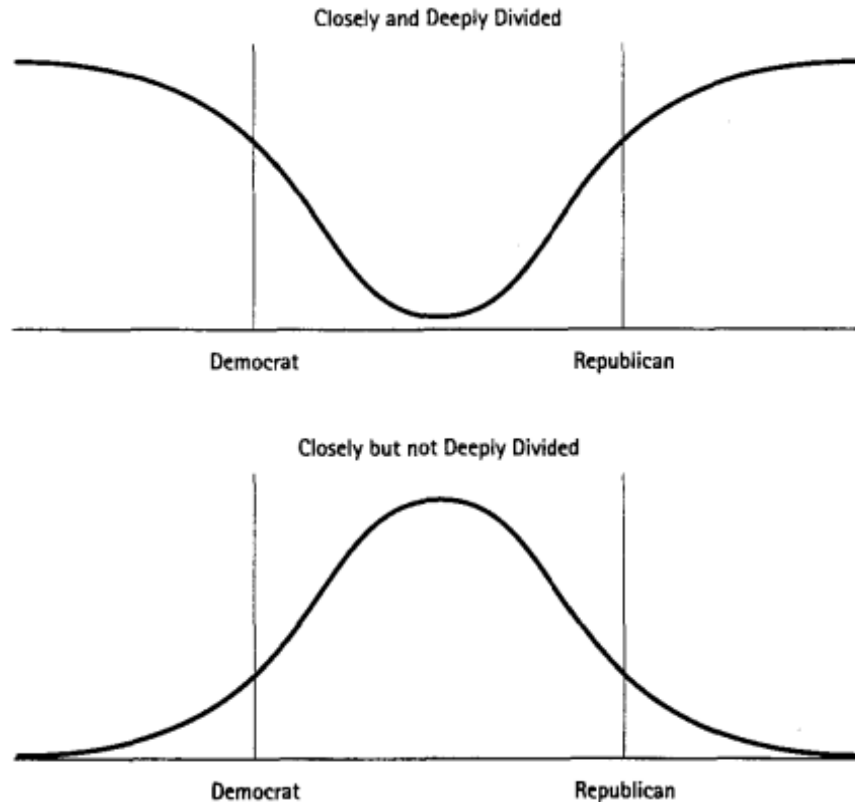
Are We Really That Divided?

On the issue of a polarized America, political scientist Liliana Mason has stated in her 2013 study, *The Rise of Uncivil Agreement: Issue Versus Behavioral Polarization in the American Electorate*, that the political science experts are, themselves, divided on this issue. One camp suggests that polarization is occurring only at an elite level (elected officials, etc.) while the other camp believes the general public has polarized, and that Americans are drawing further and further from each other politically (Mason, 2013).

Mason believes this debate between experts comes from a conflation of two different phenomena currently taking place in America today: *issue polarization* and *behavioral polarization*. “The first type,” she explains, “is characterized by an increase in the extremity of issue positions in the mass public” (Mason, 2013, p. 141). “The second type is...characterized by increasing partisan strength, partisan bias, activism, and anger” (Mason, 2013, p. 141). Mason maintains that these two types of polarization are both separable and distinct. According to Mason, it is possible for issue position polarization to remain relatively low while behavioral polarization increases. As Mason (2013) puts it, “it is true that issue position orientation and partisan orientation are strongly linked, but it is not necessarily true that the stronger one’s partisanship, the more extreme one’s issue positions” (p. 142). This is an important distinction to make, as any other representation is not an accurate depiction.

In their 2011 book, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*, Morris P. Fiorina, Samuel J. Abrams, and Jeremy C. Pope contend, “There is little evidence that Americans’ ideological or policy positions are more polarized today than they were two or three decades ago, although their *choices* often seem to be” (p. 8). In a close election, the general assumption is that the American electorate is deeply divided, but that isn’t always necessarily true. Fiorina et al. (2011) used the below figure to illustrate their point.

Figure 1. Two Very Different Close Election Scenarios



The top portion represents the highly-polarized scenario described above, where there exists a large number of voters supporting the left (Democrats) and a large number of voters supporting the right (Republicans), with only a very few moderate people

occupying the center. This graph depicts a nation that is closely and deeply divided. But that is not the only scenario that could produce a close election. In the bottom portion of Figure 1, we see a majority of the electorate holding more moderate, centrist views, but still a divided outcome based on the votes of those with more extreme views. “In the top panel,” Fiorina et al. (2011) explain, “it would be accurate to say that voters are polarized, but in the bottom panel it would be more accurate to say that most voters are ambivalent or indifferent” (p. 14). “In sum,” Fiorina et al. (2011) conclude,

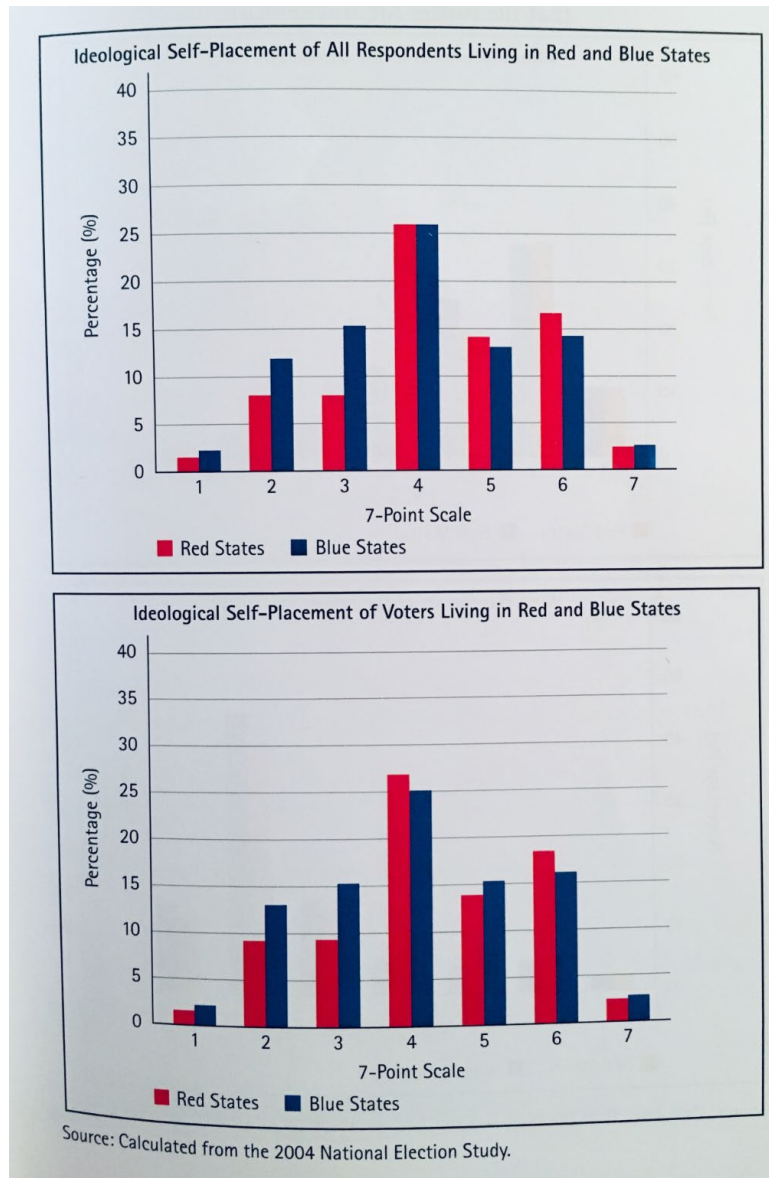
Close elections may reflect equal numbers of voters who hate one candidate and love the other, voters who like or dislike both, voters who don’t care much at all about either candidate, or various combinations of these conditions (p.15).

