

## **The Ohio Civility Project: Phase II Report**

*The Ohio Civility Project is a collaboration of the University of Mount Union's Regula Center for Public Service, the University of Akron's Ray C. Bliss Institute, and Cleveland State University's Levin College of Urban Affairs.*

The Ohio Civility Project conducted research on civility in Ohio politics in 2010 and 2011, and this research suggested two key steps in improving the civility for public discourse in Ohio: *setting standards for the appropriate tone of public discourse, and then providing information about how public statements live up to these standards.*

In 2012, the Ohio Civility Project followed up on these suggestions by developing a set of civility standards and then using the standards to develop a civility index during the 2012 national elections. These activities were both encouraging and a learning experience. We plan on improving these efforts in the 2014 state elections.

### **Developing Civility Standards**

In the spring and summer of 2012, the Ohio Civility Project developed a set of standards for judging the civility of public discourse. The goal was to articulate clear and practical standards reflecting the common values of Ohioans and the fundamental role of civil public debate in a democracy.

This process began with the definition of civility developed earlier by the Project:

*"Civility is displaying the respect and courtesy toward other citizens in public discourse that is necessary for constructive public debate about solving public problems."*

A wide range of individuals participated in twelve working sessions to develop the standards, including clergy, journalists, academics, political leaders, and community leaders. The effort included a number of public meetings. The initial standards were tested in focus groups and in a survey of the public in the Akron area.

These efforts produced three questions that could be asked to determine if a public statement was uncivil:

1. *Does the statement contain offensive language, derogatory comments, or ascribe pernicious motives to another person?*
2. *Does the statement misrepresent, belittle, or dismiss another person's opinion?*
3. *Does the statement interrupt discussion, silence debate, or escalate conflict with another person?*

For purposes of the Civility Index, the questions were rated on a "0" (civil) to "5" (very uncivil) scale.

## Developing a Civility Index

In the fall of 2012, the three questions were tested with the development of a civility index. The goal of the index was to determine if the standards could be effectively applied to real political statements and the results disseminated to the public. The goal was to provide information on the level of civility in a rigorous, transparent and consistent fashion, and thus provide participants in public debate incentives to be civil.

The civility index was implemented during the 2012 national election in the following fashion:

First, the Ohio Civility Project recruited approximately three dozen “evaluators” to apply the three questions to selected statements and advertisements from the 2012 campaign. The evaluators were recruited from across the political spectrum and closely reflected the demographic diversity of Ohio in terms of age, race, and gender.

Second, the evaluators were divided into two teams. Once a week, each team received an email inviting them to evaluate four to six statements. “Team A” was contacted on Monday (and asked to respond by Tuesday) and “Team B” was contacted on Thursday (and asked to respond by Friday). A total of 26 individuals participated more than once in the evaluations.

Third, the evaluations occurred twice a week for the eight weeks of the 2012 general election campaign, beginning after the completion of national conventions (September 11) until the weekend before the election. One final contact was sent to both Team A and Team B on the Monday before the election (November 5) to bring closure to the process. (Thus there were a total of 17 contacts).

Fourth, four to six statements/advertisements were selected for evaluation from the top stories/videos viewed on YouTube, CNN, Fox News and MSNBC, aggregated over the days since the previous (so for a Monday evaluation, the stories came from the previous Thursday through Sunday).

The basic rule was to use the top ten stories/videos. A secondary rule was to seek partisan balance by having an equal number of Democratic and Republican examples. The presidential campaign was the source of the vast majority of topics, but these included comments from the presidential and vice-presidential candidates, campaign surrogates, and party leaders; the ads came from the presidential campaigns, party committees, and allied committees, such as the Super PACs. On several occasions, the Ohio U.S. Senate race made it into the top stories/videos.

In sum, the comments/videos were broadly representative of campaign communication by both sides in the federal election.

Fifth, the evaluators’ reports were averaged after each contact and the results posted on a web-page provided by the *Akron Beacon Journal*. Each Wednesday and Sunday, the *Beacon Journal* published examples of the civility index in the newspaper, ending on the Sunday before the election.

What follows is one example of the civility index published in the newspaper:

**The Ohio Civility Project seeks to return civility to our public discourse in Akron, Ohio and beyond.**

Is this statement civil?

**The Statement:** (Mandel Remarks toward Brown)

"Senator, you are a liar... You are lying to the people of the state of Ohio. You are falsely attacking me, and I won't stand for it. You might want to try to push people around in Washington, but you're not going to push me around."

*Does the statement contain offensive language, derogatory comments, or ascribe pernicious motives to another person?*

Scale: 0 [civil] to 5 [not civil]

**RATING: 5.00**

*Does the statement misrepresent, belittle, or dismiss another person's opinion?*

Scale: 0 [civil] to 5 [not civil]

**RATING: 4.60**

*Does the statement interrupt discussion, silence debate, or escalate conflict with another person?*

Scale: 0 [civil] to 5 [not civil]

**RATING: 4.10**

**OVERALL CIVILITY RATING: 4.57**

Is this statement civil?

**The Statement:** (Brown responds to Mandel Remarks)

"Being called a liar by the winner of the Pants on Fire crown is just a pretty remarkable thing for a young man to say, or for a man of any age to say in a political debate...Josh Mandel, as we know, has trouble telling the truth."

