Rules of Engagement

Negotiating civility in the political process

CARL HAWKINSON

On May 22, 1856, Congressman Preston Brooks of South Carolina attacked Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner on the floor of the United States Senate. Brooks beat Sumner with a cane until he was unconscious after taking offense at Sumner's speech that personally criticized another senator.

As a candidate and later as president, Abraham Lincoln was subjected to constant incivility and personal attacks by his opponents—he was called everything from a despot, liar, thief, and braggart to a buffoon, monster, swindler, tyrant, fiend, and butcher as the country anticipated civil war.

Two of our most revered Founding Fathers were most uncivil toward each other for much of their political careers. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson regained their mutual civility only after their political careers had long ended. *Adams and Jefferson, The Tumultuous Election of 1800*, by John Ferling (2004), documents the rough politics between Adam's Federalists and Jefferson's Republicans. When Jefferson lost the presidency to Adams in 1796 and by the law of the day became vice-president, he left the Capitol. When Adams lost to Jefferson in 1800, he left Washington rather than attend Jefferson's inauguration. It wasn't until 1812 that Adams began a correspondence with Jefferson that lasted until their deaths in 1826.

Former Republican senator Alan Simpson was known for being partisan with a sharp tongue. In a recent interview with *Newsweek*, Simpson opined that the loss of civility in the Senate has occurred because "No one forgives anyone for anything anymore. People get angry just for disagreeing with them." Evan Bayh, Democratic senator from Indiana since 1999, announced his retirement recently, lamenting the loss of civility in the Senate and modern politics.

The aphorism "Politics ain't beanbag" was coined by Finley Peter Dunne, a nineteenth-century Chicago author, and President Obama acknowledged that reality when he appeared on *The View* in July and said, "Politics is a contact sport."

Clearly incivility in American politics is not new. Our politics has been uncivil from our nation's beginning. Voters blame politicians, and politicians blame each other for the incivility in politics. The responsibility for incivility in politics is ours, as an entire country. As voters we

Carl Hawkinson was a Republican candidate and officeholder serving in the Illinois legislature for twenty years. He is a member of the Galesburg (Illinois) Covenant Church.

want our views on important issues to prevail, and we sometimes value success more than we value political civility.

A poll conducted this year by Allegheny College found that 95 percent of Americans believe civility in politics is important for a healthy democracy. My parents used to say that you don't have to like somebody but you must at least be civil toward them. I have always thought of civility as something short of kindness. "Civility is an expression of a fundamental understanding and respect for the laws, rules, and norms that guide its citizens in understanding what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior," wrote psychologist Jim Taylor in an article titled "Politics: Is Civility Dead?" Civility is the decency that we are to accord everybody all of the time. Why then is there so much incivility in our political life?

Politicians desire to serve the public

In my experience, most people go into politics because they desire the public good, and they know that in order to serve the public, they must work across the aisle in order to accomplish their goals. It is natural and often politically advantageous for local Republicans and Democrats to work together on local issues and economic development. During my legislative years in Springfield, Illinois, I was part of a group of six legislators who worked on local matters for many years in a bipartisan manner. We developed mutual respect and lasting friendships.

There was an inevitable tension, though, between our civility and our partisan politics. Party leaders would try to get one member of the group to oppose another member through endorsements and television commercials. But our friendships made us less likely to participate in attack ads against each other. We were more likely to try to correct false information. Often a member would make a personal contact and explain his dilemma before taking partisan action. I found that such personal civility usually eased potential conflict even when we opposed each other during election campaigns.

In my years in Illinois politics I observed and experienced both Republican and Democrat civility. I also observed friendship across the aisle. In the Illinois Senate, I had the opportunity to serve with and observe then state senator Barack Obama, and I found him to be smart, committed, ambitious, and partisan. I experienced his willingness to be bipartisan when it would advance an important issue. While we did not socialize together, I experienced his friendship and found him to be unfailingly civil in his interaction with his colleagues. I have observed similar personal civility in the personal lives of other Republicans and Democrats who have moved onto the national political stage.

> "Our political life is a reflection of who we are, no matter how unattractive we may find the image looking back at us."

In their personal lives, politicians are as likely to act civilly as any other group in society. They are friendly, courteous and, believe it or not, politicians care for each other. In my experience even political adversaries were civil and often friendly to each other at campaign events. Incivility was rare, despite the tension of a campaign and the pressure to win.

The polarizing effect of culture wars

So why do good and civil public servants appear to lose some of their civility in the public political arena? I have observed that in political life, civility can be compartmentalized. While in Springfield, I shared an apartment with several of my Republican colleagues and, for a period, with a Democrat colleague. Yet some of my fellow Republicans were critical of my friendship with the Democrat and wondered whether I might reveal party information. Some Democrats felt that the Democrat should not share an apartment with a Republican. As partisanship increases, civility between Republicans and Democrats decreases.

