

# 1 / The Powerful—if Elusive— Nature of Civility

Give me thy hand: I am sorry I beat thee; but, while  
thou livest, keep a good tongue in thy head.

STEPHANO, in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Act III

Many senators said the current vitriol [over health care legislation] . . . was unlike anything they had seen. “It has gotten so much more partisan,” said Senator John D. Rockefeller IV, Democrat of West Virginia. “This was so wicked. This was so venal.”

DAVID HERSZENHORN,  
“In Health Vote, A New Vitriol,” *New York Times*

**H**igh-minded rhetoric about “civility” courses throughout issue debates across the nation. We find hopes for civility expressed in speeches by the mighty all the way down to the posts of lone, unknown bloggers. But the gap between our language about civility and the real nature of American political discourse and practice is at least as wide as it has ever been. This book explores that gap—what it looks like, how it persists, and whether it matters for a contemporary democracy like our own.

Our particular historical moment is fraught with the concerns of our day: an economic downturn, energy independence, health care reform, the conduct of major military efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq, and a fierce ideological divide between political parties that seems to grow worse each month. It is also a moment created—most of all, perhaps—by the extraordinary presidential campaigns of 2008, and

an equally extraordinary election outcome. Presidential elections and their aftermaths, despite their uniqueness, have proven to be among the best analytic tools we have for studying our political culture, and they are superb windows into the nature of civility. So my focus in this book is on civility writ large in American politics, but viewed through the distinctive lens of the 2008 campaigns and election.

Because the debates about health care reform have continued to evolve, I have been able to extend my analysis well into the winter of 2010, even though this national discussion remained far from settled. Some town hall meetings, called to debate health care reform in the summer of 2009, challenged many ideals about civility. And the now infamous shout “You lie!”—uttered by South Carolina’s Representative Joe Wilson during President Barack Obama’s address to a joint session of Congress in September 2009—marked some sort of American milestone. But in many ways the passionate absence of bipartisanship and the accolades Wilson gathered from his party reflect an anger that had developed during the 2008 presidential election campaign. Fallout from that election and new manifestations of party conflict have much to do with civility.<sup>1</sup>

It was unexpected, but our most recent presidential contest turned out to be particularly helpful in studying the contemporary practice of both civility and incivility. It boasted a variety of fascinating aspects—the tenor of the campaigns, the tone and content of media coverage, and the nature of interpersonal dialogues all around us. While voter turnout figures may have been a disappointment to scholars hoping for astronomical numbers, there is no question that—although impossible to measure precisely—emotions ran much higher than those from prior recent presidential elections. We might speculate on why the emotional pitch was so high. An economic downturn of epic proportions? The first African American presidential candidate? The proliferation of engaging Web sites and bloggers? Fierce, lengthy primary battles? No matter the causes, it was a riveting year of campaigns, and we are forever changed by the people and events of 2008.

It seems clear in retrospect that 2008 mattered to Americans in profound ways. In a context where an already-intense campaign was ratcheted up by a severe recession and two wars in progress, civility was bound to emerge as a central issue. Was the campaign civil, or should we say, civil enough for America? Did those who participated in it—from candidates to journalists to citizens—treat each other with the respect deemed appropriate in our (self-proclaimed) world’s greatest democracy? And, most interesting, should we even worry about civility, a “pie-in-the-sky” concept with an old-fashioned, nineteenth-century ring to it?

When I told people I was writing a book on civility, they thought of opening doors for women, naughty children misbehaving in public, and suppressing the desire to give others “the finger” in traffic. These niceties or hoped-for niceties are related to civility, no doubt. But my interest is in the fundamental tone and practice of democracy, in the wake of an unusual presidential campaign and at the start of the twenty-first century.

While a single presidential election offers but one window into the debates over civility, my empirical investigations seem to point to far larger, longitudinal conundrums of political culture. Some Americans, citizens and leaders, are distraught about what they see as a decline in civility. Others find the worriers both naïve and cowardly: The line between passionate engagement and civility seems chronically fuzzy and arbitrary. Both views can be persuasive, and it does us no good to choose sides. Norms of civility certainly exist, as we shall see throughout this book. But civility is also very much in the eye of the beholder. Where you sit—as a journalist, an ideologue, a candidate, or a citizen—matters immensely. Perspectives vary, and while this is all somewhat messy, it suits a democracy that must wrestle with both policy and the tone of policy debate.

The questions I want to raise about civility are challenging to answer, and the vague meaning of “civility” has much to do with that challenge. But as I argue in this book, debates over its definition, its rise, or its fall are a distraction. What we should attend to are the

*strategic uses* of civility and incivility. Civility is best thought of as an asset or tool, a mechanism, or even a technology of sorts. As I explain in this chapter, this approach opens up a wide and productive range of empirical phenomena to study *and* captures the context-dependent, historical nature of civility. If we think of civility as a strategic asset, we can pull away from the “more or less” debates and study newer forms of political discourse and behavior with far more sophistication and success.

I assume a strong free-speech framework. There is no question, as we will see in the pages that follow, that much uncivil talk in our present-day political communication is racist, sexist, or just plain rude. No one, except a mindless provocateur, would want these sorts of hateful speech acts to be commonplace. And, of course, speech that threatens violence—as we saw in the aftermath of the March health care bill passage in 2010—is unacceptable. But in my work, I have come to admit that lines are fuzzy and that *imputation* of motives from rhetoric is a dangerous game. Congressman Joe Wilson’s 2009 shout at President Obama provoked considerable debate about underlying racial motives: Would he have yelled at a white president? Why the shout during Obama’s discussion of illegal immigrants? I’m afraid that answers to such questions are elusive, empirically at least, regardless of our gut feeling. So while I do indeed find certain remarks clearly inappropriate, I will hold judgment on what I think is and is not constructive debate. I leave these matters to editorial writers and thinkers who seek particular policy or social change. They are important matters, but are not the topic of this book.

