

# CIVILITY AND US POLITICAL DISCOURSE

## A FEW THINGS WE KNOW ...

### AMERICANS BELIEVE INCIVILITY IS A PROBLEM FOR DEMOCRACY



8 in 10 Americans said the lack of civil discourse in our political system was a serious problem. <sup>1</sup>

#### Incivility has been linked with:

- Reduced trust
- Less reasoned discussion
- Polarization
- Difficulty reaching bipartisan compromise
- Gridlock

### AMERICANS STATE THAT INCIVILITY CAUSES THEM TO TURN AWAY FROM POLITICS.

When surveyed, Americans express concern about the level of incivility in politics, even to the point of leading them to distance themselves from it, or pay less attention. <sup>2</sup>

82%

of Americans agreed strongly or somewhat strongly that "some negative advertisements are so nasty that I stop paying attention to what the candidates are saying."



72%

found that mean-spirited commercials were inappropriate.



82%

found that commercials containing personal attacks were inappropriate.



### "INCIVILITY" IN POLITICS LACKS A COMMON DEFINITION <sup>3</sup>

Research has come up with two distinct concepts of incivility: <sup>4</sup>



#### Personal-Level Incivility

This type of incivility violates norms of politeness or face-to-face interaction.

##### It includes:

- Rudeness
- Name calling
- Yelling
- Swearing



#### Public-Level Incivility

This type of incivility occurs when there is a violation of the norms of the political or democratic process.

##### It includes:

- Delegitimizing another's point of view <sup>5</sup>
- Political argument motivated by personal gain rather than public good: <sup>6</sup> violating *Robert's Rules of Order* <sup>7</sup>
- Spreading misinformation and refusing reciprocity by blocking compromise with people who disagree <sup>8 7 5</sup>

### VIEWS OF INCIVILITY VARY <sup>4</sup>

Individuals perceive personal-level incivility as **more uncivil** than public-level incivility.

Political and media figures from a person's own political party are perceived as **less uncivil** than others.

People still identified personal-level incivility from partisans they most agreed with, but they were less likely to equate public-level behaviors and remarks as uncivil from members of the political party they most agreed with.

# ONLINE CIVILITY

There is a perception that we are less civil online.



However, researchers with the Engaging News Project took a close look at online comments and discovered...

## COMMENTERS

14%

have posted a comment on a news organization's site or social media page

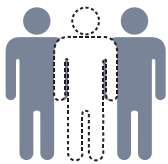


35%

have read news comments, but have not themselves posted

ABC

## ANONYMITY



Contrary to popular belief, **anonymous commenters are not more likely to be uncivil**, in general, although this varies by the topic they are discussing.<sup>10</sup>

## INCIVILITY VS. DELIBERATION

Although online comment streams are seen as cesspools, they actually exhibit more deliberative attributes (*for example, use of evidence to support one's point*) than uncivil attributes (*such as profanity or name-calling*).<sup>10</sup>



1 IN 5

online comments  
is uncivil



1 IN 4

comments exhibit  
deliberative qualities

## INCIVILITY INFLUENCERS<sup>10</sup>

What really influences whether commenters are uncivil are:



- **Topic** of the discussion
- The **news site** where the discussion takes place
- The **moderation policy** at the news site

USING ALL CAPITAL LETTERS IS NOT JUST YELLING IN COMPUTER-MEDIATED SPEECH: *IT IS LINKED TO INCIVILITY.*

## EFFECTS OF INCIVILITY



Both civil and uncivil disagreement make people upset, but this effect is heightened for uncivil disagreement.<sup>11</sup>

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