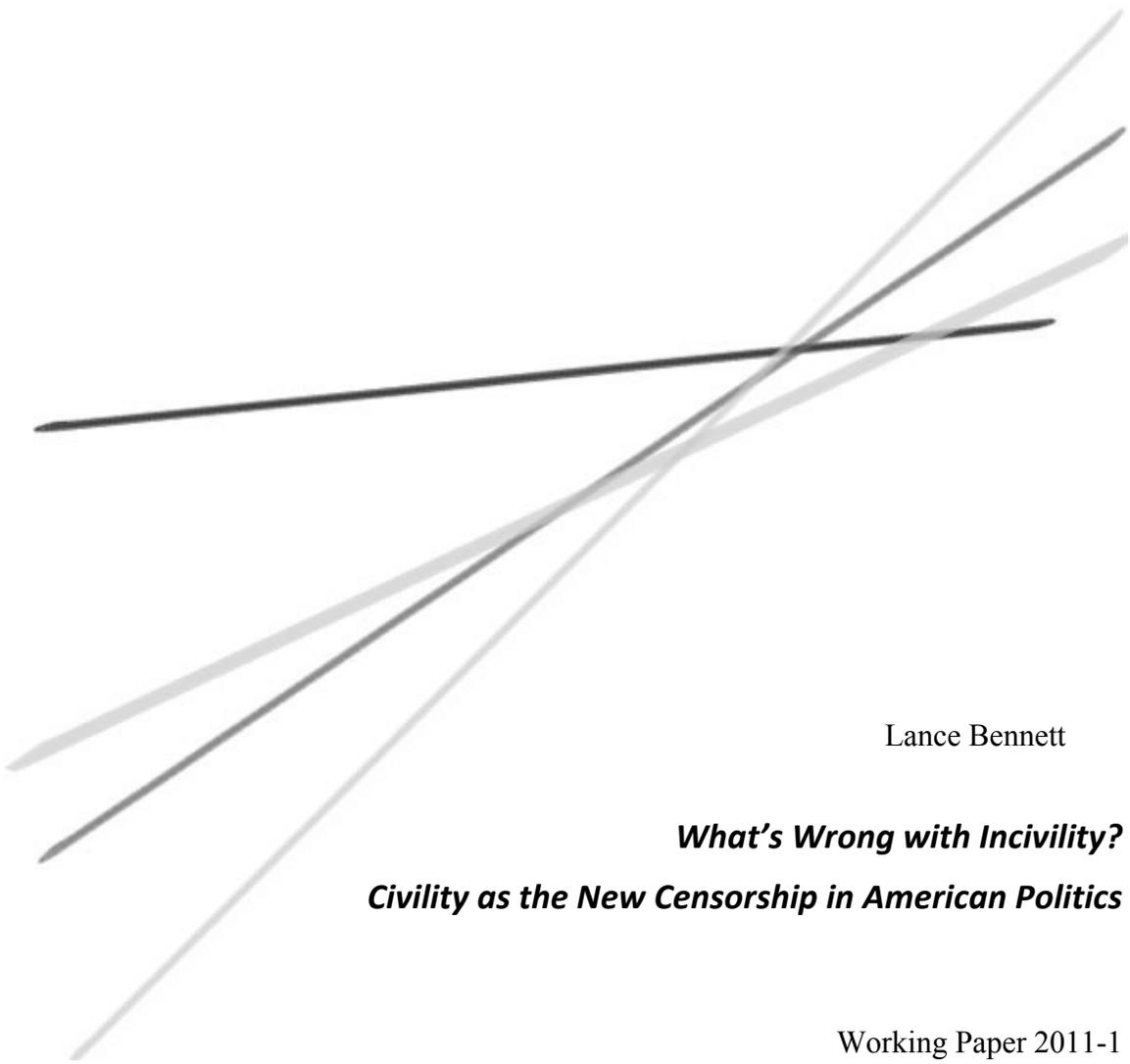


Center for  
Communication  
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Engagement



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***What's Wrong with Incivility?  
Civility as the New Censorship in American Politics***

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## What's Wrong with Incivility?

