Nastiness, Name-calling & Negativity

The Allegheny College Survey of Civility and Compromise in American Politics

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ALLEGHENY COLLEGE

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary

Even casual observers have detected rising levels of acrimony in contemporary American politics. Political rhetoric on television and radio programs seems especially shrill, and the tumult surrounding the health care reform bill has taken aback even the most seasoned observers. But what about average citizens? Do they notice a decline in civility and, if so, are they worried? Should politicians even try to be polite and respectful? If there is a problem, who and what is to blame? Can anything be done about it? Do average citizens support compromise? Are they willing to make sacrifices for the long-term good of the nation?

This study, one of the first of its kind, was intended to move beyond anecdotal evidence and punditry to get at the heart of public perceptions regarding the tone of contemporary politics. Our survey of 1,000 randomly selected Americans was designed to gauge attitudes and perceptions of civility in politics.

Our findings suggest nearly universal recognition of the problem and a growing concern about the implications of an uncivil body politic. Further, the findings cast blame at a number of institutions, but also give reasons for optimism. Here are a few specific results of the survey:

- A large majority—95 percent—of Americans believe civility in politics is important for a healthy democracy.

- Fully 87 percent suggest it is possible for people to disagree about politics respectfully.

- Nearly 50 percent of Americans believe there has been a decline in the tone of politics since Barack Obama became president; 39 percent say it has remained the same; and 10 percent suggest there has been an improvement.

- Citizens paying close attention to politics are four times more likely to say the tone of politics has gotten worse than those who pay only modest attention to the news.

- Radio listeners are much more likely to perceive a decline in civility than are newspaper readers.

- Blame for the decline in civility is spread widely, but political parties and the media are seen as the worst culprits.

- Liberals are twice as likely to promote compromise solutions than are conservatives.

- Americans want compromise on a range of policy issues. For example, some two-thirds of Americans support a compromise on immigration reform.

- Several findings suggest GOP candidates may do well in the 2010 midterm elections, but the votes of many independents appear to be up for grabs.

- An overwhelming number of conservatives who intend to vote in the 2010 primary elections expect their elected officials to stand firm, rather than compromise on tough policy questions.

- Women define civility differently than men, and are more likely to label recent public political behaviors as uncivil. Forty percent of Americans believe the least civil politicians should suffer a "trip to the woodshed," 32 percent said they should take a manners class with Emily Post, and 16 percent said they should retake kindergarten.

- 85 percent of Americans believe politicians should work to cultivate friendships with members of the other party.

- Women are more likely to be turned off by negative politics than are men.

Introduction: Our Passion for Politics

Has it ever been quite like this? Surely the intensity and passion we see in U.S. politics today is radically different than in the past. Angry protestors at legislative meetings, the sudden emergence of an active political organization, death threats, rabid participants in call-in radio shows, vituperations in the blogosphere and outbursts on the floor of the House all seem so different, so disturbing. Yet consider this observation of Charles Dickens from his travels around the United States in the early 1840s:

> Quiet people avoid the question of the Presidency, for there will be a new election in three years and a half, and party feelings run very high: the great constitutional feature of this institution being, that (as soon as) the acrimony of the last election is over, the acrimony of the next begins; which is an unspeakable comfort to all strong politicians and true lovers of their country; that is to say, to ninety-nine men and boys out of every ninety-nine and a quarter.[1]

We may forget that early candidate forums, such as the Lincoln-Douglas debates in 1858, would extend for hours and even days. Numerous accounts recall huge rallies and other political events that pressed to new levels of partisan intensity.

America has, in fact, witnessed many periods of political intensity and partisan acrimony. One of the great virtues of our system is that average citizens always have had faith in political action and a belief in the virtue of speaking out!

Partisan intensity may seem particularly high today because we are coming out of a period of subdued political engagement. Voter turnout in the years following World War II hovered around 60 percent, but by the 1990s it had dipped to 50 percent. In the 1950s, roughly 35 percent of Americans were "very much interested" in the political campaigns; by the 1990s this figure had dropped to 20 percent. The electorate had also grown detached from political parties in the final decade of the 20th century—perhaps more so than at any other point in our nation's history. We saw record levels of split-ticket voting and an ever-growing number of independent voters. Surely Ross Perot's 19 percent in 1992 speaks volumes about a de-aligned electorate. Moreover, in the 1950s, only about 2 percent of Americans didn't make up their minds until Election Day; by the 1990s, that had jumped to nearly 10 percent.[2]

And then things changed.

Making sweeping historical generalizations is always risky, but it is probably safe to say that the 2000 election triggered one of the most dramatic transformations in American electoral politics. By the 2008 election, turnout had risen to near post-World War II highs, with interest among young Americans being especially strong. Our willingness to read news stories, talk with friends and family about politics, attend political meetings and events, and send money to candidates suggested an attentive, engaged electorate. Americans had rediscovered their passion for politics.

A key dimension of this new engagement has been the intensification of partisan loyalties. The number of Americans who make up their minds on Election Day has once again dropped to just 2 percent, and the pool of split-ticket voters has nearly evaporated. The percentage of Americans who consider themselves ideologically moderate (or who have no ideological label) has declined steadily since 1992.[3] Correspondingly, party-line voting in Congress and in state legislatures is at historic highs.

Declining Civility

Broad political engagement and ideological polarization might be considered healthy for a democracy. A strong party system affords voters clear policy alternatives and candidate options, and partisan voters are also more likely than non-partisans to be engaged in a range of electoral activities. Political scientists often lament weak party politics.

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1   Charles Dickens, American Notes (London and Hall, 1842), 149, as cited in Howard Reiter, *Parties and Elections in Corporate America*, 2nd Edition, 1993, 6.

2   American National Election Study, "Timing of Presidential Vote Choice."
See: http://www.electionstudies.org/nesguide/toptable/tab9a_3.htm

3   Gallup Polling, "Conservative Maintain Edge as Top Ideological Group,"
See: http://www.gallup.com/poll/123854/conservatives-maintain-edge-top-ideological-group.aspx

Yet our new-found passion for partisan politics may be shifting things in an unfortunate direction. In the wake of the acrimonious summer town hall meetings of 2009, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman pondered "whether we can seriously discuss serious issues any longer and make decisions on the basis of the national interest." A few months later, a Republican congressman shouted, "You lie!" during a presidential address, and a Democratic congressman warned sick people that Republicans "want you to die quickly."

Brookings Institution scholar Darrell West has suggested we have entered an "arms race of incendiary rhetoric, and it's quickly reaching the point of mutually assured destruction."

The vitriol surrounding the final health care reform vote of 2010 has stunned even the most seasoned observers. Protestors yelled racial slurs at African-American members of Congress, and one legislator was actually spat on as he entered the Capitol to vote. Another outburst on the floor made headlines, and radio and television commentators were unrepentant in their use of incendiary language. With death threats against legislators, bricks thrown through legislative office windows, and a coffin left at the door of a congressperson, it seemed that Peggy Noonan was exactly right when she asserted in the *Wall Street Journal* that "it's a mistake not to see something new, something raw and bitter and dangerous, in the particular moment we're in."

While some would suggest the root of this change is conservative outrage, we might recall that one prominent member of the U.S. Senate called George W. Bush a "liar" and another suggested, "I sometimes feel that Alfred E. Neuman is in charge in Washington" (a reference to the iconic doofus of *Mad* magazine fame). President Bush was hung in effigy on numerous occasions. Sarah Palin and many other GOP officials have confronted much coarse behavior by those on the left. The violence at the 2009 summer town hall meetings came from opponents *and* supporters of reform. Noonan writes, "There probably isn't a Republican leader who has not in the past few years been menaced, and in exactly the same ways as the Democrats."

The Goal of the Study

For some, the cause of the decline in civility is obvious. "The American political system was, as the saying goes, 'designed by geniuses so it could be run by idiots,'" writes Friedman. "But a cocktail of political and technological trends have converged in the last decade that are making it possible for the idiots of all political stripes to overwhelm and paralyze the genius of our system." He refers to the growing popularity of antagonistic web sites and blogs, bombastic radio and television talk shows, and video-sharing sites, such as YouTube, where acts of incivility are given a massive audience. It also seems likely that the drive for ratings in the 24-hour news cycle is part of the problem.

David Gergen, adviser to several presidents, suggested that malicious remarks spring from and perpetuate hyper-partisanship: "Because there is so much hunger for red meat in the bases of each party, and people are looking for someone to throw them a piece, you get a short-term benefit from going after the other side with certain colorful viciousness."

Other commentators suggest that changes in our society and the economy have created a disequilibrium, leading some to strike out at perceived injustices. Noonan continues, "A modern, high tech, highly politicized democracy is a busy beehive, and sometimes the bees are angry.… People are angry at their economic vulnerability. They are angry at the deterioration of our culture, angry at our nation's deteriorating position in the world, at our debts and deficits, our spending and taxing, our threatened security in a world of weapons of mass destruction. Their anger is stoked by cynical politicians and radio ranters and people who come home at night, have a few drinks, and spew out their rage on the comment thread."

But what do average Americans think of the tone and conduct of politics these days? Do they see things as out of the ordinary? And if they do, is it something to really worry about? Do they see the system as broken? Who or what might be to blame: the media, politicians, party leaders or perhaps the nature of society? Where would average citizens draw the line between a robust political disagreement and something so uncivil it makes constructive political debate impossible? Might average citizens help scholars, journalists and pundits better understand the acceptable rules of political debate?

Another idea at play here is our willingness to compromise. One of the forces that may be driving aggressive politics is a desire to keep officials to particular ideological or partisan lines. By being unusually aggressive, do the ideological purists intimidate elected officials, pushing them to toe the line at all costs? Or do most Americans by nature balk at compromise? Are there some issues to which Americans are more open to middle-ground solutions than others?

Some also have speculated that the hostility in politics springs in part from the public's unwillingness to make any sort of sacrifice. A recent article in *Newsweek* suggested that an entitlement mentality has redefined politics in America. Elected officials shudder at the notion of asking voters to make sacrifices for the good of the nation, and the more forcefully the pols reject these demands the greater the gratitude of the voters. But is it really true that Americans are unwilling to make sacrifices? Are Americans really that short-sighted? Do they really expect their officials in Washington to take care of them at all times?

This study, one of the first of its kind, is designed to move beyond anecdotal evidence and punditry to get at the heart of public perceptions regarding the tone of contemporary politics. Our survey of 1,000 randomly selected Americans is designed to gauge attitudes on and perceptions of civility in politics, willingness to compromise, and a readiness to make sacrifices for the long-term good of the nation.

Our hope is that the information contained in this report will provide insight into what average citizens believe about the direction of our politics, and perhaps suggest avenues for change. At the core of this effort rests the notion that Americans can be active, partisan and passionate without being rude, selfish, shortsighted and, finally, undemocratic.

Methodology

The survey instrument and report were compiled by Daniel M. Shea, Director of the Center for Political Participation (CPP) and professor of political science at Allegheny College, along with four student fellows at the CPP: Maya Brod, Katie Janocsko, Matt Lacombe and Richard Shafranek.

Zogby International was commissioned by Allegheny College to conduct telephone interviews of 1,000 adults nationwide. The survey was conducted from March 24–29, 2010.

The sample included 1,000 interviews with approximately 45 questions asked. Samples are randomly drawn from telephone CDs of a national listed sample. Zogby International surveys employ sampling strategies in which selection probabilities are proportional to population size within area codes and exchanges. Up to six calls are made to reach a sampled phone number. Cooperation rates are calculated using one of AAPOR's approved methodologies[4] and are comparable to other professional public-opinion surveys conducted using similar sampling strategies.[5]

Weighting by region, party, age, education, race, religion and gender was used to adjust for non-response. The overall margin of error is +/- 3.2 percentage points. Margins of error are higher within sub-groups.

The majority of telephone lists for polls and surveys are produced by the IT department at Zogby International. Vendor-supplied lists are used for regions with complicated specifications, e.g., some congressional districts. Customer-supplied lists are used for special projects like customer satisfaction surveys and organization membership surveys.

Telephone lists generated in Zogby's IT department are called from a nationally published set of phone CDs of listed households, ordered by telephone number. Residential (or business) addresses are selected and then coded by region, where applicable. An appropriate replicate* is generated from this parent list, applying the replicate algorithm repeatedly with a very large parent list, e.g., all of the U.S.

Acquired lists are tested for duplicates, coded for region, tested for regional coverage and ordered by telephone as needed.

The resulting list is loaded into a CATI** application and the randomize function within the CATI software is run to further assure a good mix for the telephone list.

Interviews were conducted at Zogby International by professional interviewers trained on a CATI system. A policy requiring one supervisor to no more than 12 interviewers was used. The sample management module of the CATI system gives all prospective respondent households in the source telephone list the same chance of joining the sample. Regional quotas are employed to ensure adequate coverage nationwide.

Reported frequencies and crosstabs are weighted using the appropriate demographic profile to provide a sample that best represents the targeted population from which the sample is drawn. The proportions comprising the demographic profile are compiled from historical exit poll data, census data and from Zogby International survey data.

> * Replicate—A sub-list with the same cover characteristics as its parent list. Replicates are generated from the parent list by selecting every nth record from the parent list, where "n" is the size of the replicate/total records in the parent list.
>
> ** CATI—Computer-Aided Telephone Interview. This is a software application that displays survey questions to the interviewer at a LAN workstation, stores survey responses keyed in by an interviewer on a server and manages list disposition.

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4   See COOP4 (p.38) in *Standard Definitions: Final Dispositions of Case Codes and Outcome Rates of Surveys*. The American Association for Public Opinion Research, (2000).

5   *Cooperation Tracking Study: April 2003 Update*, Jane M. Sheppard and Shelly Haas. The Council for Marketing & Opinion Research (CMOR). Cincinnati, Ohio (2003).

Profile of Respondents

Our sample of respondents clearly represented a cross-section of the American public. Approximately 51 percent of the respondents were women and 49 percent men. As well, there was diversity in the age of respondents, mirroring the American population, as noted in the following table. A strong majority of the sample did not have a college degree (67%), paralleling the population, while about 33 percent had a college degree.

AGE		EDUCATION	
18–24	9.3%	Less than HS	13.0%
25–34	16.9%	HS grad	26.9%
35–54	39.4%	Some college	27.0%
55–69	20.2%	College and up	33.0%
70+	12.5%		

Clearly, the party identification and ideology of the sample is an important consideration. As the next table suggests, the sample was diverse and corresponded closely to findings noted by prominent polling firms such as Gallup and the Pew Research Center. If anything, our sample may have under-represented independent voters by a few percentage points, but one should bear in mind that measures of partisanship are quite fluid. Given that our survey was conducted immediately after the congressional health care reform vote, it probably comes as no surprise that there were somewhat fewer self-reported independents than were usually found in surveys prior to the vote.

PARTY AFFILIATION AND IDEOLOGY			
Democratic	38.1%	Liberal	25.8%
Republican	30.9%	Conservative	38.4%
Independent	28.0%	Moderate	28.4%

Respondents were evenly distributed geographically from throughout the country: East (22%), South (26%), Central/Great Lakes (30%) and West (22%). The income distribution of our sample also appears to parallel the American public, with about 25 percent making less than $25,000 per year, 17 percent making over $100,000 per year, and the rest distributed between these amounts. The racial and ethnic make-up of our sample follows in this table:

| RACE AND ETHNICITY	
White	72.0%
Hispanic	9.9%
African-American	12.7%
Asian	2.0%
Other	2.0%

Finally, approximately 56 percent of our sample reported being married, 26 percent single, 20 percent divorced, and 2 percent part of a civil union.

Frequency distributions for additional demographic variables are available upon request.

Levels of Engagement and General Perceptions of Politics

A good deal of scholarly work and anecdotal evidence suggests Americans are more engaged and more attentive to politics than in the recent past. Our survey clearly supports this claim.

Some 92 percent of the respondents reported that they were registered to vote, with a surprising 80 percent suggesting they were "highly likely" to vote in national elections and another 13 percent saying they were "somewhat likely" to vote. Of course, self-reported measures of political engagement are notoriously inflated, but even so, we believe these figures are quite high. Figures 1 and 2 offer a cross tabulation between our "interest in voting" measure and party identification and ideology, respectively.

