The State of Political Discourse in America 2019

Research Convening Report
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Introduction

The National Institute for Civil Discourse (NICD) is a nonpartisan center for research, advocacy, and policy affiliated with the University of Arizona. NICD was formed by a range of political leaders in Arizona and nationwide in the wake of the tragic shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords in January 2011. NICD works to understand the role civility and incivility play in American political and civic life, and to develop programs that aimed at improving the quality of American political discourse and increasing citizens’ ability to bridge political divides. NICD has developed a network of over fifty scholars from a range of institutions, disciplines, and political perspectives who study civility.

The NICD Research Network serves as a forum for encouraging research into how faculty might broaden their understandings of the subject matter that they study and teach. As part of its mission, the NICD Research Network holds biennial research convenings in Tucson to help its members share research, develop joint projects, and help chart the future of the organization.

The third such event — from which much of the research discussed in this report was drawn — was held September
26-28, 2019, in Tucson, Arizona. It was made possible by support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation’s Madison Initiative.

These gatherings provide a forum for determining what we know about political discourse in America today. While political discourse — the conversations we have in person and online, the framing of ideas in our media, and the ways in which our political leaders interact with each other — is not all there is to politics, the way in which we talk to each other can tell us a lot about how well-governed our country is and how well-equipped we are to confront the problems of the 21st Century. There are no easy metrics that will help us understand how good or bad our discourse is today, or to compare it to past eras in American history. Many Americans clearly agree, however, that our democracy faces significant challenges today, and that these challenges are rooted in Americans’ failure to constructively engage with each other on issues of public concern. There is, in addition, a wide range of proposals today about how to improve the health of our polity, but it is not always easy to determine what will work and what will not. The research presented at the NICD convenings enables us to address major advances over the past two years in academics’ understanding of political discourse in America, to present common themes and findings in contemporary research on civility, and to explore how NICD can build upon contemporary research to create effective programs for improving political discourse in America.
This report focuses on seven core subjects:

- Understanding the quality of political discourse in America today
- Understanding how different types of people define civility
- Exploring the relationship between political polarization and civility in government
- Determining the incentives for civil and uncivil political discussions in the media
- Measuring and combatting incivility in online communications
- Developing a theoretical account of what causes incivility
- Exploring how civil discourse can be taught in colleges and universities
Political Discourse and “Our Broken Public Sphere”

In a talk entitled “Is our Public Sphere Under Attack?” Professor Jennifer Mercieca of Texas A&M University presents her thoughts on what has become of the American political discourse. Mercieca argues that there are two levels to the public sphere: “the ‘normie’ layer that functions on the old rules of the accepted political spectacle and the ‘infowars’ layer that functions on the new rules of the new political spectacle.” For this second layer, attention and engagement are the sole metrics to gauge the success of any particular appeal. Politicians’ rhetoric — and the rhetoric of presidents in particular — was once designed to appeal to the public, to reach over the heads of other politicians and the media. Nonetheless, this rhetoric tended to include references to established democratic values or to other broadly accepted norms. It was clearly part of the first level of the public sphere. Contemporary political rhetoric, says Mercieca, uses political outrage to keep the public attentive and engaged. It weaponizes political discourse and places it squarely within the second level.

Such rhetoric can only succeed, she continues, “within a context in which Americans are incredibility distrusting of the government, one another, and traditional leadership.”

- Jennifer Mercieca
this climate, weaponized communications appear to many citizens to be authentic. Conspiratorial speech can come to seem legitimate to many, and it can ultimately contribute to the erosion of democratic norms. Mercieca does not present herself as a defender of the political status quo or as someone uncritical of some of the problems of what she calls the “normie” layer of the public sphere. She, like many on the left, has spent much of her career exploring the way in which conventional political discourse can exclude some voices and can amplify the voices of the wealthy and powerful. But, she concludes, this form of discourse did tend to exclude some of the more problematic fringe voices that today are becoming more prominent in public conversations.

