

2018

# The Rise of Trump and the Death of Civility

Keith Bybee

*Syracuse University*, [kjbybee@maxwell.syr.edu](mailto:kjbybee@maxwell.syr.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/ijpm>

 Part of the [American Politics Commons](#), [American Popular Culture Commons](#), [Leadership Studies Commons](#), [Political Theory Commons](#), [Politics and Social Change Commons](#), [President/Executive Department Commons](#), and the [Public Affairs Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Bybee, Keith, "The Rise of Trump and the Death of Civility" (2018). *Institute for the Study of the Judiciary, Politics, and the Media at Syracuse University*. 4.

<https://surface.syr.edu/ijpm/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Law at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Institute for the Study of the Judiciary, Politics, and the Media at Syracuse University by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact [surface@syr.edu](mailto:surface@syr.edu).

**Syracuse University**

---

**From the Selected Works of Keith J. Bybee**

---

2018

# The Rise of Trump and the Death of Civility

Keith J. Bybee, *Syracuse University*



Available at: [https://works.bepress.com/keith\\_bybee/11/](https://works.bepress.com/keith_bybee/11/)

*\*\*Forthcoming in Law, Culture and the Humanities\*\**

## **The Rise of Trump and the Death of Civility**

Keith J. Bybee, Syracuse University

### **Abstract**

According to supporters and opponents alike, Donald Trump has been an unconventional candidate and president. In this article, I evaluate the relationship between Trump's unconventional behavior and the requirements of civility. I provide a definition of civility, and I explain why it makes sense to relate Trump's actions to civil norms. I then discuss how civility is enacted, I examine criticisms of civility's triviality, and I explore the ways in which civility may repress dissent and maintain hierarchy. Although I consider the degree to which Trump's actions are strategic, I ultimately argue that Trump's incivilities should be understood as an effort to initiate a revolution in manners. In this regard, Trump's behavior is not unprecedented. He is participating in a longstanding American tradition of determining standards of appropriate conduct through political conflict.

### **Keywords**

Donald Trump, Civility, Norms, Manners, American Politics, Dissent, Hierarchy, Democracy

### **Contact Information**

Keith J. Bybee, 412 Dineen Hall, College of Law, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York 13244

Email: [kjbybee@syr.edu](mailto:kjbybee@syr.edu) Tel: 315-443-2529

## I. Introduction

The ordinary behavioral standards of American public life constrain political action while allowing space for criticism and confrontation.<sup>1</sup> From the very beginning of his presidential run, Donald Trump flouted the conventional constraints. Trump announced his candidacy in June 2015 by calling many Mexican immigrants rapists.<sup>2</sup> In his first month of campaigning, he pointedly questioned the intelligence of one of his opponents (Rick Perry “put on glasses so people will think he's smart. And it just doesn't work!”), condemned the esteemed veteran John McCain for having been a prisoner of war (“I like people who weren’t captured.”), and insulted a wide range of individuals, news organizations, and businesses.<sup>3</sup>

Outraged observers called on Trump to apologize for his broad slander and personal attacks. The *Wall Street Journal* editorial board declared that Trump had arrived at his “inevitable self-immolation.”<sup>4</sup> Rather than retreat, Trump doubled down. He dismissed the *Wall Street Journal* (“Who cares!”) and continued to insult and offend at will.<sup>5</sup> By the time the Republican primary season was in full swing, Trump’s consistently uncouth behavior had become a kind of vortex that sucked in other politicians. For a week in the spring of 2016, for

---

<sup>1</sup> For an effort to catalogue the constraints in electioneering, see Stephen Hess, *The Little Book of Campaign Etiquette* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> “Donald Trump’s Presidential Announcement Speech,” *Time*, June 16, 2015, <http://time.com/3923128/donald-trump-announcement-speech/>.

<sup>3</sup> Hannah Krueger, et. al., “Trump’s Most Notable Insults,” *The Hill*, July 26, 2015, <http://thehill.com/blogs/ballot-box/249102-trumps-most-notable-insults>; Jonathan Martin and Alan Rappeport, “Donald Trump Says John McCain is No War Hero, Setting Off Another Storm,” *New York Times*, July 18, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/19/us/politics/trump-belittles-mccains-war-record.html>.

<sup>4</sup> “Trump and His Apologists,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 19, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-and-his-apologists-1437345060>.

<sup>5</sup> Donald J. Trump, Twitter Post, July 20, 2015, 7:25a.m., <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/623136587241664512>.

example, the campaign trail was consumed by schoolyard taunts between Trump and Marco Rubio, including a public debate over whether the smallness of Trump's hands might indicate that his other appendages were similarly under-sized.<sup>6</sup> Although some commentators hoped that Trump would eventually adopt a more conventional style, Trump's antics persisted after he won the election and have continued, more or less unabated, throughout his term of office.<sup>7</sup>

How should Trump's behavior be understood? Scholars have already begun to frame Trump's actions as violations of political norms and as contraventions of constitutional conventions.<sup>8</sup> I, too, am interested in understanding Trump's actions in relationship to rules of behavior. But rather than focusing on the norms and conventions of official conduct, my interest is in understanding Trump in terms of civility, the baseline understanding of the respect owed to everyone in public life.<sup>9</sup> Political norms and constitutional conventions are clearly

---

<sup>6</sup> Eliza Collins, "Rubio Suggests That Trump Wet His Pants On Debate Stage," *Politico*, February 26, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/blogs/2016-gop-primary-live-updates-and-results/2016/02/marco-rubio-donald-trump-con-artist-219843>; Gregory Krieg, "Trump Defends the Size of His Penis," *CNN*, March 4, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/03/03/politics/donald-trump-small-hands-marco-rubio/index.html>.