Figure 1. Interest In Voting in 2010 by Party Identification

Figure 2. Interest In Voting in 2010 by Ideology
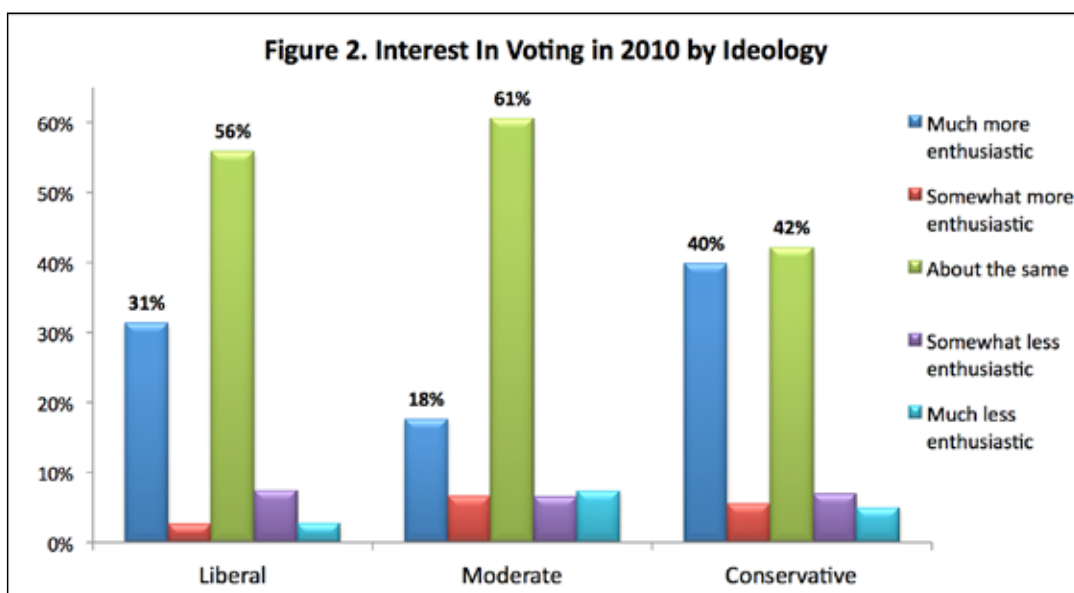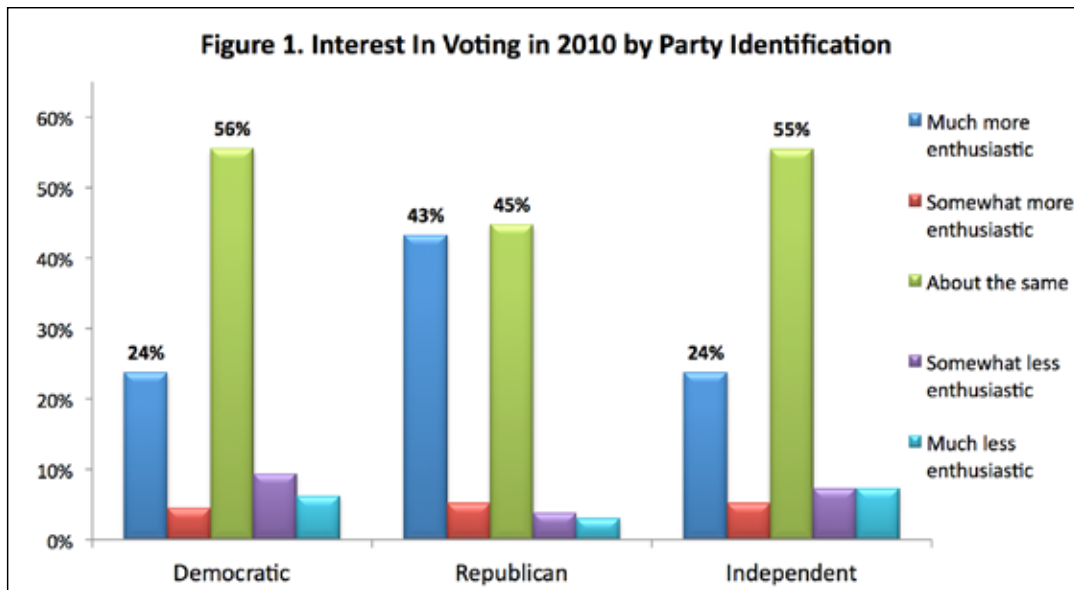
An important measure for this study concerns the extent to which the American public is paying attention to politics. Figure 3 reports the findings of such a question, controlled by age. Overall, 58 percent of Americans suggest they follow politics "most of the time," with another 28 percent saying they pay attention "some of the time." There does seem to be some generational difference, as one might expect. Older Americans are clearly more tuned in than are those under 30. Even so, the strong figures for the younger generation buttress the notion that politics is increasingly important for all Americans.

Figure 3. Paying Attention to Politics by Age
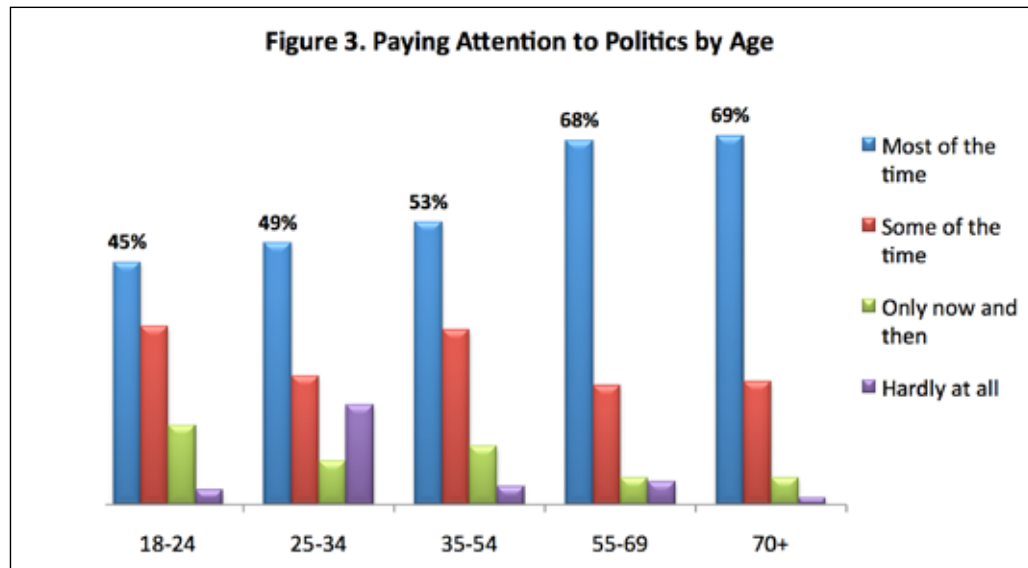
Perceptions Regarding Civility in Politics

Early in the survey we asked a fundamental question: "Do you think civility in politics is important for a healthy democracy?" The response was unequivocal, as noted in Figure 4: Slig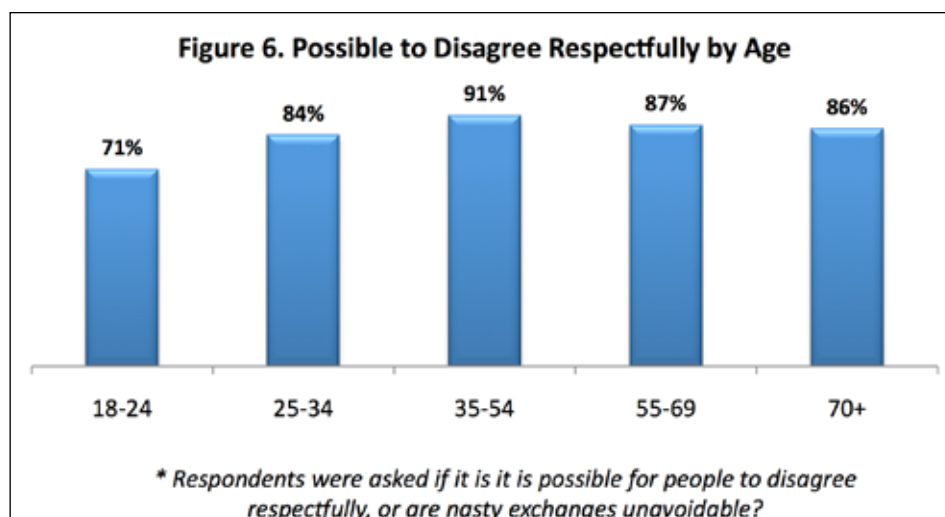htly more than 95 percent of respondents agreed, with only 2.6 percent saying it is not necessary, and the rest unsure. We believe this is one of the most important findings of the study.

Figure 4. Is Civility in Politics Important?

- Yes, it is important
- No, it is not important
- NS

95.4%
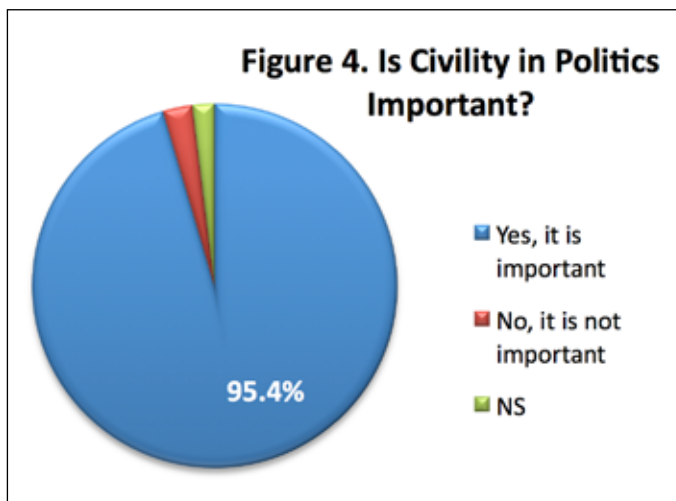
Related, we asked a question regarding the likelihood of civil politics, given the nature of issues and partisanship in America. In other words, while most might agree that civility is important, perhaps they also believe it is simply impossible given the current political climate. We asked, "Many people in this country—politicians included—hold strong views on certain issues. Given the difficulty and often personal nature of these issues, do you believe it is possible for people to disagree respectfully, or are nasty exchanges unavoidable?" To our surprise, a robust 87 percent of respondents suggested it is possible to disagree in a respectful way, as noted in Figure 5. Only 10 percent noted it was likely not possible.

Figure 5. Possible to Disagree Respectfully?

- It is possible for people to disagree respectfully
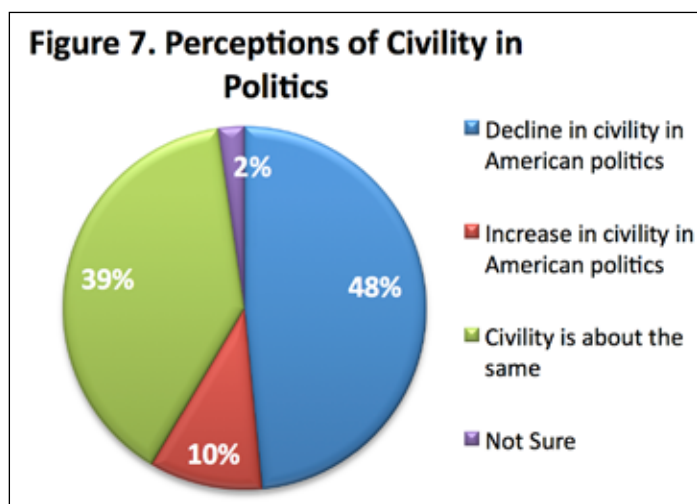- Nasty exchanges are unavoidable
- NS

4%
10%
87%
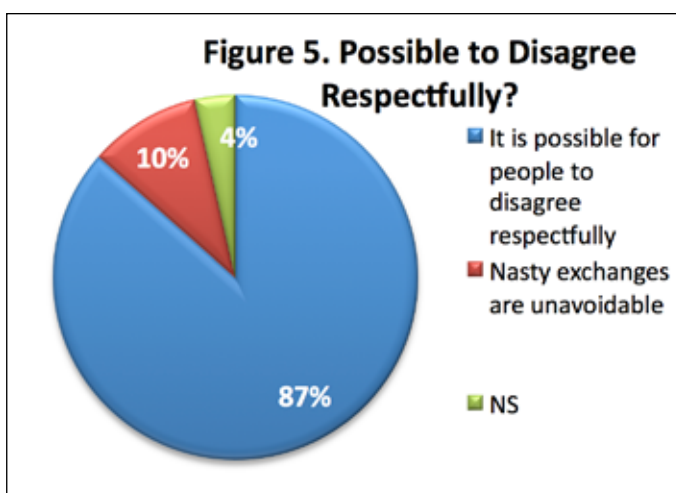
Controlling for the respondent's party identification made little difference. However, there was some variance when the respondent's age was introduced, as noted in Figure 6. The age group least likely to see respectful politics possible in today's climate was young citizens. Conversely, the older the respondent, the more likely he or she was to view polite politics as possible.

Figure 6. Possible to Disagree Respectfully by Age

Age	Percentage
18-24	71%
25-34	84%
35-54	91%
55-69	87%
70+	86%

* Respondents were asked if it is it is possible for people to disagree respectfully, or are nasty exchanges unavoidable?

This finding came as a modest surprise. Why would young citizens be less likely to see respectful politics as possible than older Americans? Where is the optimism of the youth? Perhaps this finding reflects changing norms of acceptable behavior in other realms of society. We might speculate, for example, whether Kanye West's outburst at the MTV Video Music Awards or Serena Williams's tirade at the U.S. Open were seen as "normal" behavior by younger folks. Is it possible that a generation reared on reality television programs, where rude behavior seems to be celebrated, has come to see such conduct as conventional?

As noted in the Introduction, numerous accounts of rude, impolite and uncivil behavior have made headlines in recent years. There is clearly a perception among news professionals, political commentators and most scholars that our politics have taken an ugly turn. But do average Americans see things the same way? Have things really gotten worse? Our study suggests a large proportion of Americans view civility in politics as declining, as noted in Figure 7. Asked directly if the respondent believes there has been a decline or improvement in the civility of American politics, some 48 percent noted a decline, 39 percent noted things have stayed the same and 10 percent suggested an improvement.

Figure 7. Perceptions of Civility in Politics

- Decline in civility in American politics: 48%
- Increase in civility in American politics: 10%
- Civility is about the same: 39%
- Not Sure: 2%

A very important control here seems to be the amount of attention the respondent is paying to public affairs. Figure 8 notes that among those who report that they pay close attention to politics, some 60 percent believe there has been a decline in civility, compared to just 16 percent of those who pay little attention to politics. Said a bit differently, the closer attention one pays to politics, the more politics appears uncivil.

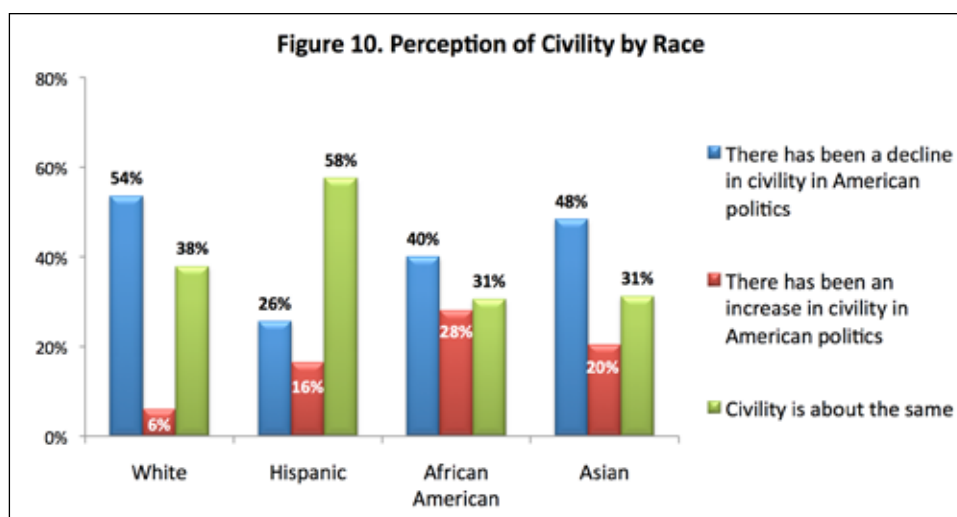Figure 8. Perception of Civility by Paying Attention to Politics
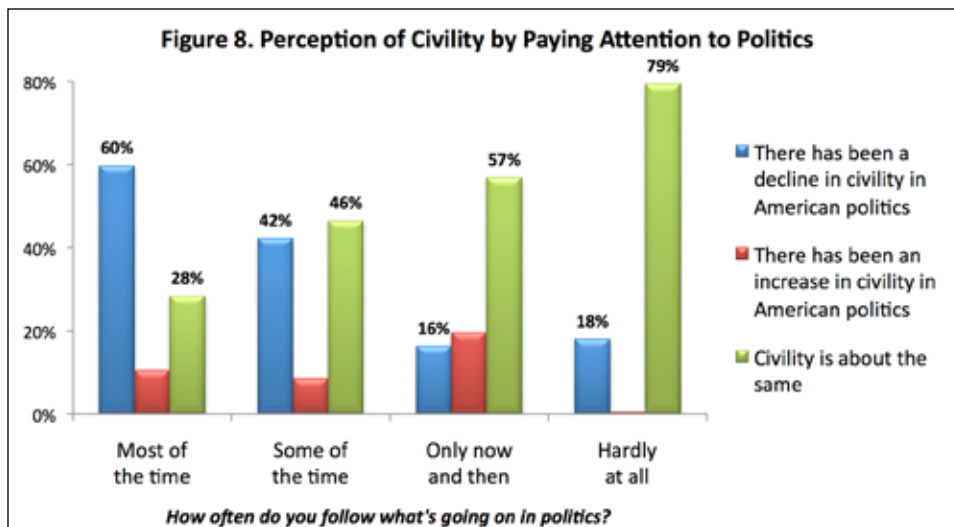
A related issue pertains to the source of the respondent's news. Do those citizens who get most of their political information from newspapers have a different view about civility than those who get their news from radio or television? Figure 9 explores this issue. This figure suggests a very important difference—perhaps a distinction that will be more important in the years ahead: Of those who report radio is the primary source of their news, 57 percent suggest things have become uncivil. This compares to just 37 percent of those who get most of their news from newspapers.