Therefore, it is not always fair to conclude that the nation is so deeply divided.

Throughout the rest of their book, Fiorina et al. study very closely public opinion data, which suggests an electorate much more like the bottom panel of Figure 1 than the top panel.

One consensus found among most political science experts is that “regardless of our level of polarization, our partisan and ideological identities have come increasingly into alignment over the past few decades” (Mason, 2013, p. 143). Once again, Fiorina et al. (2011) support this claim with a diagram reflective of the 2004 election results. The National Election Study has long since included a question asking respondents to place themselves on a seven-point liberal-conservative scale, which runs from ‘extremely liberal’ on the left to ‘extremely conservative’ on the right. Roughly a quarter of those polled choose not to respond for various reasons. The remaining 75% classify themselves as shown below in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Both Red and Blue State Residents are Basically Centrists

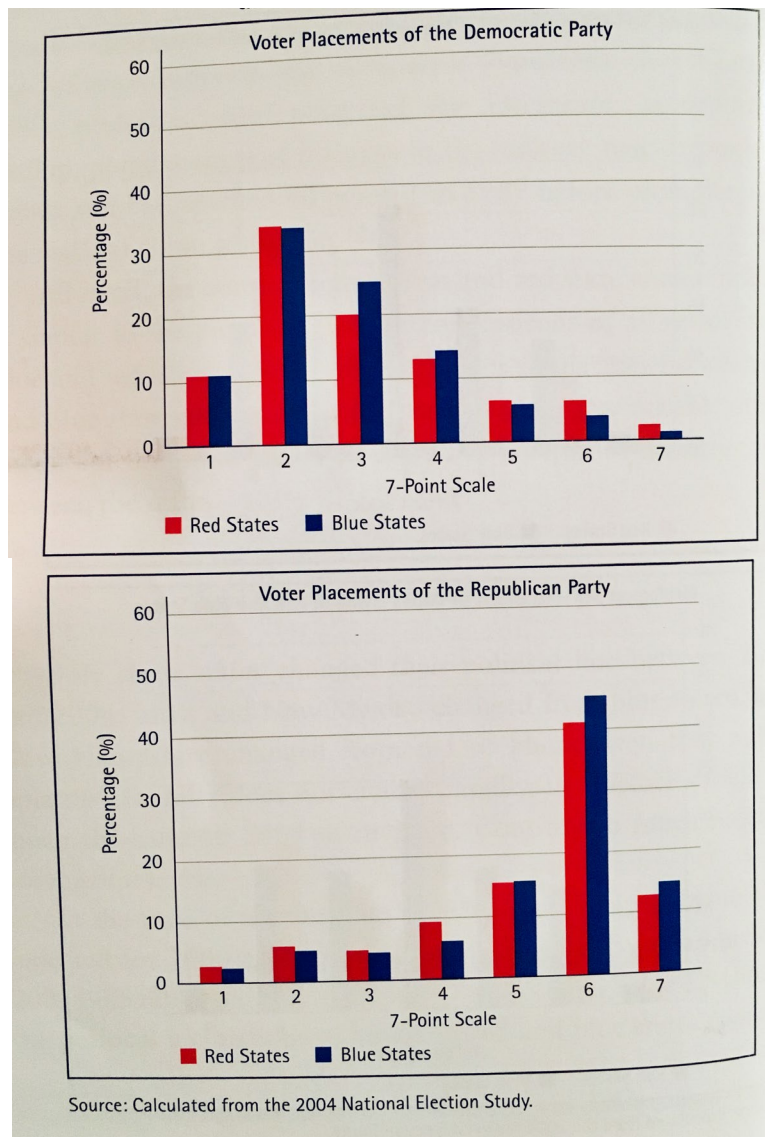


Fiorina et al. (2011) analyzed this figure as follows:

If the American electorate consisted of “two nations,” we would find red state residents overwhelmingly positioned on the right of the scale, and blue state residents overwhelmingly on the left. Instead, we see that the distributions in the red and blue states are similar – both are centered over the ‘moderate’ or ‘middle-of-the-road’ position. Half the voters in both red states and blue states placed themselves in the three center categories in 2004. Combining these moderates with those who do not classify themselves at all, the conclusion is clear: the electorate is largely moderate or ambivalent in its ideological orientation. (p. 55)

Another equally interesting figure presented by Fiorina et al. (2011) can be seen below. According to them, 90% of U.S. citizens can place the Democratic and Republican parties on this scale, but are less certain about where they stand in relation (p. 55).

Figure 3. Both Red and Blue State Voters Agree that the Parties Are Not Centrist



Again, here we see a consensus among most voters that the parties lay at the extremes; there is hardly any wavering on that. Fiorina et al. (2011) conclude from this evidence

that, “Elections are close, but voters are not deeply or bitterly divided. In both red and blue states a solid majority of voters see themselves as positioned between two relatively extreme parties” (p. 55).

Where Are We Polarized?

As previously stated, political scientists find themselves in two different camps on the issue of political polarization in America. Morris P. Fiorina and others believe the American electorate is not extremely polarized in their policy preferences, but that polarization does exist amongst the political elites – that is, our elected officials, political class, etc. (Mason, 2018, p. 77). Conversely, political scientist Alan Abramowitz argues along with others that the American electorate is in fact largely polarized, and that this polarization is defined by American policy attitudes (Mason, 2018, p. 76).

To Fiorina’s point, I have discussed research to support his claim in the first part of this chapter. Fiorina and others believe a party sorting takes place amongst the electorate in response to an increasingly polarized political class. The problem arises when this political class presents polarized issue positions and extreme candidates to choose from. If both parties move away from the center, “voters will be less enthusiastic about their choices and about election outcomes than previously, but given a choice between two extremes, they can only elect an extremist” (Fiorina et al., 2011, p. 169).

Other political scientists such as Alan Abramowitz (2010) believe:

There is no disconnect between the political elite and the American people. Polarization in Washington reflects polarization within the public, especially within the politically engaged segment of the public. It is the potentially engaged segment of the public – the attentive, informed, and active citizens – that most closely reflects the ideals of democratic citizenship, and it is the politically engaged segment of the public that is the most partisan and ideologically

polarized. In contrast, it is among the least attentive, least informed, and least active members of the public that partisanship is weakest and moderation thrives. (p. x)

It is his contention that this polarization has even done a bit of good for the country, by getting Americans interested in politics and energizing them by clarifying the stakes in elections (Abramowitz, 2010, p. x). By his account, voter turnout increased significantly in the 2004 presidential election, and even more still in 2008, when it reached its highest level in more than four decades (Abramowitz, 2010, p. x). Brooks and Geer's research also supports this claim. In their study, which we previously discussed, "the key finding is that uncivil messages (both trait and issue based) generate reasonably strong interest in voting" (Brooks & Geer, 2007, p. 9).