Another assumption I make here is that “facts”—notions that we can prove through widely accepted standards of evidence—are important in democratic debate, but they may have only a marginal relationship to the struggle over civility. Of course, facts matter, and there is tremendous interest in them, hence the appearance of “fact-checking” Web sites that put our political officials under scrutiny. This is absolutely essential work in any polity, without question. But there are significant gray areas, both during political campaigns and

between them, so again, I tread carefully. When leaders are actively, intentionally deceiving us, and we can prove—perhaps at a much later date—that they knew they lied, where do we place this phenomenon in relation to civility?

My belief is that truly interesting and important cases of intentional public lying are somewhat rare, and that creative stretching of the truths one holds dear is probably far more common. In any case, awful lies are typically revealed after the debate in question has passed, and they should be judged with vigor whenever they appear. The challenge of determining who is using facts well and who is not is a moving target, and I applaud the effort, even if it is a rough fit to thinking about civility.<sup>2</sup>

### Three Arguments about Civility

My central argument concerns the strategic natures of civility and incivility—as employed in blogs, in speeches, at campaign rallies, and in face-to-face discussions. But I posit two additional arguments, aspects of civility beyond strategy.

First, in our quest for political discussion and interchange, we have come to need a fair amount of comfort and interactivity. The “Oprah-like” culture of therapy—feeling good about our human interactions, or at least not feeling bad—has led us to avoid, or be disturbed by, even minor feelings of discomfort in political discourse, whether televised, on the Web, or in person. In addition (sometimes in tension with the need for comfort, sometimes not), our generalized desire for interaction and reciprocity is vital to how we see civility. This is likely an effect of the Internet, with its constant presence in our lives, and the feedback it so often provides. (Chapter 5 addresses the Internet.)

Civility is a complex notion, and my three conceptual approaches emerge from past literature and current practice, viewed at least partially through the particular lens of 2008. Focusing on *strategic* civility provides a way to analyze our political environment effectively

and, at the same time, avoid inconclusive debates about whether civility is on the rise or decline. The other two arguments concern the nature of the civility that we seem to desire as Americans: Civility has both *emotional* and *interactive* components that are limiting but important, as we parse contemporary American politics.

### *Strategic Civility*

It is most useful to think of civility as a tool in the rhetorical and behavioral arsenals of politics.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes people are unknowingly civil or uncivil, of course. These actions may be natural aspects of our typical participation in politics. Indeed, some individuals seem to emanate civility or incivility as part of their approach, so much so that it seems central to their very fabric of being. While partisanship abounds in the higher reaches of American politics, it is fair to say, for example, that a variety of U.S. senators, past and present, have been consistently civil in their behavior. This is one reason why they are commonly selected for sensitive and controversial tasks. (For example, Senator George Mitchell was chosen to investigate illegal uses of performance-enhancing drugs in baseball, and then was chosen as Middle East envoy.) And on the uncivil end of the continuum, we have actors like the late Lee Atwater, a political consultant who broke new ground in the pursuit of brutal and highly personal campaign mudslinging.

Apart from these cases of chronic, uniform, or innate civility or incivility, which are unusual, we should think of civility as a strategic tool or weapon in politics. It is a tool that is used intentionally, for better or worse. Someone might use incivility to great effect in a negative advertising campaign. Or, alternately, take the “high road” in advertising, hoping to gain accolades for the use of civility and even generosity of feeling toward an opponent. As noted previously, many have viewed civility as a state of a society (more or less civil) and a constellation of social norms associated with that state. I differ in this book, treating it as a tool. Table 1.1 sets out characteristics implied by the two different perspectives on civility.

TABLE 1.1 TWO APPROACHES TO CIVILITY

<i>Civility as a Set of Norms</i>	<i>Civility as a Strategic Tool</i>
Static, within eras	Temporary and changeable
Conflated with culture	Easily discerned and singled out
Tethered to a context	Fluid in use across contexts
Without a particular communicator	With a clear communicating agent
Not conducive to Internet communication styles	Conducive to Internet communication styles
Difficult to manipulate intimacy by communicators	Easy to manipulate intimacy by communicators

As we shall see in the brief review of civility through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that follows, most theorists, historians, and writers have viewed civility as a set of social and cultural norms. These observers find different levels of civility in different eras. Some see civility on the rise, and others see it in decline, scholars Stephen Carter and Robert Putnam being among the strongest proponents of the latter view. But if we think of civility as something employed for tactical purposes, we are able to pull away from these debates, which are not always as productive as they might be in an age of Web communication. This is not to say that these scholars have not contributed to the study of civility; they have done so mightily, with erudition and panache. But the time has come to shift the debate and analysis of civility. With the arrival of the Internet, we have a seemingly endless number of communicators, forever inventing new sites, channels, and techniques for persuasion, conversation, and assault.

If, as in Table 1.1, we view civility as most authors have—as a set of norms and practices—we are left with a generally static approach. Of course, the norms and ideas about civility change, but typically such changes take decades and often generations to occur. However,

we now live in an intensely communicative age where no one waits on the passage of decades: These days, communicators are utilizing, playing with, and transforming civility and incivility daily, shaping American political discourse as a result.

Sometimes the experimentation of bloggers and average citizens challenges broader cultural norms in profound ways, as we saw during the 2008 presidential election. One particularly interesting example was the role of YouTube: A variety of contributors to the site posted video footage (taken surreptitiously) of people removing Obama or McCain yard signs.<sup>4</sup> This is a superb illustration of the complex uses of incivility, one that would be difficult to parse and understand if we did not think about civility and incivility as weapons. People steal or deface signs in order to further their own candidate in a local community. Then, enterprising people catch thieves on video, thereby exposing the practice but raising the implicit prospect that stealing yard signs has become *normative*—an acceptable ground game of politics.