Politicians are elected by their fellow citizens. I believe they reflect the rest of us. What we want can be in direct conflict with what our friends, neighbors, and fellow citizens want. Issues such as war and peace, abortion, family, education, environment, public health, free markets, unionization, guns, privacy, Social Security, Medicare, and taxes both unite and divide us as a nation. To achieve our goals on any of these issues, we have to elect public officials who agree with us as a majority. We want our views to prevail, and the more we are divided as an electorate over these important issues, the more challenging it is for elected officials to govern.

Last April *Newsweek* writer Steve Tuttle described one citizen's decision to organize "a successful [political] movement based on civility instead of combat." Reacting against the populist Tea Party movement, Annabel Park organized hundreds of Coffee Party meetings, with the intention of seeking a civil discussion of national issues. "But from the moment folks in the crowd stood up to speak their minds," Tuttle wrote about one meeting in Washington, D.C., "Park knew these people had not come to sip cappuccinos and set an example of civility for an overheated nation. They were angry. They hated the Tea Party, and the Republican Party. They wanted to get even." One participant said, "I like the civility idea, but I hate

the Tea Party people."

Even when civility is the ostensible goal, voters themselves struggle to embody it.

Elections are necessary to democracy

While I value bipartisan civility in political life, I understand that political conflict is important. Elections matter. In my twenty years in the Illinois legislature, I served in the minority and in the majority for ten years each, and I understand well how much more can be achieved when your party is in control.

The business of getting elected can quickly devolve into incivility. Parties run negative attack ads because they are effective with voters. I have observed candidates veto harsh unfair political ads and lose. More often unfair ads are approved.

Why is this the case? Does high-minded governing become impossible when getting reelected seems to demand partisan behavior?

Political leaders know that they must win elections if their positions are to prevail. Political parties tend to focus on winning rather than serving. If parties do not achieve majorities, opposing views will prevail in the laws and regulations that are enacted. If the candidate doesn't win, it's impossible for him or her to serve. Some issues are more important than others, and some are not subject to reasonable compromise. The 1860 and 1864 presidential elections were critical to the preservation of our union and the abolition of slavery. Elections have consequences.

Many voters focus primarily on a specific issue when they vote. They feel so strongly about that issue that they support any candidate who will vote with them, and they oppose any who will vote against them, regardless of political party. When we feel very strongly about specific issues, winning is everything.

As a result, citizens support candidates and parties with whom they generally agree on the issues they believe to be important. In February editor of *Newsweek* Jon Meacham wrote, "Our political life is a reflection of who we are, no matter how unattractive we may find the image looking back at us." Meacham continued, "I have been struck of late by the number of people I know who believe that things used to be better, that there was a time when lawmakers drank together and agreed to do what was best for the country. Perhaps, but if things got done in the past, then why do we face so many perennial problems?" He proceeded to note that much of this nostalgia for civility is based on myth.

Many candidates choose civility in approving advertising and often reject unfair or personal attacks. The candidate on the receiving end of an ad has a different perspective, of course, on its perceived fairness.

Political ideas are complex, yet sound bites and personalities sell

Increasingly voters are asking for more civility from politicians while at the same time criticizing those who put partisanship aside to work for a common cause. Congressman Bob Inglis is a Republican from South Carolina, who was described this way in the *Wall Street Journal* on June 2: "In an election cycle dominated by angry voices, Mr. Inglis urges moderation. That has left him struggling for his political life."

Inglis was opposed in his primary by Trey Gowdy, who said, "I think you can be extraordinarily contrasting and civil at the same time. But the key to our winning again is contrast." Gowdy admitted, "The world would be a better place if more people were like Bob Inglis." But, Gowdy said, "Congress would not be." The *Wall Street Journal* writer continued, "House Republican leaders are wary of Mr. Inglis, who counts a Democrat, Illinois Rep. Dan Lipinski, among his closest friends in Congress." Inglis was defeated by Gowdy in the June 22 runoff primary.

As citizens we can improve the civility of our politics through our voting and support for candidates. We can investigate the truth of candidates' positions and records rather than accepting the truthfulness of thirty-second attack ads. Both parties stretch the truth to attack opposing candidates. Voters can take the time to learn the truth about the candidates. We can also reject anger as a driving political force in a media age that promotes political anger. We can demand civility of our candidates, and we can behave civilly at town hall meetings and other public forums.

Each of us must choose how to practice civility. Our Christian faith needs to inform our political decisions. In the public political arena, candidates and parties decide upon the fairness of attack ads. Government officials decide when to stand on fixed principle and when it is appropriate to compromise for the greater good. What issues are so important to us that we will never support a candidate who disagrees with us? Do we care about public incivility when we talk about issues of importance to us? Would we prefer that our candidate be civil even if it causes his or her defeat?

I suggest that civility is still the norm in politics and government service. While campaign incivility is not new in our politics, the changing media and blogosphere have affected the level of civility in government and politics, and sometimes we as voters fan the flames of anger and incivility. As we observe and participate in elections, we can choose to improve the level of civility in politics. We can punish incivility by voting for the candidate who campaigns in a more civil manner. Our dilemma is that the more civil candidate may oppose our views on issues of great importance to us. The choices are ours. ■