

Battleground Civility Poll
Division Remains, but Voters Ready for Better Times

Republican Analysis

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Editorial note: As you will see as we get into our analysis, there are some encouraging signs that the American Electorate would like to move into a political environment that is more civil and want the President and Congress to deal with each other in a more cooperative way to solve out country's problems. That is universally seen across the political spectrum of Democrats, Republicans, AND Independent voters. The Catch-Twenty-Two is that no one trusts the other side to take that deep breath and enter into that more civil and respectful discussion simultaneously. Our political system has the wrong incentives right now. Cable news channels provide flattering coverage of partisan grandstanders, but rarely highlight consensus builders, and even when they do, they then follow it up with the question of "what took so long?" News media needs to be part of taking a deep breath and moving towards a more civil discourse that plays to the better angels rather than feed their audience's cynicism. Given how important earned media has become for politicians of all sides, there needs to be change here. Right now, grandstanding can drive earned media which can drive highly successful online fundraising, while all too often, grinding away on a consensus deal yields no more than kind words in private from colleagues. We need to move to a political environment where voters, media, and political leaders celebrate the sober work of successful governing with more enthusiasm than they celebrate grandstanding with no purpose other than self-promotion.

As the awful and unprecedented events of last week unfolded, a culmination of the decline in political civility that this poll has tracked for the past few years, it was heartening to see much hope and optimism remain with voters. Riots and sedition have no place in any modern democracy. The riots on Wednesday were a deadly and despicable event in which the political divisions of the past four years came to a tragic climax that played out with real consequences instead of in the cocoon of social media and specialized news sources.

While voters continue to be clear eyed about the divisions in this country, including a majority (60%) of voters who think President Trump's actions regarding the elections are harming us, voters remain cautiously optimistic that changes can be made. Indeed, more than seven-in-ten voters (72%) think politics has gotten less civil under President Trump, and an equal number of voters (72%) think politics has gotten less civil since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis. When asked to rate their level of concern on a 1-10 scale with 10 being the highest level of concern, voters also have similar levels of concern about the behavior in response to the election with violence from both left wing groups (27% of voters rate at "10"/mean score of 5.22) and violence from white nationalist militias (33% of voters rate at "10"/mean score of 6.17). Voters may be divided by their politics, but there is consensus in their view that election related violence is a serious issue. In fact, after riots on Wednesday, those rating violence from white nationalist militias at "10" grew nine points from 29% on the Monday-Tuesday interviews to 38% on the Wednesday-Thursday interviews.

However, voters want improvement and believe that things can improve. Fully 92% of voters, including 85% strongly, want the President and Congress to work together to solve problems. In addition, majorities of voters believe it is at least somewhat likely that:

- Biden will be able to restore unity and civility to our politics (56%), and
- Biden and Congress will be able to work together to solve important problems facing this country (63%).

In addition, we ask voters to rate on a scale of 0-100 the level of political division in the country with 100 being the highest level of division. Asked their view of the level of division now, the mean response is 76.01. However, asked their view where the level of division will be in one year, the mean response is 65.22, an improvement of more than ten points. Voters want things to get better and believe that our political system can make a marked improvement in even one year.

As seen below, voters also continue to have a broad consensus on the need for change and what will spur change.

Q	Statement	Agree	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
9	The political, racial, and class divisions in this country are getting worse and our national dialogue is breaking down.	82%	60%
10	I am frustrated by the uncivil and rude behavior of many politicians.	93%	76%
11	Behavior that used to be seen as unacceptable is now accepted as normal behavior.	89%	67%
12	Compromise and common ground should be the goal for political leaders.	88%	66%
13	I'm tired of leaders compromising my values and ideals. I want leaders who will stand up to the other side.	87%	66%
14	I'm tired of politicians in Washington who work with the powerful special interests instead of standing up to them.	93%	79%

Voters are frustrated and think our divisions are getting worse, but as noted earlier, many voters are at least cautiously optimistic that President-elect Biden and the new Congress will be able to make improvements to this disappointing political climate.

As we have noted in the past, there certainly are some differences even with this broad consensus. Leaders who stand up to the other side might find it challenging to identify how to have compromise and common ground as a goal. Leaders who stand up to powerful interests might be reluctant to support otherwise worthy policies. There is certainly a new political era beginning with many opportunities for improvement in our political climate, but partisan grandstanders will always be able to believe they are doing the voters' will by refusing to compromise and standing up the special interests on the other side.

The challenge for our national political leaders is illustrated below. Too many partisans have retreated into a cocoon where they get the news they want to hear and not the news we all should

be hearing. Look at the deep division by political identifications on which of these entities are responsible for the increase in bad behavior in American politics.

Q	Entity	Very (All voters)	Very (GOP)	Very (IND)	Very (DEM)
15	Republican political leaders	40%	13%	37%	66%
16	Democratic political leaders	38%	71%	38%	8%
17	Social media like Facebook and Twitter	66%	79%	68%	55%
18	Large newspapers like the Washington Post and the New York Times.	35%	64%	39%	7%
19	Fox News	44%	25%	44%	61%
20	Wealthy special interests	59%	62%	62%	55%
21	CNN	41%	73%	41%	12%
22	MSNBC	34%	62%	35%	7%
23	President Donald Trump	55%	17%	55%	91%
24	President-elect Joe Biden	21%	42%	22%	2%

Republicans are notably more likely to think a disproportionate share of the blame falls on Democratic political leaders, social media, large newspapers, CNN, MSNBC, and President-elect Biden. In contrast, Democrats are notably more likely to place the blame on GOP political leaders, Fox News, and President Trump.

This clearly illustrates the challenges political leaders face in 2021. Political leaders of all political stripes can improve their standing on this issue through their actions. Working together to solve problems will do a lot to improve their standing with voters. Partisans on both sides are all too ready to blame the other side while exonerating their side. Political leaders on both sides need to speak up when those on the other side of the aisle take thoughtful actions to improve the civility of our political discourse.

Social media companies can make changes like the ones seen last week to impose penalties for irresponsible, divisive behavior. However, the three cable channels, two of which shoulder much blame from Republicans and one of which shoulders much blame from Democrats, will likely be very reluctant to abandon their current editorial direction. All three have seen great success

taking a strong point of view about President Trump. It is hard to imagine them abandoning this editorial direction even after Biden takes office. Right now, it pays to be place for news that supports the point of view of your viewers, but this is a poor outcome for the country. Just as our political leaders should acknowledge and give credit when those across the aisle take brave actions to increase political civility, there needs to be a similar incentive for the cable news channels to highlight the good actions of both sides and not be an echo chamber for one side.

Our nation founded with such care to allow free expression of ideas and strong federal representation for all voters, which has endured for these many years, will be able to survive the appalling events of last week and change the uncivil political environment of the last four years. Indeed, even after four years in which civility was not seen as political asset, most voters are at least cautiously optimistic that President-elect Biden and the new Congress will be able to usher in a more civil political environment. It will be up to our leaders, both within our government and within the media, to give voters a continued cause for optimism.