

Battleground Poll 65
Civility in Politics: Frustration Driven by Perception

Republican Analysis
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Introduction

Our analysis of the political environmental questions in this poll found that voters are energized and engaged about the 2020 election at an unprecedented high level. At the same time, partisan voters have already retreated to their corners and view the entirety of the political environment, including the national economy, through the lens of their partisanship. This deep divide is also seen on these civility questions. Voters broadly agree with the premise that our political culture has become too uncivil and lacks a focus on solutions though they still want leaders to “stand up to the other side” and stand up to “powerful special interests.” However, when offered options on who to blame for this increase in bad behavior, voters retreat to partisan corners and dole out blame in the manner one would expect.

Assessment of Civility: Broad Agreement Problems and Key Premises

Voters were asked on a 0-100 scale to rate the level of political divide in the country. The value offered for “100” was “edge of a civil war”. The mean response for all voters was 67.23, which was similar to the 70.77 score from the April 2019 Battleground.

Looking at partisans, it is surprising that it is not the party lacking control of the White House, the Democrats (67.65 mean score) or the party that lacks control of the House of Representatives, the Republicans (64.95 mean score), but rather Independents (70.77 mean score) who are most concerned about the level of political division in the country.

In addition, African-Americans (73.42 mean score) have one of the highest levels of concern among any major demographic group. So, Independents and African-Americans, two groups whose political power has declined over the past few years, have high levels of concern about the depths of the political divide in the country. Lack of political power is a strong motivator for believing the current political system is broken.

As seen below, there continues to be broad and intense agreement among voters of all political affiliations on the premise that our current political system lacks civility.

Statement	Agree (All)	<i>Agree Strongly</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.	77%	55%	64%	68%	93%
I am frustrated by the uncivil and rude behavior of many politicians.	88%	71%	83%	82%	94%
Behavior that used to be seen as unacceptable is now accepted as normal behavior.	84%	62%	80%	83%	88%
Compromise and common ground should be the goal for political leaders.	87%	64%	84%	89%	90%
I'm tired of leaders compromising my values and ideals. I want leaders who will stand up to the other side.	84%	63%	87%	77%	83%
I'm tired of politicians in Washington who work with the powerful special interests instead of standing up to them.	90%	73%	88%	88%	94%

This agreement with the premise of the lack of civility continues to present significant challenges for politicians and operatives. Voters broadly agree that we need to bridge divisions, stop rude behavior, reassert previous norms, and promote compromise as a goal. However, voters also want fighters who refuse to compromise their values and stand up to special interests.

This consensus is also contradicted by the current political climate. President Donald Trump, a norm-busting politician who frequently engages in uncivil behavior, is the most popular national figure in the Republican Party. This survey finds 87% of Republicans holding a favorable view of him and 90% of Republicans approving of his job performance. At the most recent Democratic Presidential debate, much of the debate was consumed by squabbling over policy details and calls for President Trump to have his Twitter account suspended. This high standing for Trump and this willingness to engage in skirmishes of those who wish to replace him indicate that a new dawn of more civil politics is unlikely to be forthcoming.

It is very challenging for a politician to be both a fighter and a dealmaker. It is even more challenging to try this balancing act when the most successful national politicians in your party show little interest in finding this balance.

Who To Blame: Where You Sit Determines Where You Stand

As on the April survey, voters were asked to assess whether several entities were very, somewhat, a little, or not at all responsible for the increase in bad behavior in American politics. As seen below, views are notably divided among partisans about which entities are “very” responsible for the decline in civility.

Entity	Very (All)	Very (GOP)	Very (IND)	Very (DEM)
Republican political leaders	37%	10%	32%	63%
Democratic political leaders	37%	67%	34%	10%
Social media like Facebook and Twitter	53%	52%	55%	52%
Large newspapers like the Washington Post and the New York Times	34%	56%	38%	12%
Fox News	41%	18%	44%	61%
Wealthy special interests	48%	42%	45%	55%
CNN	35%	59%	37%	11%
MSNBC	31%	55%	31%	9%
President Donald Trump	52%	16%	51%	86%

As seen above, majorities of Republican voters put the highest level of blame on Democratic political leaders, social media, large newspapers, CNN, and MSNBC. The past years of partisan battles and claims about social media and the news being fake, biased, and rigged have certainly had an impact on GOP voters. Republicans place the highest levels of blame on the political opponents that they believe are working against them – the leaders of the Democrats, the mainstream news media, and social media gatekeeper.