Again, the older view of civility as a norm (the first column) cannot help us with these new, more complicated activities, made possible by the Internet, viewed by tens of millions. YouTube, as well as many other sites, enables people to make arguments through video, audio, blogging, and chatting. If we see civility as a strategic tool, it becomes a rich, relevant topic again, one that could not be more fitting to an Internet age, with so many varied participants worldwide. The old ways of thinking about civility—as a static part of culture, not easily manipulated or quickly altered, that is widely shared—seem downright inappropriate. These days, civility can be exploited or not, with tremendous speed and ease. Communicators can “grab” it for their purposes, and the venues for the uses of civility and incivility seem limitless. Far beyond stealing or destroying signs, fascinating as that is, are the “photoshopping” of images (e.g., candidate faces attached to other bodies), the continual distortion and reediting of candidate videos, citizen battles via Wikipedia page revisions, the chronic decontextualization of quotations, speeches, and ideas,



and a variety of other communicative actions, easy enough for middle school children to carry out.

One question that arises when we treat civility and incivility as strategic tools is whether they are good or bad, helpful or hurtful for democracy. An easy answer is the one we so often see in the scholarly politics literature: Incivility is destructive and blocks proper democratic debate. I find this a banal and unsophisticated answer, one that ignores the reality of politics, communication culture, and the social environment of the twenty-first century. In this book, I do not dodge this question, but there is no definitive answer to it either, and we would be dishonest to grandstand on it. It depends entirely on issue and situational context, and is closely tied to ideology and passion. Someone who believes that an embryo is a human being, for example, thinks it good for democracy and morality to use incivility—perhaps peacefully displaying images of horribly destroyed fetuses—as a strategic weapon. To these actors, such discourse enhances the debate and injects vital reality to it. And there are examples from the political left, just as powerful. In fact, Herbert Marcuse, a leading Marxist public intellectual of the 1960s, advocated forms of incivility—harsh interference with the speech of others, for example—if they furthered the values of social movements and justice.<sup>5</sup> In any case, it is not productive to go round and round on these matters, but better to evaluate them in the context of a national debate, as I do in Chapter 3, when discussing the 2009 health care policy “town meetings.” And in my conclusion, I will argue that tying ourselves up in knots about what is right or wrong, civil or uncivil, is far less useful than educating Americans about how to debate and develop the thick skin that strong democratic debate demands. *The real question is whether we want both depth of debate and the work that comes with it.*

Nonetheless, my thesis may be hard to swallow for some, because we have for so long seen the issues as black and white—civility is good, incivility is bad. Would not acceptance of incivility as a valid rhetorical tool like so many others lead to even more tactical, nasty, and ultimately destructive public discourse? Far from it,

as I argue throughout this book. If we see civility and incivility as strategic assets, we humanize the players on our political scene, in our town councils, and in our workplaces. Civil people can say uncivil things and uncivil people can be civil. Second, thinking about the *uses* of civility and incivility boosts our self-consciousness about the nature of political talk, reflection that is absolutely essential for a healthy nation. Finally, if we can view uncivil talk as just that, there can be change: If civility and incivility are “states” and not “traits,” as the early psychologists used to say, how we talk to each other is changeable—daily.

### *Civility, Comfort, and Personalized Interactivity*

It has become clear that the nature of civility is conflated with both feeling and interactive discourse in our time. In a culture where emotion is a dominant concept, used to describe everything from workplace dynamics to international diplomacy, we tend to think of civil behavior in the context of how it makes us feel. And we seem to know best how we feel, as a population, through our engagement with media—the nature and content of our “personal” media (our e-mail, our online relationships), as well as more distant media (pundits we watch or blogs we read). To attain “civility” in the twenty-first century, I posit here, is to achieve emotional affirmation *and* to have done so through immediate, intense communication. Put another way, civility is about feeling good while we interact with others, whether in person or through Twitter and Facebook. These dual components of civility—emotional comfort and intimacy in communication—are two broad axes around which my subsequent, more particular arguments revolve.<sup>6</sup>

It is good to feel good, while engaged in any social behavior. But one result of our current mode of civility is the anxiety produced by uncomfortable political interaction. Are we truly open to heated debate? What happens when we head toward the more intensive, passionately ideological, or even cruel exchange of words? Does a “take-

no-prisoners” form of debate or journalism have a place in our current culture of civility? These are questions I take up later, and they are central to understanding our own moment in politics.

How we treat each other in democracy has long been the realm of political philosophers and more recently cultural historians as well. The nature of our “manners,” often conflated with civility, has also been of great interest to scholars and writers for centuries. But there is no question that changes in media infrastructure, the rise of the Internet, and our seemingly endless need to take our personal and collective emotional temperatures demand that we evaluate civility and its future in new ways. Throughout this book, in trying to understand what civility is and should be, I will come back to the themes of feeling and communication, in hopes of shedding light on one of the oldest ideals in democracy.

The emotional thread that winds through contemporary conversations about civility is in fact an ancient one. Aristotle wrote extensively about friendship in democracy and its vital importance in the underpinnings of the state. The other thread I noted—how civility is determined by and shaped through communication media—has a long history as well, although not quite as old. One might argue that the ancients, Aristotle included, thought of civility as a communication-oriented concept, evidenced by Greek and Roman interest in rhetoric and public persuasion. But given the dramatic technological changes we have seen in mass communication, it is far more useful to turn to the early-twentieth-century communication theorists Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan, who spoke directly to the notion that available technology shapes the tenor of our times. While both were technologically determinist in their sensibilities, later scholars would pave a two-way street, demonstrating that technology and the nature of public discourse are more likely mutually reinforcing.<sup>7</sup>

The tensions that surround civility in the twenty-first century are great. Americans seek happiness, as is our way, but we *believe* that we seek argument, passion, and democracy along with it. How the two coexist—good feeling and discourse—is a subject that is fundamen-

tal to contemporary citizenship, regardless of our route to political participation and communication.

