

The Ohio Civility Project: Report and Recommendations

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 lack of civility in public discourse in the United States has become a subject of great concern. Both participants and observers of national politics believe that disrespectful and discourteous behavior is retarding the solution of pressing nation problems.

Put in the affirmative, civility in public discourse allows Americans to trust one another enough to engage in constructive debate about public purposes. It ensures that citizens can pursue their own interests, security and dignity through the democratic process and the rule of law. It fosters a delicate balance for goals and tensions within a diverse and dynamic society so that public problems can be solved.

In the spring of 2010, we began investigating civility in Ohio politics to better understand its level, causes and consequences of incivility. We chose Ohio because it is a bellwether state in national elections. Today we report the principal results of the project and suggest some ways to increase civility in public discourse. For more details, see <http://www.mountunion.edu/the-regula-center-for-public-service>; www.uakron.edu/bliss.

Defining Civility

After research and reflection, we adopted the following usable definition of civility in public discourse:

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

- On the one hand, civility is not just politeness or expressions of goodwill—as welcome as such things may be in public discourse. Rather, civility is conduct with broader public purposes of constructive debate in mind.
- On the other hand, civility does not preclude substantive disagreements, vigorous advocacy of points of view, or cogent criticism of alternative perspective. After all, such things are essential for constructive public debate as well.

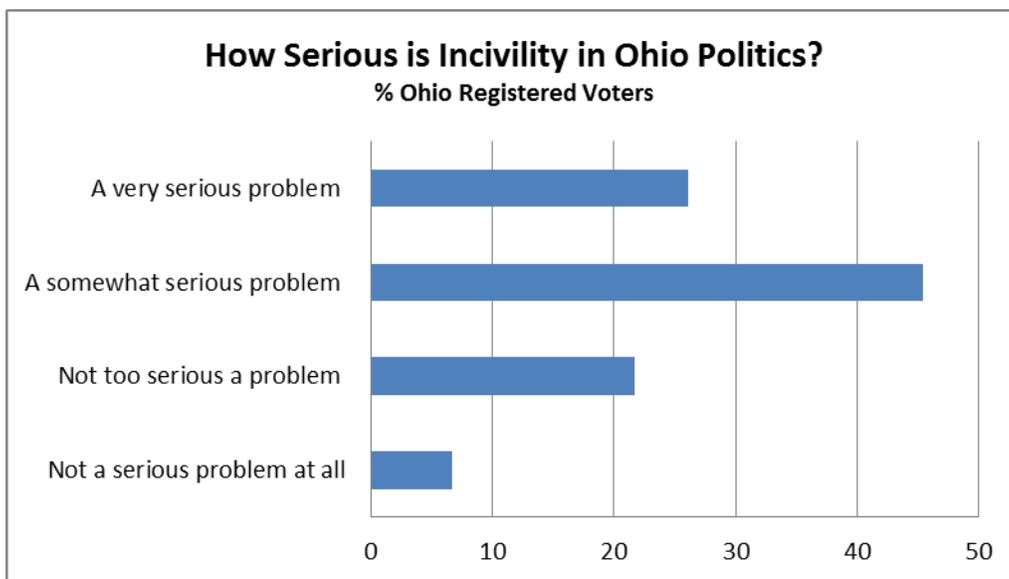
Civility in Ohio Politics

On May 6, 2011, a panel of knowledgeable observers was convened at the University of Mount Union to discuss civility in Ohio politics: Lee Leonard (retired statehouse reporter for the *Columbus Dispatch*); Nancy Hollister (former Lieutenant Governor of Ohio);

Tom Suddes (statehouse columnist for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*); and Pat Sweeney (former Minority Leader of the Ohio Senate).

The panel agreed that a lack of civility was a major problem in Ohio politics. A poll conducted by the project in the summer of 2011 found that the Ohio public agreed with this assessment.

One-quarter of Ohio adults said that a lack of civility was “a very serious problem” and almost one-half said it was “a somewhat serious problem.” To put this finding in perspective, the same survey found that one-quarter of Ohioans identified the state’s budget problems as a major problem.