Admittedly, Abramowitz recognizes that there are significantly fewer moderate Democrats and Republicans in Washington, and that the policy differences between the two parties has increased dramatically over the years. Still, he maintains that this deep partisan divide in Congress is comparable to the divide in the public (Abramowitz, 2010, p. 2). Abramowitz believes this polarization in the U.S. has had both positive and negative consequences for democracy, but that those who are largely responsible for such a division can be referred to as the *'engaged public'* (Abramowitz, 2010, p.4).

The citizens which make up the engaged public are the most interested in government and politics, pay close attention to the actions of political leaders, and actively participate in elections (Abramowitz, 2010, p. 4). These same individuals make up the electoral bases of both the Democratic and Republican parties and therefore, have the power to influence political leaders who rely heavily on their support in terms of campaign contributions as well as crucial votes needed during both the primary and

general elections (Abramowitz, 2010, p.4). Abramowitz makes three important arguments about this engaged public. First, that partisan-ideological polarization is greatest among this community, and lowest amongst the disengaged; ideological moderation is most prevalent amongst the disengaged. Second, that there is no disconnect between the political elites and the public. Because candidates pay a disproportionate amount of attention to the politically engaged, polarization at the elite level is merely a reflection of the polarization in the polity. Lastly, that by further clarifying party positions for voters, and raising the stakes in elections, partisan-ideological polarization effectively motivates the public to vote and further engage in politics, increasing the size of the engaged public (Abramowitz, 2010, p. 5).

That said, Abramowitz also believes that party leaders play a large role in setting the tone for policy issues and can be a source of polarization amongst the politically engaged public (Abramowitz, 2010, p. 7). Abramowitz (2010) states,

As party leaders and elected officials have become increasingly consistent in their views across a variety of issues, the public, and especially the politically attentive segment of the public, has followed suit. (p.7).

Abramowitz (2010) makes an additionally important point when he says,

Although the process of partisan-ideological polarization may have been initiated by political elites, growing polarization among politically engaged citizens means that the behavior of candidates and elected officials is increasingly constrained by the preferences of their most active and informed supporters. (p. 7).

To further make his point, Abramowitz also turned to data from the American National Election Study (ANES). From 1984 to 2004, the ANES tracked the responses to seven of the same policy-related questions after each presidential election related to liberal versus conservative identification, abortion policy, government versus private responsibility for jobs and health insurance, defense spending, etc. Abramowitz took this

data and coded the responses to each issue question according to whether they were more liberal or conservative leaning, as well as neutral. He charted the results on a 15-point liberal-conservative policy scale, ranging from -7 to indicate a consistently liberal response to +7 for holding consistently conservative views to these questions. As Abramowitz explains, the standard deviation of the scores indicate the extent of ideological consistency and polarization within a group; the larger the deviation, the greater the extent of consistency and polarization (Abramowitz, 2010, p. 40). Below is a recreation of Abramowitz' table depicting the scores from 1984, 1988, 1992, 1996, 2000, and 2004 among four groups of citizens with varying levels of political engagement: nonvoters, voters, active citizens, and campaigners (Abramowitz, 2010, p. 40).

Figure 4. Polarization on Seven-Item Policy Scale by Political Engagement, 1984-2004

	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	Change
Nonvoters	2.52	2.52	2.44	2.60	2.68	2.67	+6%
Voters	2.89	3.13	3.15	3.39	3.31	3.60	+25%
Active citizens	3.15	3.50	3.48	3.70	3.59	3.89	+23%
Campaigners	3.74	3.50	3.75	4.10	3.71	4.27	+14%

Source: American National Election Study Cumulative File.
Note: Entries are standard deviations of scores on a seven-item policy scale. Items included in the scale are liberal-conservative identification, defense spending, abortion, aid to blacks, jobs and living standards, health insurance, and spending versus services. Scores on the scale range from -7 (consistently liberal) to +7 (consistently conservative). *Active citizens* are engaged in at least one activity beyond voting; *campaigners* are engaged in at least two activities beyond voting.

According to Abramowitz (2010),

The data show that in all six years, campaigners were the most polarized group, followed by active citizens, voters, and nonvoters. In addition, between 1984 and

2004, all four groups showed some increase in polarization. This increase among nonvoters was very slight, and the increases among voters and active citizens were considerably more polarized in 2004 than they were in 1984. (p. 40).

Abramowitz (2010) refers to this phenomenon as '*partisan-ideological polarization*'. He explains that,

As the policy positions of Democratic and Republican leaders have become increasingly consistent and distinct, politically active citizens have responded by bringing their party identification into line with their policy preferences or by bringing their policy preferences into line with their party identification. (p. 37).

Despite their differences in opinion, both Abramowitz and Fiorina would agree that this ideological polarization and party sorting have both taken place and are both closely related. Mason (2013) also shares in this observation:

The gradual sorting of partisans into the “correct” parties during the past 50 years has transformed a nation of cross-cutting partisan identities into a nation of aligned partisan identities. This does not necessarily have anything to do with issue position extremity. Even if sorting doesn’t change our issue positions, it can still create a more partisan and vitriolic political environment. (p. 144).

Who’s Influencing Whom Here?

Given the previously discussed and generally accepted information, Mason came to a rather dismal conclusion in her book, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became our Identity*. She believes that “despite clearer partisan boundaries and a more active public, the polarizing effects of social sorting have done more harm than good to American democracy” (Mason, 2018, p. 7) Similar to the thoughts and findings of Bill Bishop in his 2009 book, *The Big Sort*, which purport that Americans have been sorting themselves into like-minded communities, Mason argues that this separation has made it harder for Americans to find “cross-cutting social ties that once allowed for partisan compromise” (Mason, 2018, p. 6).

In her book, Mason argues that over time, our politics (views, opinions, etc.) have become an increasingly large part of our identities. She attributes a lot of our tribalism and polarization to our innate propensity for forming groups, and defending those groups. It is human nature to want to belong to a group and, simultaneously, differentiate oneself from another; we satisfy these needs by joining a group and defining boundaries which separate our group from others (Mason, 2018, p. 9). Mason (2018) observed, “Across the electorate, Americans have been dividing with increasing distinction into two partisan teams” (p. 3). Over time, Americans have allowed their politics to become a larger part of their identity, Mason argues, leading to what’s known as “*identity politics*”. Mason (2018) explains,

A single vote can now indicate a person’s partisan preference *as well as* his or her religion, race, ethnicity, gender, neighborhood, and a favorite grocery store. This is no longer a single social identity. Partisanship can now be thought of as a mega-identity, with all the psychological and behavioral magnifications that implies. (p. 14).