Figure 9. Perception of Civility by Source of News
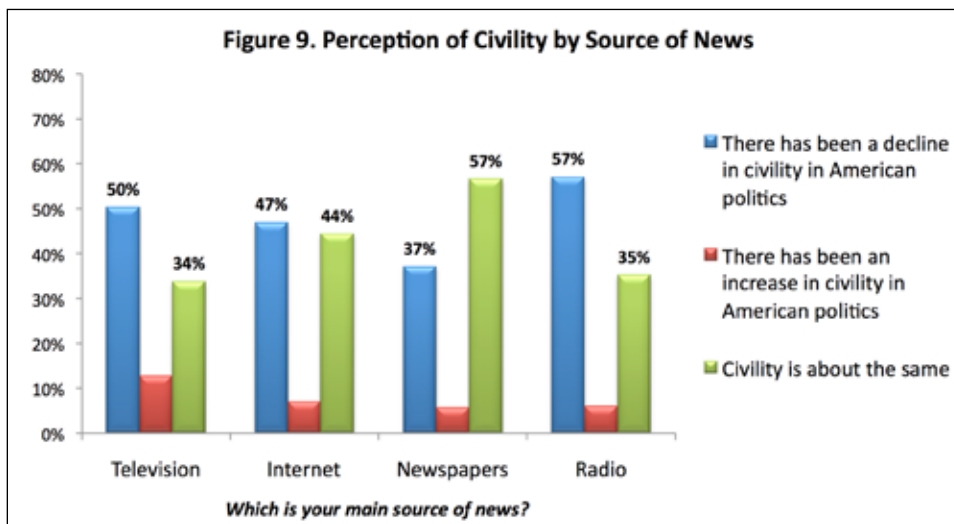
As for partisan differences, there was some modest variation. Republicans were slightly more likely to view civility as on the decline (54%) than were Democrats (47%). One might have expected independent voters to be especially concerned about the tone of politics, given that deep partisan divisions seem to be at the heart of many disputes, but that does not appear to be the case. Some 46 percent of independents believe things have gotten worse, a figure more or less on par with Democrats and Republicans.

Some have speculated that there might be some interesting gender difference concerning perceptions of civility in American politics. But this does not appear to be the case either: nearly exactly the same percentage of men and women see civility on the decline (48%). Men were slightly more likely to see things as getting better than women, but the difference was negligible.

Interestingly, there does seem to be a relationship between the respondent's race and their perceptions of civility. As Figure 10 notes, African-Americans are considerably less likely to note that things have gotten worse.

Figure 10. Perception of Civility by Race

Legend:
- There has been a decline in civility in American politics
- There has been an increase in civility in American politics
- Civility is about the same

Race	Decline	Increase	About the same
White	54%	6%	38%
Hispanic	26%	16%	58%
African American	40%	28%	31%
Asian	48%	20%	31%

We explored the relationship between perceptions of civility in politics and feelings of whether the nation is headed in the right direction. Our findings, noted in Figure 11, are revealing. Of those who believe our nation is headed in the wrong direction, 57 percent believe our politics has become less civil. Of those who believe the nation is getting better, only 39 percent noted that we've become less civil. We might suggest, with a bit of caution, that the general perception of how well we are doing as a nation is linked to how we do politics.

Figure 11. Perception of Civility by Right Direction / Wrong Direction?

Legend:
- There has been a decline in civility in American politics
- There has been an increase in civility in American politics
- Civility is about the same

Direction	Decline	Increase	About the same
Right direction	39%		43%
Wrong track	57%		36%
Not Sure	39%		44%

Generally speaking, would you say things in this country are heading in the right direction, or are they off on the wrong track?

Finally, we took a look at perceptions of the debate over health care reform. We asked whether "Americans should be proud of the way elected officials dealt with the issue" or "ashamed of the way elected officials acted." A robust 69 percent of Americans believe we should be ashamed. As expected, controlling for partisanship yielded some differences. As figure 12 notes, a much larger percentage of Republicans suggested we should be ashamed of the process than Democrats.

Figure 12. Perception of Recent Health Care Debate by Partisanship

- Americans should be proud of the way our elected officials dealt with the issue
- Americans should be ashamed of the way our elected officials acted

Democratic: 36%, 54%
Republican: 4%, 90%
Independent: 18%, 72%
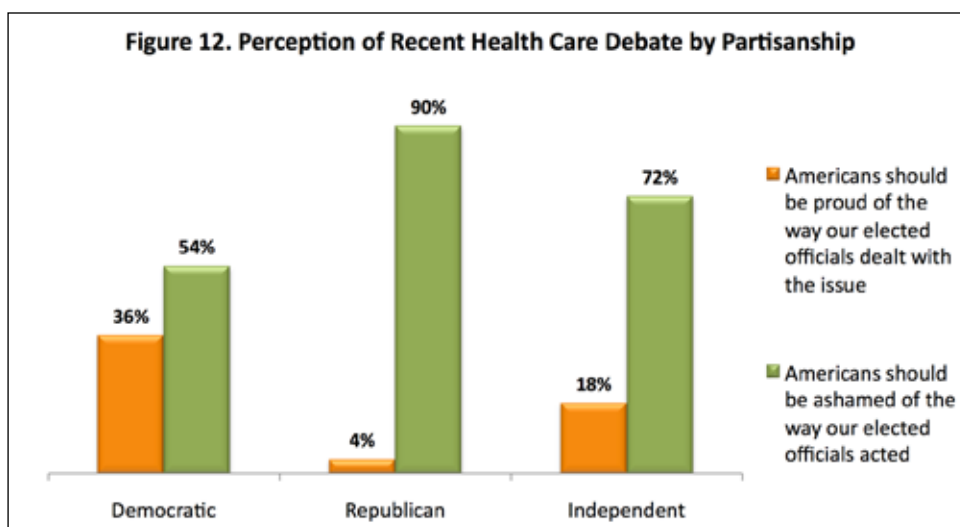
One important qualifier on this question would be varying interpretations of the root of the problems. Democrats might feel pleased with the outcome, but disheartened by the vitriol throughout the process. Republicans, on the other hand, might be upset with what they perceived to be "backroom deals" and underhanded tricks. Either way, most Americans are clearly not proud of the way our elected officials tackled this historic change.

Respondents who pay the most attention to politics were much more likely to state that they think Americans should be ashamed with the way health reform was handled. Also, as respondents were classified in older generation categories, they were much more likely to feel that Americans should be ashamed of the health reform process.

Figure 13. Perception of Recent Health Care Debate by Age

- Americans should be proud of the way our elected officials dealt with the issue
- Americans should be ashamed of the way our elected officials acted

18-24: 25%, 51%
25-34: 37%, 56%
35-54: 19%, 74%
55-69: 13%, 79%
70+: 15%, 72%
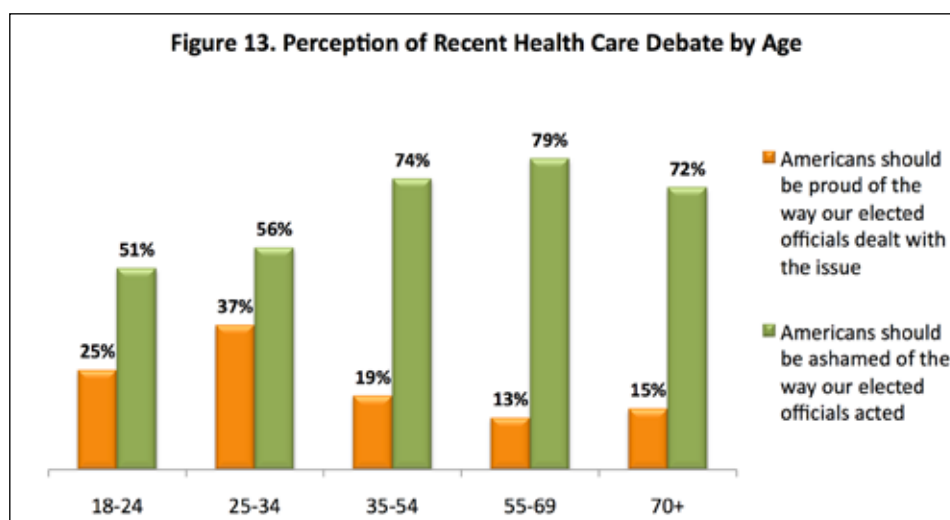
Combined, these measures clearly imply that Americans believe civility is important for a democracy, yet they see things as getting worse.

Defining the Rules of Civility

How are Americans defining civility? That is, what types of public acts do Americans believe cross over the line into uncivil, inappropriate behavior? Rather than rely upon our own perceptions, or those often suggested by media pundits, we called upon respondents to assess a series of behaviors from recent events. Specifically, we asked them which of the following behaviors would not be okay if they were to "create a rule book for civility in politics." Their responses follow.

| **A RULEBOOK FOR POLITICS**	
If you were able to create a rule book for civility in politics, which of the following would not be okay—would be, that is, against the rules?	*Percentage of Respondents*
Belittling or insulting someone	89%
Comments about someone's race or ethnicity	89%
Personal attacks on someone you disagree with	87%
Shouting over someone you disagree with during an argument	85%
Comments about someone's sexual orientation	81%
Interrupting someone you disagree with in a public forum	77%
Manipulating the facts about an issue to persuade others	77%
Questioning someone's patriotism because they have a different opinion	73%
Disruptive but nonviolent forms of protest, such as sit-ins	28%
Phoning legislators to express your views	16%

As shown above, a full 89 percent of respondents find belittling or insulting someone as uncivil behavior, and more than 85 percent of respondents find shouting over someone during an argument is uncivil. Put a bit differently, a solid 8 out of 10 Americans perceive the behaviors that are quite common at political events and on radio and television programs to be "over the line."

Overall, the majority of respondents found most of these behaviors to be uncivil. However, two such measures stand out—the ones most closely related to civic engagement. Only 15 percent of respondents found phoning legislators to express one's views as uncivil, but over one-quarter (28%) of respondents said disruptive yet nonviolent forms of protest are uncivil.

Other interesting findings resulted when some variables were controlled. Consider a few partisan-based differences, noted in Figure 14. For example, 66 percent of Republicans and 68 percent of independents think that questioning someone's patriotism because of a differing opinion is against the rules of civility, yet almost 83 percent of Democrats feel that this behavior is against the rules. Also interesting was that independents were less likely than Democrats or Republicans to think personally attacking someone you disagree with to be against the rules.

Figure 14. Uncivil Behaviors by Respondents' Party ID
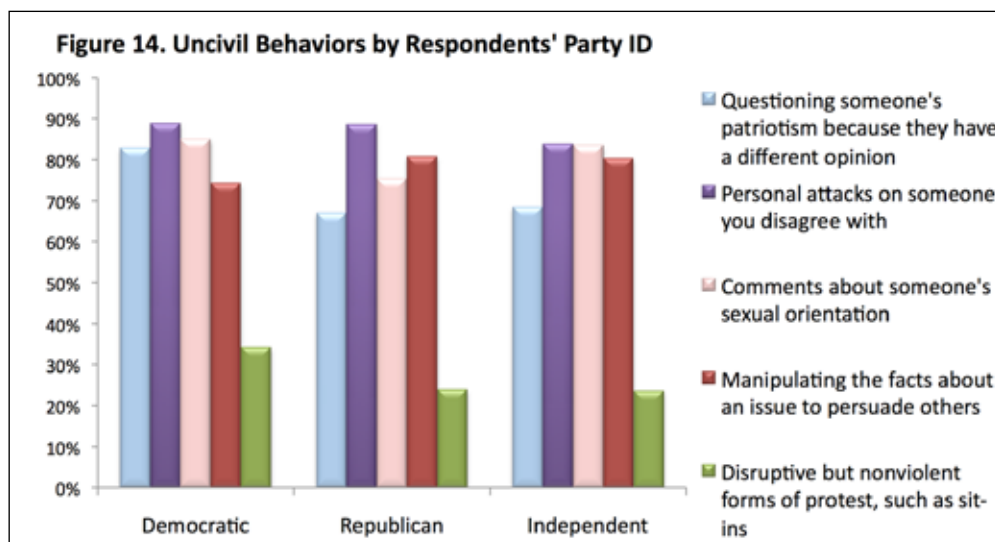
Besides partisan differences, age group differences also exist in categorizing behaviors as civil or uncivil, as suggested in Figure 15. At times, 25- to 34-year-olds were less likely to categorize behaviors as uncivil than any other age group of respondents—even those younger and older than themselves. For example, 25- to 34-year-olds were the *least* likely to categorize interrupting someone you disagree with in a public forum as uncivil, shouting over someone as uncivil, and personally attacking someone you disagree with as uncivil. Yet this age group was the most likely to view disruptive yet nonviolent behavior as uncivil.

Figure 15. Uncivil Behaviors by Age
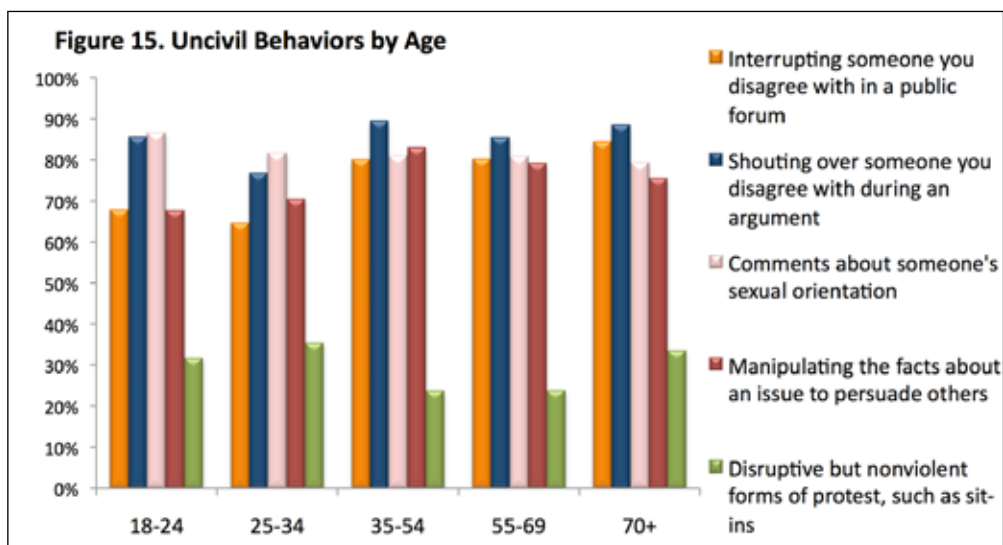
Another distinction in defining civil behavior emerges between those who have volunteered in their communities in the past 12 months and those who have not. Consistently, community volunteers were more likely to view these behaviors as being uncivil than those who had not volunteered in their community, except for the two engagement-related behaviors. Oppositely, volunteers were less likely to view disruptive yet nonviolent behaviors as uncivil; similarly, they were less likely than non-volunteers to view phoning one's legislator as uncivil.

The frequency of following politics also seems to influence our respondents' judgment of whether some public behaviors are civil or uncivil, as underscored in Figure 16. Those who follow politics most or some of the time are consistently more likely than those who do not follow politics to view the listed behaviors as uncivil. There is one exception to this: Those who do follow politics are much less likely than their non-following counterparts to view disruptive but nonviolent forms of protest as uncivil behavior.

