

THE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF UNCIVIL POLITICAL DISCOURSE

L. Sandy Maisel

What are the discernible negative consequences of uncivil discourse?

Difficulty Recruiting and Retaining Public Officials

Who enters the political arena? Are people deterred because political debate is often uncivil? Do they leave because of it?

Potential candidates resist pleas to run for office because they are not willing to face the kinds of personal attacks — not policy, but personal — that they would have to face if they were to run for office. The question often turns on not what would be said about a candidate, but rather whether the candidate's family will be publicly scrutinized.

They do not want to be considered “one of those politicians,” and the tone of political discourse and, as a result, how politicians are viewed by the public makes running for office unattractive. Many of “the best and the brightest,” committed to doing their part to improve the lives of those around them, no longer see public service, and certainly not elective office, as a means to that end. Others, choose to leave public life rather than to fight to change the nature of debate.

Inability to Govern

Incivility leads to an inability to govern. The frustrations of those in office centre on the lack of results. The gridlock in Washington and in many state capitals is partly caused by partisan one-upmanship often expressed in ways that do not show respect for those with differing views. House Majority Leader Erik Cantor (R-VA) says, “In Washington these days, being liked is not a substantial advantage. It is much better to be deemed so unreasonable that your opponents ultimately feel no choice but to bend to your will.” And, if your will is to prevent legislation from passing, to prevent the president's agenda from moving forward, to work the system to your political advantage, then lack of civility works.

In her resignation speech, Senator Olympia Snowe (R-ME) said, “What we've been witnessing is dysfunction and political paralysis in Washington.” Senator Joe Lieberman (I-CT): “Why would you spend all the time raising money, run for office and go through the nastiness that's part of a general modern political campaign to come here and be involved in gridlock?”

Furthermore, no one talks about the common good. The lack of civility and the increased partisanship that we have seen in recent decision making and campaigning is detrimental to the body politic. As a nation we are worse off because partisanship, not concern for the public good, motivates congressional (and in many cases state legislative) decisions. Politicians engaged in such actions will not respond to these claims until the disgust that the public expresses in the polls is also reflected in the voting booth.

The level of public dissatisfaction has risen to an alarmingly high level. A polity is not healthy if a majority of the people wants to replace all of those in office. It is a short step from there to dissatisfaction with the entire system of government. The lack of civility in public discourse clearly contributes to this decline.

Differences from the Past

What is it about the lack of civility in the current political scene that distinguishes today's politics from those of other eras? Why is today's situation so different?

The easy answer is the 24–7 news cycle, the unfiltered nature of much of the news that reaches the public over the Internet and the increase in public awareness about how politicians view each other. The highly partisan cable news outlets, radio talk shows, blogs and Internet sites serve as a huge echo chamber. Whereas an attack on a candidate, an exaggerated claim or a personal insult might have been seen by a small audience and perhaps repeated on the “inside the Beltway” rumour mill, today repetition after repetition means that we as a public see and hear much more of

the incivility in politics than was the case ever before. Because of that, politicians are much more likely to use these tactics purposively.

Yet, there are deeper, systemic answers. In the early years following our nation's birth, although the country's leaders disagreed vehemently on the critical issues of the day, they also had been allies in the greatest struggle of their time: the fight for independence. Their dislike for one another was often personal, and each knew the personal foibles of the other. But they also knew that each was a patriot and although they had different views of the nation's future, the differences were not so fundamental that they had forgotten what bound them together.

During the run-up to the Civil War, however, one could not make that claim. Then, the incivility in the political process reflected a far deeper divide in the nation. Those people on the "losing side" in that great debate felt so strongly about their position that they were willing to secede from the nation; they were brought back to the union only by force. The Civil War was the tangible recognition that the political process had failed.

By the post-World War II period, service in government had become a full-time occupation. Republicans and Democrats, and their families, lived together in Washington. Although partisan differences abounded, and rhetoric was often quite heated, at the end of the day legislators retreated to their families where their wives and children were often interacting with the wives and children of those with whom they had been debating vigorously on Capitol Hill. The result was a strident, but cordial partisanship. Enter Joseph McCarthy — with a blatant disdain for the truth and total disregard for the personal lives he was ruining. His claims, although based only tangentially in fact, were cause for alarm. For a time, the nation was cowed. Then sanity returned — symbolized by two moments. First, was "The Declaration of Conscience" of Margaret Chase Smith (R-ME) in which she said, in part, "Freedom of speech is not what it used to be in America. It has been so abused by some that it is not exercised by others"; and second, the defence of a young lawyer, Fred Fisher, by Joseph Welch, a Boston Brahmin lawyer, who responded to Senator McCarthy's most vituperative attack with, "At long last, Senator McCarthy, have you no decency?" Senator Smith refused to be cowed. Welch refused to listen to McCarthy any longer. At the end, McCarthy was left ranting to an empty chair, as everyone left the room.