### Civility as The New Censorship in American Politics\*

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For all the heated talk about incivility, there has been little light shed on whether it is a problem for democracy, and if so, just what kind of problem. It would be nice to think that disagreements can be civilized and polite, yet politics is often rough and tumble. Indeed, incivility may be a more honest response to some challenges than remaining polite in the face of assaults upon one's values. Civility in politics implies more than just politesse, although there is something to be said for manners. Civility would seem to require listening, recognizing the other side, and in higher forms, even trying to bridge differences. Yet when the other side declares those differences to be irreconcilable, civility becomes a losing strategy. Indeed, when facing stark absolutism, civility seems to entirely miss the point.

Some societies have thought more deeply about the problem of harmonizing public discourses than is typical in America. Germany, for example, has various laws regulating the qualities of public debate, limiting discussion of certain sensitive issues, and even prohibiting certain displays of interpersonal animus on the streets. America seems to prefer a more rugged discourse culture. Indeed, personal expression seems to be valued over various possible limits. While some prominent voices promote a more deliberative style of communication, they are generally confined to elite and mostly liberal media and academic niches. It appears that there are two very different discourse cultures operating in contemporary American politics, with calls for civility from one camp falling on deaf ears in the other. As a result, those persisting in the quest for civility are at a disadvantage in public debate and need to find more effective forms of rhetoric without emulating the shrill discourse of the other side that they find so unappealing.

Before examining how best to communicate across the current rhetorical divide, it may help to try to understand the foundations of the often harsh and hyperbolic tone of

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American politics, particularly on the right these days. For some, it appears to be good clean fun to shout down the other side and call them names instead of discussing their ideas. More importantly, for many of these Americans, extremism in defense of virtue is no vice. Consider Sarah Palin's defense of her right (and the right of all Patriots) to freedom of expression in responding to charges following the Tucson massacre that her political rhetoric might have incited the shooter to act out his anger.<sup>1</sup> (Similar charges of language inciting violence have been leveled at other conservative media personalities such as Glen Beck and Bill O'Reilly). Proponents of civility found it outrageous that Palin put a number of Democratic politicians, including the member of Congress shot in Tucson, in crosshairs on a national map and urged Tea Party insurgents to "reload" and target those enemies of freedom. In her video response to charges linking the symbolic targeting to the shooting, Palin condemned the calls for less volatile communication as infringements of free speech that undermine core American values. She set the civility bar fairly low by adding, "When was (the rhetoric) less heated, back in those 'calm days' when political figures literally settled their differences with dueling pistols?"<sup>2</sup> She completed her defense of free speech by suggesting that her challengers were the real ones abusing speech by committing a "blood libel" against her and her political tribe, invoking a myth that has historically stirred hatred toward Jews. In this bizarre construction, the real victim of Tucson was Sarah Palin as the embodiment of free speech, an American Joan of Arc reclaiming her homeland for true Americans, liberating it from the siege of freedom hating liberals.

How does one engage with that?

This effort proceeds in three steps. First, how can we understand the commitment of some partisans to absolutist and extreme discourses? Second, how can we evaluate the effects of combative rhetoric on our politics? Finally, how should those who prefer a more reasoned, dialogical communication style operate in an environment with others who make a mockery of civility?

### ***Why the incivility?***

The answer here seems simple: Incivility is a winning strategy for an underdog determined to defend fundamental principles and win the political game at any cost. Attack. Intimidate. Distort. Deceive. Whatever it takes to promote one's goals. If the opposition is smeared or denigrated in the process, they deserve it. Ironically, this strategy seems to work best when opponents prefer more civilized discourse, which makes them appear weak or flustered. Recall how the US health care debate was dominated by shrill messages that circulated virally through the media echo chamber: health care will kill yer granny; death panels; Obamacare is Nazism and, often in the same breath, Obama care is Communism; Imam Hussain Obama; the "birther" slanders, and many more. Amplified by the same media that generally pronounced the Republicans down and out after the 2008 election, this noisy rhetoric paved the way for an electoral comeback just two years later.