### *Defining Civility: Virtue and Manners*

While some scholars and authors have been brave enough to define “civility” and have made wonderful contributions as a result, existing definitions are imperfect, owing to the complexity of the concept. Some definitions seem a bit too intimate, focused on interpersonal interactions—how we treat our friends and neighbors, or even strangers on the street. Others are too impersonal, using high-flying rhetoric of democracy, but forgetting that citizens are living, breathing people. None of the definitions seem quite right, so scholars and writers have—logically—chosen to orient their work around definitions that make sense for the level and nature of their empirical or theoretical work. I will do the same, within the milieu of a contemporary presidential election year and its aftermath. But a detour through some of the more thoughtful works on civility is most helpful.

In an essay centered squarely on the meaning of civility in the United States, Virginia Sapiro argues—nodding to the literary critic Raymond Williams—that civility lacks proper standing in the sense of a democratic “keyword”:

Even in scholarly discussion, *civility* rests on a much looser less formalized (in any sense) set of meanings than, say, *justice*, *democracy*, or *equality*, which are the subjects of concerted efforts at definition and analysis. . . . It would take an advanced degree in alchemy, not political science, to draw a tidy but reasonably comprehensive definition out of the literatures to which one must turn to learn about civility as it is understood today.<sup>8</sup>

Sapiro goes on to note three types of definitions of civility. The first category focuses on politics, citizenship, and community, and is

related to good character and virtue. Another group of definitions is closer to manners—civility being on the other end of a behavioral continuum from barbarism. In these definitions, self-control is of utmost importance, as civility implies regulation of the body, the emotions, and speech. The third meaning of civility, the one closest to mine for the purposes of this book, is *communicative* in nature: Civility demands arguing, listening, and respect for the deliberative process.

The first category is an important one, but as Sapiro rightly notes, it tends to bleed into citizenship and citizenly virtues. Of course, citizenship matters immensely in political theory and practice, but it has fairly well-defined components, so we can set it aside neatly as we explore civility. While the fringe contours of citizenship are subject to debate in the United States, there are some shared notions of what constitutes it—staying informed about public affairs, serving on juries when called, and so forth. This is in contrast to the more nebulous civility, which lacks a shared definitional core.

The second category outlined by Sapiro is a bit more interesting for our purposes in this book, even if not relevant at all junctures. Being civilized, having good manners, controlling one's behavior, and showing restraint in expression are necessary (even if not sufficient) for the civility needed in a strong democratic polity. Thankfully, a large number of extraordinarily talented social and cultural historians have explored the evolution of manners over time, and their work is well worth a brief discussion.

Among the most prominent historians of civility, when defined as manners and self-control, was Norbert Elias, a German sociologist who published *The Civilizing Process* in 1939.<sup>9</sup> Elias argued that whereas extremes of human behavior—loud conviviality, excessive crying, even uncontrolled physical occurrences such as burps and flatulence—were common and accepted for many centuries, fundamental changes in self-control emerged in the eighteenth century. This shift is in evidence throughout nineteenth-century Europe, and even in the New World, well represented by the first American pres-

ident. As a young man, George Washington studied a centuries-old set of French Jesuit rules on how a person should behave.<sup>10</sup> Among these 110 numbered “Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation” were many related to self-control, from the mundane to the comical. A sampling:

5th: If You Cough, Sneeze, Sigh or Yawn, do it not Loud but Privately; and Speak not in your Yawning, but put Your handkerchief or Hand before your face and turn it aside.

7th: Put not off your Cloths in the presence of Others, nor go out your Chamber half Dressed.

16th: Do not Puff up the Cheeks, Loll not out the tongue rub the Hands, or beard, thrust out the lips, or bite them or keep the Lips too open or too Close.

But beyond bodily control and personal manners, some rules spoke to behavior in conversation, to morality, and to optimism:

58th: Let your Conversation be without Malice or Envy, for 'tis a Sign of a Tractable and Commendable Nature: And in all Causes of Passion admit Reason to Govern.

And finally, number 110:

Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire called conscience.

The young Washington may have found these rules helpful on a personal level, in navigating an emerging American political sphere. But most interesting is how many rules are included, and the sense of *agency* they underscore. In much the same way that contemporary self-help books and speakers emphasize the power of the individual

to evoke kindness and friendship, these 110 rules of civility imply one's ability to control local environments. The implication is that, through sensitivity to social cues and self-respect, one might be virtuous, well-mannered, and perhaps even popular.

The nineteenth century saw a proliferation of books and writings on etiquette. As John Kasson notes in his study of nineteenth-century America, manuals on etiquette focused not only on practical rules, but also the control of emotions: "To conceal feelings meant to discipline them, and etiquette manuals praised such discipline as fundamental to politeness. . . . Through will and practice an individual could learn to contain eruptions of feeling just as one learned to stifle a yawn."<sup>11</sup>

Etiquette manuals became important as an American people tried to define itself and its class markers. Meanwhile, the most talented minds of the day turned their attention to manners and emotional control as well. Charles Darwin had a great interest in the display of emotions, as did the psychologist William James. James had developed a rather complex view of self-control, concluding that the "self" is multifaceted and that people are stage actors of sorts. Kasson argues that James's ideas foreshadow those of the twentieth-century sociologist Erving Goffman, in weaving together the psychological and the physical with the social world: "In pointing to the 'discordant splittings' of the self and the fear of discovery, James suggested the deep anxieties of daily life in a complex, segmented society. Ironically, such anxieties easily led to further role-playing as a defense—as the profusion of etiquette books eloquently testifies."<sup>12</sup>

Darwin and James were not the only nineteenth-century intellectuals to study politeness, although interest in sociability took wildly different forms. John Stuart Mill addressed the issue within the context of his discussion "Of Individuality" in *On Liberty*. He noted an increasingly worrisome cultural desire for what he called "moderation." In achieving a moderation of thought and behavior, a "despotism of Custom" crushes the individual: "That standard [of moderation], express or tacit, is to desire nothing strongly. Its ideal of

character is to be without any marked character; to maim by compression, like a Chinese lady's foot, every part of human nature which stands out prominently."<sup>13</sup> Here we see a conflation of manners, custom, and public opinion, connections that Mill sped through on his way to other arguments. Would Mill have welcomed the distinct lack of manners and uncontrolled Internet discourse we now have? Perhaps. Unhealthful moderation of expression is easily overcome when we pound computer keys, alone at our screen, and beyond the confines of in-person, face-to-face interaction.