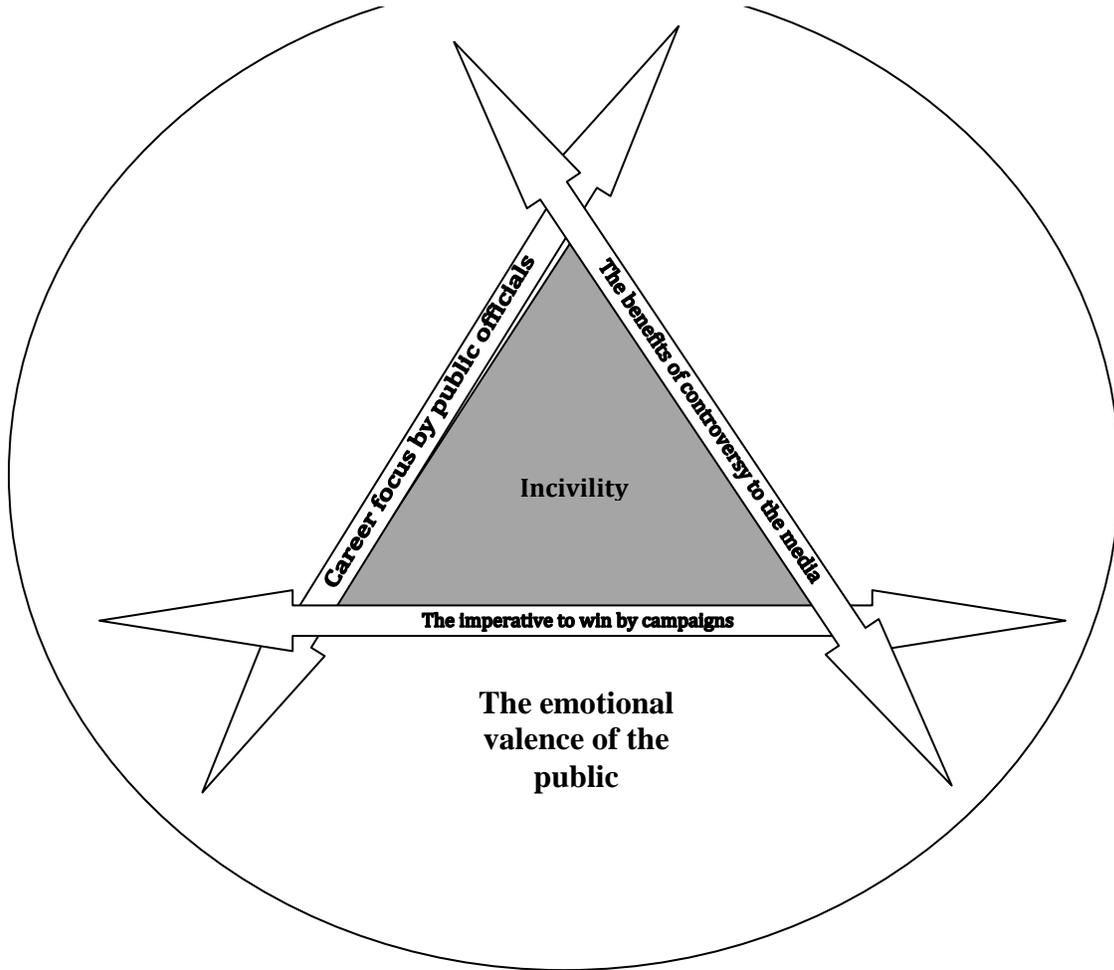
The panel of observers also agreed that Ohio politics has become less civil over the last several decades. But these observers also noted that incivility has been part of Ohio politics from its origins and that the present era is by no means the least civil in the state’s history. At the same time, incivility in the past, even by prominent leaders, has never served as a standard of conduct for public discourse.