In contrast, majorities of Democratic voters put the highest level of blame on Republican political leaders, social media, Fox News, wealthy special interests, and President Trump. Much of how Democrats assign this blame is the reverse of how Republicans assign blame. As expected, Democrats blame the consistent bogeymen for their partisans -- Republican leaders, wealthy special interests, Fox News, and President Trump. However, they place little to no blame on large newspapers, CNN, or MSNBC. Republican griping about the bias of the mainstream news media clearly has the effect of convincing a significant number of Democrats that mainstream news is a force for promoting civil discourse.

For Independents, the only two groups receiving a majority “very” response are social media and President Trump. One would certainly expect those less engaged in the process to place the highest levels of blame on where they see political strife the most – with social media and from the loudest and most covered voice in national politics – President Trump.

Given that our sponsor and partner in this poll, Georgetown University, hosted the founder and CEO of Facebook at an on-campus event last week, it bears additional discussion that social media is the only entity that receives majority “very” responses from Republicans, Independents, and Democrats. When voters place blame on social media, a clear culprit is Facebook, the most widely used social media platform. In fact, a 2019 Facebook survey found that 69% of U.S. adults have a Facebook account, including 74% of these users who visit Facebook at least daily. For many voters, the daily grind of those friends or relatives who use Facebook as their personal political megaphone is driving their belief about the corrosive nature of social networks.

However, one cannot understate the impact of President Trump’s Twitter usage. History has shown us that quite a few Presidents engaged in uncivil language about their political opponents. Twitter has allowed President Trump to air these previously private grievances in a very public way. This weaponization of Twitter by the President is the main lens through which many Americans witness his uncivil behavior. These frequent uncivil outbursts are why the President’s political opponents see him as the top driver of incivility in our political culture.

Conclusion

Civility is an issue like many others in our public discourse. There is a broad consensus that there is a problem and those most affected by incivility are the most engaged about this issue. However, the challenge will come in finding a consensus solution.

Voters cannot agree on who is most to blame for this incivility beyond agreement on the negative impact of social media. These divergent views on blame allow partisan politicians to succeed via crass behavior and then blame opponents and biased news coverage for creating incivility in the political environment. The most effective solution to this problem will be politicians willing to try the tactic of being civil, even when it is challenging. That may take time, but the success of even one politician with this tactic will be a valuable encouragement for all politicians.

The current lack of civility in our political environment is a “chicken or the egg” problem. There is no question that President Trump has engaged in uncivil behavior previously unseen in American politics from his divisive rhetoric to his unprecedented use of Twitter. However, his extraordinary success in politics, going from a private citizen with no experience running for any elected office to winning the Presidency, may indicate he changed the norms of our political environment. He could have also just tapped into an existing general decline in civility in our society and reaped the success of being the first national politician to embrace and to benefit from this decline.

In either case, restoring a higher level of civility to our politics will take a dedicated and courageous group of Republicans, Democrats, and members of the media to reject the easy tactics of uncivil rhetoric that paints opponents as enemies. In the multiple tributes after the passing of Senator McCain, many people noted that even in the final, heated days of the 2008 Presidential campaign, he refused to allow attendees at his rallies to characterize President Obama as scary or not American. McCain lost that election but gained the respect of many across the political spectrum. There will never be another John McCain, but there certainly can be many politicians, pundits, operatives, and voters who can embrace his willingness to engage vigorously in debates over policy and philosophy while refusing to engage in the politics of personal destruction.

We will continue to use the Battleground Poll to do the important work of monitoring civility in politics. We share the hope of many voters that the next few years will see vast improvements in these measures.