Figure 16. Uncivil Behaviors by Follow Politics?
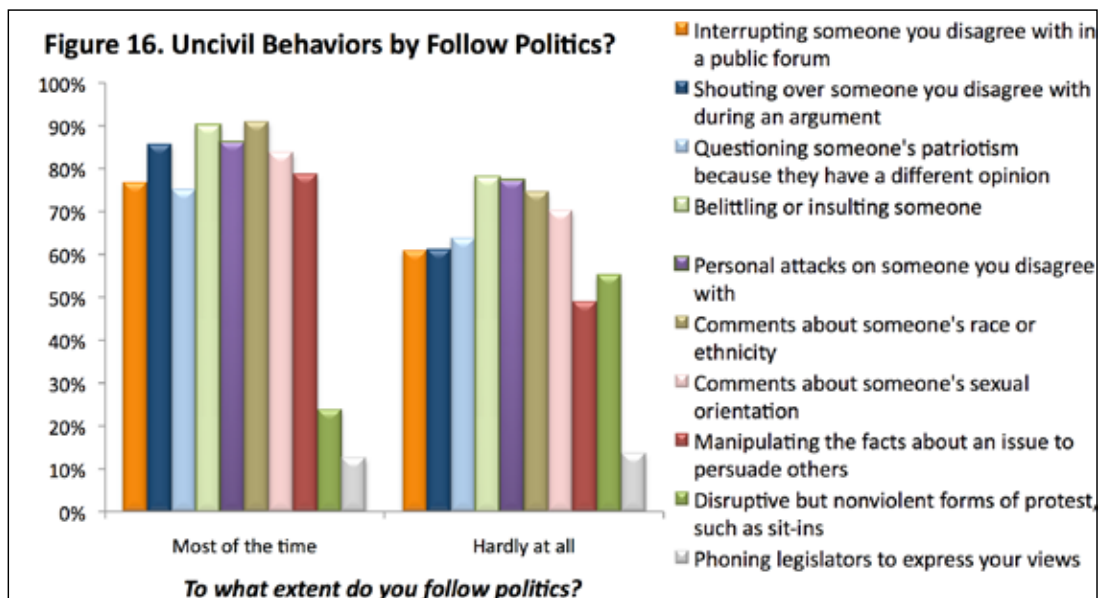
Interestingly, notable increases in categorizing public behaviors as uncivil are evident among those respondents who blame radio talk shows for pushing politics toward becoming less civil. In other words, respondents who believe that radio talk shows have pushed us toward incivility are consistently more likely to view the listed public behaviors as uncivil. For example, 82 percent of respondents who blame radio talk shows for a rise in incivility feel that questioning someone's patriotism is uncivil, while only 59 percent of respondents who do not blame radio talk shows for a rise in incivility find this behavior uncivil.

What behaviors are not civil?	Think radio talk shows are to blame *n=606*	Does not feel radio talk shows are to blame *n= 394*
Interrupting	85%	68%
Shouting	92%	78%
Belittling	95%	81%
Personal attacks	93%	80%
Questioning patriotism	82%	59%
Nonviolent protest	26%	26%

Finally, among our respondents, women consistently define civility differently than men. There are consistent differences in public behaviors that women and men categorize as civil or uncivil. For each and every questionable behavior asked of respondents, women were more likely than men to classify the behavior as uncivil. At times this difference was notable. For example, women are over 5 percentage points more likely than men to view both belittling or insulting someone and manipulating the facts about an issue as uncivil behaviors.

Assessing Blame

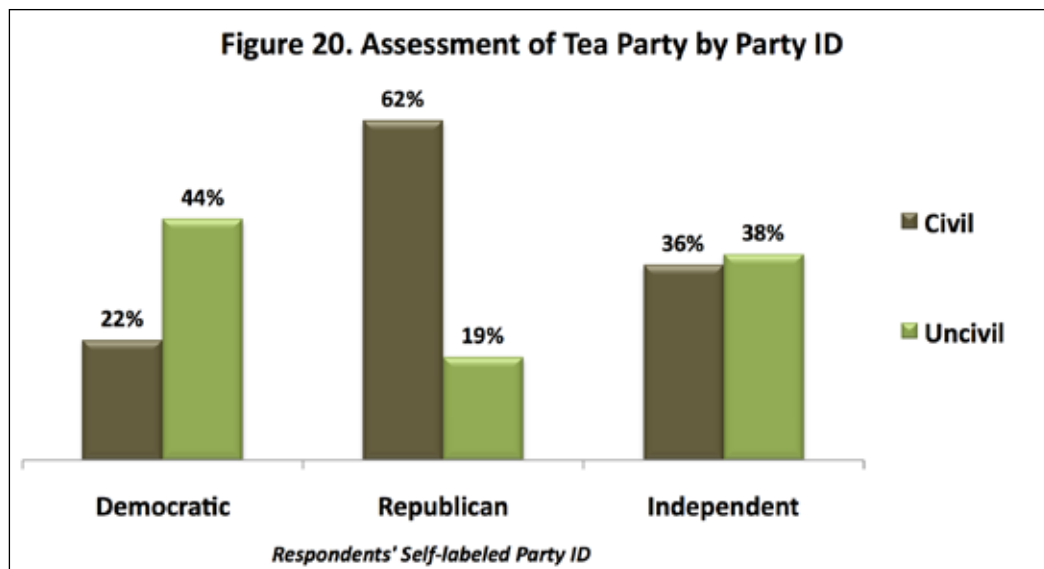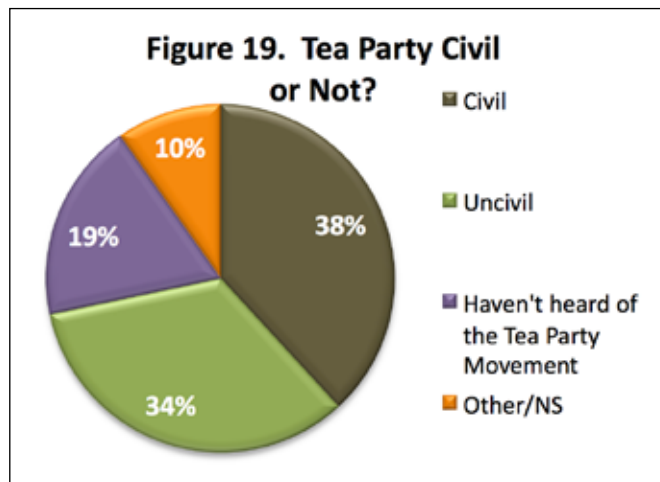Given the tumult of the last year in American politics, we felt that it was necessary to ask our respondents who or what might be to blame for the decline in civility. For each of the respondents who suggested there has been a decline (some 48% of the total sample), we asked , "Which political party do you think is more to blame for the decline in civility, Republicans or Democrats?" As Figure 17 suggests, approximately 28.1 percent of the respondents felt that Democrats were the pot-stirrers, while 33.1 percent blamed Republicans. Interestingly enough, 33.4 percent of respondents believed that *both* parties were to blame for the decline in American political discourse. It appears that, overall, respondents are equally split among all three views.

Figure 17. Which Party Is To Blame?
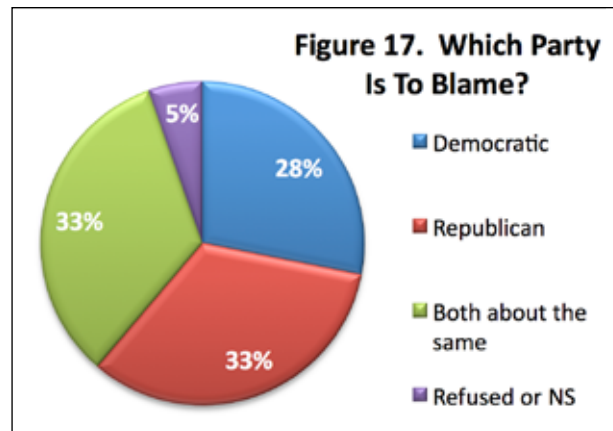
When we took the respondent's party identification into account, things divided across party lines, as one might expect. Figure 18 notes that of the Democrats that we surveyed, 66.8 percent blamed Republicans for the growing trend of political incivility, while 52.2 percent of the GOP respondents pointed their finger at the Democrats. Interestingly, most independents (42.9%) felt that both parties were to blame for the growing rudeness.

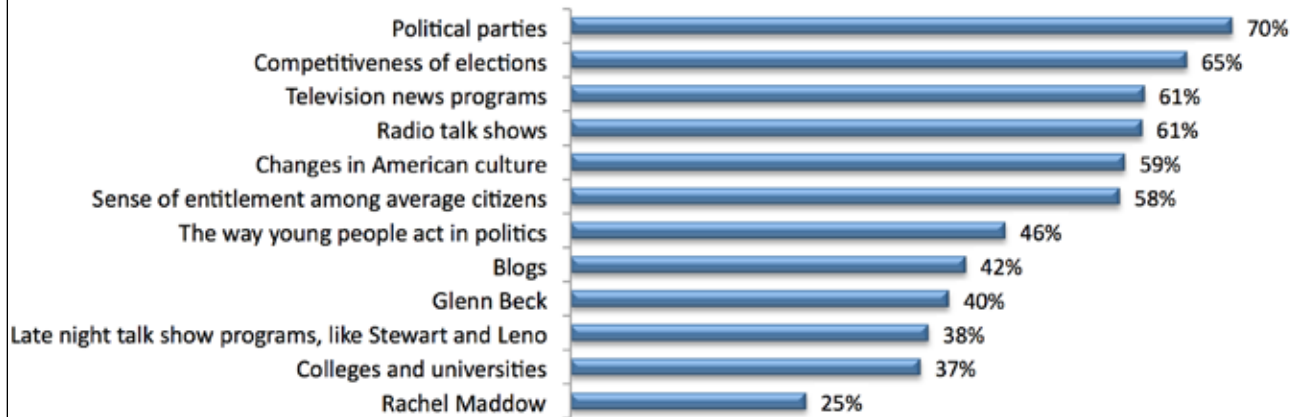Figure 18. Who's to Blame by Respondents' Party ID
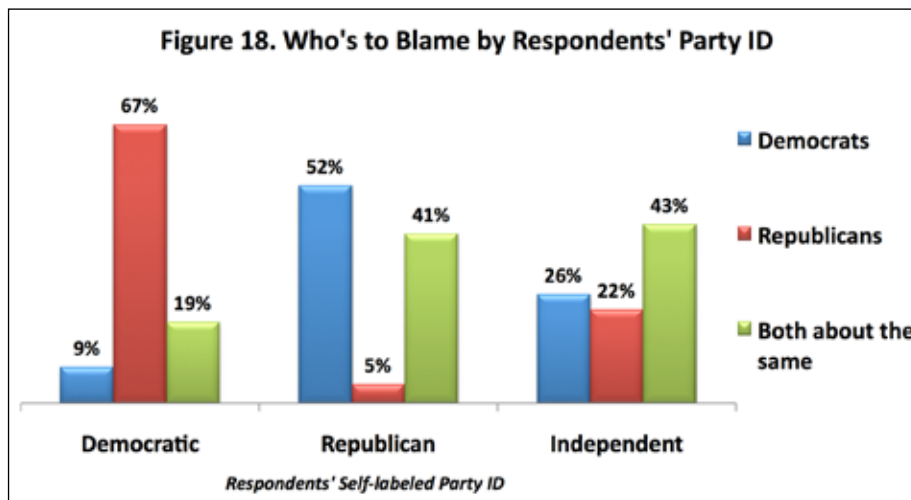
We also specifically assessed perceptions of the Tea Party activists. More Americans found this group to be civil than uncivil, as noted in Figure 19. Once again, the respondent's party identification proved to be an important control, as noted in Figure 20.

Figure 19. Tea Party Civil or Not?

Segment	Percent
Civil	38%
Uncivil	34%
Haven't heard of the Tea Party Movement	19%
Other/NS	10%

Figure 20. Assessment of Tea Party by Party ID

Respondents' Self-labeled Party ID	Civil	Uncivil
Democratic	22%	44%
Republican	62%	19%
Independent	36%	38%

Our study suggests that Americans' views of the Tea Party movement are also closely tied to their perceptions of "where our country is headed." Of the respondents who felt that our country was heading in the "right direction," 52.7 percent saw the Tea Party protesters as uncivil; whereas 55.1 percent of those who think we are on the "wrong track" viewed the Tea Party movement as civil.

We also introduced a rather lengthy list of potential culprits, where respondents were asked if they thought each was partly responsible for the decline in civility. As Figure 21 notes, the blame can be spread across a range of actors. Rising to the top of the "blame list," however, are political parties. Simply stated, 7 out of 10 Americans place blame for the decline in civility squarely at the door of political parties.

Figure 21. Who or What Has Pushed Politics To Become Less Civil?

| Category	Percent
Political parties	70%
Competitiveness of elections	65%
Television news programs	61%
Radio talk shows	61%
Changes in American culture	59%
Sense of entitlement among average citizens	58%
The way young people act in politics	46%
Blogs	42%
Glenn Beck	40%
Late night talk show programs, like Stewart and Leno	38%
Colleges and universities	37%
Rachel Maddow	25%

The media does not escape blame, either. A robust 60 percent note television shows and radio programs as contributing to the problem. Perhaps surprisingly, two of the lead players on what is perceived to be highly partisan televisions programs, Glenn Beck and Rachel Maddow, fare a bit better. Potentially, fewer Americans noted these personalities as part of the problem because they are unfamiliar with them.

Even more specifically, women were much more likely than men to blame radio talk shows for pushing politics toward incivility, by over 8 percentage points. Similarly, big differences were found among political orientation and blame for radio talk shows and television shows. As shown in Figure 22, Democrats were much more likely to blame media sources for incivility than Republicans, with independents falling in the middle.

Figure 22. What's to Blame by Respondents' Party ID

Respondents' Self-labeled Party ID
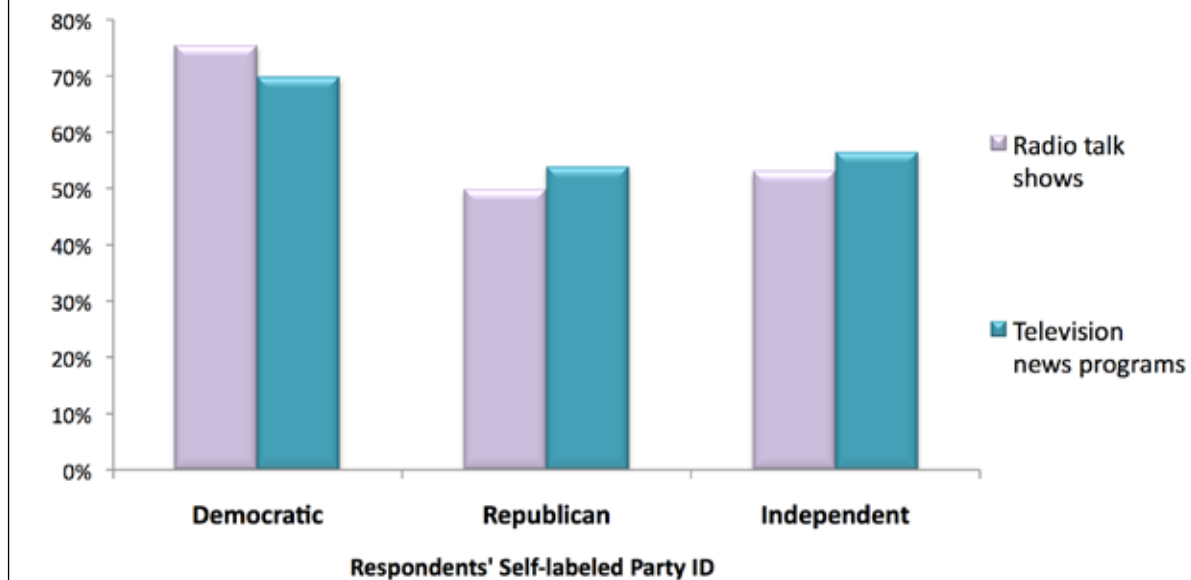
As expected, there are some notable age group differences in assigning who is to blame for a rise in incivility. For example, as shown in the Figure 23 below, the older generation does not blame blogs as heavily as the younger generation. As well, younger respondents do not blame radio talk shows as heavily as older respondents. This may be a reflection of the age of the audience of these two outlets.