Whatever one thinks about Mercieca’s account, it shows how even those who have long been critical of norms of civility have renewed their interest in understanding their function in contemporary America. Mercieca, like many scholars across the political spectrum, recognizes the ways in which what scholars of populism have called “low” political discourse has now become part of mainstream political conversations. And she makes the case that there is a link between political polarization and incivility. She sees the excesses of the Trump presidency as symptoms of a change in political discourse that preceded Trump’s election.
Political Polarization and Perceptions of Civility

Many of those who study political discourse have offered definitions of civility. There is a general agreement that civility is not merely a matter of language or rudeness; rather, it is a broader disposition toward other citizens, an agreement that all are partners in civic affairs and have a certain degree of equality.

The bounds of civility have clearly been tested in America in recent years. As Washington College political scientist Melissa Deckman reports in “Americans’ Attitudes about Civility and Politics,” an overwhelming majority of Americans believe that civility is an important prerequisite for democracy. There are, however, growing partisan divisions about the importance of civility and about what constitutes civility. Democrats are more likely than independents or Republicans to link civility to democracy. Republicans are more tolerant of incivility than Democrats, and men are more tolerant of civility than women. Unsurprisingly, there were also substantial differences in attitudes toward individual politicians – Republicans were much more likely to state that President Trump is civil than were Democrats.
Robin Stryker, Bethany Conway-Silva, and Vasundhara Kaul argue in “Calling Out our Own? Shared Versus Oppositional Partisanship and Perceptions of Political Incivility” that Deckman’s findings are part of a more general problem. We are far more tolerant of uncivil acts performed by those with whom we agree than we are of the same acts by our political opponents. Or to put matters in slightly different terms, we are more likely to identify a particular statement as being uncivil if it is made by someone of the other party. We are also much more likely to impute bad motives to our opponents. For instance, when a public figure says something false, we tend to assume this is a deliberate effort to deceive when we dislike that public figure, but are inclined to believe it was an honest mistake when the statement is made by someone whom we support.

Political scientist Erin Cassese takes this argument even further. In her work on what she calls “partisan dehumanization,” Cassese shows that strong political partisans rate their own party as significantly more human than the opposing party. This leads to a preference for increased social distance from supporters of the opposing party and a sense of moral superiority over supporters of the opposing party. They rate opposing partisans lower on seemingly nonpolitical issues such as trustworthiness and integrity.
These partisan divisions make it difficult to develop shared definitions of what is civil or uncivil. In addition, partisan conflict makes it difficult to come to an understanding of whether civility or incivility are good things. That is, is it always good to be civil? Is incivility always inappropriate? Most of us have intuitive notions of what is uncivil, but we often fail to distinguish between different types of incivility. As NICD Research Director Robert Boatright noted in his introductory comments, there are many serious arguments today suggesting that an emphasis on civility is misplaced or harmful.

Boatright distinguishes between three arguments for incivility. First, some argue that the term “civility” is used “as a cudgel,” to silence dissenting views. The voices or political tactics of racial minorities or other groups that are discriminated against are sometimes branded as uncivil. Second, some argue that incivility is really just bluntness;
civil speech can be inefficient, and in some circumstances it is necessary to dispense with niceties — “political correctness” to some — in order to speak clearly. And third, there are some who argue that standards for civility are constantly changing, and can be manipulated by those in power to delegitimize political arguments that once seemed reasonable.

It is this third type of incivility that Boatright argues should be of the most concern. This argument essentially boils down to power — to the idea that political winners will change the rules and norms to silence opponents, or to question their opponents’ legitimacy within the polity. It is incumbent upon all of those who work toward civility to recognize ways in which references to civility can exclude or can infringe upon others’ right to speak. The purpose of studying civility, he argued, should not be to enforce rules but to understand rules of discourse, to critique them, and to understand why they change.
However, in their book *Taming Intuition: How Reflection Minimizes Partisan Reasoning and Promotes Democratic Accountability*, political scientists Kevin Arceneaux and Ryan Vander Wielen contend that the relationship between partisanship and attitudes towards out-group members in not insurmountable. They describe a number of experiments in which participants were given time to reflect on the others’ situations and to try adopting others’ perspectives. The result of such experiments, Arceneaux and Vander Wielen argue, is that “thinking can help people be less partisan if they were willing to second guess their gut reactions.”
Does Polarization Lead to Uncivil Politics?