Mill's arguments about civility are rooted in his notions about conformity, and he posits that the superior person maintains individuality in the face of enormous social pressure to conform. Fearless expression of opinion defines the person of character, and constructing a society where this is possible should be the goal of all who value liberty. Mill is tackling a large number of interrelated concepts in *On Liberty*, but for our purposes he should be seen as one of the theorists least interested in manners, since manners—to his mind—buttress conformity and suppress bold ideas. As the political theorist Richard Sinopoli notes, "Mill urges upon us a thick-skinned liberalism. . . . [His] notion of civility might lead to a less 'polite' society than he lived in and for us, a society that is impolite in different ways."<sup>14</sup>

Conformity constrains bold opinions for most, in Mill's eyes, but it is even worse than that. Those with majority opinions are allowed to be more rude than those in the minority: "With regard to what is commonly meant by intemperate discussion, namely invective, sarcasm, personality and the like, the denunciation of these weapons would deserve more sympathy if it were ever proposed to interdict them equally to both sides; but it is only desired to restrain the employment of them against the prevailing opinion."<sup>15</sup>

During the same period, Alexis de Tocqueville, incisive visitor to nineteenth-century America, reflected on manners as he experienced them on his great journeys. He argued that manners in a democracy vary and stand in great contrast to the codes one finds in a European aristocracy. The sheer diversity of the American popula-



tion—by class, race, region, and party—led to a situation where, in Tocqueville's words, "There is still some memory of the strict code of politeness, but no one knows quite what it said or where to find it."<sup>16</sup> He saw American manners as a work in progress, although he speculated that a code might be inherently impossible in a democracy:

Men [in America] have lost the common standard of manners but have not yet resolved to do without it, so each individual tries to shape, out of the ruins of former customs, some rule, however arbitrary and variable. Hence manners have neither the regularity and dignity frequent in aristocracies nor the qualities of simplicity and freedom which one sometimes finds in democracies; they are both constrained and casual.<sup>17</sup>

Where Tocqueville lands, in his discussion of manners, is perhaps one of the more optimistic views among all writers, of any century:

Democratic manners are neither so well thought out nor so regular [as those in aristocracies], but they often are more sincere. They form, as it were, a thin, transparent veil through which the real feelings and personal thoughts of each man can be easily seen. Hence there is frequently an intimate connection between the form and the substance of behavior; we see a less decorative picture, but one truer to life.<sup>18</sup>

Tocqueville wrote during a period when Americans found an abundance of manuals and essays on etiquette to guide them. On the one hand, then, there was a growing interest in polite behavior on the part of an expanding, self-conscious "respectable" class. On the other, the still-new democracy boasted the value of equality, often a difficult fit with manners, a chronic indicator of class stratification and status. Tocqueville saw that there is indeed a challenge in the flattening of manners required for a truly democratic, cross-class discourse and sensibility. He wondered if democratic conversation, an interpersonal

phenomenon in his nineteenth-century world, was possible without eliminating traditional behavioral codes.

This seems a quaint matter in an age of electronic media; many of our interactions are mediated, and the “real feelings and personal thoughts of each man” are not, contra Tocqueville, so easy to sense over the Internet or airwaves. Of course, we argue with our friends, our relatives, and our coworkers. But with regard to the content of media, we cannot achieve the level of sincerity in discourse Tocqueville described.

One last nineteenth-century voice worth noting is Ferdinand Tönnies, the highly influential German social theorist, best known for his 1887 masterwork, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (*Community and Society*). Tönnies famously argued that, over time, civilization moves from social interactions rooted in kinship and friendship to those based in commerce and contracts. With the onset of industrialization, there is a shift from ties of blood, communality, custom, and love, to markets, impersonality, self-interest, individuality, and rationality. As with Max Weber’s theory of rationalization, “society” is not a particularly attractive place to Tönnies. There is a coldness about it, and we are most likely to treat others as a means to self-interested ends, rather than as persons with inherent value.<sup>19</sup> Tönnies pondered civility in modern society, noting that it was certainly necessary in order for markets to operate and contracts to be negotiated. The utility of civility was clear to him, but the trade-offs were also clear: Contemporary society would crush the emotional, humane remains of *gemeinschaft* (community-based) society. He notes, depressingly:

All *conventional sociability* may be understood as analogous to the exchange of material goods. The primary rule is politeness, an exchange of words and courtesies where everyone appears to be concerned for everyone else and to be esteeming each other as equals. In fact everyone is thinking of himself and trying to push his own importance and advantages at the expense of the rest.<sup>20</sup>

Tönnies, Weber, and their European colleagues took a dim view of civility in industrial societies, holding far more negative views than Tocqueville, who is downright sunny in comparison. Even within the varying views of civility and its motivations, nineteenth-century thinkers struggled with the nature of evolving social interactions in the context of a changing world. By doing so, they continually visit themes of this book—emotional comfort and communication as defining aspects of civility.