<sup>7</sup> For a recent argument that Trump should act like a more conventional President, see Peggy Noonan, "Over Trump, We're as Divided as Ever," *Wall Street Journal*, March 8, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-screwball-tragedy-of-donald-trump-1520552914>. And for overviews of Trump's continued disdain for convention, see Jasmine C. Lee and Kevin Quealy, "The 425 People, Places, and Things Donald Trump Has Insulted on Twitter: A Complete List," *New York Times*, January 3, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/01/28/upshot/donald-trump-twitter-insults.html>; Peter Baker, "For Trump, A Year of Reinventing the Presidency," *New York Times*, December 31, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/31/us/politics/trump-reinventing-presidency.html>; and Artin Afkhami, "Norms Watch: Democracy, The Trump Administration, and Reactions to It (February 2018)," *Just Security*, March 1, 2018, <https://www.justsecurity.org/53301/norms-watch-democracy-trump-administration-reactions-feb-2018/>.

<sup>8</sup> Neil S. Siegel, "Political Norms, Constitutional Conventions, and President Donald Trump," 93 *INDIANA L. J.* (forthcoming 2017), [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3096033](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3096033). Siegel defines political norms as "principles of right action that bind elected official and serve to guide and control their conduct in office" and constitutional conventions as obligatory rules that "advance a purpose of the Constitution, such as limiting presidential power in order to prevent dictatorship." See also Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> In making my argument here, I draw upon and extend previous work, *How Civility Works* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

important, but they are also specialized and tend to limit attention to the activity of those in government. Civility applies to all public interactions. By relating Trump's actions to the requisites of civil behavior, we can widen our analytical lens and situate Trump within the broader history and development of standards of appropriate conduct.

In this article, I begin with a definition of civility and I detail the ways in which civility differs from politeness and common courtesy. I then discuss how civility is enacted and I evaluate criticisms of civility's triviality. I also explore how civility may repress dissent and maintain hierarchy. Although I consider the degree to which Trump's actions are strategic, I ultimately argue that Trump's incivilities should be understood as an effort to initiate a revolution in manners. In this regard, Trump is not without precedent. He is participating in a longstanding American tradition of determining standards of appropriate behavior through political conflict.

## **II. What Is Civility?**

In the most general sense, civility is a code of public conduct.<sup>10</sup> It is not the only such code. Politeness and courtesy are codes of public conduct too, as are chivalry and gallantry. All of these modes of behavioral management, including civility, are forms of good manners.

The different forms of manners cluster and blend in several ways, yet each retains its own meaning. Today we think of chivalry and gallantry as antique forms of manners principally

---

<sup>10</sup> For the leading source on the origins, meaning, and history of civility and good manners, see the two volume series by Norbert Elias: "The History of Manners," Vol. 1 of *The Civilizing Process*, translated by Edmund Jephcott (New York: Urizen Books, 1978, originally published 1939) and "Power and Civility," Vol. 2 of *The Civilizing Process*, translated by Edmund Jephcott (New York: Pantheon, 1982, originally published 1939).

concerned with the treatment of women. Unlike chivalry and gallantry, politeness is not narrowly preoccupied with female protection. On the contrary, polite society has rules that are meant to govern the behavior of everyone within it. This breadth of application is paired with an element of elevation: politeness is a refined set of good manners aligned with the interests and pursuits of high culture. Although people may sometimes refer to ordinary politeness, polite behavior generally carries an air of polish and urbane sophistication.

Like politeness, courtesy also has a link to elite affairs. Courtesy initially drew its name from princely courts and referred to the gracious behavior of courtly gentlemen. Unlike politeness, courtesy did not retain its patrician patina. Over time courtesy became less associated with courtiers and ultimately took on a more democratic cast. This more plebian descendant is now known as common courtesy and it signifies an everyday form of correct conduct.

Civility is a close cousin of both politeness and courtesy. Civility originally emerged out of courtesy during the Middle Ages. Compared to its medieval predecessor, civility called for a more self-conscious molding of personal behavior to conform to norms of appropriateness and to facilitate coordination in increasingly complex urban communities. After being adopted by the upper classes (and connected with politeness), civility gradually spread throughout society, developing into a standard of conduct for all citizens in the polity. By the mid-1500s an understanding of civility as “behavior proper to the intercourse of civilized people” had been established in the English-speaking world.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

The intersecting histories of civility, courtesy, and politeness—as well as the fact that all three codes now apply to broad swaths of society—lead many people to treat these schemes of manners as largely interchangeable. And it is certainly true that it can sometimes be useful to emphasize a family resemblance between the types of good manners. For example, to underscore that being civil is a kind of cultural achievement, one can render civility as a species of politeness. To highlight the everyday utility of being civil, one can relate the requirements of civility in the language of courtesy.

The differences between civility, courtesy, and politeness are nonetheless real. Just as we can distinguish the polish of politeness from the daily devotions of common courtesy, we can find a distinctive significance in civility's foundational role. As the standard for all citizens, civility is the baseline of decent behavior and its requirements outline the most basic kinds of respect that we owe one another in public life. We might frame civility's baseline function negatively as the bare minimum of good manners steering people away from only the most blatant rudeness. Alternatively, and more positively, we might view civility as a threshold condition that precedes and permits the kinds of interaction required by the other codes of conduct. Either way, a sense of fundamentality is civility's central defining feature. Whether one is at the dining table, in the workplace, about town, or engaged in political discussion, civility is the base level guideline for conduct.