While many researchers have studied the relationship between political polarization and political discourse among citizens, there is also reason to be concerned about the relationship between political polarization and incivility among our political leaders. It is possible to have strong political or ideological disagreements yet to address or resolve them in a civil fashion. As several recent works in political science note, however, this is not happening in American politics today. One consequence of political polarization is that those on one side become unfamiliar with the reasoning behind their opponents’ views. They cease to view their political opponents as participants in a shared enterprise.

We can see this at work in Congress today. In Opting out of Congress, Danielle Thomsen (a political science professor at the University of California, Irvine) explores reasons for the declining number of moderates in Congress. While many studies of polarization in Congress have discussed ideological sorting in the electorate, redistricting, or other patterns that take place outside of Congress, Thomsen notes that Congress itself shoulders part of the blame. Moderate legislators — particularly moderate Republicans — are often blocked by their party leadership from achieving positions of
power. The slights moderates receive from their fellow partisans can push them toward retirement. As a result, the members most likely to want to broker bipartisan compromises or to reach out to the other side are becoming rare. While Thomsen’s book is not about civility per se, research on civil discourse has noted that civility often entails understanding and responding to others’ points of view. The current incentive system in Congress, Thomsen argues, does not encourage this type of civility. Polarized parties require their members to be dependable and will reward those who advance the party’s ideological agenda.

Thomsen does not exclusively blame Congressional leaders for the declining number of moderates, however. Citizens, as well, do not reward moderation. While the public has never had a high opinion of Congress, public support for Congress in the past decade is lower than it has been at any other point since the advent of polling. Thomsen shows, as well, that the types of candidates who are interested in serving in Congress tend to be those whose ideological leanings are strong enough that they are willing to take a more adversarial approach to their jobs. She shows that state legislators who choose to run for Congress today tend to be more ideologically extreme than those who ran in the past.

In a recent paper, “How Bad is it? Incivility Toward Members of Congress on Twitter,” Jeremy Gelman and Steven Wilson document some of the abuse members of Congress receive from the general public. Overall, constituents are relatively civil toward their legislators; the majority of the profane or abusive tweets come from outside of their states or districts. The ideology of the legislator does not matter very much in the level of incivility directed toward
him or her. Ideological moderate Susan Collins (R-ME), for instance, received a torrent of vitriolic tweets in the weeks surrounding the Brett Kavanaugh Supreme Court confirmation vote. We cannot know how much this incivility affects members of Congress — and in conversation at our conference, some participants noted that members of Congress they interviewed did not actually monitor what was said about them on Twitter. However, Gelman and Wilson’s work suggests that new communications technologies have clearly enabled more incivility.

Just as incivility or heightened partisan conflict can drive some voices out of politics, it can also provide an advantage to other politicians who are effective at using incivility as a political tool. In *Donald Trump and New Hampshire*, St. Anselm College political scientist Chris Galdieri explores the origins of Donald Trump’s primary candidacy. Trump had, as is well-known, toyed with the idea of running for president for two decades, and by 2016 he had become effective in using his celebrity status as a tool of combat. The sorts of vulgarities that Trump trafficked in during his primary campaign — and, some might add, during his
general election campaign and presidency — are tools Trump had honed during his time as a television host and a media figure. As Galdieri, and many others at the conference pointed out, Trump may not be that singular of a figure. The rhetorical tactics he has used may well be emulated by other politicians in the future.

Julia Azari, a professor of political science at Marquette, cautions as well that Democrats are hardly immune to the tendency toward incivility that Thomsen and Galdieri noted among Republicans. Citing some of the rhetoric in the 2020 presidential debates, Azari notes that within the Democratic Party in 2020 uncivil incidents have tended to be more substantive than in the past. They have revolved around race, gender, and generational conflict. Accusing one’s (intraparty) opponent of sympathizing with the other party can delegitimize statements about policy disagreements. Such claims are hardly new to politics, but in Azari’s view, they may have reached the point where they can impede the sort of political disagreements that can be necessary for parties to develop their platforms and adapt to changing political circumstances.

There has long been a debate within political science about the relationship between elite and mass polarization. Although some political scientists quarrel about measurement tools, most analyses begin with the premise
that Congress produces less bipartisan legislation than it used to, and that Democrats and Republicans hold sharply contrasting ideological views. Some political scientists have argued that the public is similarly divided, while others have argued that it is not and that the public tends not to see policy ideas in partisan or ideological terms. Researchers were torn, however, about whether the links between polarization and incivility in government contribute to our understanding of the public. Recent papers by Ashley Muddiman and Melissa Deckman both suggest that citizens are more tolerant of uncivil statements or actions done by politicians with whom they agree. Yet there is still general consensus about what is out of bounds in politics.