*Does the statement contain offensive language, derogatory comments, or ascribe pernicious motives to another person?*

Scale: 0 [civil] to 5 [not civil]

**RATING: 3.60**

*Does the statement misrepresent, belittle, or dismiss another person's opinion?*

Scale: 0 [civil] to 5 [not civil]

**RATING: 3.50**

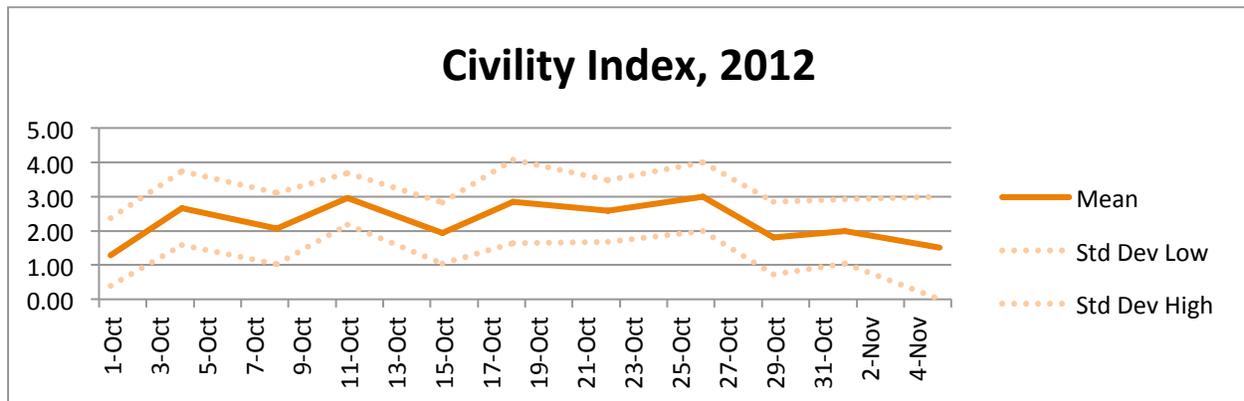
*Does the statement interrupt discussion, silence debate, or escalate conflict with another person?*

Scale: 0 [civil] to 5 [not civil]

**RATING: 3.60**

**OVERALL CIVILITY RATING: 3.57**

Averaging the civility index scores across the eight weeks of evaluation shows the following pattern:



This pattern reveals considerable fluctuation in the level of civility over the course of the campaign, with the mean score rising from less than the “2” on the scale (on balance civil) to a high point of “3” (on balance uncivil). The fluctuations seem to follow the controversies of the campaign, such as the debates.

But also note the low and high standard deviations around the mean: some evaluators saw the campaign as much less civil, while others saw it as more civil.

One reason for this pattern is partisan polarization among the evaluators, especially on typical campaign discourse: Democrats tended to see Democratic discourse as more civil than Republican discourse--and vice versa. However, there were specific examples of comments/videos where the rating seemed to transcend partisanship, in both the positive and negative directions.

### Evaluation of the Project

Analysis of the results suggests some areas from improvement in both the civil standards and the civility index.

The civility standards were not without controversy. In the first question, some evaluators did not see questioning a person’s motives as uncivil. And in the second question, other evaluators were unsure if misrepresentation was part of civility, since the factual basis of campaign appeals is often a matter of opinion. In the third question, other evaluators didn’t see how interrupting discussion really applied to campaign comments and advertisements.

In addition, the responses to the three questions for each individual and topic were very highly correlated, suggesting that a single question would be a more efficient way to evaluate the civility of comments/videos.

A single question might be this:

*Does the statement contain derogatory language, belittle an opinion, or escalate conflict with another person?*

The civility index could be improved in several ways:

1. More timely recruitment of evaluators would be valuable, along with a meeting to discuss the standards, procedures, and goals of the index.
2. There was considerable comment on the topics chosen to be evaluated: some observers felt that the topics were overly broad and others were concerned that the partisan balance may obscure the overall level of incivility if one candidate or party were markedly less civil than the other.
3. The pace of the evaluations was problematic for some evaluators. It may be that asking people to participate less often would produce better results; this approach could require a larger number of evaluators.
4. Although the project received considerable attention during the campaign, thanks in large part to the support of the *Akron Beacon Journal*, there is room for improvement.

\*The project could benefit from having its own stand-alone website.

\*Such a website could allow for the general public to evaluate the comments/videos, so that the views of citizens could be compared to view of the evaluators.

\*Another option is to make clearer judgments about the results of the index, highlighting cases of serious incivility, but also examples of civil and constructive discourse.

\* Explore having candidates, journalists, and party leaders sign a civility pledge before the start of the campaign.

\*Full engagement with the national media about the project is necessary.

## **Next Steps**

A good next step would be to hold a conference in the early fall of 2013 to discuss the results of the project with a broad cross-section of leaders in Ohio.

Given the 2012 experience, it may make sense to conduct the project again during the 2014 gubernatorial general election campaign in Ohio.

If it is decided to conduct the project again in 2014, the planning for the project should begin in earnest in January, 2013.