

Democratic and Republican voters both love civility, but nobody can agree on what civility is

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When former Vice President Mike Pence declared, in a speech to a conservative group, that "[democracy depends on heavy doses of civility](#)," several attendees stood up and walked out of the Georgetown University

auditorium.

That speech came just three weeks before the [midterm elections](#) as commentators and candidates around the country were [calling for greater civility in politics](#).

This is no surprise.

Civility is popular with the American people. Across the [political spectrum](#), citizens [agree that politics has become dangerously toxic](#), and they think the [problem](#) is [worsening](#).

That is one [political issue](#) we all agree on—democracy needs to regain civility. If it's going to, the effort has to start with each of us individually, rather than waiting for someone else to make the first move.

Bipartisan hypocrisy

This unanimity that more civility is needed in politics may be an illusion.

Citizens tend to lay the blame for political incivility solely on their [political opponents](#). They want civility in politics, but say they think compromise is a one-way street.

They want politicians to [work together](#), but also want the opposition to capitulate.

They value civility, but hold that their partisan rivals are uniformly [immoral, dishonest and close-minded](#).

Pence reflected these us-versus-them attitudes himself during his Georgetown speech when he claimed that powerful institutions have

"locked arms to advance a woke agenda designed to advance the policies and beliefs of the American left."

Defining civility

Despite the multiple pleas for civility, little is said about what civility is.

That probably explains why civility is so popular.

Each citizen gets to define the term in their own way, and no one believes their own side to be uncivil. But if we believe that the U.S. needs to restore civility, we must define it.

It cannot be the demand to always remain calm in [political debate](#). It's generally good to keep one's cool, of course. But when engaging in political disagreement, it's not always possible to do so.

Our [political opinions](#) typically reflect deeply held values and commitments about justice. We tend to regard those who disagree with us about such matters as not merely on the other side of the issue, but on the wrong side. We should expect disagreements about important matters to get heated.

Civility might be better understood as the avoidance of undue hostility and gratuitous animosity in political debate. This could be something as simple as calling out inflated rhetoric, as [John McCain famously did](#) during his [presidential campaign](#) when his supporters claimed that Barack Obama was untrustworthy and not an American.

This idea acknowledges that heated debates can be appropriate within reason. It allows for some degree of antagonism, while at the same time prohibiting unnecessary vitriol.

In a sense, this makes civility a matter of judging whether our subject's behavior calls for an escalation of hostility. The problem is that, when it comes to evaluating the behavior of our opponents, we are remarkably poor judges.

Partisan civility

Americans' assessment of political behavior tightly tracks our partisan allegiances.

We cut our allies slack while holding our opponents to very high standards. When our allies engage in objectionable behavior, we excuse them. But when members of the opposition engage in the same behavior, we condemn them. [In one experiment](#), when partisans were told of an ally stealing an opposing candidate's campaign signs off neighborhood lawns, they chalked it up to political integrity. But when those same partisans were told that an opponent had stolen their signs, they condemned the act as undemocratic.

We over-ascribe [hostility, dishonesty and untrustworthiness](#) to our political opponents. Consequently, we will almost always see fit to escalate hostility when interacting with our opposition. When civility is understood as the avoidance of unnecessary rancor, it fails.

I've argued in my recent book "[Sustaining Democracy](#)" that civility isn't really about how we conduct disagreements with political opponents.

Instead, civility has to do with how people formulate their own political ideas.

We are uncivil when our political opinions do not take due account of the perspectives, priorities and concerns of our fellow citizens.

To better understand this idea, consider that in a democratic society, [citizens share political power](#) as political equals. As democratic citizens, we have [the responsibility to act](#) in ways that respect the equality of our fellow citizens, even when we disagree with their politics.

In my view, one way to respect their equality is to give due consideration to their values and preferences.

Of course, this does not require that we water down our own political commitments—or always try to meet our opponents halfway.

It calls only for a sincere attempt to consider their perspectives when devising our own.

People are civil when we can explain our political opinions to our [political opponents](#) in ways that are responsive to their rival ideas.

A civility test

Here is a simple three-part test for civility:

First, take one of your strongest political views, and then try to figure out what your smartest partisan opponent might say about it.

Second, identify a political idea that is key to your [opponent](#) and then develop a lucid argument that supports it.

Third, identify a major policy favored by the other side that you could regard as permissible for government—despite your opposition.

If you struggle to perform those tasks, that means one has a feeble grasp on the range of responsible political opinion.

When we cannot even imagine a cogent political perspective that stands in opposition to our own, we can't engage civilly with our fellow [citizens](#).

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