### **III. Is Civility Trivial?**

In order to actually be civil—just as in order to be polite or courteous—one must follow the appropriate rules and requirements. These rules and requirements are generally known as



etiquette or decorum, and their number and specificity vary substantially depending on the source consulted. As a teenager in colonial America, George Washington wrote out 110 precepts for his *Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior in Company & Conversation*, listing equal respect as the first commandment of civility (“Every Action done in Company, ought to be with Some Sign of Respect, to those that are Present”) and ending with a directive to maintain moral sensibilities (“Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire called conscience”).<sup>12</sup> More recently, P. M. Forni, director of the Civility Initiative and author of *Choosing Civility*, has settled on twenty-five rules of civil etiquette, including “Speak kindly,” “Refrain from idle complaints,” and “Respect the environment and be gentle.”<sup>13</sup> Lynne Truss, an author who decries the decline of civility in her book *Talk to the Hand*, boils down all manners to a single rule: “remember you are with other people; show some consideration.”<sup>14</sup> *Emily Post’s Etiquette*, now in its nineteenth edition, not only lists a number of everyday manners, common courtesies, and guidelines for living but also details specific rules of behavior for dozens of different situations, ranging from dining and traveling, to work, weddings, funerals, and social life.<sup>15</sup>

Whatever the rules of etiquette happen to be at a given time (and I will have more to say about the varieties of civility later on), appropriate behavior typically requires only relatively

---

<sup>12</sup> George Washington. *Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior in Company & Conversation*, <http://wwwFOUNDATIONSmag.com/civility.html>.

<sup>13</sup> P.M. Forni, *Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> Lynne Truss, *Talk to the Hand: Thee Utter Bloody Rudeness of the World Today, or Six Good Reasons to Stay Home and Bolt the Door* (New York: Gotham Books, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> Lizzie Post and Daniel Post Senning, *Emily Post’s Etiquette: Manners for Today*, 19th ed. (New York: William Morrow, 2017).

minor modifications of speech and action. Critics of civility have sometimes argued that the small-scale restrictions must mean that civility itself is a trivial concern. Thomas Hobbes, for example, swept aside all manners as inconsequential requirements focused on “how one man should salute another, or how a man should wash his mouth, or pick his teeth before company.” When it comes time to consider “those qualities of man-kind that concern their living together in Peace, and Unity,” there is simply no place for trifling questions about appropriate actions and “other points of the *Small Moralls*.”<sup>16</sup>

In spite of such dismissive criticism, generations of Americans have recognized that the small demands of decorum have great importance. In the nineteenth century, there was a huge commercial market for literature on civility.<sup>17</sup> In the twentieth century, Emily Post wrote *Etiquette* with the belief that millions of people wanted to know the details of appropriate behavior.<sup>18</sup> Post proved to be quite correct and her book attracted an enormous audience. From the first publication in 1922 until Post’s death in 1960, *Etiquette* would go through ten editions (after Post died, the Emily Post Institute would continue to crank out revised and expanded editions along with a variety of spin-off works). During World War II, *Etiquette* was the book most often requested by GIs; and for decades Post’s manual on manners would consistently rank second on the list of books most commonly stolen from public libraries (the number one spot was held by the Bible). Post’s success spurred others to produce their own guides to good manners—many of which proved to be bestsellers in their own right. Amy

---

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Penguin English Library, 1981), 160.

<sup>17</sup> John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990).

<sup>18</sup> Laura Claridge, *Emily Post: Daughter of the Gilded Age, Mistress of American Manners* (New York: Random House, 2008).

Vanderbilt's *Complete Book of Etiquette*, first published in 1952, would sell nearly one million copies in its first six months. And the market was not limited to blockbuster books: when Deborah Robertson Hodges attempted to catalogue all the writing on etiquette published in the United States from 1900 to 1987, she produced a bibliographic volume nearly two hundred pages in length that documented a vast outpouring of books, pamphlets, and articles.<sup>19</sup> The torrent of writing on manners has continued right through to the present day.<sup>20</sup>

Just as commercial authors and the buying public have consistently re-affirmed civility's significance, so too have scholars demonstrated the importance of civility in a variety of venues, ranging from city streets to the news media.<sup>21</sup> It is true, as Hobbes noted, that civility is a matter of minor restrictions and small behavioral modifications. Nonetheless, it is also true, as Erving Goffman observed, that out of small gestures and minor restrictions "the gossamer reality of social occasions is built."<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Deborah Robertson Hodges, *Etiquette: An Annotated Bibliography of Literature Published in the English in the United States, 1900 through 1987* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 1989).

<sup>20</sup> A quick search of Amazon.com yields thousands of titles on "good manners": [https://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb\\_sb\\_noss\\_1?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-keywords=good+manners&rh=n%3A283155%2Ck%3Agood+manners](https://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_sb_noss_1?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-keywords=good+manners&rh=n%3A283155%2Ck%3Agood+manners).

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Jennifer Lee, *Civility in the City: Blacks, Jews, and Koreans in Urban America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); and Diana C. Mutz, *In-Your-Face Politics: The Consequences of Uncivil Media* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>22</sup> Erving Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings* (New York: The Free Press, 1963), 247. See also Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor, 1959).

#### IV. Strategic Incivility

Civility is fundamental to public life. It is this sense of fundamentality that explains why perceived declines in civility are often greeted by choruses of alarm. If civility is the zero point for appropriate behavior, then incivility undermines the rudiments of order and all is lost.