While slinging invective on one political front, another rhetorical move that has equally chilling effect on civil dialogue is the simple speech act of saying "No" to most everything proposed by the opponent, even when the opponent seems to represent the

democratic majority. In contemporary Republican political code, “No” is a form of discourse that claims to speak for the American people who want to stop big liberal government. What is so hard to understand about No? Indeed, “the party of No” came by its strategy thanks to master political linguist Frank Luntz who showed how staying on this simple message could block or weaken most every Democratic initiative. His strategy memo to Republicans urged equating any government action with big government incompetence and threats to freedom: “The American people are not just saying 'no.' They are saying 'hell no' to more government agencies, more bureaucrats, and more legislation crafted by special interests.”<sup>3</sup>

The irony in these words for liberals, of course, is that government actions in the first place – decisions to deregulate industries, to stop enforcing existing regulations, and to appoint former industry insiders to government regulatory posts -- effectively allowed special interests to run amok, creating crises in the areas of health, energy and the economy. Nevertheless, “just saying no” serves the goals of the interests that Luntz’s clients prefer to have running these policy areas. Politics is always a question of what interests government serves, not of getting the interests out of government. The longstanding campaign of the right against government has clouded this underlying reality. Although liberals seem hard pressed to understand it, becoming “the party of no,” did not hurt the Republicans appreciably in the polls, nor did Democratic policy gains in the areas of health care, banking regulation, or consumer protection help them prevent the Republican landslide in 2010.

### ***What are the effects of incivility on American politics?***

An important but little examined effect of what Susan Herbst calls Rude Democracy<sup>4</sup> is to make it easier for a political minority to accomplish otherwise unpopular goals such as: restoring the power of business sectors to self-regulate, easing the tax burden on the upward spiral of wealth, and distributing less of what remains in the public treasury for public goods. Indeed, the spectacle of incivility masks the inconvenient truth about the corruption of the representation process, as levels of inequality in both income and wealth, and in their political companion, power, continue to grow faster and larger in the United States than in any other leading OECD democracy.<sup>5</sup> Yet those who lead the media barrage are relentless in their insistence that liberals such as “Imam Barack Hoover Obama,” as Rush Limbaugh called him, are killing the freedom of the rich:

... we have a political party who wants to impede progress and punish those who are successful with increased taxes and regulation, even if they want to remove obstacles to dependence. We look at it, and it shames us, it embarrasses us for our country, and now, this is also embarrassing.... we are a great country at risk in a dangerous world. We have threats external and internal. And it is not a good sign. It is not something healthy for the American people to not know what religion their president is, to have doubts to the extent that they do about this man and his life and where he's been and who he is... <sup>6</sup>

Never mind that Limbaugh contributed to the concerted effort to raise those doubts about the president’s religion and his citizenship. Normal standards of reason do not apply as they do in “civil discourse.” The connection between Obama’s religion, or his

citizenship, or his alleged political extremism and his imputed desire to kill freedom “for those who are successful” is psychological, not logical. And therein lies the great impasse between proponents of civility and those who choose whatever symbolic means justify their ends. Conjuring the bogey men of big government and taxes, and denigrating the dangerous liberals who promote those evils helps to drown out more reasoned discourse about things such as how business could be more responsible to society (and perhaps even prosper in the process). As political scientist Murray Edelman observed, nothing distracts public capacity for reasoned discourse like spectacle,<sup>7</sup> and modern times have seen few spectacles like the rise of the Tea Party, with its cheerleading masters of media incivility such as Glen Beck, Rush Limbaugh, and Sarah Palin. Such distracting discourses enable a populism that would make the Wizard of Oz proud.