Many scholars associated with NICD have documented concern among Americans about increased incivility. Additionally, several have explored how American define civility. It is difficult, however, to measure incivility across time. The incivility that characterizes many social media interactions, for instance, does not necessarily tell us much about the American public more broadly.
In his book *Civic Hope: How Ordinary Americans Keep Democracy Alive*, however, University of Texas political scientist Roderick Hart provides a far more optimistic argument about public engagement with democracy than is present in many of the studies of on-line nastiness. The focus of Hart’s book is letters to newspapers. He tracks these letters over a seventy-year period in a representative selection of American cities. He argues “creating and sustaining a culture of argument at the grassroots level is the key to a healthy democracy” and that these letters represent just such an argument. However, Hart finds some worrying trends. What he calls “national touchstones” — appeals to shared values or reference points — have declined. Today’s letters tend to be less philosophical and more “actional.” “Oppositional literacy,” or understanding of one’s political opponents views, has also declined. Yet at the same time, Hart concludes that the culture of argument established in these letters is an important part of democracy, and that these letters still do show a desire among many Americans to engage political differences constructively.

What might be done to address incivility among political elites? One strategy is for politicians themselves to identify and address the problems brought about by polarization. Thomsen and a colleague are currently developing a project
to study the Problem Solvers Caucus, a bipartisan caucus within the House of Representatives formed in 2017 to create bipartisan legislative proposals and to work toward their passage. The fact that the caucus was only formed recently, and is led by new members of Congress, suggests that some of the Representatives elected in 2018 see it as part of their legislative mandate to work to overcome polarization.

Another strategy is for outside organizations to develop tools for legislators to use. NICD Executive Director Keith Allred prepared testimony to the Joint Committee on the Modernization of Congress (another recently formed organization) on rules changes that might enhance civility. Allred solicited recommendations from a wide number of political experts, and spoke with the committee about establishing a regular bipartisan retreat, about adjusting the congressional schedule so that there is more time for members to deliberate and interact informally, and to build a civility component into new member orientations.

Michael Neblo, Kevin Esterling, and David Lazer (who have also provided testimony to the joint committee) have also worked extensively to develop online town halls for members of Congress to use to discuss policy with their
constituents. In their book *Politics with the People: Building a Directly Representative Democracy*, the three authors contend that such discussions can enable far more meaningful discussions than do conventional district events, and they can yield positive, civil discussions that connect legislators not only with their supporters, but with constituents who may not support them. Programs such as these can serve as an antidote to the sort of issueless social media conflicts that Gelman discussed.

These interventions may not, independently, solve some of the civility problems cause by polarization within government, but they provide venues for citizens and politicians to work together to address problems. These interventions do not seek to silence strong opinions or to remove vitriol entirely from politics. As Gina Masullo Chen notes in her forthcoming book *The New Town Hall: Why We Engage Personally with Politicians*, it is legally problematic for politicians to try to block Twitter followers or to take other steps that would silence dissent, even if it is dissent
that is designed to offend or shock. The task is to encourage civility without silencing incivility, to encourage political argument while providing tools that will make arguments substantive and productive.
Civility and the Media

Does the American media encourage incivility? In her new book *Irony and Outrage: The Polarized Landscape of Rage, Fear, and Laughter in the United States*, Dannagal Goldthwaite Young explores why this might be the case. Young studies the popularity among liberals of satirical television shows such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* and the popularity among conservatives of FOX News personalities such as Bill O’Reilly and Sean Hannity. Both types of programming are, she argues, a consequence of ongoing changes in society and the media, including deregulation of the media, the rise of profit-centered news channels, and declining public trust in the media and in government. These factors have encouraged provocative combinations of news and entertainment.

These types of programming differ according to psychological characteristics of the target audience — left-leaning audiences are receptive to content that features ambiguity, experimentation, and openness, while right-leaning audiences are receptive to appeals based on moral certainty and the establishment of boundaries. Ultimately, Young concludes, it is not necessarily the ideologies of the
audience that cause incivility in these contexts. However, these audiences differ in what they find offensive or uncivil.