Alarm and fears of existential threat are exactly what Trump's norm-bashing behavior has produced. Trump has shown that he can define "deviancy downward at the speed of sound," Jonathan Rauch warned. If Trump manages to destroy accepted standards of appropriate public conduct, then there is nothing to stop the existing system from collapse.<sup>23</sup>

Is Trump really at risk of destroying civility, as critics suggest? It is worth recalling that Trump is a notorious showman and self-promoter. Rather than seeing him as a mortal danger to good manners, one could argue that his brazen rudeness is a stunt designed to enhance his own celebrity and feed his desire for importance. As Susan Herbst argues in her book *Rude Democracy*, etiquette violation can be a tactic that political actors use to achieve their objectives.<sup>24</sup> It could be that Trump is counting on the existence of some consensus beliefs about the appropriate limits of polite politicking. He then intentionally provokes a defense of the consensus in hopes of triggering an avalanche of publicity.

The self-serving moves of the strategic offender are infuriating, but these moves do not obliterate norms of appropriate public behavior. The strategic offender challenges reigning

---

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Rauch, "Containing Trump," *The Atlantic*, March 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/03/containing-trump/513854/>. See also Thomas B. Edsall, "The Self-Destruction of American Democracy," *New York Times*, November 30, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/30/opinion/trump-putin-destruction-democracy.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Susan Herbst, *Rude Democracy: Civility and Incivility in American Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).

civilities with spectacular breaches of decorum. On a deeper level, however, the strategic offender actually affirms prevailing forms of good manners by relying on their acceptance. Strategic incivility performs a kind of jujitsu, seizing the indignation generated to protect civility and redirecting it to serve personal purposes. The breach of good manners is real; even so, the impact on the larger practice of civility is usually localized, and the strategic offender attempts to use the existing order, not to displace it.

There are some indicators that Trump's incivility has been of strategic value. Trump has a well-documented interest in ratings and his exploits have garnered an extraordinary amount of the media attention he craves.<sup>25</sup> During the presidential primary season, Trump spent a small fraction of what his competitors spent on media advertising (Jeb Bush's media budget, for example, was more than eight times greater than Trump's).<sup>26</sup> Yet Trump's so-called "earned media coverage"—that is, all the free news and commentary about his campaign on television, in newspapers and magazines, and on social media—far outpaced that of any other candidate. Indeed, as the end of the presidential primaries neared, Trump had nearly as much earned media coverage as all the other candidates, Republican and Democratic, combined.

As President, Trump continues to attract an unusual degree of publicity. His frequent and wide-ranging attacks on individuals and organizations regularly drive news cycles and flood social media. By one count, Trump received about one-third of all Twitter mentions in 2017, and there were only 17 days in the entire year when he was not the leading topic of

---

<sup>25</sup> Josef Adalian, "A History of Donald Trump's Obsession With TV Ratings," *Vulture.com*, August 29, 2017, <http://www.vulture.com/2017/01/donald-trumps-tv-rating-obsession-a-history.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Nicholas Confessore and Karen Yourish, "\$2 Billion Worth of Free Media for Donald Trump," *New York Times*, March 15, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/16/upshot/measuring-donald-trumps-mammoth-advantage-in-free-media.html>.

conversation on the platform. And Trump’s Twitter dominance comes at a time when the total volume of “political Twitter conversation is up six-fold since 2015—from 450 million tweets then to 2.8 billion today.”<sup>27</sup>

The incivilities that win Trump all forms of media coverage are a central feature of the raucous rallies he has held throughout his campaign and presidency.<sup>28</sup> At his rallies, unlike those held by other recent Presidents, Trump does not focus attention on a specific issue with the aim of growing support for a favored policy.<sup>29</sup> Instead, Trump focuses on himself and entertains by recounting his untoward behavior. He repeats his past accusations and broadsides to the delight of his capacity crowds. To shouts and laughter, he rehearses the disparaging nicknames he has given foreign leaders, Democrats, celebrities, and members his own political party. He attacks the “fake news” press and foments roaring chants of “Lock her up!” at the mention of Hillary Clinton.

The rallies allow Trump to share the mischievous joy of scoffing at established manners. His strategic violations of civility not only generate useful outrage, but also serve as sources of excitement and pleasure. Trump revels in the tsunami of attention that his rule breaking brings and his supporters get a subversive thrill from seeing proprieties flouted. The fun is in knowing that many Americans continue to accept the norms of behavior that Trump has contravened.

---

<sup>27</sup> Dawn C. Chmielewski, “Twitter’s No. 1 Topic Of 2017? You Gussed It: Donald Trump in a Landslide,” *Deadline.com*, December 28, 2017, <http://deadline.com/2017/12/2017-was-the-year-of-trump-1202233320/>.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Emily Cochrane and Maggie Haberman, “Trump Hosts Fiery Rally on the Heels of a Whirlwind Week,” *New York Times*, March, 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/10/us/politics/trump-rally-pittsburgh.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Theodore Kupfer, “Welcome to the Permanent Campaign,” *National Review*, August 24, 2017, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2017/08/trump-rallies-permanent-campaign-tactics/>.

To have a good time at a Trump rally, one could argue, it is not necessary to believe that civility should be killed off. It is enough to be shown that the right people are getting poked in the eye.

## **V. Civility in Crisis**

The benefits of tactical rudeness and provocation may very well account for some of Trump's personal motivations and success. But strategic incivility does not seem to fully explain what we observe.

