

Stockton promotes civility in politics, learning how to disagree, by John Froonjian

John Froonjian For The Press
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Last May, the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University launched a series of group discussions about the lack of civility in American political speech. It was inspired by National Institute for Civil Discourse (NICD) programs aiming to elevate political conversation. The Hughes Center is a community partner in the NICD's Revive Civility campaign.

As discussion moderator, I repeated a tenet of the NICD that I privately thought at the time was hyperbolic: Uncivil speech can lead to violence.

The horrifying Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol reinforced the truth behind that warning: Name-calling, tribalistic disrespect for opponents and falsehoods are all parts of a trend that can escalate into bloodshed. The riot that claimed five lives, including that of a police officer, had its roots in speech. Baseless accusations of widespread election fraud fueled arguments that fueled rage that ultimately fueled violence. Words matter.

The Hughes Center explored incivility in politics in eight group discussions over seven months as the 2020 election unfolded. Those sessions showed many are fed up with the low tone of politics, but persistent rancor often blocks any effort at improving civility.

Participants included members of the public, Democrats, Republicans and independents, and Stockton faculty, staff and students. We promised confidentiality to encourage candor. As moderator, I directed the discussion and posed questions:

How do you feel about how we talk about politics in this country? What impact does lack of civility have on democracy? Does your personal behavior make things better or worse?

NICD research has found that Americans overwhelmingly see incivility as a serious problem, in part defined as mocking opponents, disrespect, refusing to listen to different viewpoints and lying. Virtually all agree that threatening physical harm and using racial, religious, ethnic or sexual slurs is uncivil.

A few universal themes emerged from the Hughes Center discussions: • Most participants bemoaned the state of U.S. political speech. They said name-calling and character attacks distract from serious policy and prevent compromise. • They said incivility intimidates people from engaging in political discussion. A Stockton professor said students don't speak up in class for fear of being attacked for their views. • Some blamed social media for coarsening much of our dialogue, with a corrosive effect on democracy.

However, the polarization we see in all things political today was also evident in the group discussions.

A few partisans insisted the other side was so bad, they did not deserve to be treated civilly. A few attacked the very concept of civility as a tool for the powerful to oppress their opponents. It's a waste of time to engage because the other side won't even listen, some claimed.

The discussions remained polite. But some anti-Trump participants rejected the idea of engaging with his supporters. Others said it was the liberals who had closed minds. "Why should I respect anyone who doesn't think I'm legitimate?" one participant asked.

In every session, I cautioned that restoring civility isn't easy. I took no sides. But, I asked, "If we cannot even speak to our opponents, how will things ever improve?"

We can all start with the NICD's Golden Rule 2020 program for talking to people with whom you disagree. • Listen respectfully to the other person without interrupting. • Avoid inflammatory words or names and questioning the other person's values or legitimacy. • Use precise language and don't generalize to entire groups. • Most importantly, seek areas of common agreement on which to build a civil conversation.

Last year may be one many of us would like to forget. But the NCID's Golden Rule 2020 is certainly one goal we should carry forward into 2021.

Our center's namesake, the late William J. Hughes, was a beacon of civility and bipartisanship as a 2nd District congressman and ambassador to Panama. When President Joe Biden was a U.S. senator, he rode the Amtrak train to Washington with Bill Hughes and the two became friends. Both faced political adversity but refused to sink to name-calling. Instead they found common ground and developed legislation that would benefit the country.

A new administration is an opportunity for a new start, new attitudes and new conversations. They may not all be pleasant, but they can be civil. In his inauguration speech, President Biden said: "We must end this uncivil war." The Hughes Center is committed to joining that effort in the year ahead.

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