## Civility and Communication

My working definition for this book falls into the third category of meanings of civility delineated by Sapiro: civility as constructive engagement with others through argument, deliberation, and discourse. It is a comfortable category for many scholars, because it pulls together so much important theoretical work on political conversation (e.g., Jürgen Habermas's notion of the "public sphere"), as well as empirical work aimed at strengthening deliberation in communities (e.g., James Fishkin's "deliberative polling" or the American Association of State Colleges and Universities' American Democracy Project).<sup>21</sup>

Much theorizing about deliberation, as well as projects devoted to strengthening community discussion about vital issues (e.g., projects by the Kettering and Ford foundations), is interpersonal in nature: How do we talk with each other in small groups and in larger assemblies of citizens? This focus on face-to-face human interaction is important, but again, discussion is more difficult to scrutinize in online interactions. I do not mean that the literature and experiments in face-to-face political talk are irrelevant to the online democracy we now have. But we must keep in mind that what is considered "civil" in the blogosphere often would not be appropriate behavior at a city council meeting.<sup>22</sup>

Listening is as vital to civility as respectful talk. Although he takes on the much broader issues of American citizenship, moving

far from civility, theorist Benjamin Barber reminds us that the scholarly discussion of deliberation is greatly biased toward speech. He argues that *listening* is underplayed in discussions of citizenship, and this theme will reappear repeatedly in later chapters as we focus on real cases of civility and incivility. He notes, “One measure of healthy political talk is the amount of *silence* it permits and encourages, for silence is the precious medium in which reflection is nurtured and empathy can grow. Without it, there is only the babble of raucous interests and insistent rights trying for the deaf ears of impatient adversaries.”<sup>23</sup> How one “listens” on the Internet and where to locate silence were not questions for Barber two decades ago. Listening involves taking some time and sitting back, contemplative postures that do not fit well in our world of immediacy, impatient typing, and general communicative hyperactivity.

To say that deliberation and constructive conversation are—or should be—the defining characteristics of civility in the twenty-first century is simple enough. But we need to elaborate the concept more fully, to highlight its richness and its value. Talk is not equivalent to civility: Civility needs to be deeply and profoundly reciprocal.

More than three decades ago, long before German theorist Jürgen Habermas’s work was translated and garnered American scholarly interest, before organizations like the Kettering Foundation built programs on community engagement, and when “media” meant newspapers and television, political scientist Heinz Eulau turned his considerable talents to the meaning of civility. He argued that while civility would be as elusive to define as human political behavior itself, reciprocity and mutual dependence were central components of the concept:

The politics of civility as I think of it, refers to a broad range of potential behavioral patterns that can be expressed by such participles as persuading, soliciting, consulting, advising, bargaining, compromising, coalition-building, and so on—in other words, forms of behavior in which at least two actors

stand in a mutually dependent relationship to each other. . . . In a civil relationship, then, the interaction is reciprocal, though not necessarily symmetrical, in that both actors gain from it.<sup>24</sup>

This meaning of civility makes argument and deliberation central but also underscores the complexity of talk. So many of our current projects in deliberation focus on consensus-building, and that is an extraordinarily worthy goal in a nation divided by race, class, region, ethnicity, and ideology. But civility does not always succeed in producing constructive results or even closure. Civility is a process populated by agents with varying goals. Civil discourse ties agents together, whether for a moment, an election, or a lifetime. Eulau emphasized that one of the most difficult aspects of civility and civil behavior is the ability to tolerate ambiguity. Political talk, indeed our very coexistence in a democracy, demands an understanding, or tacit agreement, that clarity and consensus may not come at all.

My argument throughout this book is that we need a definition that is discursive—broad enough to include deliberation, argument, conversation, and reciprocity. But I posit that some form of emotional self-control, as well as a sense of good feeling, is just as vital to civility in our day. We need emotional restraint but also comfort if we are to engage well through communication. That is easier said than done, as we shall see in our cases that follow. How we got to this juncture, with emotional satisfaction becoming so central to civility, is a subject better left to cultural sociologists. But it seems clear that in our therapeutic society, where self-disclosure of our innermost anxieties dominates the airwaves and the bookstores, civility has great emotional content. We have to argue out differences for the sake of democracy, but we typically have to feel happy somehow while we are doing so if we are to like it or try it again. Thanks to Oprah and Dr. Phil, Americans have a far more sophisticated understanding of the complexities of daily happiness than ever before, but we have also come to seek contentment in almost all spheres.

The literature on etiquette emphasizes that manners are a chore; one needs to commit to memory—as the young George Washington did—a code of sorts. Tocqueville argued that the code is loose in a democracy; there is room for many styles and types of behavior. And these days, both make sense: We self-regulate to avoid offending people, but we cling to our rights as individuals with our own opinions, styles of expression, and so forth. These balances are central to civility, but they seem a jumble. Again, Eulau gets to the bottom of it, proposing that civility is about emotional *maturity*: “We have achieved the politics of civility when we are capable of asking not only ‘What is in it for me?’ but also ‘What can I do for you?’ It is out of these two simple questions that the maturity of civility is born.”<sup>25</sup>

So, put another way, the emotional aspects of civility require tolerance and other-directedness. Selflessness is certainly not required, but an acknowledgement of mutuality will—in most cases—result in the good feeling we seem to need, as we argue about politics in our time.

## A Note on Deliberation

Some of the most interesting work in political theory over the last decade has revolved around democratic deliberation—how we come to make decisions, whether in legislative, judicial, or community settings. Of course, the study of conversation and talk has a long pedigree, with serious attention in the late nineteenth century from Tocqueville and Gabriel Tarde, the French social theorist. Civility and deliberation are not nearly the same concepts, since deliberation is typically an activity aimed at resolution of disputes or conflicts. We deliberate in advance of a decision to be made, typically, and those who study this sort of talk do so with an interest in the ultimate quality of our decisions.