There is, then, an economic logic to many of the more provocative appeals in the media — incivility can be profitable. Yet in a paper entitled “Incivility and News (Dis)Engagement,” Ashley Muddiman provides evidence that citizens often pass up article headlines about incivility in favor of articles about civility. She presents a number of hypotheses about why this may be so. To some extent citizens’ choice of what to read depends on subject matter — for instance, uncivil articles on immigration policy draw more attention than objective articles. In general, citizens tend to prefer uncivil articles than neutral, more information articles. Yet when given a choice between articles with a headline suggesting civility among politicians and those suggesting incivility, citizens tend to choose the civility frame. Citizens also tend to avoid articles that frame information with reference to political strategy. Muddiman’s research suggests that media content that emphasizes civility may find a more receptive audience than has previously been assumed.
Work such as this — and work such as Kevin Arceneaux’s piece discussed above — points to interventions that might be used to diminish the use of more conflict-oriented and uncivil frames in the media. It suggests, as well, that the economic incentives documented by Young have their limits. More research certainly must be done to explore ways in which audiences for the conventional media and in online settings might be provided with different types of presentations of political content.
Civility Online

It is well-established that online communications tend to be quite uncivil. In “Uncivil Discourse Meets Big Data,” communications scholar Patricia Rossini recounts several reasons why this is so. Weak or non-existent ties between those online, a lack of accountability, and reduced social risk can all encourage trolling and other uncivil behaviors. These behaviors can occasionally be quite harmful to targeted individuals.

Several NICD network members have explored reasons for incivility and techniques for reducing incivility online. Rossini notes in her work that these techniques can be quite challenging to implement — it is often quite difficult to create computer algorithms that will identify incivility or distinguish between situations where incivility is harmful and those where it is not. Incivility, as noted above, is not necessarily an issue of language or the use of particular words. Hence, hiring individual content monitors can often abridge citizens’ free speech. Likewise, Gina Masullo Chen
notes that in her interviews of people who were blocked from President Trump’s account on Twitter, most respondents claimed that their responses to the president’s tweets were civil — they saw civility as a matter of respect for democracy, not as a matter of the language that they used.

In her ongoing project on Twitter response to school shootings, Deana Rohlinger emphasizes the importance of opinion leaders online — journalists or individuals with specialized knowledge of a situation often can set the tone for how citizens will discuss particular issues online. It is important, she argues, for accurate information to be established early when some particular crisis or news event has occurred — in the absence of efforts by opinion leaders to shape discussion of an issue, misinformation or trolling may become prevalent. She contrasts social media discussions of two different school shootings — one at Ohio State University and the other at Florida State University — to show how similar types of events can be discussed in quite different fashions on Twitter.
Another team of communication researchers – Yotan Shmargad, Kate Kenski, Steve Rains, and Kevin Coe – explore the effect of online voting systems on uncivil comments. The intention here, as with the Rohlinger and Rossini pieces, is to explore whether online discussions can be organized so as to incentivize civil behavior. The authors show that there can be either a “backing off” or a “ramping up” effect depending on how others react to uncivil comments. Understanding this social context can help platform moderators determine how to structure discussions, and how to understand when discussions get out of control.

Each of these studies shows the importance of fully understanding the context of civil and uncivil discussions online. And each shows that online forums can become more civil without limiting speech or engaging on costly efforts to identify and remove uncivil comments.
What Causes Incivility?

Many of the quantitative researchers associated with NICD have documented the public perception that politics — and, perhaps, society in general — has become less civil. One could develop measures to show rising incivility in particular places; NICD has, for instance, sought to measure the level of incivility in presidential debates; some researchers have sought to measure the level of incivility in Congress; and the discussion above shows how researchers have sought to measure civility online. Yet measuring changes in political discourse within society is difficult, and perhaps impossible, as is determining why political discourse might become less civil.

Some of the more theoretically inclined NICD Research Network members have focused, however, on developing arguments about why contemporary social conditions might encourage incivility.