Sources of Incivility

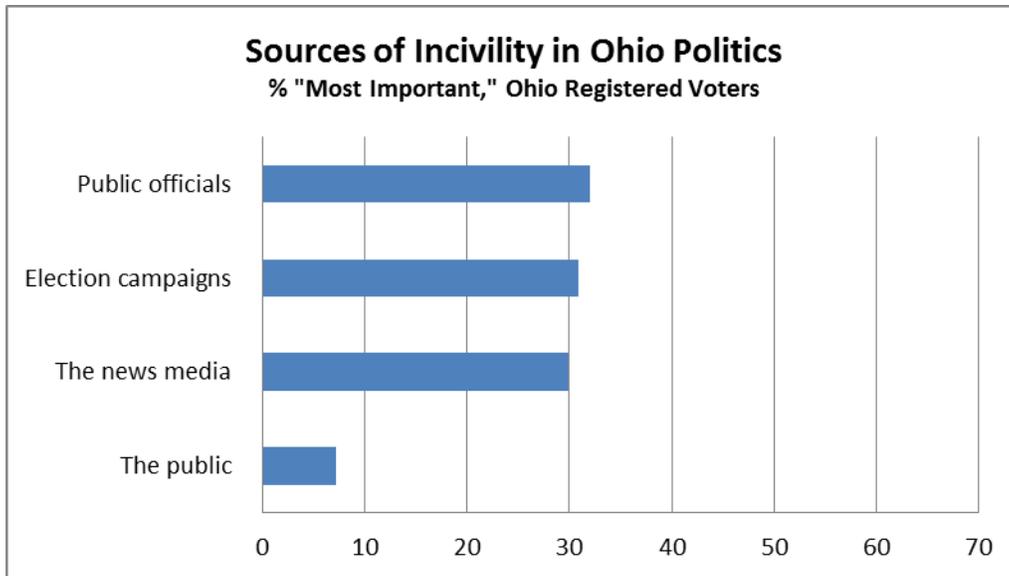
The panel of observers identified four kinds of players that contribute to incivility—public officials, election campaigns, the news media, and the public. The first three are often *initiators* of uncivil discourse because of incentives inherent to each role: the career-orientation of public officials; the imperative to win by campaigns; and the benefits of controversy to the news media. Meanwhile, the fourth actor, the public, is often a *responder* to uncivil discourse, with individuals reacting to the emotional valence of the message they receive from the other players.

The nearby diagram illustrates how the mix of incentives can foster incivility in Ohio politics.

Incentives and Incivility in Ohio Politics



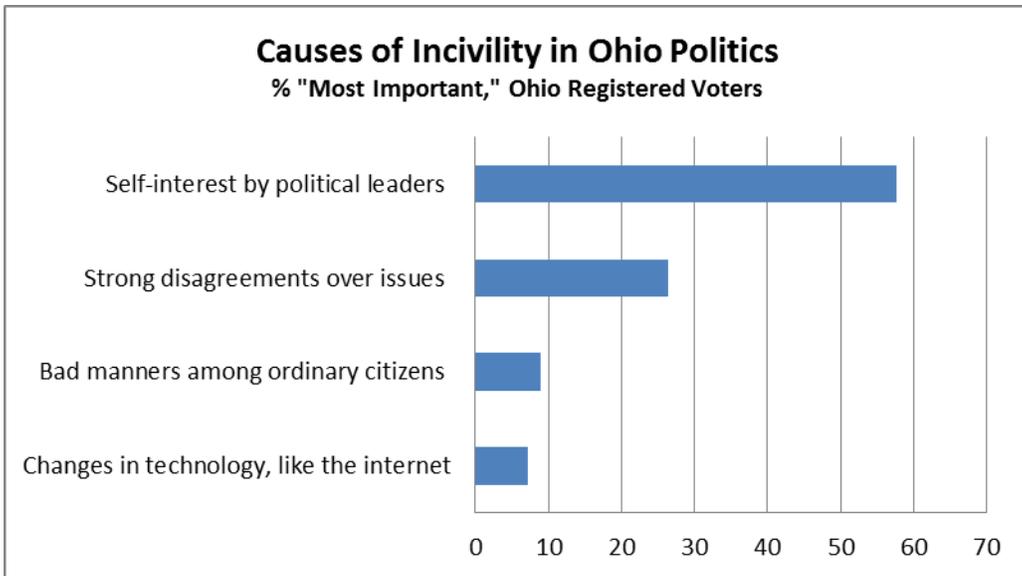
The poll of the Ohio public found a similar perspective on the sources of incivility. Roughly one-third of Ohioans believed that public officials, election campaigns, and the news media were the “most important” cause of incivility. However, the public did not fault themselves nearly as much: less than one-tenth said the public itself was the “most important” cause of incivility.