A knock-on effect of the incivility spectacle is that most Americans hate politics and politicians, and have developed a lukewarm relationship with government. Even as incivility mobilizes shrill minorities, it turns off discouraged majorities. Those who spout hatred of government in one breath also promise to go to Washington and clean up the mess with the next. This spiral of cynicism ends up changing little, while serving the special interests who pour billions into getting the right representatives elected and keeping them in line as much as public attention and press accountability allow.

Which brings us to the roles of public and the press in perpetuating the spectacle of incivility. First, consider the public. A public that is largely turned off to politics is hard to reach with logic and reason. Consider the plight of Barack Obama who persisted in well-meaning civility in the face of sustained attacks. Obama’s dilemma is sketched here by Charles Blow:

The message that voters take away is not nuanced: Democrats in control. Bill complicated. Republicans oppose. Politicians bicker. Progress stalls. Democrats failing.

Obama has to accept that today’s information environment is broad and shallow, and we now communicate in headline phrases, acerbic humor and ad hominem attacks. Sad but true....

The most trusted “newsman” may well be a comedian (Jon Stewart), and stars of the “most trusted news network” (Fox) may well be a comedian’s dream.

The president must communicate within the environment he inhabits, not the one he envisions. The next time he gives a speech, someone should tap him on the ankle and say, “Mr. President, we’re down here.”<sup>8</sup>

Blow also noted that polls taken at the time of the health care impasse in the Senate showed that only 1 in 4 Americans knew that it takes 60 votes to block a filibuster and only 1 in 3 knew that no Republicans in the Senate voted for health care. All of which raises the question posed by *Times* political editor Richard W. Stevenson: “Is it possible to embrace complexity in a political and media culture that demands simple themes and promotes conflict?”<sup>9</sup>

Which brings us to the role of the press. Several brief observations on this pillar of our national incivility will have to suffice. First, it is not news to observe that the

media feed on spectacle. And few recent spectacles have topped the Tea Party, with its disruptions of public meetings, character assassination of the president, and the right wing media echoing those dramatic narratives in ways that the mainstream media cannot ignore. At the same time, relatively few stories have appeared about the financial backing of the Tea Party (Dick Army, David Koch, et al.), assessments of the number of followers, their political and demographic makeup, or the veracity of their claims. Even if a beleaguered press system facing a financial crisis had the reporting resources to investigate the deeper machinations of the Tea Party, it is not clear how such investigative reporting could possibly balance the daily stream of media spectacle to make an impression on the public. A few good investigative reports have appeared, but not enough to balance the daily barrage of noisy attacks. These realities of public inattentiveness and press sensationalism raise questions about how to communicate effectively in response to uncompromising attacks.

### ***What is the appropriate political response?***

It may seem ironic that neither Obama nor the Democrats seem interested in pointing out the corporate corruption behind the cynical populism of their opponents. Perhaps this is because the current electoral system propped up by Supreme Court decisions on money and free speech has spread corruption so evenly across party lines. The main difference between left and right seems to be that the right has used the legally sanctioned equation of money with free speech to fill the public sphere with harsh images and Patriotic gore, taking the high national symbols as their own. One might tip their hats to them, but for the evident pain felt by many on the left who have become poster children for appearing foolish and un-American.

In the face of such a rhetorical deficit, it is puzzling why liberals, from Jon Stewart to Barack Obama, continue to preach civility. This is all the more puzzling when proponents of civility seem to understand that the harsher discourses of their opponents are more effective. For example, Obama gave an eloquent speech on incivility at the 2010 commencement ceremony at the University of Michigan. He described questions sent to him by a kindergarten class: “Do you work a lot?” “Do you live next to a volcano?” “Are people being nice?” He went on to observe: “Well, if you turn on the news today - particularly one of the cable channels - you can see why even a kindergartener would ask this question. We've got politicians calling each other all sorts of unflattering names. Pundits and talking heads shout at each other. The media tends to play up every hint of conflict, because it makes for a sexier story - which means anyone interested in getting coverage feels compelled to make the most outrageous comments.” He noted that the destiny of a nation requires finding some points of agreement in times of crisis, and lack of civility makes this difficult: “The problem is that this kind of vilification and over-the-top rhetoric closes the door to the possibility of compromise. It undermines democratic deliberation. It prevents learning - since after all, why should we listen to a ‘fascist’ or ‘socialist’ or ‘right wing nut?’ It makes it nearly impossible for people who have legitimate but bridgeable differences to sit down at the same table and hash things out. It robs us of a rational and serious debate that we need to have about the very real and very big challenges facing this nation. It coarsens our culture, and at its worst, it can send signals to the most extreme elements of our society that perhaps violence is a justifiable response.”<sup>10</sup>