Mason (2018) further stresses,

This is the American identity crisis. Not that we have partisan identities, we’ve always had those. The crisis emerges when partisan identities fall into alignment with other social identities, stoking our intolerance of each other to levels that are unsupported by our degrees of political disagreement. (p. 63).

This is all increasingly important because, as Abramowitz (2010) notes, “The growing partisan-ideological divide has also had important consequences for political campaigns. Growing consistency between partisanship and ideology has made it much more difficult for candidates to appeal for support across party lines” (p. 10). If the American electorate – or at least, the engaged public – is truly more divided and polarized than ever before, political candidates and elected officials must adapt their campaign strategies in order to win votes. Traditionally, conventional political wisdom

dictated that, “parties should nominate candidates on the moderate side of their party who might appeal to the uncommitted or independent voter” (Fiorina et al., 2011, p. 28). In today’s society, that is no longer the case.

As Abramowitz previously notes, the engaged public is most influential during the political process, and as both Abramowitz and Fiorina agree, the more politically active citizens (the engaged public) are both the loudest and most polarized. This group of political extremists are what make up the Democratic and Republican voter base, and are, therefore, who candidates are most concerned with pleasing. The strategy then becomes attracting the most votes by adopting more extreme policy views, thereby neglecting those who hold more moderate opinions. When both Democrats and Republicans do this, they force voters to choose between two extremes, of whom they would’ve never opted to vote for before (i.e. the 2016 election). Ultimately, the question then becomes, “Is the changing character of our politics reflective of the changing positions and priorities of voters, or the changing positions, priorities and strategies of the political class?” (Fiorina et al., 2011, p. 128).

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

This study aims to determine whether the members of the electorate have detected a shift in the discussions of American politics – a shift from a civil exchange of ideas to a more escalated, uncivil argument. It has long since been my suspicion that conversations surrounding politics have grown increasingly uncivil, and their participants intolerant. Initially, I believed the best method for evaluating this was through a focus group, in which I observed the conversations taking place amongst individuals about politics. I quickly realized, however, that particular method wouldn't yield the most accurate results. The way in which a person communicates with complete strangers is not the same as the way they would interact with close family members or friends. My concern was that any interactions I observed in a focus group made up of complete strangers would not be an accurate depiction of how people are truly discussing politics.

Quantitative Research

I first took a quantitative approach by creating a brief survey using the Qualtrics program. I asked a total of twenty questions: nine binary (yes/no; agree/disagree), three seven-point scale, three short answer, and one multiple choice, with the remaining questions seeking demographic information. The goal of this survey was to gauge more accurately the civility of political conversations taking place amongst Americans.

Most questions were designed to yield simple, direct responses that would either support or discredit the rise of uncivil discourse in American politics. Short answer

questions allowed respondents to further explain their thoughts, opinions or experiences pertaining to the topic. The survey was disseminated throughout the University of Pennsylvania College of Liberal and Professional Studies' Organizational Dynamics program, to both current and former students via email listserv. There were a total of 150 respondents over the course of a two-week period.

Respondents' ages spanned anywhere from eighteen to sixty-five and older, with the majority of responses (53%) coming from those between the ages of forty-five and sixty-four. Of those who chose to respond, seventy-nine were women, fifty-five were men, and the rest elected to remain anonymous. It is important to note that none of the survey questions, including the demographic questions, required a response. It is therefore a limitation of this study that a truer representation of those polled cannot be known.

What is known, however, is that all respondents are well-educated members of academia, having completed some post-graduate course work. In addition, while it is impossible to know where each respondent resides, it is safe to say that most hail from the Philadelphia area, seeing as most students attend(ed) class in-person on Penn's campus. The limitation here is that most respondents live around one of the more populated major cities along the east coast. Such places are typically known to be more one-sided in their politics, leaning slightly to the left. Therefore this study is lacking in that it only represents a small section of the much larger United States.

Qualitative Research

In addition to this survey I also gathered some qualitative data by reaching out to Liz Joyner for an interview, a woman whose organization I discovered while conducting my initial research. Joyner is the Founder and CEO of The Village Square, a nonpartisan organization dedicated to restoring constructive conversation across the partisan divide. She started The Village Square back in 2006 after experiencing a lack of public discourse first-hand in her hometown of Tallahassee, Florida.

The community was divided on the subject of buying into a local coal plant. Joyner recalled countless advertisements and a community divided into two teams: the business team and the environmental team. At the same time, she was also helping with the reelection campaign of a local commissioner, where she bore witness to very different conversations taking place regarding the coal plant. In that setting, she watched as various community leaders participated in deep, meaningful discussions about the coal plant controversy. Many of these leaders disagreed vehemently on the issue, but because they maintained close professional relationships with one another outside of this controversy, the conversations were much more respectful and fruitful. Joyner recognized that this form of communication was missing from the community at large, and subsequently started The Village Square to provide a space for such discourse.

The interview was conducted over the phone and lasted [63:29] in length. I asked a total of seven open-ended questions, which often evolved into short discussions. The intent of this interview was to gain an expert's opinion on public discourse, from an individual that experiences it on a regular basis.

The limitations of this study include Joyner's credentials. She does not hold a degree in political science or human behavior. Rather, she has acquired expertise through experiential learning, having been involved with public discourse for 12+ years.

CHAPTER 5

DATA FINDINGS

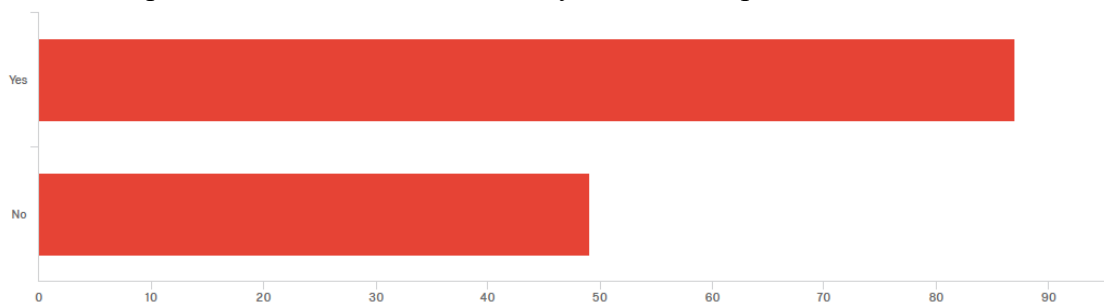
Survey Data

After disseminating the survey, Qualtrics recorded and tracked each respondent's answers. I was then able to review the data for recurring themes in open-ended questions and major trends in the binary questions. My analysis and discussion of these findings will follow some of the highlights described below.

The survey began with various probing questions, to learn the audience's level of engagement in politics. There seemed to be a high interest in elections, both recently and for future races. Roughly 89% of respondents said that they generally participate in their local/state elections. What's more, 92% had participated in the 2016 presidential election and 97% said they would be participating in the next one (in 2020).

When asked about discussing politics with others, 82% said that most individuals tend to agree with their political viewpoints, rather than disagree. Further, most (64%) would say that the potential for someone to either agree or disagree with their politics dictates whether or not they would discuss politics with that person at all (see diagram below).