One would expect the strategic offender to select specific occasions when incivility is most likely to advance the offender's goals. For example, during the Republican primaries, when Marco Rubio taunted Trump for being short-fingered and lacking the "stature" to lead, Rubio reverted to conventional behavior once his provocation was complete. By contrast, Trump's incivilities are continuous and unrelenting. When taken as a whole, his pattern of behavior does not resemble a series of discrete calculations designed to deflect and re-orient attention. There appears to be no higher-level set of objectives; his improprieties seem to be an assault on civility itself. In Trump's case, as Michael Grunwald has put it, "the side show is the real show."<sup>30</sup>

If Trump's actions undermine civility, how should his efforts be understood? In posing this question, I do not mean to suggest that Trump would himself explain his behavior as an assault on civility. To the extent that Trump might connect his actions to a particular code of conduct he would most likely say that he is attacking political correctness (I will have more to

---

<sup>30</sup> Michael Grunwald, "Donald Trump Is A Consequential President," *Politico Magazine*, December 30, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/12/30/rating-donald-trump-year-one-2017-216199>.

say about political correctness later on). I also do not mean to suggest that all of Trump's actions can be linked to fully articulated intentions or to a conscious plan. Whether or not Trump intends any given comment to be uncivil, the fact is that he consistently contravenes standards of appropriate conduct. What can be made of his behavior?

To begin, it is important to note that worries about the state of civility are not limited to Trump's presidency or to the most recent presidential election.<sup>31</sup> Before Trump began his campaign, we regularly experienced episodes of turbulent protest. And beyond any particular instance of turmoil, we inhabited and sustained a contentious public culture. Our politics were preoccupied with the demonization of opponents. Our news media was saturated with aggressive bluster and vitriol. Our workplaces were rife with boorish behavior. Our digital platforms teemed with expressions of disrespect and invective. Reflecting these conditions, many Americans believed we were living in an age of unusual anger and discord.

In those pre-Trump days, a host of authors and observers called for a return to civility as a remedy to our malaise. Americans once treated one another with far greater respect and consideration, the argument went. If we can recover the traditionally courteous modes of relating to one another, we will find that our public life can be more restrained and peaceful. Political disagreements will remain, but new compromises will become possible as adversaries turn their attention away from maligning one another's character and focus instead on

---

<sup>31</sup> For an influential pre-Trump warning about, and response to, the civility crisis, see Stephen L. Carter, *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 1998). See also Os Guinness, *The Case for Civility: And Why Our Future Depends on It* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008); Daniel M. Shea and Morris P. Fiorina, eds., *Can We Talk? The Rise of Rude, Nasty, Stubborn Politics* (New York: Pearson, 2013); Forni, *Choosing Civility*; and Truss, *Talk to the Hand*.



scrutinizing competing policies. The news media will model civil engagement in its coverage, emphasizing fact-based analysis rather than sensationalizing conflict and relentlessly stoking animosities. Everyday exchanges between individuals—including those on social media, in website comment sections, and at work—will become more sociable, with substantially less tolerance for harassment and insult.

One could argue that that Trump’s rise makes the restoration of civility more difficult today than it used to be a few years ago. Yet, as historians of civility have noted, generations of Americans have felt that civility was in a precarious position and they had no trouble finding causes in their own time.<sup>32</sup> At different points during the twentieth century, Americans chalked up the deterioration of public conduct to jazz music, World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, rock and roll, and the large-scale entry of women into the workforce. Nineteenth-century Americans blamed the Civil War, new immigrants, urban life, the vulgar rich, and the insolent poor. Talk of social crisis and fear of coarsening relations were also easy to find in the eighteenth century. James Madison along with many of our Founders complained about the truculence and crass materialism produced by the grasping, interest-ridden politics in the states.

Viewed in this broader context, Trump is the merely latest chapter in our long history of rudeness. To understand the significance of what Trump is doing today, we must understand why people have continued to value civility when it has never been fully established and secure

---

<sup>32</sup> Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility*; Mark Caldwell, *A Short History of Rudeness* (New York: Picador USA, 1999); and Gordon S. Wood, “Interests and Disinterestedness in the Making of the Constitution,” in *The Idea of America: Reflections on the Birth of the United States* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011), 127–69.

from challenge in the past. If we have always had problems getting along, what makes us think that there can or should be agreement on the requirements of appropriate behavior now?

## VI. Civility's Repressive Power

We can best appreciate the case for civility by first considering the case against it. The obdurate unruliness of American society is not an obvious problem if one is skeptical of civility in the first place. Rather than seeking consensus on the rules of appropriate public conduct, many have argued that people should be allowed to present themselves more or less as they like.

The themes of uninhibited expression and unfettered self-definition run throughout the modern Supreme Court's interpretation of the First Amendment.<sup>33</sup> And the roots of this argument run even deeper than current legal doctrine. In the middle of the 1800s, more than a half century before the Supreme Court began actively championing First Amendment rights, the classic case for broad personal freedom was powerfully developed in John Stuart Mill's essay *On Liberty*.<sup>34</sup>

According to Mill, it is very often the case that conflicting opinions each possess some grain of truth. In such situations progress toward the whole truth can be made only through the free competition of ideas, a competition that Mill called "the rough process of a struggle between combatants fighting under hostile banners."<sup>35</sup> The ardent advocates participating in the competition of ideas are themselves unlikely to gain a better or more accurate

---

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, *New York Times v. Sullivan*, 376 U.S. 254 (1964).

<sup>34</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. David Spitz (New York: Norton, 1975).