While such pleas for civility may be music to liberal ears, to many conservatives they sound like invitations to compromise on basic truths or to yield valuable political ground. Indeed, Rush Limbaugh has labeled the civility culture of the left as “the new censorship.”

We keep hearing about "uncivil," and I love our previous caller's comment that this civility equals censorship. That's exactly what Obama and the left mean when they start talking about civility. "We need to bring civility back to our discourse," that means shut us up! Censorship. Now, if politicians are uncivil to us -- if they are dismissive of the last election, for example. They lost. They got shellacked. But if they are dismissive of that election, if they are dismissive of the Constitution (as they were the other week, when it was read on the floor of the House) how are we to react to them? Say we disagree but do it quietly, without passion, in hushed tones, with words "please" and "thank you." How are we supposed to react when they are uncivil to us? I've actually been thinking about doing a program the way they would like to hear this program done... Okay, here's what it would sound like. So we got a sound bite of them saying Sarah Palin is asserting herself improperly, she's dumb and stupid. What would be the civil way of reacting to that? What would be the civil way of reacting to their allegation that this program's responsible for what happened in Arizona? What would be the civil way of reacting to it? Because understand, it is not uncivil to make the accusation, as they define all this. There's no limit on them. They are not guilty of anything. What's uncivil is when those of us minding our own business, bothering no one, are accused of some atrocity, and we respond to it. That's the incivility.

...When they pass laws to harm our businesses or control our lives, what should we do? What's the civil response? What is the civil reply to legislation that limits freedom? What's the civil response to legislation that further erodes the opportunity for economic prosperity? Well, some say that I wouldn't have to do a program the way the libs want me to. Just listen to NPR and you have the idea -- and to a certain extent, yes. And I could do NPR.

...We don't need lectures from uncivil leftists about civility, much less Obama... and all the other incendiary things he's had to say, both as a candidate and as president. In fact, ladies and gentlemen, isn't one of your complaints that Republicans are too docile? Isn't one of your complaints that Republicans just sit there and take it, that the left is always on the march, always accusing, always throwing bombs, and the Republicans just sit there and take it?

...Apparently the civil thing for Sarah Palin to do is to get down on her hands and knees and beg forgiveness for her obvious crimes, and maybe that's what some Republican candidates would have done in the past. But Palin isn't that kind of Republican...<sup>11</sup>

If we accept the evidence that two fundamentally different and irreconcilable discourses are at work in America today -- one more predominant on the left and the other more embraced by the right -- how is dialogue, debate, or deliberation possible?

The simple answer is that these outcomes are not possible by just calling for them. Calling for civility also begs the question of how much deliberation or debate is even relevant if we accept the evidence that the media spectacle favors presenting dramatic and polarized fare to a largely passive and inattentive public?

The larger question is how to level the communication playing field so that the left can reclaim a share of the patriotic high ground and stop its weak insistence on civility. A first step is one that many have already taken: to recognize how the right has magnified its voice in national communication and managed to make both liberals and the press defensive about both their patriotism and their grip on reality in the bargain. The problem is what to do about it. How might the left change its tone without sacrificing its apparent commitment to logic and reason? One answer commonly offered by Democratic strategists is to continue to use comfortable values to create policies and positions, but then to find more direct emotional ways to sell them. The reasoning here is that there is nothing wrong with marketing and branding if they are not deceptive. Much ink has been spilt on the effort to get a better brand story for the Democrats (cf. George Lakoff and Drew Westin).