Figure 5. Survey Question: Does the potential for someone to agree or disagree with your positions dictate whether or not you'd discuss politics with them?

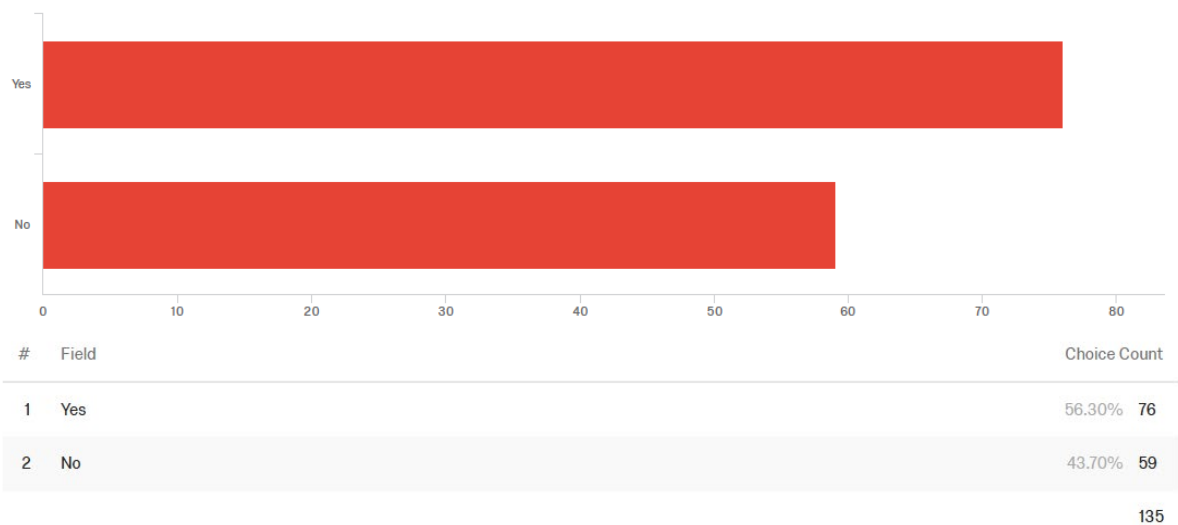


#	Field	Choice Count
1	Yes	63.97% 87
2	No	36.03% 49

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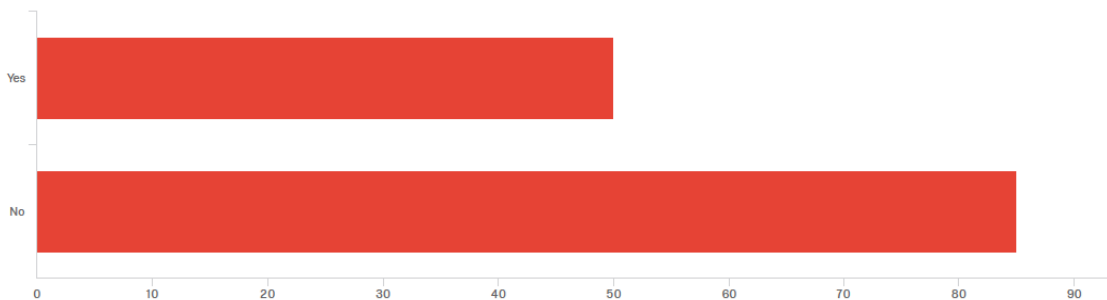
If and when the other person disagrees with the respondent's politics, 56% said they do so civilly and respectfully (see diagram below).

Figure 6. Survey Question: When others disagree, do they do so respectfully/civilly?



Perhaps a more telling data point can be found in the results of Question #8, which was asked of respondents (see diagram below).

Figure 7. Survey Question: Do you feel that you are able to discuss your political opinions freely with others, without fear of being criticized?



#	Field	Choice Count
1	Yes	37.04% 50
2	No	62.96% 85

135

A mere 37% said ‘yes’, while 63% said ‘no’. In general, an overwhelming 94% of respondents have noticed a definite change in the way Americans discuss politics.

Up to this point, the data discussed has been gleaned from the more binary questions (eg. yes/no; agree/disagree) asked throughout the survey. By design, these types of questions made up most of the survey (nine out of sixteen questions, excluding demographic questions) in an effort to learn definitively whether the general public believes our discourse surrounding American politics has grown increasingly uncivil.

It is equally important, however, to discuss the findings from the open-ended questions as well. When asked, *‘Do you discuss politics with others? And if so, with whom?’* most respondents did confirm that they will discuss politics with close family and friends, and some co-workers. Several indicated that they would only discuss politics with like-minded individuals. These responses mirror the findings of the previously noted statistic that 82% of respondents found most agree with their politics, when discussed.

A select few commented that they would discuss politics with “anyone who’ll listen”, “anyone who is around”, and “anyone that will engage without ad hominem attacks”. One respondent specified that he/she would discuss politics “with friends and associates who are intelligent and emotionally mature enough to know that not everyone will or should agree with everyone else”. Even fewer stated that they expressly wouldn’t discuss politics at all, by choice.

Respondents were also asked, *'Have you recently experienced/witnessed a situation in which the conversation surrounding politics grew increasingly uncivil?'* A common theme found throughout several responses indicated the prevalence of such situations on social media. One respondent wrote, "Social media is the worst place to have political discussions, as people feel less responsible for what they say when they can't see the other person at the receiving end of the conversation." Another had a similar opinion, stating, "Social media removes social norms. People are more argumentative when there are no personal, instantaneous repercussions for their unfiltered language." Speaking from a more personal experience with this, one respondent commented, "...I've been called unkind names in Facebook comments, usually having nothing to do with the actual politics." Perhaps this respondent summed it up best when he/she said:

I think social media provides a platform for its users to feel a level of freedom/anonymity to state whatever one is thinking/feeling about the political climate without consideration for the opposing side. Any political meme on social media has an uncivil comment attached to it. It is a rarity to witness an in-person political discussion get out of hand since most folks communicate their thoughts over social media.

Along these same lines, many respondents noted that they haven't seen an uncivil exchange in person. Slightly more, however, are those who claim to have experienced/witnessed an uncivil exchange. "I have a friend," said one respondent, "who needed a break from having any contact with her dad after passionately disagreeing on politics." One respondent recalled, "When differences of opinion emerged, the conversation switched to unsubstantiated opinion without any consideration or willingness for the potential that there is more than one truth." Another respondent stated:

I have family members that no longer speak due to political differences that were not addressed constructively. The most recent blowup happened at a family reunion. The point raised (something about public space and municipal parks!)

turned to taxes, which turned to economic data, which turned personal very quickly. No one took the chance to slow down and turn the conversation back to an exchange of ideas vs. name-calling and personal slurs. By the time others intervened, the exchange was so far gone from civil, that the relationship at this point has been damaged beyond repair.