<sup>35</sup> Mill, *Liberty*, 46.

understanding of issues. If anything, advocates tend to become more sectarian, inflexible, and extreme during heated disputes with their opponents. It is the audience, “the calmer and more disinterested bystander,” that benefits from no-holds-barred argument.<sup>36</sup> By attending to the freewheeling opinions of fervent dissenters and impassioned partisans, the audience identifies error, learns new truths, and gains a more vital grasp of the truths it already knows to be sound. The “truth has no chance,” Mill wrote, “but in proportion as every side of it, every opinion which embodies any fraction of the truth, not only finds advocates, but is so advocated as to be listened to.”<sup>37</sup>

Free expression not only allows whole truths to rise and flourish but also permits individuals to follow the widest range of life plans. Liberty of action and freedom to fashion one’s own identity are essential goods, and necessary for human excellence. “Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it,” Mill argued. Human nature is instead “a tree, which requires itself to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing.”<sup>38</sup>

Great personal freedom not only yields important benefits without requiring agreement on a code of civil conduct; insistence on a shared code may actually preclude the progressive discovery of truth and the ongoing development of human faculties that personal freedom promises. Systems of manners can be used to shore up hierarchies in the community, drawing distinctions between courteous and rude behavior in ways that entrench a pecking order across classes. When deployed in this fashion, civility becomes an impediment to change, insulating

---

<sup>36</sup> Mill, *Liberty*, 50.

<sup>37</sup> Mill, *Liberty*, 50.

<sup>38</sup> Mill, *Liberty*, 56.

dominant groups from challenge and suppressing free competition of ideas along with experiments in living.

Mill recognized that civility could be employed to silence expression and he denounced the enforcement of polite conventions that “stigmatize those who hold the contrary opinion as bad and immoral men.”<sup>39</sup> And there are many examples of political actors complaining that the powerful use preferred versions of civility to exert control. Consider the contemporary criticism of “tone policing.”<sup>40</sup> Feminists who angrily object to sexism, Black Lives Matter protesters who raise loud voices against institutionalized racism, antiwar demonstrators who passionately inveigh against military engagement—all report instances of being told that they should calm down and try being more polite. The demand to moderate demeanor is experienced as a means of deflecting attention from injustice and relocating the problem in the style of complaint. In this way, a broad constellation of activists and dissenters now feel they cannot express themselves without being called uncivil.

If civility is opposed to free speech—and if civility is at best superfluous in a vibrant democratic society, and at worst a strong-arm tactic used by repressive elites—then who needs it? As it turns out, those in need of civility are often the critics of civility themselves.

People who decry civility’s coercive use are usually not opposed to the general idea of civil conduct. Although Mill severely criticized the wielding of civility against those holding minority views, he also welcomed rules of temperate speech and fair discussion that applied

---

<sup>39</sup> Mill, *Liberty*, 51.

<sup>40</sup> “Tone Policing,” Wikipedia, last modified February 21, 2018, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tone\\_policing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tone_policing).

equally to all, “giving merited honor to everyone, whatever opinion he may hold.”<sup>41</sup> We see the same openness to civility among political actors. Beginning in 2014, Black Lives Matter activists and their sympathetic allies convulsed college campuses around the country with obstreperous demonstrations, but their ultimate goal was not to destroy civility.<sup>42</sup> The protestors’ most common demands were to increase the diversity of faculty and to extend existing campus programs to include diversity training. These are demands for inclusion and recognition. The protestors did not altogether dispense with codes of appropriate behavior so much as they sought to alter prevailing practices in order to foster equal treatment and a sense of belonging for people of color.

Free speech advocates and dissenters of all stripes have an affinity for civility because rules of appropriate conduct (once revised) offer something they desire. As Aristotle observed centuries ago, persuasive rhetoric entails sound logical reasoning, targeted emotional appeals, and effective representation of the speaker’s integrity and credibility.<sup>43</sup> Yet in a society committed to free expression, people are at liberty to ignore the elements of persuasiveness that Aristotle identified. It is perfectly permissible for speakers to spout illogical arguments, to anger the very audiences they wish to please, and to present a poor image of their own character. Failed rhetorical sallies are, as we have seen, the means by which the free trade in ideas moves toward truth—but that does not mean such failures are easy to endure when they are one’s own. It is particularly painful when we project character defects through our free

---

<sup>41</sup> Mill, *Liberty*, 52.

<sup>42</sup> Leah Libresco, “Here Are The Demands From Students Protesting Racism At 51 Colleges,” *FiveThirtyEight.com*, December 3, 2015, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/here-are-the-demands-from-students-protesting-racism-at-51-colleges/>.

<sup>43</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, <http://classics.mit.edu//Aristotle/rhetoric.html>.

expression. After all, each of us wants to think of ourselves as being a good person and we all want others to regard us in the same way. The chance to come across as disreputable and morally deficient is not a chance people are generally eager to take. (Or at least the great majority of us are reluctant to take this chance—as the philosopher Aaron James details in *Assholes: A Theory*, there is a type of person who cares very little about what others think.)<sup>44</sup> The problem with free speech is that it constantly exposes us to the risk of being seen in a negative light. It is here that civility can be of service.

Civility plays an incredibly important communicative role: it is a simple, easily employed means of conveying integrity and moral standing, a way of behaving that guarantees we are portraying ourselves positively.<sup>45</sup> With appropriate words and actions, the civil person grants basic respect and consideration to others. At the same time, the use of appropriate words and actions also signals that the civil person is worthy of receiving basic respect and consideration herself. In short, good manners communicate our goodness. Opponents of civility seek what those invested in a prevailing code of conduct already have: a shared means of interaction that allows participants to show that they are good and decent people, even as they may argue and disagree.