Figure 23. What's to Blame by Age
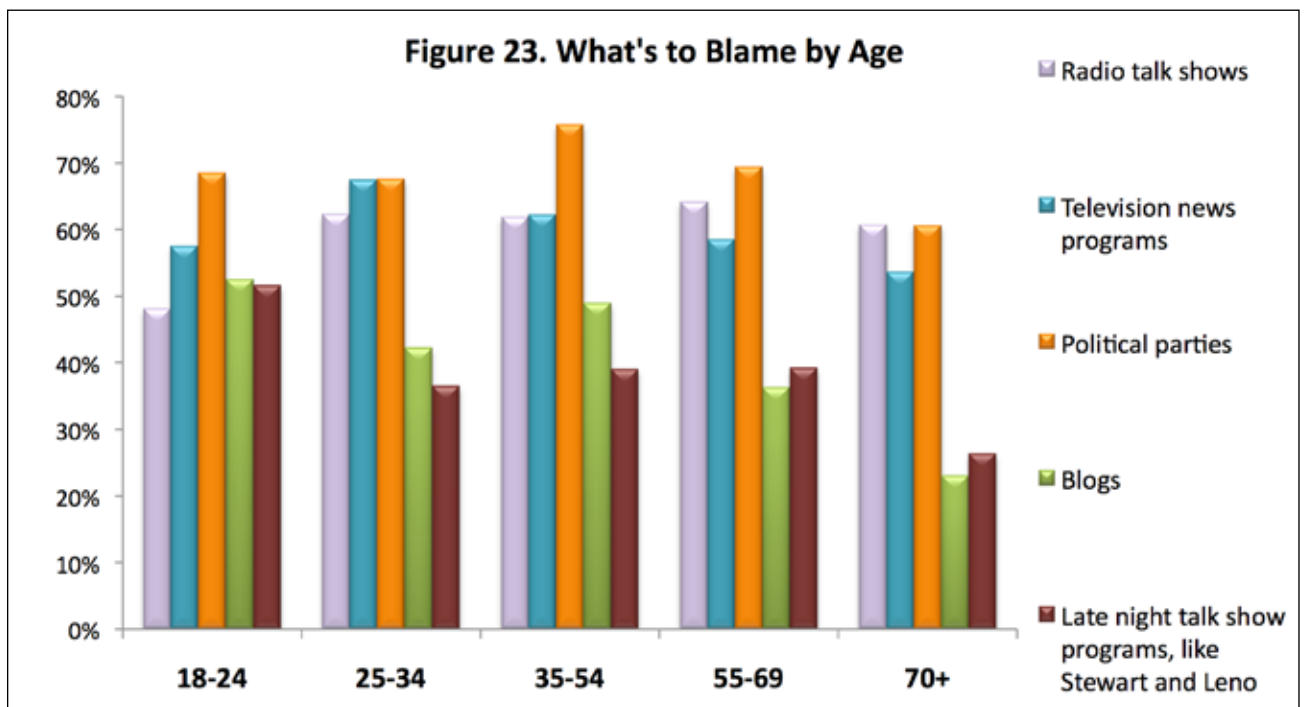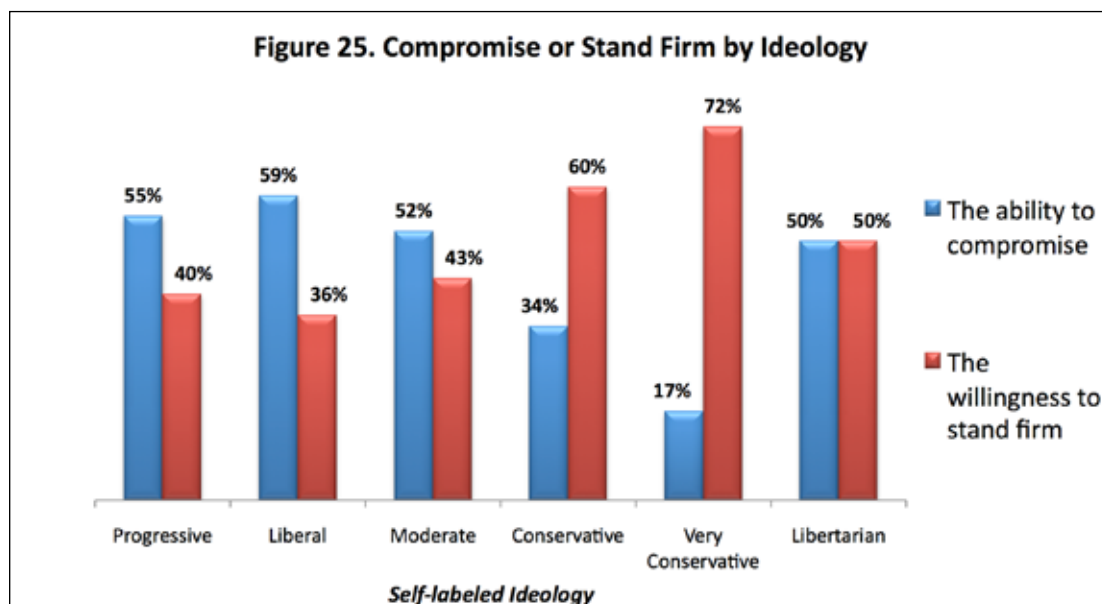
Our Willingness to Compromise

Compromise is another key issue in contemporary politics. U.S. Senator Evan Bayh (D-Ind) suggested in an *New York Times* op-ed after announcing that he would not seek reelection that "strident partisanship and unyielding ideology" has led to a dysfunctional government.

Americans certainly seemed to perceive a problem: 77 percent of respondents "somewhat" or "strongly" agreed with the statement "Right now, Washington is broken," and 60.4 percent of respondents believe that Republicans and Democrats are opposing one another more than usual.
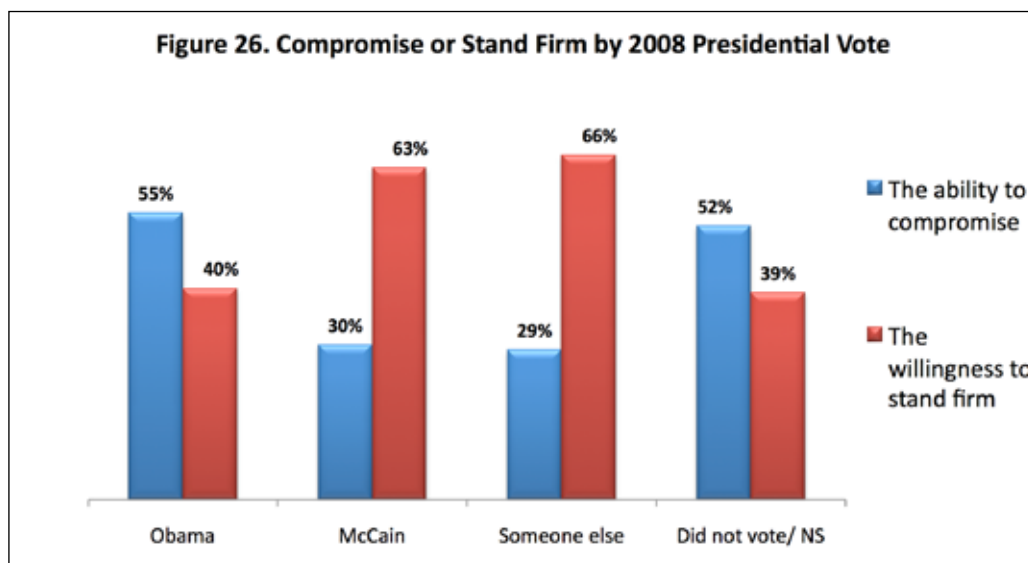
Senator Bayh offered this suggestion to fix these problems: "The most ideologically devoted elements in both parties must accept that not every compromise is a sign of betrayal or an indication of moral lassitude." Americans, though, seemed to be evenly divided on the issue of compromise. We asked, "Which do you think is more important in a politician: the ability to compromise to get things done, or a willingness to stand firm in support of principles?" Neither option was selected by a majority of respondents, as noted in Figure 24: 44.6 percent expressed a preference for compromise, compared with 49.0 who favored "standing firm."

Figure 24. Which is More Important?
- The ability to compromise — 45%
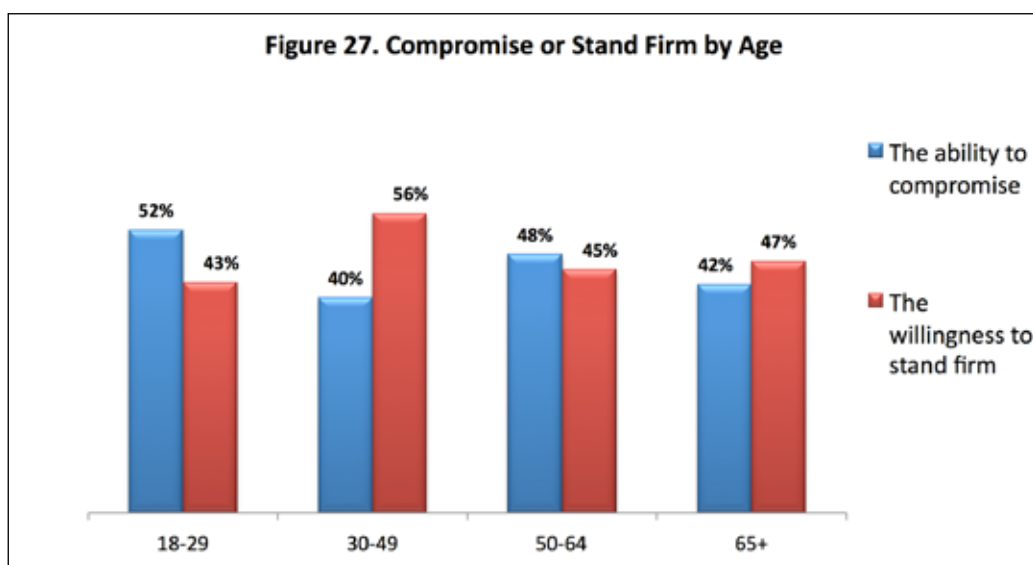- The willingness to stand firm — 49%
- Other/Not Sure — 6%
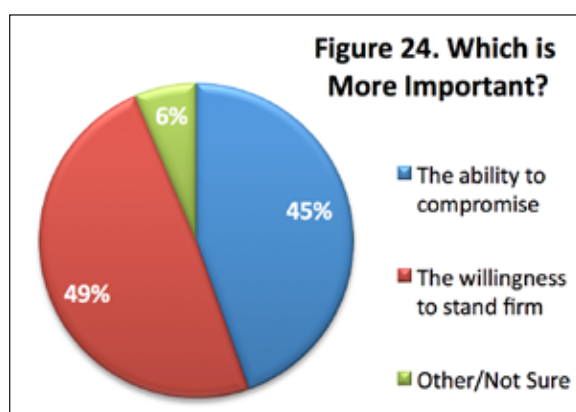
Despite this fairly even division, there were a number of interesting—and striking—variations among demographic groups and along party lines. While Senator Bayh suggested that elements on *both* sides of the ideological spectrum are unwilling to compromise, our data does not exactly support this view. We observed clear differences along party lines: 52.3 percent of Democrats valued compromise over sticking to principle, compared to 43 percent of independents and only 35 percent of Republicans. Similarly, as noted in Figure 25, respondents who identified themselves as progressive, liberal or moderate preferred compromise by wide margins, while conservatives strongly favored standing firm.

Figure 25. Compromise or Stand Firm by Ideology

Self-labeled Ideology	The ability to compromise	The willingness to stand firm
Progressive	55%	40%
Liberal	59%	36%
Moderate	52%	43%
Conservative	34%	60%
Very Conservative	17%	72%
Libertarian	50%	50%

Whether Democrats are inherently more compromising than Republicans or, being in the majority, simply have more latitude to enjoy the luxury of compromise, is uncertain. President Obama is widely acknowledged as a consensus-builder, and we found a strong association between a preference for compromise and a vote for Obama in 2008—perhaps suggesting the former. Figure 26 notes the results of this cross-tabulation.

Figure 26. Compromise or Stand Firm by 2008 Presidential Vote

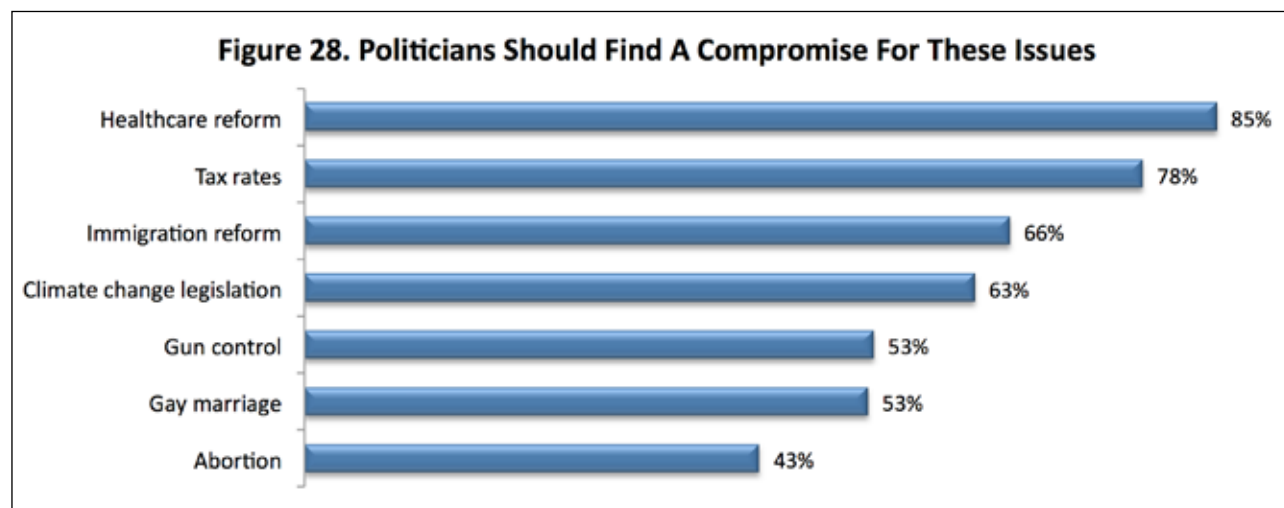|	Obama	McCain	Someone else	Did not vote/ NS
The ability to compromise	55%	30%	29%	52%
The willingness to stand firm	40%	63%	66%	39%

The respondent's age was also quite important for this issue of compromise, as highlighted in Figure 27. Our survey suggests that young people (ages 18–29) were considerably more likely to prefer compromise than members of older generations. Over 52 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds chose compromise, compared to 39.9 percent of 30- to 49-year-olds, 47.7 percent of 50- to 64-year-olds, and 42.5 percent of those 65 and older.

Figure 27. Compromise or Stand Firm by Age

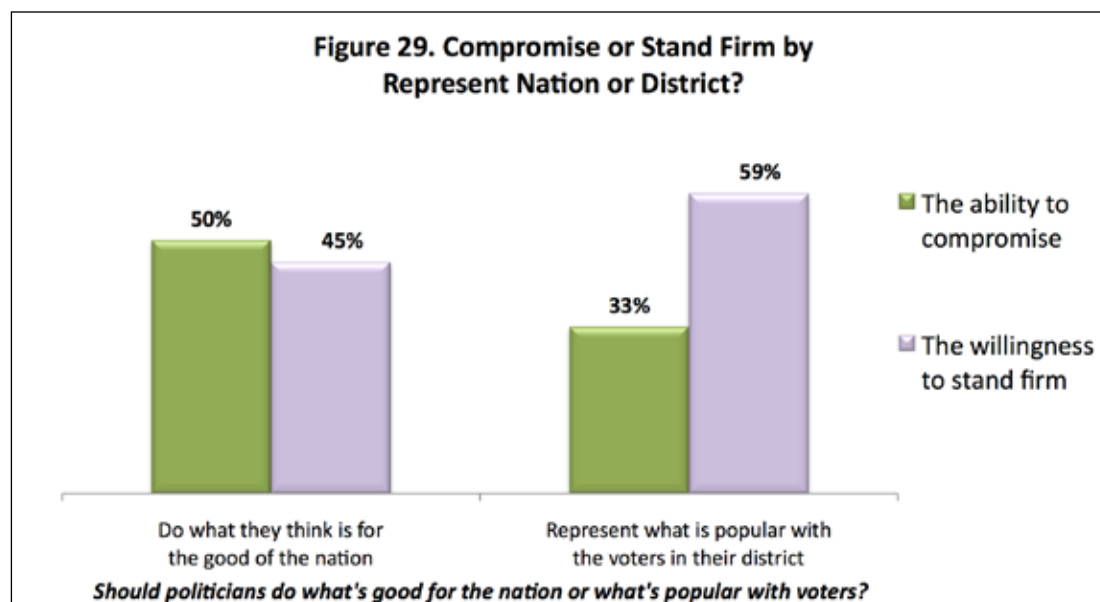|	18-29	30-49	50-64	65+
The ability to compromise	52%	40%	48%	42%
The willingness to stand firm	43%	56%	45%	47%

This difference was even more apparent when the age groups were broken down further: Fully 57 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds expressed a preference for compromise. Whether this difference was truly generational, or merely a function of ideology (young people were considerably more likely to self-identify as liberal or progressive than members of other age groups) remains unclear. But given the other unique characteristics of the Millennial Generation—e.g., their strong commitment to volunteerism and community service and overwhelming 2008 preference for Obama, a consensus-builder—a generational tendency toward compromise is certainly possible.

Differences were striking, too, depending on respondents' views of the country's direction: 54.8 percent of those who considered the country to be headed in the right direction preferred compromise, compared to a mere 33.9 percent of respondents who believed the country to be on the wrong track.

Perhaps our most striking, and indeed most heartening, finding related to one's willingness to compromise when we turned to specific issues. An overwhelming majority of respondents suggested that "elected officials should look to find a compromise" for all but one major issue we asked about (the sole exception being abortion, perhaps due to Americans' traditionally black-and-white views on that issue), as noted in Figure 28. For all the constant rhetoric about an insurmountable partisan divide in America, most respondents believed that our elected officials *should* find compromise on most of the key issues of our time.

Figure 28. Politicians Should Find A Compromise For These Issues

Issue	Percent
Healthcare reform	85%
Tax rates	78%
Immigration reform	66%
Climate change legislation	63%
Gun control	53%
Gay marriage	53%
Abortion	43%

Interestingly, respondents who consider it more important for their elected officials to "represent what is popular with voters in their district," rather than "do what they think is good for the nation," were considerably more likely to oppose compromise: 58.8 percent of these respondents preferred their politicians to "stand firm" rather than seek compromise. This data is offered in Figure 29.

Figure 29. Compromise or Stand Firm by Represent Nation or District?