Similarly, one respondent described an experience at a holiday meal, “The screaming hit a point where we had to decide not to speak about politics at family meals. Some family members have opted not to attend family functions for a while.” One respondent recalled an experience that emerged while partaking in one of his/her hobbies, “We had a person drop out of our book club because she felt her ideas were not heard. Problem was, the book club is primarily against Trump and she was very pro-Trump. Had she stayed we would not have discussed politics at all when we met.”

Other testimonies suggest that surveyors have lost friends and become estranged from their family members over politics and uncivil discourse. One person witnessed two coworkers discussing politics, which escalated to a point that required a manager to intervene. Another was “personally screamed at by someone while making a comment on US foreign policy”. Perhaps a more interesting testimony came from one respondent who didn’t comment on a specific instance of uncivil discourse, but rather a noticeable trend.

He/she said:

I find anger and hatred towards the way I vote. You can no longer debate political issues or views. People become unhinged relating to political discussions. I grew up in a society where you could safely discuss and debate your political beliefs and views. That has ended. I also believe that network television and its programming has significantly influenced our civilians and show the masses that you must hate the current administration and anyone associated with it. I didn’t agree with previous presidential winners but I never hated them. I gave them a chance and was open to their agendas and programs. I never just blankly hated anything they said or did. This must stop and it’s unhealthy for our nation. But our media continues to stoke the fire rather than call for civility.

Interview Data

At the onset of the interview, I wanted to know whether Joyner thought our nation was deeply divided. Political scientists such as Morris P. Fiorina and Alan Abramowitz are split on this point. Members from Fiorina's camp believe U.S. citizens actually agree on most of the major issues, whereas Abramowitz and others believe the turmoil and disagreements found on Capitol Hill are a direct reflection of the divide within the electorate.

Given her experience, I was curious which camp Joyner might submit to. When asked, Joyner responded, "...what I've observed over the years, is that in many ways our divisions are related to very different views and frames that we're looking at issues from" (L. Joyner, personal communication, June 17, 19). Joyner believes it is therefore essential that we [as citizens] "keep the conversation going".

If you can get rid of some of the polarization and the demonization, then it's not 'we're good, you're evil'. It's, 'we're trying together to push a rock, and we're working where we can, and disagreeing where we have to'.

I also think there is an aspect of our disagreements that have just become so tribal. We've gone into teams so much that we'll believe one thing one day because our team believes, and the next day we'll believe something else because our team believes it. That is not real division; that's basically just us, unfortunately descending into...the natural state of human beings – being a little team-ish, group-ish – tribal. (L. Joyner, personal communication, June 17, 2019).

Next, I asked Liz Joyner if she noticed a change in the way we (as citizens) discuss politics. "Absolutely," she said, without hesitation. "In the course of my life, there is just no comparison," said Joyner (L. Joyner, personal communication, June 17, 2019). Joyner expressed real concern for our current state of affairs, and how we might correct it. Joyner described to me a phrase she coined; a term she uses to describe certain individuals throughout our society.

There are ‘professional polarizers’ out there. They make money by us being polarized. That includes a lot of people in the media, and many politicians, and I think that one of the dynamics that’s happening with professional polarizers and with the increasing use in social media...what’s happened is, we’ve shifted the locus of our conversation to a national conversation.

So if you think about what’s happened nationally, you’ve taken an epicenter of civic life, and moved it from communities to this national debate...And all the things that we know [that] make people soften their judgment of other people (or make people like each other better), can’t be operative online – it just doesn’t work...So in a way, just the structure of the shifts in our society have almost made it [kind of] a no brainer that this would happen. (L. Joyner, personal communication, June 17, 2019).

Part of the problem, according to Joyner, is the current focus of our civics and politics. She began by describing an analogy for the U.S. government she heard from the former Speaker of the Florida House. “The government,” Joyner explained, “should be a layer cake, with the broadest touch with citizens are on the bottom, then the state is the next smaller layer – higher, but smaller – and federal is *highest* and *smallest*” (L. Joyner, personal communication, June 17, 2019). Joyner believes the same analogy can be made about our civics as well. According to her,

...what we’ve done is we’ve flipped the layer cake. And it’s upside down. So the vast majority of our civics and politics right now is focused on national issues...one of the key things we’ve got to do is, we’ve got to flip it back. If we do that, what we have seen over and over again is, if you put people in proximity to each other, and if they have something in common, and you let them have a good experience with each other, the polarization just drops away.

It’s amazing because human beings have this amazing capacity to sort of lean towards each other in the right circumstance, and the problem is, that our civic lives together is no longer giving them the right circumstance. And if you keep looking in the wrong places, where you can’t be set up to have these meaningful exchanges, you’re not gonna solve the problem (L. Joyner, personal communication, June 17, 2019).

I then asked Joyner what she thought would have to happen first in order for the discourse surrounding politics to be more civil. She began by rattling off some ‘quick fixes’ like putting an end to gerrymandering, which she believes to be ‘low-hanging

fruit'. She then went on to describe more abstract, 'big picture' areas for improvement. Joyner has noticed and described a trend towards localism. She has seen a big push in her community to 'go local, buy local,' etc. She believes, "if communities stop waiting for Washington [D.C.] to fix it, and started turning back around to their communities and their neighbors, I think we'd be kind of surprised with what kind of shifts you'd see" (L. Joyner, personal communication, June 17, 2019).

Joyner also commented, "If I were to outline the most central lessons in all this, I think that there is an amazing window for humanity to learn human nature a little better, and then adapt to it." Joyner believes we, as a society, can both work together with and learn from academics and intellectuals, who could be sharing with us the tendencies of human nature. This way, we could better understand our tendencies and adapt to them. "To me," she says, "adapting to it is backing off of this kind of obsession we have with focus on this national fist fight, and just open up part of our lives to something that's a little different" (L. Joyner, personal communication, June 17, 2019).

Joyner continues,

There are some things that are kind of like common wisdom in society, about the 'human condition'. And if it got to be, sort of common wisdom in society, that we humans are group-ish creatures, and we tend to want to kinda group off and have teams, and if we're gonna have social media, it means that we have to have adaptations to it that include seeking out people in real life that you don't agree with...but if this horrible circumstance we're having now is good for anything, to me, it's good to teach us that we need to shift some things, we need to understand some things better, or this will keep getting worse. (L. Joyner, personal communication, June 17, 2019).

Joyner made another interesting point when I asked her to describe the methods and/or practices that make The Village Square so successful. "A vast majority of ensuring that a program is successful in terms of being constructive and not overly polarizing," she stated, "is [having] the right panel" (L. Joyner, personal communication, June 17, 2019).

Joyner has noticed a common practice when organizations build panels on any given issue – say, climate issues, for example.