Despite this focus on decisions, some key aspects of deliberation are of interest in the study of civility. In particular, Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson’s notion of “civic magnanimity” highlights

aspects of civility that explore new territory.<sup>26</sup> First, civic magnanimity demands an acknowledgment of the moral status of someone else's position. It also calls for a degree of open-mindedness, during the deliberative process. Finally, they argue, to achieve magnanimity, citizens should seek an "economy of moral disagreement" whereby they try to minimize conflict where possible and seek consensus, while not necessarily compromising one's position.

This is important and heady stuff, outlining the ideals a good society might strive toward. It is too grand a standard for the more base, simple civility I discuss in this book. But it is important to be cognizant of the higher-level principles for political behavior that have characterized normative views of citizen deliberation. Perhaps these principles have more value in the practice of civility than is typically evident during campaigns and other moments where talk is talk and there is no immediate, prescribed aim or decision point. It is an issue we take up later, especially with regard to the nebulous journalistic standards we find in contemporary media coverage of political candidates.

## **So Which Is It? Are We More Civil or Less Civil?**

Without question, the dominant strain in the literatures on both manners and political civility has been a struggle over the *trend*: Is civility on the decline? Journalists, scholars, and statesmen have asked the question repeatedly in different venues and for varying purposes. This discussion takes on many forms. During presidential campaigns, for example, we ask whether the nasty mudslinging is a new phenomenon. Inevitably, a historian points out that things were worse in the eighteenth or nineteenth century, and that assertion is either believed or not.

Most scholars and writers—apart from cultural historians like Elias and Kasson, who have seen manners as contextually bound—have bemoaned a decline of civility in American politics and social life. This ruefulness is a shame, since so many historians have doc-

umented phenomena to disprove this view, such as the horrendous dirty presidential campaigning of the past. (Thomas Jefferson and John Adams attacked each other viciously; Lyndon Johnson's "Daisy" ads against Barry Goldwater were quite over the top.) But I suppose the popular logic goes something like this, even if it does not match history: We have gone "downhill," but we can regain that civility, an American ideal we somehow lost over time.

In any case, the alleged decline of civility, of manners, and the public sphere in the United States more generally, has captured the imagination of the academy and Americans well beyond college campuses. One writer who has made the strong argument for a decline is Stephen Carter, law professor and novelist. Carter believes that the American civility decline began dramatically in the 1960s.<sup>27</sup> He argues that, before the 1960s, there was a "golden age" in the United States where people generally held the same dreams for the American experience. It is not so much that life before the 1960s was better, he posits. But there was a shared creed about America, and it was diminished by the Vietnam War and the student movement. John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Robert Kennedy were assassinated, and division—not solidarity—prevailed. Carter bemoans the destruction of a common morality and set of values, and notes

As the sixties swept into the seventies, leaving behind the wreckage of the illusion, there was nothing available to put in its place: no shared meanings, no shared commitments, none of the social glue that makes a people a people. . . . Having abandoned the illusion of commonality, we have adopted an even more dangerous illusion: that social norms are not important and thus we can do as we like.<sup>28</sup>

The most compelling empirically based arguments about our decline have come from the sociologist Robert Putnam. While his "bowling alone" hypothesis spurred a rancorous debate and significant criticism from many quarters, the contributions he has made



to current discourse are extraordinarily valuable and worth our time here. Putnam is concerned broadly with social life in America, but his arguments about how we treat each other in daily life are certainly relevant to a study on political civility.<sup>29</sup>

While Putnam takes on a variety of topics in the general arena of social life and culture, he is interested in civility as it is manifest in altruistic behavior. Hence he studies volunteerism, philanthropy, and other forms of individual contributions to neighborhood and community. He also studies polite behavior toward faceless “others.” One of the premier examples from his enormously popular *Bowling Alone* is the decline in number of drivers who obey stop signs, an intriguing indicator of how people act, not toward others directly, but toward fellow citizens *in theory*. He notes that, according to studies of New York intersections with stop signs: “In 1979, 37 percent of all motorists made a full stop, 34 percent a rolling stop, and 29 percent no stop at all. By 1996, 97 percent made no stop at all at the very same intersections.”<sup>30</sup>

Attacks on Putnam—his propositions and data—are abundant and vehement in many scholarly circles. But so is the chronic appeal of his decline argument, hence the attention he has received. I do not hope to settle long-running debates over the “bowling alone” thesis here, but it seems clear from the historical literature pioneered by Elias that arguments about decline are a bit dangerous when it comes to political civility. We have many well-documented cases of incivility, from well over two centuries of American electoral politics (poor Martin Van Buren, already vice president, was accused of wearing a woman’s corset!), not to mention outstanding cases of incivility by sitting statesmen, such as Senator Joseph McCarthy’s performances and the hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee in the 1950s.

These moments in American history underscore to us just how disrespectful, worrisome, and downright mean political discourse has been in our past. To argue that we do much better today is a difficult proposition to uphold. But it is not clear that we do worse either.

What is easier to argue is that the uncivil tendencies in American culture are more apparent and abundant thanks to pervasive media. One might have been able to ignore gruesome partisan bickering in the early nineteenth century simply by neglecting the newspaper or avoiding the local tavern. But the “in your face” quality of contemporary media makes this avoidance impossible: We wait in airport gates, car washes, and doctors’ offices with the blare of CNN keeping us company, even if we would prefer a different soundtrack as we go about our business.

So I will not argue here that civility has declined—clearly the most popular argument these days—or is on the rise. Neither assertion seems supportable, and both are far too broad to be stated definitively. What we can do, however, is document the tendencies and tools related to civility and incivility, and try to make sense of what they mean for American political culture.

## **Plan for the Book**

The chapters to come elaborate the three arguments made in this chapter: that civility and incivility are best seen as strategic assets, that comfort (or discomfort) is a critical component of civility, and that we somehow must reconcile both these notions with the demand for communicative interactivity brought to us by the Internet.