The politicians of the Federalist period were united in a cause — their unity overrode their differences so that they could progress with the business of the nation. During the Civil War period, the division was so deep and so fundamental that the political process failed and the nation was torn apart. During the McCarthy era, although the concern over a threat from the Soviet Communists was real, our nation's leaders also understood that they were in a common enterprise and that the common experience they shared in governing required adherence to some rules. Among those rules were to treat others involved in the enterprise — both those who agreed with you and those who did not — with respect and civility, and ultimately to rely on truth to win the day.

What about today? While we may have difficulty identifying exactly what aspects of political discourse we find uncivil and worrisome, two aspects stand out.

A Lack of Regard for Others

The first is the lack of regard for other individuals in the process. Too often the strategy is to demonize those with whom you disagree, with the ultimate goal of political victory. In an interview with the *National Journal* in October 2010, Kentucky Senator Mitch McConnell, the Republican leader in the Senate, compared the GOP's situation in 2010 with that in 1996. "The single most important thing we want to achieve is for President Obama to be a one-term president." According to McConnell's analysis, his party's goal should be to work against the Democrats and deride all of their proposals. Possible policy agreements are less important than political gain.

Why do politicians feel that victory is so essential? We know about the polarized political scene in Washington and some state capitals. But what is less known is the reason for this polarization. When citizens despair about the future of our nation, when some see the United States' global

standing decline, when the economy is stagnating at a level with unacceptably high unemployment, Democrats and Republicans differ on the most fundamental issue: the role that the federal government should play in countering these trends. It is not merely that they disagree, but rather also that they think if their opponents prevail, everything that they hold dear will be destroyed. In that context, incivility is a small cost if the gain is winning the ultimate battle. The reason that politicians do not “respectfully disagree” is that they do not in fact respect the views of their opponents; they see those views as dangerous. It is unclear that the public sees the stakes as that high — they merely want politicians to find solutions to the pressing problems — but political leaders do.

These views are exacerbated because those in government do not really know their opponents. When the legislative work week is over, they leave Washington and return to their political homes to discuss the terrible views of the opposition with those whose opinions mirror their own. It is far easier to demonize those whom you barely know than it is to do so with your children's friends' fathers. The rhetoric of campaigns leads to characterizing political opponents as enemies; life in Washington does little to change that image. No Margaret Chase Smiths are standing up to those who degrade the political process; those who might do so fear personal attacks, even within their own party, at home.

A Lack of Regard for the Truth

This lack of personal regard for fellow elected officials is compounded by the second evident aspect of today's political incivility, a lack of regard for the truth. Politicians say what they need to say — about themselves and about those running against them — to win elections. Television networks on the Right and Left repeat these falsehoods and give them credibility because networks have discovered that outlandish claims lead to bigger audiences. The same is true of radio talk shows. Polling data show that most citizens gather news from outlets with whose position they agree. Conservatives listen to Fox News and liberals to MSNBC. Competition for viewers and listeners drives coverage and opinion. Too often efforts to rein in untruthful claims are lost in the cacophony of partisan repetition.

A new local-national dynamic regarding how incivility is viewed by the public may be at work in the electoral process. The general public is fed up with the tone of political debate; most of us, including most mainline political commentators, are troubled by the lack of civility in our political discourse. If candidates can appeal to extreme elements to win primary elections — and many general election constituencies lean heavily to one party or the other — we may be witnessing a corollary of Fenno's paradox: that we as a nation are fed up with uncivil discourse and the extent to which it prevents public officials from focusing on solving problems and from seeking the common good ... but we love our own heroes when they behave in such a manner by demonizing those who do not agree with their preferred solutions.

The result is a raucous policy deadlock, insults thrown across the partisan aisle and general recognition that the policy process has failed. Those who “stand on their principles” and cause deadlock draw support from their true-believer followers — on the Left and on the Right — while leaving the nation and the majority of the public with another unsolved problem.

It is important to separate the aspects of political discourse that are legitimate from those that undermine the system. Our system requires more than colourless, timid discourse. People in public life should vigorously debate the pressing issues of the day on which they disagree. But the polity loses and is threatened when personal disregard for fellow politicians overcomes a basic sense of values and when regard for accurate portrayal of the truth is lost in an effort to press a partisan advantage.