In his recent book *Wish I Were Here: Boredom and the Interface*, University of Toronto philosopher Mark Kingwell explores some of the consequences of our new media environment. Kingwell begins his book by describing what he calls the “interface,” transitional areas such as airports or bus stations whose entire point is to serve as a transition place to somewhere else. Kingwell likens such places to the condition of many of us in a world where news, entertainment, and contact with others always beckons from our cell phones and other electronic devices. We are never fully present and engaged in what we are doing, Kingwell argues, because we are always waiting to be distracted. We endure a certain sort of boredom in such circumstances —
boredom that is made manifest in busy, yet meaningless behavior. Offensive or shocking behavior by politicians, entertainers, or other news figures can serve as a momentary diversion.

In “Populism and Civility,” Amit Ron and Majia Nadesan take a broader political approach, noting the relationship between civility and pluralism, and between incivility and populism. Populism, they go on to say, is a response to crises of legitimacy: “…crisis brings to the fore questions not only on the basic terms of social cooperation, but also of the social processes and procedures through which these terms are formulated.” This leads, they continue, to questions of whether “Existing codes of civility are part of an illegitimate order.” Discussions of civility are always discussions about the boundaries of the civic community; given that populism challenges what these boundaries are, it will necessarily be judged to be uncivil Ron and Nadesan show here the difficulties in making normative claims about civility — populists may sometimes have legitimate grievances and, for

“…crisis brings to the fore questions not only on the basic terms of social cooperation, but also of the social processes and procedures through which these terms are formulated.”

- Amit Ron and Majia Nadesan
this reason, civility may be a term used to deny these grievances.

In “The Five Faces of Political Misogyny,” Suzanne Dovi takes particular interest in incivility surrounding the 2016 election. It is difficult, she argues, to separate incivility between men and women from misogyny. Dovi emphasizes that political misogyny is different from other types of misogyny. It involves a public effort by men to denounce and distance themselves from women while it is also something that can be done by women seeking to distance themselves from other women. It is often made manifest in off-the-cuff statements or jokes. Not all incivility, of course, is misogynistic, but the misogynistic statements and acts that Dovi discusses show two things. First, they show another reason why incivility might become more common in certain
circumstances or over time. Second, they show how incivility can be used for instrumental purposes — even if the actor or speaker is not always conscious that he or she is engaging in this sort of calculated effort.

These are, of course, not the only reasons why levels of incivility might increase. These three pieces show, however, the importance of developing theoretical accounts of the role civility and incivility play in our discourse, and they show why larger theoretical or qualitative accounts are necessary to the study of civil discourse.
Civility and the Academy

NICD is one of many organizations working to bridge divides among citizens and to improve public deliberations about the issues that face our country today. Discourse on college and university campuses, however, is a particular matter of concern. Academic research can be influenced by the politics of college campuses, and political disputes on campus can shape national politics for many years to come. Colleges and universities are societies themselves, creating opportunities for faculty, staff, and students to engage one another in classrooms and other campus settings as diverse citizens.

There have been many high-profile conflicts on campuses over free speech, racial and gender diversity, and political expression in recent years. NICD has worked with many of its members and with other partner organizations to understand these conflicts and to improve political discourse on campus. There is much to be done to improve the quality of discourse on campus, and doing so can yield benefits for faculty, administrators, students, and even for the communities surrounding higher education institutions.

NICD has, for instance, provided seed funding for J. Cherie Strachan’s “Rude Politics” project. Strachan, along
with colleagues at several universities, has developed a survey of college students to measure what students think constitutes rudeness for politicians. We know that citizens’ beliefs about what constitutes acceptable political discourse changes over time, and that younger adults do not necessarily evaluate political statements the same way older adults do. Yet, as Strachan argues, a political climate in which some people feel intimidated or discriminated against can drive these people from politics altogether.

Strachan’s research shows the importance of including discussion of, and training in, civility in the college curriculum. There are many ways to do this. The state of Arizona is currently developing a statewide curriculum on civil discourse for students in its public universities; Arizona State University philosophy professor Joan McGregor is leading this effort. Faculty at the University of Connecticut, including philosopher Michael Lynch and historian Brendan Kane, developed a program entitled *Humility and Conviction in Public Life* which brings together college students and community members to explore the importance of intellectual humility.