---

<sup>44</sup> Aaron James, *Assholes: A Theory* (New York: Anchor, 2014).

<sup>45</sup> This understanding of civility spans centuries. See Desiderius Erasmus, *De Civilitate Morum Puerilium* (1530), trans. Brian McGregor, in *Literary and Educational Writings 3*, 273–89. Vol. 25 of *Collected Works of Erasmus*, ed. J. K. Sowards (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985); and Cheshire Calhoun, “The Virtue of Civility,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 29 (2000): 251–76.

## VII. Revolutions in Manners

The possibility that civility can be revised to give new groups a fresh means of communicating their standing is essential to keep in mind. Some commentators have envisioned civility as a fixed standard that always requires recognition of others as equals and that provides an independent means of defining what counts as a good democratic society.<sup>46</sup> Yet, in actual practice, civility is constituted by—not external to or independent of—the politics of the day. When we look back across the history of civility in the United States, it is important to see not only that good manners are often under threat of falling apart, but also that good manners are often in the process of being re-fashioned to serve new needs. The rules of civility were not forged once in a golden age of virtue and then left to slowly decay. Instead, the rules undergo revolutions as they are forged repeatedly over time.<sup>47</sup> Codes of appropriate public conduct do not, in other words, exist outside of politics as an independent force that restrains and pacifies our disputes. The codes themselves are the subject of political struggle and debate. Civility is a mode of behavior and means of communication that is developed and perpetually re-worked through conflict.

Contestation over the shape and meaning of civility has taken many forms. During the late 1700s, for example, the Federalist supporters of the new Constitution practiced a patrician-led politics organized around disinterestedness, the requirement that public officials unselfishly rise above all pecuniary interests in their lawmaking.<sup>48</sup> Against this established approach to the

---

<sup>46</sup> Richard Boyd, “Michael Oakeshott on Civility, Civil Society, and Civil Association,” *Political Studies* 52 (2004): 603–622.

<sup>47</sup> For an extended elaboration of this point, see Caldwell, *Short History of Rudeness*.

<sup>48</sup> I draw my account of the Federalist/Anti-Federalist debate from Wood, “Interests and Disinterestedness”.

conduct of public life, the Anti-Federalists claimed that all of politics was a competition among interests and they refused to conform either their arguments or their actions to the etiquette of disinterestedness.

The Federalists reacted to this rejection of the traditional leadership ideal with disbelief and fury. Surely the Anti-Federalists could not seriously maintain that no one, no matter how educated or virtuous, was capable of seeing beyond his own narrow concerns. To see self-interested action everywhere was to deny that any class of individuals was capable of pursuing the public good, and to push the American people, as Benjamin Rush put it, to the verge of “degenerating into savages or devouring each other like beasts of prey.” Yet what the Federalists understood as a social crisis and a return to barbarism, the Anti-Federalists presented as the requisites of good order. Anti-Federalists like William Findley felt no sting from the Federalist rebukes. Findley argued that the cardinal rule of appropriate behavior was not to pretend some aristocratic class was entirely above parochial concerns, but rather to make sure that all claims of self-interest were treated with equal regard. In America, Findley insisted, “no man has a greater claim of special privilege for his £100,000 than I have for my £5.” Although we retain something of the original Federalist sensibility today in our disdain for special interests, it is clear that the Anti-Federalists were ultimately able to shift the norms of American public life in their favor.

Female political activists were embroiled in a different set of disputes over civility during the 1800s.<sup>49</sup> Conventions of good behavior at the time required women to remain dependent on men as their guardians in public spaces. A woman appearing in the streets of town without a

---

<sup>49</sup> Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility*.



male escort invited opprobrium, and a woman standing alone, arguing against slavery or for the right to vote, was considered to be nothing short of indecent. “Contending for your rights stirs up the selfish feelings of others,” one 1837 etiquette manual for women advised, “but a readiness to yield them awakes generous sentiments.” Given these conditions, the political work of women could not be limited to giving speeches, lobbying policymakers, or proposing model legislation. It was also necessary to advocate a different conception of appropriate conduct that allowed women to participate in the public sphere as independent actors.

The fact that independent participation by women is an accepted part of public life today demonstrates that the nineteenth-century movement for more egalitarian manners was successful. Yet, even though civility was recast in terms that permitted women to signal their equal worth and standing, there is no guarantee that future movement will not be in the opposite direction, with groups advocating new pecking-order rules that assign women to a subordinate rank.<sup>50</sup> As manners rise, fall, and reform, they do not inevitably progress toward inclusion and equal treatment, for there is no necessary incompatibility between good manners and inequality. It is entirely possible to fashion codes of appropriate behavior suited to a rigidly rank-ordered society. In such a hierarchical society, the civil norms through which individuals communicate their good character simply feed into an order where each class has its particular place.

---

<sup>50</sup> The modern-day Men’s Rights Movement, for example, claims that women are given too much power and standing in American public life. See Warren Farrell, “The Myth of Male Power: Why Men Are the Disposable Sex, Part I,” *New Male Studies* 2 (2012): 4–33; and “The Myth of Male Power: Why Men Are the Disposable Sex, Part II.” *New Male Studies* 3 (2012): 5–31.