Causes of Incivility

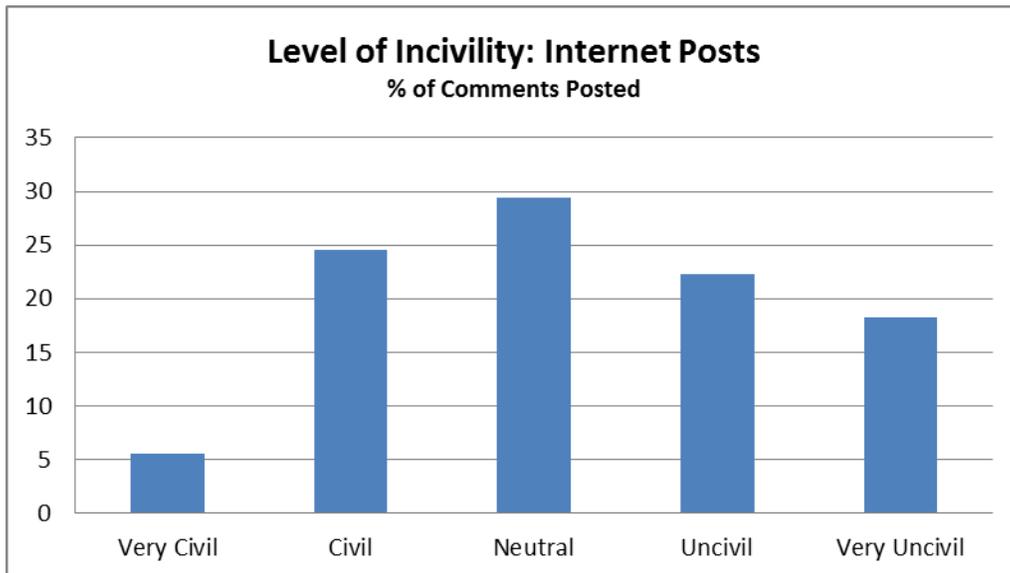
The panel of observers identified four broad factors as contributing to incivility: self-interest by politicians; disagreement over issues; changes in communication technology (such as the internet), and poor manners among ordinary citizens. These factors intensify the reinforcing incentives among public officials, campaigns, and the news media that intensifies the *transmission* of uncivil discourse to the public.

Here the poll of the Ohio public revealed a somewhat different perspective on the causes of incivility. Three-fifths of Ohioans said that self-interest among politicians was the “major reason” for the lack of civility. This figure was as large as the one-quarter who said that strong disagreement over issues was the “major reason” for incivility. Interestingly, less than one-tenth of Ohioans say bad manners among ordinary citizens or change in technology (such as the internet) as a cause of incivility.