However, what is often lost in these discussions is that there is more to branding and marketing than just focus groups and market research aimed at finding emotional hot buttons. The basis for any good story is that it needs a moral. The Republicans have one, and in the bargain have made the Democrats afraid to espouse their most obvious counterpoint: the ways in which inequality is eroding American democracy. To restore more meaningful national communication, the left might begin by recognizing that the entire symbolic scheme and brand strength of the right is leveraged by the single core moral value of freedom, as in freedom of markets, freedom from government intrusion in markets, and related consumer choices. What has happened to the other historic American core value of equality?

The left has all but abandoned its natural moral position by withering when discussions of equality are shouted down by the right as socialist, unpatriotic, and worse. Yet any measure of democracy must include equality, and any society interested in sharing the same geographical and political space on democratic terms must be able to discuss questions of inequalities growing at an alarming rate. It is telling that even as inequality by many measures, from wealth and income to health and education, has grown alarmingly in the US over the past thirty years, the national conversation on these troubling issues has grown ever more faint. One important counter to the patriotic freedom call of the right is for the left to find a way to reintroduce equality into the American value scheme and align it with patriotism. This entails showing how current levels of inequality threaten many of the very freedoms that the right holds so dear. Rather than grimacing or miming a pale imitation of conservative chants that “We’re Number One!” the left might point out how far the US has actually fallen in world comparison rankings of various measures of health, education, child welfare, violence, crime, mental health, and other defining qualities of “the good life” that Aristotle held as the true measure of a polity. To fail in this rhetorical opportunity to be honest about American values will make tactical choices about political discourses -- civil or uncivil,

brand x or y -- matter little. For democracy, and for the left, remaining silent in the face of glaring levels of social, economic and political inequality means game over.

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<sup>1</sup> A Google search of the term “Tucson massacre” at the time of this writing yielded over 1,700,000 hits, with a casual inspection suggesting that the blogosphere was ablaze with discussions about violence, civility and their meanings for American life.

<sup>2</sup> Craig Medred, “Palin’s response to Tucson tragedy is ‘all about Sarah.’” *Alaska Dispatch*, January 12, 2011.  
<http://www.alaskadispatch.com/voices/medred/8264-palins-response-to-the-tucson-tragedy-is-all-about-sarah?start=1>.

<sup>3</sup> Sam Stein, “Frank Luntz Pens Memo to Kill Financial Regulatory Reform.” *Huffington Post*, February 1, 2010.  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/02/01/frank-luntz-pens-memo-to\\_n\\_444332.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/02/01/frank-luntz-pens-memo-to_n_444332.html). Accessed August 19, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Herbst, *Rude Democracy: Civility and Incivility in American Politics*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why equality is better for everyone*. London: Penguin Books, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/home/daily/site\\_081910/content/01125110.guest.html](http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/home/daily/site_081910/content/01125110.guest.html). During the time when the media echo chamber focused on the question of Obama’s religion, there was a ten point jump in polls among people who believed he was Muslim, and nearly 40 percent doubted his Christianity. Similar poll trends occurred when the focus was on Obama’s citizenship.

<sup>7</sup> Murray Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988,

<sup>8</sup> Charles M. Blow, “Lost in Translation.” *The New York Times*, January 29, 2010.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/30/opinion/30blow.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Richard W. Stevenson, “The Muddled Selling of the President.” *The New York Times*, January 30, 2010.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/31/weekinreview/31stevenson.html?ref=todayspaper>.

<sup>10</sup> Full text and video area available at Huffington Post, May 20, 2010.  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/05/01/obama-michigan-graduation\\_n\\_559688.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/05/01/obama-michigan-graduation_n_559688.html).

<sup>11</sup> Rush Limbaugh, “Civility is the New Censorship,” program transcript January 13, 2011.  
[http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/home/daily/site\\_011311/content/01125108.guest.html](http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/home/daily/site_011311/content/01125108.guest.html).