	Do what they think is for the good of the nation	Represent what is popular with the voters in their district
The ability to compromise	50%	33%
The willingness to stand firm	45%	59%

Should politicians do what's good for the nation or what's popular with voters?

Finally, survey respondents provide an interesting link between one particular source of blame and how much they value compromise in their elected officials. Among survey respondents who feel that radio talk shows have pushed politics to become less civil in the past few years, over 53 percent value compromise among politicians. Yet only 31 percent of survey respondents who don't blame radio talk shows value compromise among elected officials. Alternatively, 61 percent of these respondents value the willingness to stand firm in politicians.

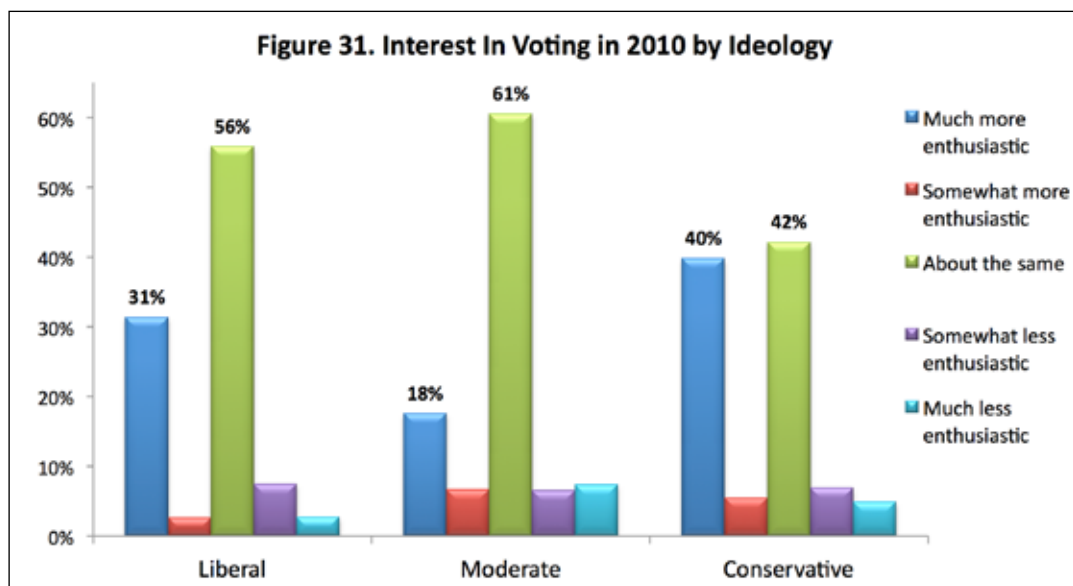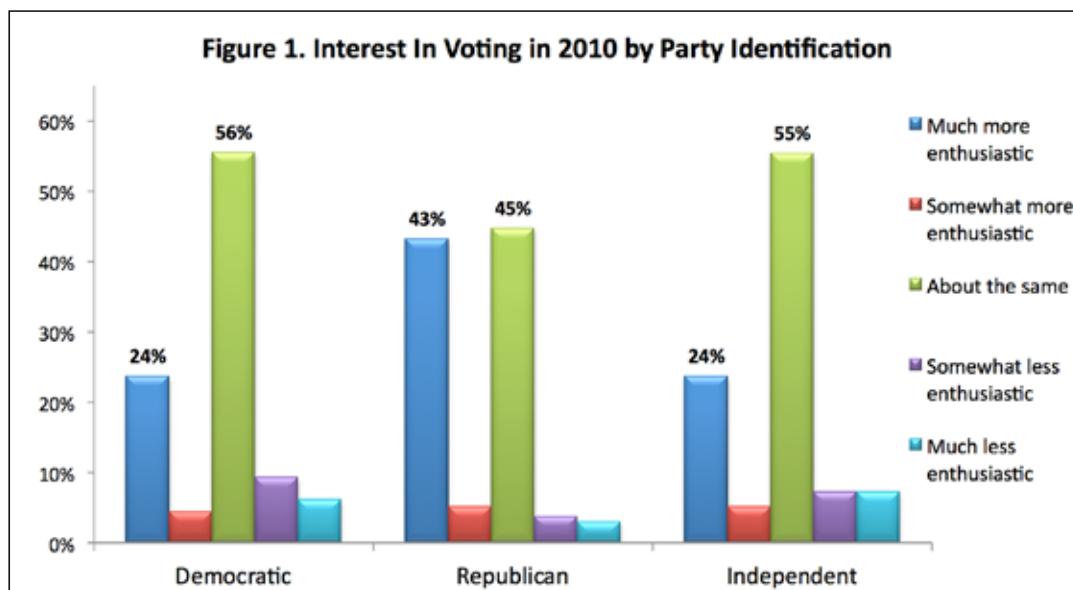| Which is more important?	Think radio talk shows are to blame _n=624_	Does not feel radio talk shows are to blame _n= 376_
Ability to compromise	53%	31%
Willingness to stand firm	41%	61%

The 2010 Election

As discussed in earlier sections, we have seen growing interest in political action. This might be linked to a decline in civility. Considering the high turnout in the 2008 election, particularly among the newest generation of voters, some have speculated that we are at a turning point where high levels of political participation will be the norm. What might we expect in the next election?

As noted in the first section of this report, our survey suggests many citizens remain engaged. When asked, respondents gauged their interest in the November 2010 election as just over 34 percent, noting that they were "much more enthusiastic" or "somewhat more enthusiastic" about voting than in previous elections, as noted in Figure 30. The majority (52.6%) replied that their enthusiasm about voting was about the same as in previous election cycles. Only 5.6 percent suggested they were less interested than in previous years.

Figure 30. Interest In Voting In 2010?
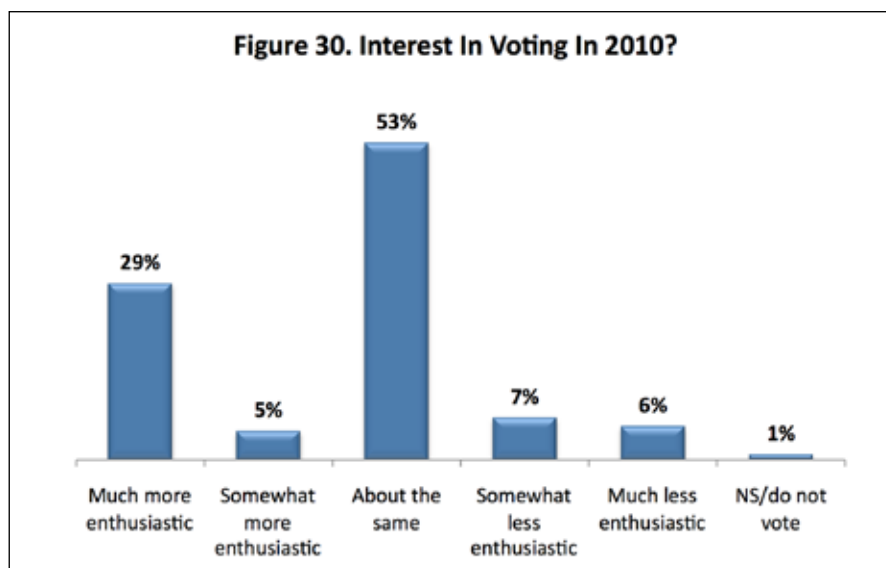
Perhaps hoping to bring their party back into power, Republican voters appear to be more revved up to vote than Democrats, as noted in Figure 1 (reprinted below). Just over 43 percent of respondents who identified themselves as a Republican are "much more enthusiastic" about the upcoming elections, as opposed to 23.7 percent of self-identified Democrats. The same picture emerges when we take a look at the respondent's ideology, as noted in Figure 31.

Figure 1. Interest In Voting in 2010 by Party Identification

Figure 31. Interest In Voting in 2010 by Ideology

Regarding voter choice in the 2010 general elections, the electorate remains nearly perfectly divided, as noted in Figure 32. Asked who they might support in the coming elections, some 26 percent noted mostly Republican candidates, 25 percent mostly Democratic candidates, and 18 percent were undecided. About one-third of the respondents noted they would likely support a mix of Democratic and Republican candidates. In short, we believe these data suggest a highly competitive 2010 election.

Figure 32. Which Party Will You Support In 2010?

Mostly Republican	Mostly Democratic	Undecided	A mix of Dem. and Rep.
26%	25%	18%	29%
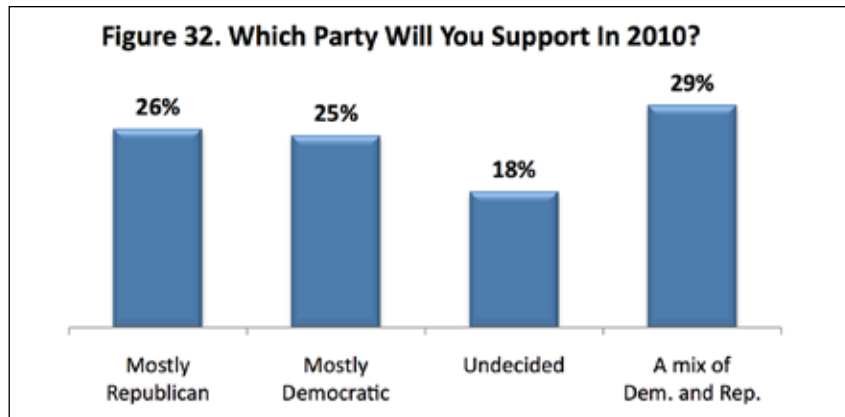
And what about the independent voters? Reaffirming the possibility of a Republican resurgence, our survey suggests that independents may be leaning more toward the Republican Party in the next election: Some 21.3 percent of independent respondents stated they would be supporting mostly Republican candidates in 2010, and only 12.9 percent replied they would support mostly Democrats.

On the other hand, with 47.2 percent of all respondents reporting that they will either support a mix of Democratic and Republican candidates or are still undecided, one would be hard pressed to interpret these data as forecasting a Republican landslide.

When asked, "Are you more or less likely to vote for a candidate for congress who supported Barack Obama's health care reform plan," a solid 36 percent of respondents said they would be *less* likely to support a candidate who voted for health care, as opposed to 26 percent who were *more* likely to support such a candidate. This can be interpreted as tough news for the Democrats. But it gets worse, as Figure 33 suggests. Here we offer the party of the respondent as a control. First, over 60 percent of Republicans noted that support for the health care initiative will make them much *less* likely to support a candidate; compared to just 35 percent of the Democrats who noted it would make them much *more* likely to support a candidate. Second, and conceivably more important, independents are much more likely to punish candidates who supported the bill than they are to reward those who voted for the bill. Most understood that the health care bill would be a tough vote for Democrats, and our data seem to confirm it.

Figure 33. Will you vote for a candidate who supported the Health Care Reform Plan? by Party Identification

Respondents' Self-labeled Party ID

Legend:
- Much more likely
- Somewhat more likely
- Makes no difference
- Somewhat less likely
- Much less likely

	Much more likely	Somewhat more likely	Makes no difference	Somewhat less likely	Much less likely
Democratic	35%		42%		10%
Republican	7%		23%		60%
Independent	10%		43%		30%

A related topic is interest in the upcoming nomination contests. There has been much speculation that one of the forces behind record high party-line voting in congress, and conversely the unwillingness to seek compromise, is the intensity of primary voters. Few politicians seem anxious to upset the base voters of their party. U.S. Senator Arlen Specter (D-Pa), for example, switched parties because he felt he was not likely to win the GOP primary. Our study came at this issue from more than one direction.

First, how interested were the respondents in upcoming nomination contests? Some 28 percent of respondents noted they were much more enthusiastic about voting in the primary election than in previous years. About half the respondents (54%) suggested that there was no change in their enthusiasm to vote in the upcoming primary elections for house and senate candidates, and only about 10 percent were less or much less enthusiastic.

Second, are there any differences between the parties? Republicans were significantly more enthusiastic about voting in the upcoming primary elections than were Democrats. Similarly, conservatives were significantly more interested in the party contests than were moderates or liberals. These data clearly add credence to the notion that Republican/conservative voters intend to make their voices heard during the nomination contests.

We explored interest in the primary contests and a willingness to seek compromise. Given what we know about the overall intensity of primary voters, we might speculate that those quite interested in nomination contests would be the least likely to support compromise. We've long heard that primary election voters are the most ideological, the most steadfast. Our data seem to confirm this supposition. Figure 34 presents a cross tabulation between our compromise question, discussed in a previous section, and interest in primary elections. The results are very revealing. Some 45 percent of the Republicans that oppose compromise solutions are "much more enthusiastic" about the upcoming primary elections than in previous years, compared to 15 percent of Republicans who support compromise. Put a bit differently, Republicans who believe politicians should stand firm on policy questions are three times as likely be to very interested in the upcoming primary elections than are those Republicans who support compromise.

Figure 34. Interest In Voting in 2010 Primary by Importance of Compromise / Standing Firm
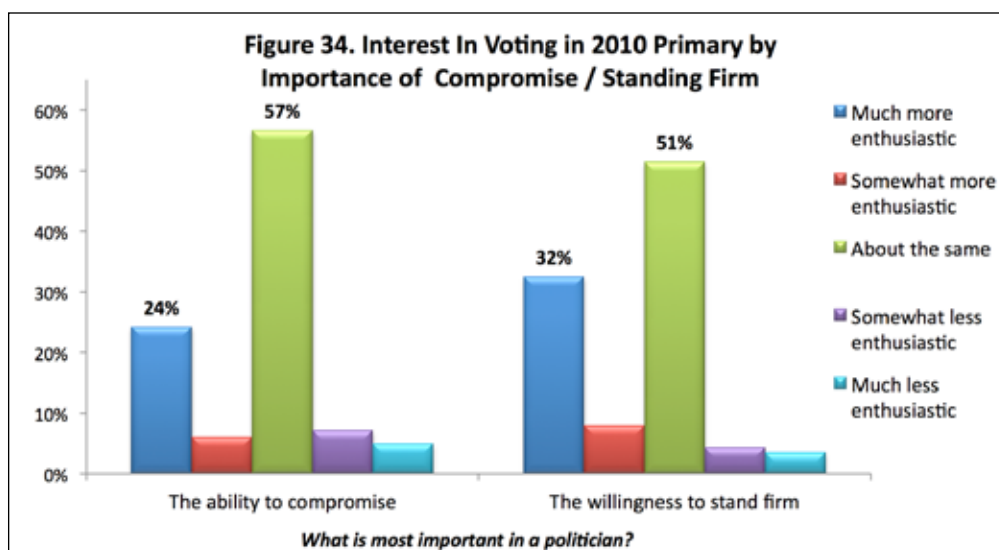
Figure 35 takes a look at three variables: interest in the primary election, a willingness to compromise, and the party ID of the respondent. We believe the most important figure here is that there is a great deal of interest in voting in the primary election among Republicans who are anxious to stand firm for principles.

Figure 35. Interest in Voting, Willingness to Compromise, and Party ID
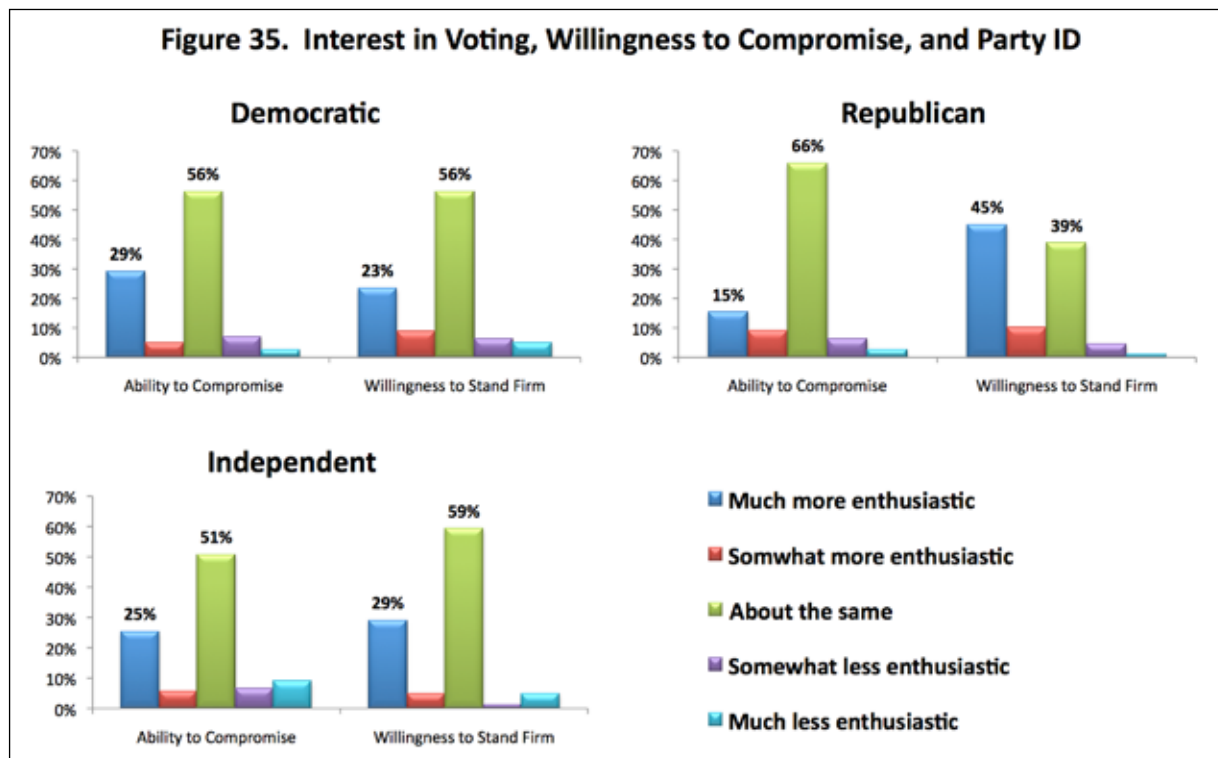
Switching to age, our survey appears to indicate that the excitement generated by Barack Obama's campaign may again bring young voters to the polls in 2010. As highlighted by Figure 36, the percentage of 18- to 29- year-olds who responded that they were "much more enthusiastic" and "somewhat more enthusiastic" about the 2010 elections was on par with the older age groups. In fact, the 18–29 age group had the largest percentage of respondents either "much more enthusiastic" and "somewhat more enthusiastic" about the upcoming primary elections. It is plausible to conclude that the weight of young voters, who tend to be more liberal than most other voters, may exert the same pull in Democratic primaries that conservative voters do in GOP contests.