Chapter 2 is devoted to one fascinating aspect of the 2008 presidential campaign—the candidacy of Alaska’s governor, Sarah Palin, for the vice presidency. Interest in this new player on the national political scene was intense, and she received attention and scrutiny—good and bad—at a level we rarely see for either a vice presidential or even a presidential candidate. Some of this attention was rooted in novelty, as a new political face is always intriguing. But this novelty was exacerbated by her being the first female Republican vice presidential candidate, her attractiveness, and her ability to give a rousing speech, as well as the generally exciting nature of the campaign itself. To say that she received great attention is a tremendous under-

statement: She was discussed across millions of households and workplaces, and was a constant focus of media attention. In our time, the number of “hits” one receives on a search engine like Google is a fine indicator of public interest. In their annual wrap-up, the 2008 Year-End *Zeitgeist*, the Google management noted that Governor Palin took first place honors as the most “googled” person in the world, followed by “Beijing 2008” (the Olympics) and the Facebook log-in site. President Obama held down the number-six slot, while neither his running mate nor his opponent even appears on the top-ten list.<sup>31</sup>

There are, as a result of Palin’s visibility in the campaign, multiple points of scholarly interest—gender dynamics, the place of Alaska in a national political context, and the role of leadership background among executive-level candidates in the United States. In Chapter 2, however, my focus is solely on speeches that Palin delivered, the nature of her campaign rallies across the country, and the media reaction to her rallies. Her well-attended campaign events are a useful arena for studying civility, rich in dynamics: the composition and behavior of the crowds, her rhetorical style, the interaction between her and her audiences, and how journalists portrayed these events. My empirical analysis shows that the media did tend to focus on the least civil of her behaviors, for better or worse. But it also shows that Palin’s rhetorical approach opened up opportunities for citizen expression that were unusual and difficult for journalists to parse. Based on scrutiny of news articles about Palin’s events, I argue that journalists spent an inappropriately large amount of time and energy on incivility at Palin rallies, given the paucity of truly uncivil behavior they encompassed.

Chapter 3 analyzes our new president’s words, as he took the stage for a highly charged address on civility—his 2009 commencement address at the University of Notre Dame. The president was invited by the university president to speak in South Bend, and the invitation set off a firestorm of controversy. Vocal alumni and students, as well as Catholics far beyond campus, were appalled that a president who had been an outspoken advocate of abortion rights

and stem cell research would both address graduates and accept an honorary degree. Although many presidents had been invited to do the same in Notre Dame's storied past, none had the documented record of conflict with Catholic doctrine that Obama had, from his published work to his campaign speeches. America and the world watched the speech with great anticipation that May afternoon, and the president took the opportunity to speak directly about abortion and civility. His success in moving us toward that elusive "common ground" remains to be seen over the coming years. But I argue that the speech reveals much about his perspective on American civility, as well as the nature of public opinion in the United States. The Notre Dame address is full of promise and ideas, ideas that may very well shape the Obama presidency itself.

Only a few months after Obama spoke about civility at Notre Dame, he was confronted with a far more complex set of issues surrounding civility, with the appearance of often violent health care "town hall meetings" in the summer of 2009. While it is unclear just how many raucous meetings occurred, the scenes of yelling and screaming, between members of Congress and constituents, dominated the news and the Web. Obama was forced to recognize the nature of these town meetings and what they might mean for civility. So in Chapter 3, I also review the health care debates during 2009, an arena where both Obama and Palin found themselves playing a starring role.

The final empirical chapter is about our American future—the young people raised on the Internet. Any study of civility should pay substantial attention to young people, given the vital nature of political socialization in a civil society.<sup>32</sup> Adults, be they citizens, journalists, or politicians, have their own ideas about civility, but without an intense focus on our newest generation of citizens, we have few clues about the future. I attempt to map their struggles with civility, anxieties that will be broader American struggles as these young people mature. I aggregated opinions of college students from more than thirty college and university campuses across the state of Geor-

gia—from small, rural two-year institutions to large urban research universities (Georgia State University and Georgia Institute of Technology) to a land-grant institution, the University of Georgia. Colleagues and I collected these data in the spring of 2008 and again in 2009, in response to state legislative concerns about free speech, in particular to fears that some students were not able to express their opinions in the classroom and in public spaces.

While I found nothing particularly worrisome related to free speech, or at least no patterns that ran counter to what one typically finds in higher education, I did find—in response to open-ended queries—tremendous unhappiness with civility. Students complained about each other most of all, and this was an intriguing result for a study originally focused on faculty-student interaction. The diversity of students in the study, opining during a very contentious election year and the subsequent spring, is a magnificent setting in which to explore civil behavior and conversation. One wonders, with these study results, how we can build a culture of polite argument, given the negative way students view each other when political tensions run high.

In closing, I raise the earlier question one last time: Is there a danger in my approach—treating civility and incivility as tactics or strategies? Can this perspective demean American politics, making civility seem less valuable and important? I do not believe so. As I will argue in the concluding chapter, seeing civility as a tool can enable citizens and leaders to approach their activities with more self-consciousness and more care. When we think about what we do and realize our own agency, there is an opportunity for greater integrity of action and attention to real democratic ideals.

While civility in politics is a concept with many faces and my case studies probe only a few aspects of it, they are helpful in understanding the challenges we face as Americans. Are we prone to incivility in our discourse? What does it actually look like, and how much does it matter? How do different actors on the political stage approach civility, be they journalists, our elected officials, or the college students

who will one day set the tone for American citizenship and leadership? This book hopes to shed light on areas we must explore, given the imperatives of democratic theory and the need to enhance political life as best we can.

I shall not close with a definitive meaning of civility, since its meaning will always be tied to the changing nature of social relations. What was civil and acceptable in the nineteenth century is often uncivil today, and the same may well be true in the future. Taking on a grand concept like civility may seem outrageously ambitious, but in the end I hope to develop and value it in a way that fits our immensely complicated moment in political culture.