Across the United States and beyond, NICD Principle Research Specialist and Kanas State University faculty member Timothy J. Shaffer leads the Deliberative Pedagogy Lab that has published two books — *Deliberative Pedagogy: Teaching and Learning for Democratic Engagement* and *Creating Space for Democracy: A Primer on Dialogue and Deliberation in Higher Education* — that look at the various
ways faculty, staff, and students can use civil discourse as a way to learn content-specific knowledge as well as how to be engaged citizens. Shaffer and others noted the importance of opportunities to engage others and to support opportunities where political differences are approached as an opportunity for deeper thinking about issues rather than a reason to shy away.

Heterodox Academy, an organization formed in 2015 to encourage ideological diversity within the academy, now has 3,500 members from a wide range of academic disciplines. Heterodox Academy has developed many tools for scholars to use to measure the openness of their campuses to different political views, and it has sought to show how this sort of diversity can improve research and enable researchers to avoid the sort of blind spots that can emerge when they do not make connections with scholars who do not share their basic political assumptions. This is a matter of concern in the humanities and social sciences, but as University of California, Riverside professor Kevin Esterling has shown, improving discourse about political ethical issues in the sciences can also improve research and improve researchers’ satisfaction with their work.

Efforts to improve discourse have become a stated goal of many within higher education, bringing civil discourse into conversation with other explicit efforts to cultivate dialogue and deliberation for students and beyond. The panel,
composed of scholars and practitioners, spoke to the challenge of understanding and exploring civility within the context of academic courses and co-curricular spaces, especially as it challenges expectations or free speech and the need to prepare students to become skilled in facilitation and discussion skills for meaningful and engaged citizenship.

Beyond the panel, convening participants spoke to the inherent tensions of these ideas, emphasizing the expectations of opportunities for students to speak openly and freely with the desire to have opportunities for structured discourse that is grounded in principles of civil discourse. University of Arizona philosopher David Schmidtz, for instance, emphasized the need for great dialogue across disciplines. Several NICD members are working on campus-wide projects of this nature. NICD seeks to further these conversations on campuses and beyond. The future state of political discourse depends on it.
NICD’s Commitment

NICD continues to explore ways to support cutting-edge research on political discourse. We have also sought to use the skills and expertise of our research network members to strengthen our own programs. In the past two years, NICD has:

❖ Developed and implemented a project to measure the civility of presidential and senatorial debates, and established standards that candidates, moderators, and the public can use in understanding what makes for a good political debate. These standards were used to develop research on the 2016 presidential election and six different 2018 Senate elections.
❖ Published *A Crisis of Civility: Political Discourse and Its Discontents* (Routledge, 2019), an edited volume of some of the best research on civility by research network members.
❖ Established a program to measure civility and collegiality in state legislatures. This project has been implemented in two states (Idaho and Maine) in conjunction with NICD’s Next Generation workshops and trainings, and in collaboration with a team of researchers from the Thomas Foley Institute at Washington State University.
Distributed ten seed grants, of approximately $25,000 apiece to encourage research on civility, and distributed five $25,000 grants for interdisciplinary research on core democratic concepts. These grants were provided to NICD by the Charles Koch Institute’s Courageous Collaborations project.

NICD hopes to continue work related to these various projects. In addition, NICD intends to explore several new efforts to stimulate new research on civility and to put some of the ideas discussed above into practice. Some future plans include:

- Creating a series of small workshops or mini-conferences at NICD’s Washington, DC office that bring together academic researchers, policymakers, and journalists.
- Expanding NICD’s web presence and use the new website to promote new work on civility.
- Creating working groups that bring together experts in some of the areas discussed above. NICD is currently exploring sponsoring events and securing grant support for projects related to civility in the media and online and for projects related to the 2020 redistricting.
- Working with other academic organizations to develop teaching resources related to civil discourse.
- Using research findings on civility as part of our work to encourage meaningful reforms in Congress.
- Continuing to hold events that bring together researchers on civility and developing future reports such as this one on the state of political discourse in America.
The research presented in this report suggests that many of the more problematic aspects of American political and social discourse will remain with us for some time. These are problems that have been developing for many years, and while contemporary politics may have brought them into sharp relief, they will not go away any time soon. NICD remains committed to sponsoring research on civility, and to using this research to inform advocacy and policy.
Recommended Reading


Esterling, Kevin M. 2019. “Institutional Re-engineering Ethical Discourse in STEM (iREDS).”