Figure 36. Interest In Voting in 2010 Primary by Age
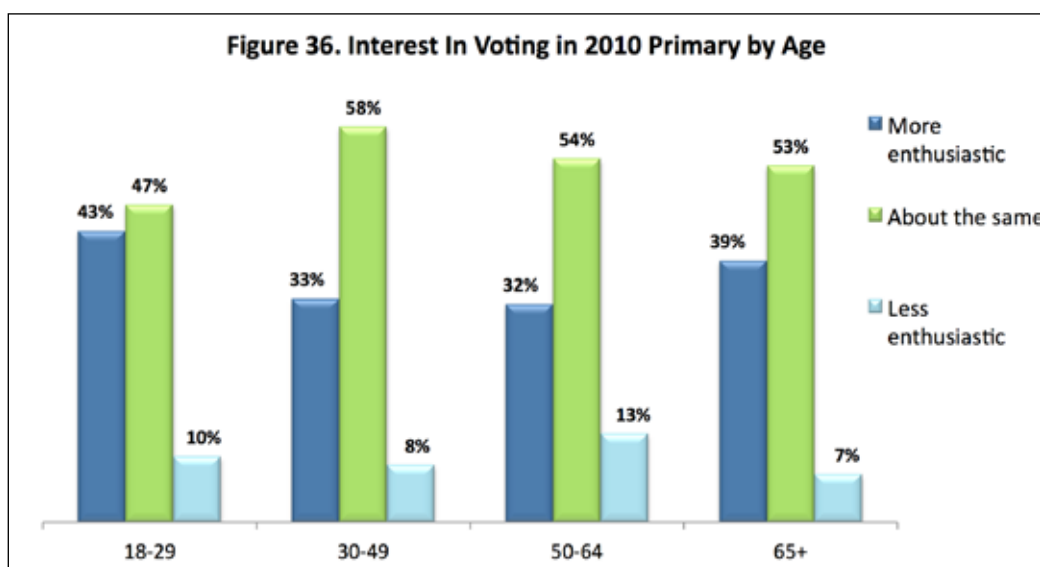
Our study confirms that the American public is enthusiastic about the 2010 elections. Very few seem to be "tuned out" or indifferent. It also points to remarkable parity between the two parties, with roughly one-third of the respondents currently slated to support candidates from each of the two parties.

There is a good bit of data to suggest GOP candidates may have the wind at their back. It is surely implicit in these data that there will be few Republican defectors on Election Day; that a sizable block of voters, perhaps an historically large group of voters, are ready to lend their support.
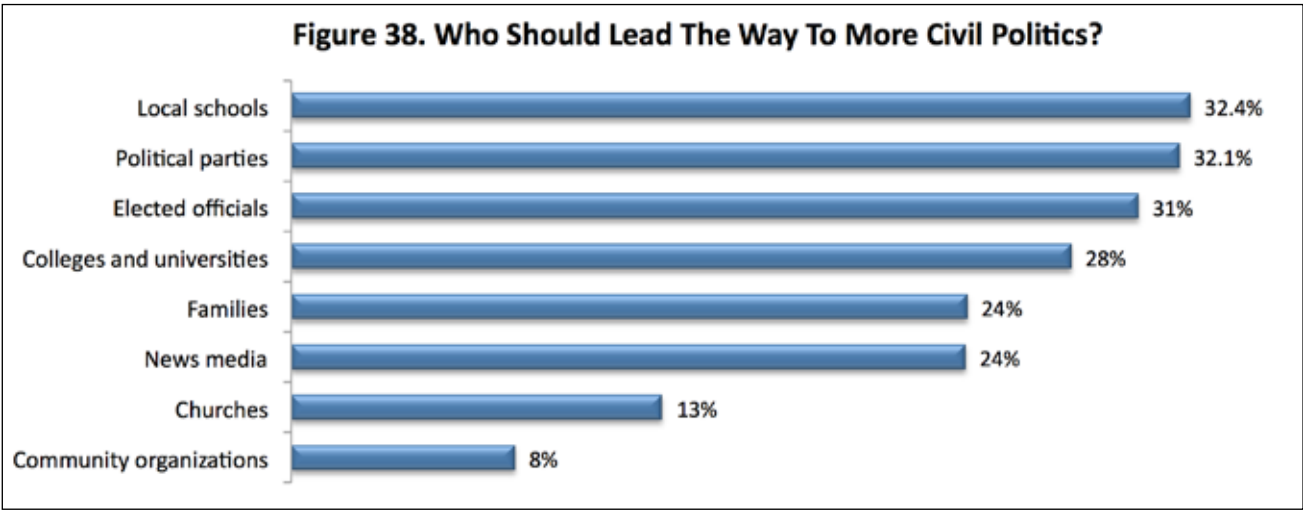
Finding Solutions

Identifying problems related to incivility is one thing, solving them is another. Near the end of the survey, we asked respondents a series of questions regarding which institutions are responsible for ameliorating political incivility and how uncivil politicians should be dealt with.

We first asked about the role of education: "Do you think schools should include lessons on how to act respectfully in politics?" As noted in Figure 37, a large majority of respondents, 77 percent, affirmed that schools should teach students how to act respectfully in the political arena, with only 19 percent disagreeing and 3 percent unsure.

Figure 37. Should Schools Teach Respect In Politics?

- Yes — 77%
- No — 19%
- Not Sure — 3%
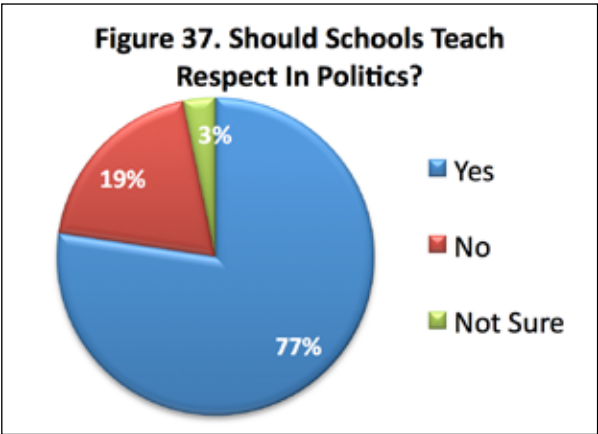
Next, we asked about the role of different societal institutions in improving the tone of politics heading into the future. Results are noted in Figure 38. Respondents were enlisted with the following task: "Please tell me which two of the following you think should take a lead role in making politics more civil in the years ahead." We included eight options from which to choose: local schools, colleges and universities, churches, political parties, community organizations, news media, families and elected officials. Reaffirming the findings of our question about the role of education, local schools, chosen by 32.4 percent of respondents, was the most frequently selected option and colleges and universities was also a popular choice (28.1%). Following closely behind local schools were two political institutions: parties (32.1%) and elected officials (30.6%). Considering that 70.1 percent said earlier in the survey that political parties have made politics less civil in recent years, it seems that respondents believe that political institutions, as culprits of incivility, hold a special responsibility to make things better.

Figure 38. Who Should Lead The Way To More Civil Politics?

- Local schools — 32.4%
- Political parties — 32.1%
- Elected officials — 31%
- Colleges and universities — 28%
- Families — 24%
- News media — 24%
- Churches — 13%
- Community organizations — 8%

Divided along partisan lines (Figure 39), it appears that Democrats have more faith in educational institutions to make politics more civil than do Republicans, with 35.8 and 33.8 percent of Democrats selecting local schools and colleges/universities, respectively, as institutions that should take a lead role in increasing civility. Conversely, when asked the same question, only 24.2 and 21.8 percent of Republicans selected local schools and colleges/universities, respectively. On the other hand, our results imply that Republicans are more likely to believe that churches and families are responsible for teaching civility, with 20.1 percent selecting churches and 34.1 percent selecting families, compared to 13.0 and 17.4 percent, respectively, among Democrats. Members of both parties were similarly likely to identify political parties and elected officials as those who are most responsible for making politics more civil.

Figure 39. Who should take a lead role in making politics more civil, by Party Identification
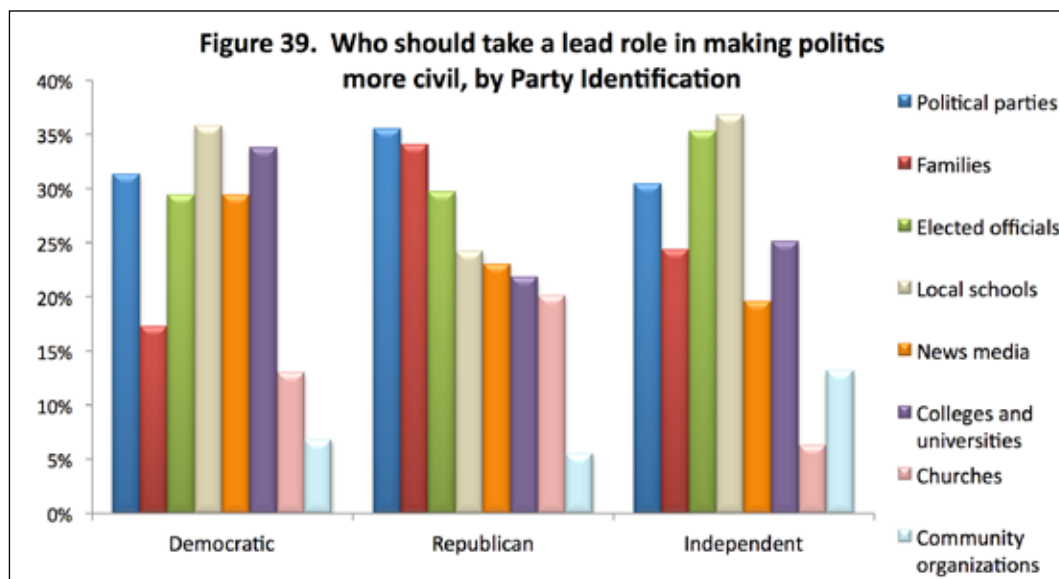
Age also affected perceptions regarding who should play leading roles in making politics more civil, with respondents between 18 and 29 more likely than any other age group to select educational institutions as most important (Figure 40). With 44 percent of young people selecting colleges and universities, it seems that today's students feel that campuses are crucial arenas in which Americans can learn to participate in politics respectfully, hopefully indicating that politics may take on a more civil tone as today's students become tomorrow's leaders.

Figure 40. Who should take a lead role in making politics more civil by Age
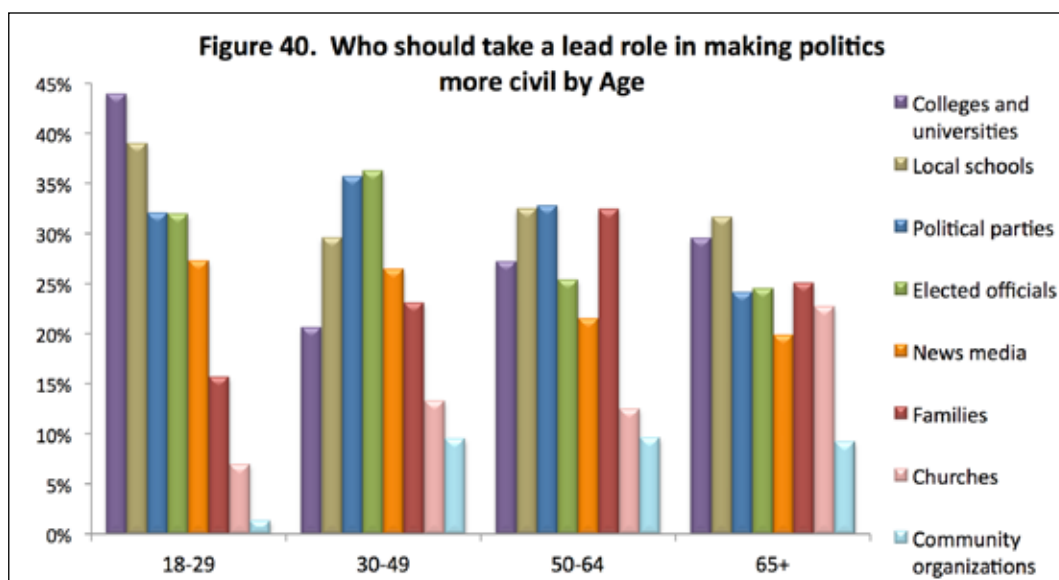
We also explored the issue of cultivating friendships. Regardless of one's positions on policy questions, Americans have always seemed to be friendly with those on the other side; to cross the divide partisan divide to be gracious and sociable. Many older politicians seem to lament the decline in friendships in government. Do we still feel that way? Figure 41 clearly suggests we do. An impressive 85 percent of respondents suggested elected officials should work to cultivate friendships with members of the other party.

Figure 41. Should Elected Officials be Friends With Individuals of the Other Party?
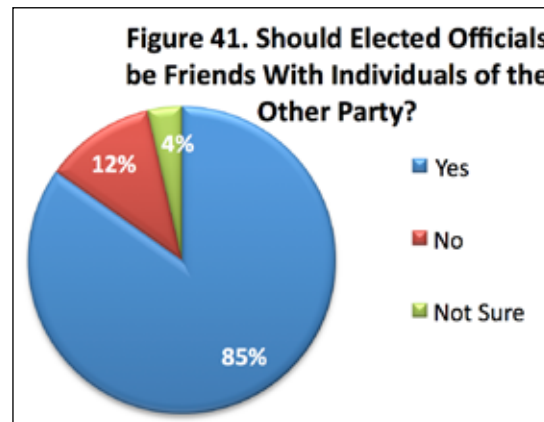
Finally, and more or less for the fun of it, we asked, "What training would you recommend for the least civil politicians?" The results are noted in Figure 42. Given three options, 39.5 percent of respondents felt that uncivil politicians have earned "a trip to the woodshed," while 32 percent said that uncivil politicians should take "a manners class with Emily Post."

Figure 42. Training For Least Civil Politicians?
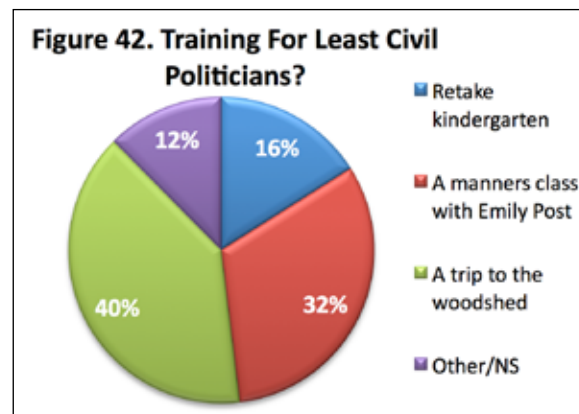
In summary, our results seem to indicate that Americans see political and educational institutions as most crucial in improving civility in politics. While members of both parties generally agree on the role of political institutions, Democrats seem to more strongly favor education, with Republicans more likely to favor religion and families. Young people most strongly view education as a catalyst for improving civility.

Conclusion

On one level, the results of our study are unequivocal. There is nearly universal agreement that civil politics is essential for a healthy democracy. We must be engaged and passionate about the policy disputed, but remain respectful and polite. Asked if respectful political action was possible, given the nature of issues these days, Americans remain incredibly optimistic: well over 8 in 10 believe we *can* do this. Passionate, respectful politics is not an oxymoron.

Unfortunately, we found strong evidence that most Americans believe the tone of politics has declined in recent years. Things have gotten bad. This is especially true for respondents who report paying close attention to the news. Nearly twice as many Americans noted that we should be ashamed of the recent health care debate rather than be proud of how it was conducted. Not surprisingly, a significant majority of Americans who see politics becoming less civil also believe that our country is headed in the wrong direction.

