

Battleground Poll 64

Civility in Politics: Voters Want Change and the Same; Blame Everyone

Republican Analysis

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Preamble

This sixty-fourth edition of the Battleground survey marks an exciting new chapter of this poll. We have been collaborating with Celinda Lake and her firm on the Battleground Poll since June 1991. This partnership has spanned 14 election cycles and seen us conduct over 75,000 voter interviews. The poll releases have always included not just the data, but separate, partisan, strategic analysis by Celinda Lake and her team on the Democratic side as well as Ed Goeas and his team for the Republican side.

This edition marks the beginning of a new relationship with the Georgetown University Institute of Politics and Public Service who will be hosting an on campus event to both celebrate this collaboration and review questions on civility in the political world.

Introduction

Our analysis of the political environmental questions in this poll found that most voters are simultaneously frustrated with President Trump and pleased with the work of President Trump and Republican leaders on key pocketbook issues such as the economy and jobs. These questions on civility find a similar contradiction. Most voters agree with every criticism offered about the political system; place blame for the decline of civility on a wide ranging number of figures; and are quite concerned about the level of political division in the country. However, fully 79% of voters also agree with the statement: “I’m tired of leaders compromising my values and ideals. I want leaders who will stand up to the other side.” Voters want less division, but they want it from leaders who place a premium on standing up to the other side. This is quite a delicate balance for even the most skillful political leaders to manage.

Now, voters are quite comfortable holding contradictory viewpoints. Recently, many conservatives pointed out the contradiction of Cher, who has been bluntly critical of President Trump and his policies, sending out a tweet urging President Trump to abandon his proposal to release illegal immigrants in Los Angeles, her hometown. For many voters, the best policy outcome for them is far more important than any philosophical political beliefs.

In addition, politics is very often about imitating and co-opting the successful efforts of other campaigns. The continued success of the “take no prisoners” wings of both political parties, whether it be the Tea Party, the Freedom Caucus, the Sanders Presidential campaign, or the Democratic Socialists, provides a guide to many budding political campaigns. For many candidates, campaigning on a “no compromises” commitment of sticking to principles at all cost is seen as the bedrock of a successful campaign.

This political environment leads to the situation we have today. Most voters agree on the need to change the political culture, but are also in favor of the unwavering commitment to principles and the willingness to seek conflict that are the primary driving forces behind the current political environment.

Statements on Civility: Broad Agreement on Key Premises

As seen below, there is broad and intense agreement among voters of all political affiliations on the premises that our current political system is too divisive and crass.

Message	Agree	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	Agree (GOP)	Agree (IND)	Agree (DEM)
The political, racial, and class divisions in this country are getting worse and our national dialogue is breaking down.	83%	61%	74%	79%	93%
I am frustrated by the uncivil and rude behavior of many politicians.	90%	74%	87%	90%	93%
Behavior that used to be seen as unacceptable is now accepted as normal behavior.	83%	66%	82%	75%	87%
Compromise and common ground should be the goal for political leaders.	85%	63%	80%	87%	90%
I’m tired of leaders compromising my values and ideals. I want leaders who will stand up to the other side.	79%	58%	85%	69%	78%
I’m tired of politicians in Washington who work with the powerful special interests instead of standing up to them.	89%	71%	87%	87%	91%

This consensus presents a real challenge for politicians. Voters are frustrated by division, nostalgic for less crass times, and eager to see their leaders seek common ground. However, they also want their leaders to stand up to the other side and stand up to powerful special interests.

Another perspective on “standing up to the other side” is partisan grandstanding. In addition, another perspective on “powerful special interests” is thoughtful and concerned voters who have banded together to pursue a shared policy goal.

And, as seen on the section on whom voters blame for the increase in bad political behavior, no entity has the gravitas to be a trusted guide on setting behavioral standards.

Entities on Civility: Blame Everyone

As seen below, a majority of voters think every entity tested is at least somewhat responsible for the increase in bad behavior in American politics.

Entity	Very	Somewhat	Very+ Somewhat
Republican political leaders	38%	41%	79%
Democratic political leaders	36%	39%	75%
Social media like Facebook and Twitter	51%	30%	81%
Large newspapers, like The Washington Post and The New York Times	28%	28%	56%
Fox News	43%	28%	71%
Wealthy special interests	52%	29%	81%
CNN	34%	27%	62%
MSNBC	28%	27%	55%
President Donald Trump	54%	24%	77%

Interestingly, some of the expected partisan divides are less pronounced than one would expect. Majorities of Republicans think their GOP political leaders (62%), Fox News (53%), and President Trump (54%) are at least somewhat responsible for this increase. On the other side, majorities of Democrats think their Democratic political leaders (58%) and CNN (50%) are at least somewhat responsible for this increase. The notable exception is MSNBC, which has just 37% of Democrats placing even somewhat blame on it.

Social media gets strong blame with majorities of Republicans (58%) and Independents (51%) along with 45% of Democrats saying it is “very responsible” for this increase in bad behavior.

As with the statements on civility, this data presents a real challenge to efforts to promote civility. Voters blame their own leaders and their allies in cable news for this discord, but past behavior indicates partisan voters are unlikely to abandon their support of like-minded politicians or end their support of sympathetic media due to concerns about tone and tactics. It also seems unlikely voters are going to abandon their social media lives based on concerns about the state of political debate. Dramatic change will come when it is the politically advantageous thing to do. Most voters are not indicating there is much to be gained by setting an example of civility.

Indeed, voters were also asked to rate on the 0 to 100 scale, the level of political division in this country with “0” at no division at all and “100” at the edge of civil war. The mean response to this query was 70.8 and the most common response was 75. More than half the likely electorate thinks we are more than seventy percent of the way to being at the edge of civil war. This is a startling response given the political data in this poll. Voters recognize the challenges in raising the level of political discourse and the pessimism in these numbers clearly reflects that concern.

Conclusion

This data presents a true tightrope for politicians. Too often, the expedient and confidence building solution in campaigns and in policy debates is harshly attacking political opponents. This will not change until voters and political leaders demand better. It will start with political parties policing their own. When the reward for attacking opponents is eliminated, politicians will change their tactics. Successful politicians quickly adapt to the tactics that give them the greatest opportunities for success.

In the long and storied history of our country, our political leaders have faced challenges considerably more daunting than now. While political leaders will face the challenge of finding the electorally acceptable balance between compromise, principles, and toughness, this challenge is one that many politicians can and will master. Politics is frequently an effort to respond and adapt to the successful tactics of political opponents. Once there are some successful examples of politicians finding this balance and succeeding, many more politicians are certain to follow.

The Battleground Poll plans to monitor political civility over the next few years. This time series study will allow us to monitor and to examine the demographic groups causing the shifts in this important measure.