They say, ‘Okay, I’m gonna get one person who’s job it is to advocate for climate change policies, and another who is a climate change denier’. The thought there is that you need to get the opposite ends. But really, the way we build programs is that we start with somebody that we really want to be there. Then we’ll say, ‘Who do they know and work with who really disagrees with them on this, but who could make an argument for people from the other side of the aisle?’ (L. Joyner, personal communication, June 17, 2019)

With this way, Joyner believes they are “moving people from where they are in these sort of set, fixed, ideological places” (L. Joyner, personal communication, June 17, 2019). Joyner noted that it’s not always possible to build a panel of individuals who know each other beforehand. If the panelists don’t know each other, Joyner and her team will help them get to know each other. She explains,

So if they don’t know each other then what we’ll do is we’ll get them together. So we’ll have a phone call maybe, or maybe we get them together ahead of the program. And again, it’s amazing what happens...you break bread with somebody ahead of an event and it’s gonna go pretty well. There’s not gonna be a fist fight. Because again you’re using good moral psychology to build what you’re doing. And I think that if you look at these things as sort of being informational policy disagreements, you make the wrong decisions when you build a panel. (L. Joyner, personal communication, June 17, 2019).

Discussion

Judging from the data collected, there appears to be a sense of definite change in the way Americans discuss politics. The cause and effect of this phenomenon, however is a bit unclear. The survey found that most people will discuss politics with like-minded individuals, and yet, they will still allow a person’s politics to dictate whether or not to engage in a conversation with them, even though the likelihood that they will agree is

very high. It appears that this behavior continues despite high reports of civil, respectful disagreement on the issues.

Another interpretation of this, however, might be that conversations with like-minded individuals are sought out in an attempt to avoid the possibility of an uncivil exchange. Liz Joyner touches on this point several times, as she's observed over the years how people tend to group-off, and associate with those who share the same views. This theory is supported by the statistic that 63% of survey respondents feel that they are unable to discuss their political opinions freely with others, for fear of being criticized.

It is somewhat refreshing to know that this fear hasn't stifled discussions of politics completely, nor has it negatively affected engagement in politics. It is apparent that an increase in incivility may have discouraged some from partaking in politics; for others, it may have meant a change in habits, in terms of how and when they discuss politics. But it hasn't stopped people from talking entirely, generally speaking. This finding can be likened to that of those found by Brooks & Geer (2007), which inferred that even the most uncivil of campaign messages does not deter people from engaging in politics. The same can also be said about the uncivil exchanges that people experience. Judging by the expected participation in the next presidential election (97% of respondents), one could argue that this incivility further engages the public in politics, another finding of Brooks & Geer (2007).

One common theme found through both the survey and interview with Liz Joyner was the effect of social media on civil discourse. When referring to the personal testimonies from survey respondents, and the observations of Joyner, similar conclusions can be drawn: social media is having an adverse effect on political discourse in America.

While these platforms can be great sources of information and breaking news, they can also create informational silos for their readers. In a Forbes article from 2016, AJ Agrawal refers to Facebook as “probably the biggest example of a social media platform using algorithms to great effect” (Agrawal, 2016). Agrawal continues, “According to Facebook, they want to make sure that people receive the content they actually care about” (Agrawal, 2016). This could include the more innocent content of pictures and posts from friends and family, but it can also include political content from only one side of the aisle, creating a filter bubble for the viewer.

Online interactions through social media are themselves, by nature, a disservice to political discourse. The lack of face-to-face interaction and content that is devoid of voice inflection or tone only further stymies meaningful political conversations. As some survey respondents have noted, social media users are much more brave and brazen when it comes to voicing their political viewpoints online, rather than expressing those same views in person. Similarly, Joyner has found that personal interaction is a key ingredient to finding a consensus on major issues. By way of social media, and perhaps media at large, this key ingredient is missing – it has been eliminated. It is for these reasons that Joyner tried to bring back the town hall meetings. Since then, she has seen great success in her community’s ability to converse, respectfully disagree, but also compromise.

Another finding echoes those found by generations before us. Joyner speaks of human nature, and the tendencies of mankind to group off and be tribal. She acknowledges that there are certain human behaviors, which we are wired to have. Knowing that not all of these behaviors are conducive to a healthy political environment, she believes we need to acknowledge these behaviors, and make adaptations to our

processes to counteract those tendencies. A similar conclusion was drawn nearly 250 years ago, when our Founding Fathers recognized human fallibility, our imperfections, and our tendencies to be rather selfish. To counter balance these tendencies, the Founders put in place a series of checks and balances so that our government might be protected from the overly ambitious and self-serving. Perhaps we should heed the advice of our ancestors and pay tribute to their wisdom by enacting similar fail-safes for this day and age.

CHAPTER 6

SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS

In summary, this capstone focuses on the change in the way we discuss politics with each other, as noted by 94% of those polled. According to these respondents, this change has been seen, heard, and experienced both in person as well as online. A chief finding is that the use of social media to discuss politics has had a noticeably adverse effect on political discourse, as expressed by those surveyed for this study, as well as Americans at large. Discussing politics isn't easy – it never has been. But something has happened in recent years to make it even harder.

Prominent political scientists point to an overall ideological polarization and major party sorting over the last 50+ years as a likely source of these intense feelings of division amongst our electorate. It is important to note this distinct difference from a polarization of the general public, however, whereas the former indicates a polarization of the ideas and the latter indicates a division amongst the people. A recent study out of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, published by Professor Yphtach Lelkes, proved that we are not more polarized as a society since the election of Donald Trump (“Donald Trump’s Election,” 2019). Lelkes and his team of researchers conducted a series of studies in 2014, which they recreated in 2017, in order to detect any possible changes in the levels of political polarization since his election as President. Subsequently, they found no increase in the overall polarization amongst the public. “I’ve been studying polarization for a long time,” Lelkes says, “and elite discourse is arguably at its worst, which led us to theorize that partisanship would be

worse since Trump took office. But we found that things really have not budged” (“Donald Trump’s Election,” 2019). Lelkes continues, “Trump is a symptom of polarization rather than a cause of it. People voted for him because of the highly polarized environment we already live in; he didn’t create that environment” (“Donald Trump’s Election,” 2019).

When it comes to determining whether we are truly divided as a nation, the experts are divided themselves. Some say we are generally aligned in our [policy] stances on major issues, but that we are forced to choose between polarized candidates at the polls, citing post-election data. Others argue the division we see on Capitol Hill is a direct reflection of the polarization amongst ourselves; but the key distinction there is that the division is present amongst the engaged public, which are those who are most interested in politics, and therefore more strongly opinionated.

The major focus of this study was the presence of uncivil discourse amongst our electorate, and what that might mean for our future. Certain types of incivility have been found to be more detrimental than others. Surprisingly, some incivility in politics has been known to increase overall engagement. Still, most polled (63%) currently feel unable to discuss their politics freely with others, for fear of being criticized.

Somewhere along the line we’ve allowed politics to become more than just politics to us. No longer are a person’s political beliefs merely just one facet of their identity. Anymore, a person’s politics has come to imply other stereotypical characteristics about them, sort of like a mega-identity. By doing this, we have begun labeling one another as ‘the enemy’, simply because they think a little differently than us,

thereby creating separation and division. In reality, this is the beauty of America that should be celebrated and harnessed – not admonished or discouraged.

Per Liliana Mason, as was previously mentioned, we have devolved from a nation of cross-cutting partisan identities into one of aligned partisan identities, and this sorting may not change our issue positions, but it can create a more volatile, partisan, and vitriolic political environment. Over time, we have allowed politics to infiltrate more of our lives through social media – a place that, ironically, was initially designed to make us more social and bring us closer together.