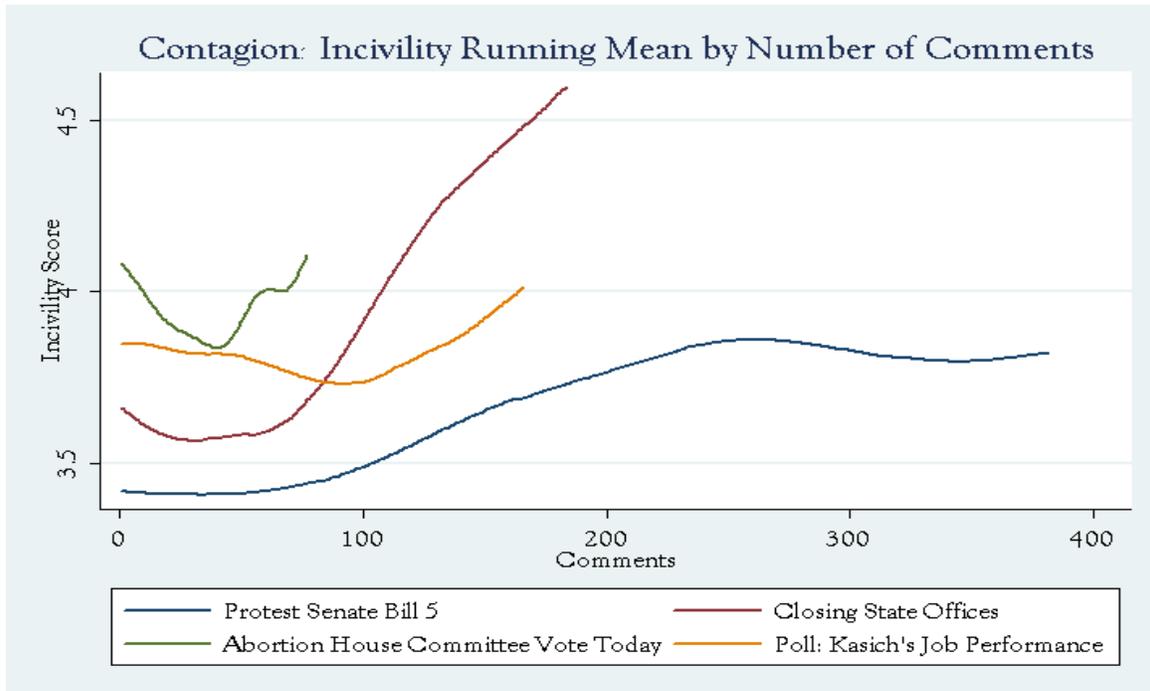


Transmission of Incivility

Other research illustrates the transmission of uncivil discourse. An analysis of comments posted on the internet by the public in response to political news articles in major Ohio newspapers found that two-fifths of the posts analyzed were uncivil in tone and content. (These figures surely understate the level of incivility since the most uncivil posts were excluded by the website managers.)



Most importantly, there was strong evidence of “contagion effects” in the comments posted, with an uncivil comment provoking additional uncivil comments. But the reverse also occurred: civil comments encouraged more civil comments in return. The internet increases speed by which such contagion—good or bad—travels among participants.



A separate survey of individuals who posted comments online suggests that they are highly educated, deeply engaged in public debate, and concerned that incivility was a major problem in Ohio politics.

Consequences of Incivility

Additional research suggests that incivility between lawmakers creates crises for the public employees implementing the laws on behalf of citizens of Ohio. These problems reduce the efficiency of public services, and also erode public trust in governments. The inability of the political process to solve many pressing economic and social problems exacerbated this phenomenon, further alienating the public. Over time, the coarsening of processes for informed and respectful debate over public problems has created a system where public employees have either too much or too little discretion. The government becomes predictable only in the respect that no one is content with the results.

Improving Civility

This research suggests there are two key steps in improving the civility for public discourse in Ohio: **setting *standards* for the appropriate tone of public discourse, and providing *information* about how well the major players live up to these standards.**

A first step is to develop such *standards* by engaging a wide range of players in a discussion of the necessary respect and courtesy for public debate in Ohio politics. Such standards must be clear and practical so they can be easily understood and applied to public discourse. Such standards must reflect the common values of Ohioans, but must also be rooted in the fundamental goal of public debate in a democracy, namely, solving common problems.

Such standards can help change the *expectations* of appropriate discourse by public officials, campaigns, the news media, and the public. In effect, such standards can reset the rhetorical “thermostat” for public debate in Ohio, lowering the “temperature” of debate to a more civil level.

A second step is to provide *information* to all participants on the level of civility in Ohio politics by means of the regular application of the standards to public discourse. Such information must be fair, actionable, and widely disseminated. Such information must be collected in a rigorous, transparent, and consistent fashion. Such information must come from an independent and nonpartisan source, disinterested in the particular controversies of the moment.

Such information can help provide *incentives* for public officials, campaigns, the news media, and public to follow the appropriate standards of discourse. In effect, such information serves as a “referee” in public debate, calling the “fouls” of incivility and noting the “good plays” of civil discourse.

The Ohio Civility Project intends to pursue the implementation of these kinds of remedies in 2012.