Thus, a core finding of our study is the potential long-term danger posed by the conduct of contemporary politics. We believe our study signals a warning: Americans do not like the way we are "doing politics," and they believe hostility and vitriol are signs of an ailing system. Several years ago, columnist and author E. J. Dionne Jr. noted that "a nation that hates politics will not long thrive as a democracy." We could not agree more.

Our survey suggests the blame for the decline in civility can be shared by numerous actors, but specifically political parties and the media. Many scholars have remarked that the resurgence of party politics is one of the great comeback stories in American history. By the 1970s, most had agreed with the title of David Broder's oft-cited book: *The Party's Over*. Due in large measure to their adaptability and a flood of soft money, parties rebounded and are today key players in many aspects of politics. But has the focus of party efforts shifted to where the drive to win the next election pleases most candidates, but also turns voters away? Are long-term connections to the voters, especially young voters, jettisoned in the name of raising ever-larger sums of money to win elections at all costs?

Another important dimension of party dynamics is its impact on individuals. Has individual level partisanship become too intense, exceptional by any historic standard? This is a difficult question to answer, given that systemic survey research was not done prior to the 1940s. Also, even though partisan intensity seems heightened for some voters, the ranks of independent voters continue to swell. (It is likely that the traditional, normal distribution of ideological/partisan dispositions has flattened in recent years.) Yet much of our survey suggests the polarization of the electorate and aspects of the decline in civility can be attributed to this change.

Beyond party dynamics, changes in the media are also at work. Clearly, respondents blame radio and television for much of the acrimony. Is it possible that the same general approach that parties use to win elections also propels the media in their quest for higher ratings? Is it a drive for higher ratings at any cost? Cultural factors, such as the mean-spirited nature of most reality television programs, have also contributed to the problem. This might explain why young people are less optimistic about the chances for polite politics than are older Americans. A recent letter to the editor in *The New York Times* seemed to hit the nail on the head: "On sports' fields, on popular reality television shows, power and humiliation, the strong celebrating over the weak, the many outshouting the few—these are staples of our social life and our entertainment."[6]

Our respondents also revealed some genuinely notable differences in views between Americans who do and do not blame radio talk shows, in particular, as a source of incivility. Differences exist in political ideology, partisanship, and even optimism for potential solutions to an uncivil political atmosphere. Our survey provides some real evidence that Americans believe radio talk shows track with polarized political views.

Beyond the issue of respect and civility in politics, our survey draws a sharp focus on Americans' willingness to compromise and push their elected officials to find middle-ground solutions. On one hand, slightly less than one-half of the respondents suggested compromise solutions were more important than standing firm for principles. But on the other hand, as we moved through a series of specific issues, most respondents indicated a willingness to find a middle ground. There were also some rather

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6   Slote, John, "A Culture of Bullying: Where do Kids Learn," Letter to the Editor, New York Times OnLine, April 11, 2010.

stark differences between liberals/Democrats and conservatives/Republicans. Indeed, one of the most significant findings in this study is that those on the right are significantly less likely to agree with compromise than those on the left. This might explain why many GOP officials seem more reluctant to compromise than in the past.

There are some important generational differences in our study. As our results show, younger survey respondents are much less likely to feel that disagreeing in a respectful manner is possible, and less likely to think Americans should be ashamed with the way the health reform process was handled. As well, surprisingly, 25- to 34-year-olds were the least likely to classify our listed public behaviors as uncivil, even less than the 18- to 24-year-olds or the older respondents we surveyed. Yet, younger Americans felt the strongest that politicians should compromise, and were much more likely to have faith in educational institutions as a solution to incivility.

We also see a new story emerging among Americans who categorize themselves as independents. While prior to the 2008 presidential election many independents' political views tracked more closely to the views of the Democrats or to a liberal or progressive ideology, our survey results reveal this group now tracks more closely to the Republicans' views and are more conservative than two years ago.

Finally, we see that incivility is bad for democracy—it pushes people away from politics and from paying attention to politics, and lessens their willingness to be engaged. On a heartening note, more than half of our respondents have volunteered in their communities in the past 12 months, and a minority of respondents feel that nonviolent protesting or phoning one's elected officials are uncivil acts. We seem to be a people eager for community-oriented institutions, such as schools, to join hand-in-hand with the political parties themselves to solve the incivility problem facing our nation.

Our hope is that the information contained in this report will provide insight into what average citizens believe about the direction of our politics, and perhaps suggest avenues for change. Once again, at the core of our effort rests a notion that Americans can be active, partisan and passionate without being rude, selfish, shortsighted and, finally, undemocratic.

About the Authors

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RICHARD SHAFRANEK hails from the small town of Chardon, Ohio, and is currently a senior at Allegheny College, where he is double majoring in political science and English. After graduation, Richard hopes to secure an AmeriCorps VISTA position, but graduate school is likely in his long-term future. Richard's scholarly interests include, among other things, the important intersection between politics and language.

About Allegheny College

Allegheny College is a national liberal arts college where 2,100 students with unusual combinations of interests and talents develop highly valued abilities to explore critical issues from multiple perspectives. A selective residential college in Meadville, Pa., Allegheny is one of 40 colleges featured in Loren Pope's *Colleges That Change Lives* and is also featured in *Harvard Schmarvard: Getting Beyond the Ivy League to the College That is Best for You* and *Peterson's Competitive Colleges, 400 Colleges That Attract the Best and the Brightest*, among many other guidebooks.

About the Center for Political Participation at Allegheny College

In October 2002, Allegheny College established the Center for Political Participation, a national center dedicated to encouraging greater political involvement among young people by fostering an appreciation for the vital link between an engaged, active citizenry and a healthy democracy. Seeking new strategies and mechanisms for promoting political participation, the Center has established programs for three audiences—Allegheny students (campus activities), scholars nationwide (scholarly research), and citizens of the wider community (educational outreach). In November 2007 the Center founded the Soapbox Alliance, a group of institutions that are committed to ending the practice of holding closed campaign events in campus facilities. Former President Clinton endorsed the Soapbox Alliance in a speech he made at Allegheny on April 19, 2008.

The Survey Instrument

Implemented by Zogby International, March 24–29, 2010

Hi, my name is _____ and I'm doing a poll of U.S. ADULTS for ZOGBY INTERNATIONAL. May I ask you some questions? (Do you have a few minutes?)

2001. Are you registered to vote in the United States?
      1. Yes
      2. No
      3. Not sure

2002. How likely are you to vote in **national** elections?
      1. Very likely
      2. Somewhat likely
      3. Not likely
      4. Not sure

2003. In the 2008 presidential election, the candidates were Democrat Barack Obama, Republican John McCain, independent Ralph Nader, Libertarian Bob Barr and Green Cynthia McKinney. For whom did you vote?
      1. Obama
      2. McCain
      3. Nader
      4. Barr
      5. McKinney
      6. Someone else
      7. Did not vote
      8. Not sure

2004. In which party are you either registered to vote or do you consider yourself to be a member of—Democrat, Republican, independent/unaffiliated, or a minor party?
      1. Democrat
      2. Republican
      3. Independent/unaffiliated
      4. Minor
      5. Not sure

1. Some people seem to follow politics most of the time, while others aren't that interested. Would you say you follow what's going on in politics most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all?
      1. Most of the time
      2. Some of the time
      3. Only now and then
      4. Hardly at all
      5. Not sure (**Do not read**)

2. Generally speaking, would you say things in this country are heading in the right direction, or are they off on the wrong track?
      1. Right direction
      2. Wrong track
      3. Not sure (**Do not read**)

3. Altogether, would you describe economic conditions in the country today as excellent, good, fair, or poor?
      1. Excellent
      2. Good
      3. Fair
      4. Poor
      5. Not sure (**Do not read**)

4. Which of the following would you say is your main source of news—television, the Internet, newspapers, radio, or magazines?
      1. Television
      2. Internet
      3. Newspapers
      4. Radio
      5. Magazines
      6. Other
      7. Not sure (**Do not read**)

5. Have you volunteered in your community during in the past 12 months?
      1. Yes
      2. No
      3. Not sure (**Do not read**)

6. Have you tried to persuade anyone to agree with you about a political issue in the past year?
      1. Yes
      2. No
      3. Not sure (**Do not read**)

Now we would like to ask a few questions about the tone of politics in America. For the purpose of this survey, when we refer to civility or being civil, we're talking about general politeness and respect.

7. Do you think civility in politics is important for a healthy democracy?
      1. Yes, it is important
      2. No, it is not important
      3. Not sure (**Do not read**)

8. If you were able to create a rule book for civility in politics, which of the following would **not** be okay—that is, they would be against the rules?

      (Choose all that apply)
      1. Interrupting someone you disagree with in a public forum
      2. Shouting over someone you disagree with during an argument
      3. Belittling or insulting someone
      4. Personal attacks on someone you disagree with
      5. Questioning someone's patriotism because they have a different opinion
      6. Comments about someone's race or ethnicity
      7. Comments about someone's sexual orientation
      8. Disruptive but nonviolent forms of protest, such as sit-ins
      9. Phoning legislators to express your views
      10. Manipulating the facts about an issue to persuade others

9. Many people in this country—politicians included—hold strong views on certain issues. Given the difficult and often personal nature of these issues, do you believe it is possible for people to disagree respectfully, or are nasty exchanges unavoidable?
      1. It is possible for people to disagree respectfully
      2. Nasty exchanges are unavoidable
      3. Not sure (**Do not read**)

11. Do you think there has been a decline or improvement in civility of American politics since Barack Obama became president, or do you think things have stayed about the same?
      1. There has been a decline in civility in American politics
      2. There has been an increase in civility in American politics
      3. Civility is about the same
      4. Not sure (**Do not read**)

(Q 12 only if Q11=1)

12. Which political party do you think is more to blame for the decline in civility, Republicans or Democrats?
      1. Democrats
      2. Republicans
      3. Both about the same (**Do not read**)
      4. Refused or Not sure (**Do not read**)

13. Do you support or oppose the health care reform plan that was proposed by Barack Obama?
      1. strongly support
      2. somewhat support
      3. somewhat oppose
      4. strongly oppose
      5. Not sure (**Do not read**)

14. Which of the following best describes your view of the recent debate over health care reform?
      1. Americans should be proud of the way our elected officials dealt with this issue
      2. Americans should be ashamed of the way our elected officials dealt with this issue
      3. Other/not sure (**Do not read**)

15. Of the following, please tell me if you think each item has pushed politics to become **less** civil in the past few years.
      (Choose all that apply)
      1. Radio talk shows
      2. Television news programs
      3. Blogs
      4. Late night talk show programs, like Stewart and Leno
      5. Glenn Beck
      6. Rachel Maddow
      7. Political parties
      8. Competitiveness of elections
      9. Sense of entitlement among average citizens
      10. Changes in American culture
      11. The way young people act in politics
      12. Colleges and universities

16. When politics becomes nasty and rude, does it turn you off, push you to be more active, or does it have little effect on your willingness to be involved in politics?
      1. It turns you off from politics
      2. It pushes you to be more active in politics
      3. It has little effect on your willingness to be involved in politics
      4. Not sure (**Do not read**)

17. Which do you think is more important in a politician: the ability to compromise to get things done, or a willingness to stand firm in support of principles?
    1. The ability to compromise
    2. The willingness to stand firm
    3. Other/ Not sure (**Do not read**)

18. Do you think it is more important for elected officials to do what they think is for the good of the nation or what they think is most popular with voters?
    1. Do what they think is for the good of the nation
    2. Represent what is popular with the voters in their district
    3. Other/Not sure (**Do not read**)

19. Do you think **your** elected officials—the ones that represent you in Washington—are more concerned with winning their next election or with doing the right thing for the nation?
    1. Winning next election
    2. Doing what's right
    3. Not sure (**Do not read**)

20. Do you think Republicans and Democrats have been working together more than usual to solve problems, have they been opposing one another more than usual, or has there been no change?
    1. Working together more than usual
    2. Opposing one another more than usual
    3. No change
    4. Not sure (**Do not read**)

21. Some people feel so strongly about certain issues that they are unwilling to support a compromise. But on other issues they are okay with a middle ground. Please tell us whether you think elected officials should look to find a compromise on the following issues.
    (Choose all that apply)
    1. Healthcare reform
    2. Gay marriage
    3. Abortion
    4. Tax rates
    5. Immigration reform
    6. Climate change legislation
    7. Gun control

22. Do you think elected officials should pursue personal friendships with members of other parties?
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. Not sure (**Do not read**)

23. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "Right now, Washington is broken."
    1. Strongly agree
    2. Somewhat agree
    3. Somewhat disagree
    4. Strongly disagree
    5. Not sure (**Do not read**)

24. Do you consider most of the activities of the Tea Party movement to be civil or uncivil?
    1. Civil
    2. Uncivil
    3. Haven't heard of the Tea Party movement
    4. Other/ Not sure (**Do not read**)

25. Sometimes organizations spend money on elections in a district where they are not located. Do you support or oppose this practice?
    1. Strongly support
    2. Somewhat support
    3. Somewhat oppose
    4. Strongly oppose
    5. Not sure/no opinion

26. Do you think schools should include lessons on how to act respectfully in politics?
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. Not sure (**Do not read**)

27. Please tell me which two of the following you think should take a lead role in making politics more civil in the years ahead.
    (Choose two)
    1. Local schools
    2. Colleges and universities
    3. Churches
    4. Political parties
    5. Community organizations
    6. News media
    7. Families
    8. Elected officials.

28. What training would you recommend for the least civil politicians?
    1. Retake kindergarten
    2. A manners class with Emily Post
    3. A trip to the woodshed
    4. Other/not sure (**Do not read**)

29. Looking forward to November, 2010: compared to previous elections, are you more enthusiastic than usual about voting, less enthusiastic, or about the same?
    1. Much more enthusiastic
    2. Somewhat more enthusiastic
    4. Somewhat less enthusiastic
    5. Much less enthusiastic
    6. About the same
    7. Not sure/do not vote (**Do not read**)

30. Looking forward to the primary elections for House and Senate candidates: compared to previous elections, are you more enthusiastic than usual about voting, less enthusiastic, or about the same?
    1. Much more enthusiastic
    2. Somewhat more enthusiastic
    4. Somewhat less enthusiastic
    5. Much less enthusiastic
    6. About the same
    7. Not sure/do not vote (**Do not read**)

31. We understand that the election is many months away, and that things can change, but given what you know now do you think you will be supporting?
    1. Mostly Republican candidates
    2. Mostly Democratic candidates
    3. Undecided
    4. A mix of Democratic and Republican candidates
    5. Other/do not vote (**Do not read**))

32. Are you more or less likely to vote for a candidate for Congress who **supported** Barack Obama's health care reform plan, or will it make no difference in your vote?
    1. Much more likely
    2. Somewhat more likely
    3. Somewhat less likely
    4. Much less likely
    5. Not sure/do not vote (**Do not read**)

Thanks, we're almost done. I just need some statistics.

701. What is your age? _____

702. Which of the following best represents your race or ethnic group?
    1. White
    2. African American
    3. Asian/Pacific
    4. Other/mixed
    0. Refuse (**Do not read**)

703. Do you consider yourself Hispanic or Latino?
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. Not sure (**Do not read**)

903. Which of the following best describes your highest level of education?
    1. Less than H.S. graduate
    2. H.S. graduate
    3. Some college
    4. College graduate or more
    0. Refuse (**Do not read**)

906. Which description best represents your political ideology?
    1. Progressive/Very liberal
    2. Liberal
    3. Moderate
    4. Conservative
    5. Very conservative
    6. Libertarian
    7. Not sure (**Do not read**)
    0. Refuse (**Do not read**)

907. Which of the following best represents your religious affiliation?
      1. Roman Catholic
      2. Protestant/other non-denominational Christian
      3. Jewish
      4. Muslim
      5. Atheist/Realist/Humanist
      6. Other/no affiliation
      0. Refuse (**Do not read**)

908. (**Only if 907=2**) Do you consider yourself to be a born-again, evangelical (**ee-van-GEL-uh-kull**), or fundamentalist Christian?
      1. Yes
      2. No
      3. Not sure (**Do not read**)
      0. Refuse (**Do not read**)

9140. Which of the following best describes your marital status?
      Married
      Single, never married
      Divorced/separated
      Widowed
      Civil Union
      Not sure (**Do not read**)
      Refuse (**Do not read**)

921. Which of the following best represents your household income last year before taxes?
      1. Less than $25,000
      2. $25,000-$34,999
      3. $35,000-$49,999
      4. $50,000-$74,999
      5. $75,000-$99,999
      6. $100,000 or more
      0. Refuse (**Do not read**)

922. Gender (Do not ask, simply record.)
      1. Male
      2. Female

927. Would you be interested in speaking with a reporter from the _____ about the results of this survey?
      1. Yes (Record name, telephone #, best time to call)
      2. No
      3. Not sure (**Do not read**)
      0. Refuse (**Do not read**)

Thank you for taking time to complete the survey.

ALLEGHENY COLLEGE

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