Unfortunately, it seems as though uncivil dialogue has spread across social and political classes, disrupting and challenging our ability to think critically, openly, and disagree respectfully. To counteract this, we need to re-center the importance of politics and political compromise and when we see, hear, and engage in it. Social boundaries need to be reset and common ground reestablished.

The data from this capstone show and reiterate that we are currently suffering in this country from a lack of community. In an effort to rebuild this, we must work harder to be more open-minded with each other; resist the temptation to reduce a person to simply a Democrat or Republican (or Independent) and write them off entirely. It is even more critical now that we strive to engage in open dialogue, with less judgment, and find the middle ground. It is imperative that we find ways to expose ourselves to other viewpoints, whether it be through social media, a different channel on TV, or discussions with a friend or family member on the other side of the political spectrum. The recent shout-down of a speaker at Penn because of his political views that seemed antithetical to

those of the students illustrates this growing alienation and scapegoating behavior of political intolerance.

Another recent study that came out of the Annenberg School of Communication offered hope for a return to more civil discourse. Back in November 2017 Twitter doubled its allotted character limit from 140 to 280, and many were skeptical as to what this might mean for tweets that had grown increasingly hostile. Surprisingly, Professor Yphtach Lelkes was able to analyze tweets from both before and after Twitter increased the character limit, and found that the average quality of conversation improved overall (“Brevity is the Soul,” 2019). Lelkes and his team of researchers “found that when people had more space to explain themselves, the overall discourse was more deliberative, polite, and civil” (“Brevity is the Soul,” 2019).

We live in an amazing time with incredible tools at our disposal. It’s our responsibility, however, to use these tools – which have recently been used to divide us – to unite us. We need to find ways in which we can repurpose them into tools of constructive communication, rather than destructive criticism. We can start by making adaptations to these tools, like Liz Joyner suggests. When scrolling through Facebook and Twitter, rather than only liking, sharing, or re-tweeting political news that echoes our own beliefs, it would be more beneficial to read through more articles supporting the opposing viewpoints. Similarly, when using search engines like Bing or Google to research information, we should read through the top articles from both political perspectives. Since the top Google results are influenced by the greater number of clicks a given article gets, we can affect the news we read to ensure it’s a more balanced picture. It might even be worthwhile to decrease the amount of information we give to

Google and Facebook (which they use to market to us) by clearing the cookies on our computers and removing our Internet search history, so that we're not constantly fed information that supports our own theories.

The benefits of this are two-fold. First, we're immediately exposing ourselves to viewpoints other than our own, thereby increasing our level of education and understanding of an opposing view. Second, we're preventing the development of filter bubbles to take form, in which we only see and hear reverberations of our own thoughts and opinions. Rather than admonish those on social media who offer a difference of opinion, we should highlight and share stories of political tolerance and acceptance. When political pundits in the media condemn Congressmen and women for 'abandoning' a party, we should instead champion their efforts of crossing political lines to find resolutions.

It is ultimately our responsibility, as attentive American citizens, to take an interest in protecting our country from spiraling into internal turmoil. The tribalism and divisiveness we're feeling can be traced to any number of factors – social media and filter bubbles, the 24-hour news cycle, loss of connectivity to our communities – the list goes on and on. Perhaps the size of our engaged public, and the level to which they are engaged, has something to do with it as well.

Circling back to political scientist Alan Abramowitz, he makes the case that we are deeply divided as a nation, but primarily amongst the engaged public, which are those who are most interested and participatory in government politics. The members of this engaged public are arguably the most informed, opinionated, and "loudest" citizens of the republic, while the greater majority is considerably less divided and fervent by

comparison. Perhaps further study could investigate the impact of having more information, and how that affects the civility of our conversations. A former study done in 2014 evaluated the question of whether voters who have a larger say in politics, based on their country's political system, are, in general, better informed. The study looked at voters in countries across the European Union and Switzerland to find "empirical evidence that voters are better informed when they have a larger say in politics" (Benz & Stutzer, 2004, pg. 56). Perhaps we could take the findings of this study one step further, to look at whether this increased knowledge leads to increased or decreased civil discourse.

Political commentator and radio personality Rush Limbaugh has offered somewhat of a theory related to this concept. Limbaugh (2013) believes "a segment of the electorate approaches elections without adequate information to make a proper decision" (Muhammad, 2013). He refers to these individuals as "low information voters". One might question whether this theory has any merit in a future study. Of course, this is all assuming the information is both readily available and reliable. We live in what many refer to as the great Information Age. But if we're supposedly more informed than ever before, and we're still experiencing high levels of incivility, perhaps the integrity of the information is in question.

This is all to say that the current state of affairs in America should give us all pause. "America is an idea," said Senator Ben Sasse (2018, p. 136). He is of course referring to the various concepts and cornerstones on which this nation was built, and how dangerously close we're coming to losing them. Ideas such as freedom of speech, religion, and the free press; a democratic government in which no one branch can seize

ultimate power, and the people are truly represented far and wide, from large and small states alike. Sasse (2018) explains:

We've come to assume that the American idea can be neglected year after year and nonetheless endure. It can't. It's an idea – and as such, it needs to be taught and learned. It needs to be passed on and lived out. (p. 137).

Lately it feels like we are letting politics and policy makers dictate to us how important politics should be, and forcing us to choose between extremes. If we continue to let the political elite dictate to us how we should feel, think, or act with regards to politics, we forfeit our power as a democracy to influence policy and control our own destiny as a nation. Differences and disagreements are expected, beneficial, and even healthy in a two-party system like we have in the United States. Our form of government, by design was intended to encourage – even welcome – the free exchange of ideas. Now, 200+ years hence, the exchange of ideas has become so caustic and divisive as to pose a threat to the functionality of the system itself. “There is no law of nature that says the United States must always exist,” says Sasse (2018), “although we often seem to think so” (p. 137). It is said that upon leaving the Constitutional Convention in 1787, Benjamin Franklin was asked what sort of government the delegates had created. He responded, “A republic, if you can keep it”. Uncivil dialogue poses a threat to our democratic society, and by allowing this regression into division and intolerance, we are abandoning the values we once held so dear. As Dr. Richard Beeman of the University of Pennsylvania (n.d.) concludes, “democratic republics are not merely founded upon the consent of the people, they are also absolutely dependent upon the active and informed involvement of the people for their continued good health.”

Part of America's charm is in her ability to take charge and make a change. It is our underlying spirit, and what makes us so great a nation. Upon his arrival in the 1830's, hoping to see what all the hype was about across the Atlantic, French writer Alexis de Tocqueville discovered this uniquely American spirit. Time and time again he found communities where the people identified an unmet need and they rallied together to find a solution. They didn't wait for the government to intervene or provide the necessary funding – they took care of it themselves (Sasse, 2018, p. 235). Of this, de Tocqueville remarked, "There is scarcely an undertaking so small that Americans do not unite for it." This capstone concludes with the notion that it is the same for even our most daunting undertakings, such as this one.

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