Conflict between different views of appropriate public behavior was also at the heart of the Civil Rights Movement in the twentieth century. Following the end of Reconstruction, a network of Jim Crow laws established formal racial segregation throughout the former Confederacy. These laws were surrounded and sustained by rules of racial etiquette that, when complied with, relegated African Americans to a subordinate position. Martin Luther King Jr. described what “proper” treatment of blacks looked like under these rules: “your first name becomes ‘nigger,’ your middle name becomes ‘boy’ (however old you are) and your last name becomes ‘John,’ and your wife and mother are never given the respected title of ‘Mrs.’”<sup>51</sup> King rejected this code of conduct and demanded that African Americans be shown the same signs of respect as whites. From the perspective of those steeped in the old racial etiquette, King’s egalitarian demands were gross violations of good manners that were to be sharply criticized and quickly suppressed. King and other “outside agitators” were castigated for being ill-mannered and for refusing to keep to their appropriate station in the racial order.

The Civil Rights Movement prevailed and substantially changed understandings of the respect due to racial minorities and other marginalized groups in public life. As with the case of women, however, success in achieving more egalitarian manners carries no guarantee of permanence.

Consider the current controversy over political correctness as described by the preeminent authority on contemporary civility, Miss Manners.<sup>52</sup> Broadly speaking, the Civil Rights Movement ultimately gave rise to political correctness in the sense that Miss Manners

---

<sup>51</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963, [https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html).

<sup>52</sup> Miss Manners is the pen name of Judith Martin.

defines the term: to be “politically correct” is to refrain “from delivering wholesale insults to groups of people.”<sup>53</sup> Miss Manners celebrates the public intolerance for “hate talk,” and she uses political correctness as her “favorite counter-example to those who believe that etiquette has steadily deteriorated since the days of King Arthur.” Yet, as Miss Manners recognizes, forward progress is subject to revision and reversal. On one hand, some proponents of political correctness possess an “arrogance disguised as sensitivity” that leads them to attack “people for perceived slights when clearly none were intended.” Such proponents of political correctness label as “bigotry” anything they do not like, an aggressive tactic that subverts political correctness by transforming it into a reason for, rather than a bulwark against, delivering wholesale insults to groups of people. On the other hand, some opponents of political correctness undermine it more directly: they wish to engage in the very nastiness and insults that political correctness forbids. These opponents claim that we can only have productive public interactions if people are allowed to say what they honestly think. But as Miss Manners argues, “name-calling is not conducive to debate” because productive discussion requires “treating opponents with respect.” “Those who seize their right to be offensive,” Miss Manners observes, “should not be shocked that others take offense.”

And thus, we arrive at Trump, the latest in a long line of figures contesting the meaning of good manners. It might seem like a stretch to put Trump’s attacks and accusations in the same league as historic disagreements over civility. Nonetheless, Trump—like eighteenth-

---

<sup>53</sup> Judith Martin, et.al., “Name-Calling Is Not the Same Thing as Debate,” *Washington Post*, Feb 07, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/miss-manners-name-calling-is-not-the-same-thing-as-debate/2016/02/05/c4aadbce-c11f-11e5-bcda-62a36b394160\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.e064c8112409](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/miss-manners-name-calling-is-not-the-same-thing-as-debate/2016/02/05/c4aadbce-c11f-11e5-bcda-62a36b394160_story.html?utm_term=.e064c8112409).

century Anti-Federalists, nineteenth-century female abolitionists and suffragettes, and twentieth-century civil rights activists—is part of a movement advocating a new code of public conduct.<sup>54</sup>

Trump, along with his many supporters who praise him for “telling it like it is,” is a vociferous opponent of political correctness. Trump opposes political correctness on the grounds that it prevents him from frankly stating his views. As Trump sees it, neither he nor the country can afford the luxury of pulling punches.<sup>55</sup> As he succinctly summarizes his position, “I am so tired of this politically correct crap.”<sup>56</sup>

Some commentators have worried that by breaking the limits of acceptable discourse Trump has pitted himself against the entire idea of appropriate conduct, pushing us all to the point where there will be little more left than the shouting of unfiltered opinions.<sup>57</sup> But like all erstwhile critics of civility, Trump is not pursuing a program that obliterates all rules of appropriate behavior. His actions work to transform the rules so that civility can be used to communicate standing and character in a new way.

Trump speaks for those who dislike and distrust the conventional pieties of appropriate behavior. He advances a new version of civil norms that will recalibrate the baseline of respect that we owe one another in public life. The recalibration is accompanied by a great deal of

---

<sup>54</sup> Although Trump personally receives an enormous amount of public attention, it is important to emphasize that he is not acting alone. Alterations in manners require the work of many hands. It is not only Trump, but also Trump supporters and Trumpism, that are contesting the basic ways in which respect is conveyed and conferred in American public life.

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, “Donald Trump Debate – Political Correctness,” *YouTube*, August 13, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ODgVXnRG-8>.

<sup>56</sup> Nick Gass, “Trump: I’m so Tired of this Politically Correct Crap,” *Politico*, September 23, 2015, <https://www.politico.com/story/2015/09/donald-trump-politically-correct-crap-213988>.

<sup>57</sup> Jason Willick, “How Trump Affected Political Correctness,” *The American Interest*, May 26, 2017, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/05/26/how-trump-affected-political-correctness/>.

name-calling and plenty of inflammatory insults, but it is not a matter of name-calling and insults for all. Trump has no tolerance for invective directed against himself or his supporters.<sup>58</sup> Trump also offers praise and the due regard for people who believe they have been undeservingly lumped together with the unworthy. At the announcement of his candidacy, for example, when Trump made headlines by labeling many Mexican immigrants as “rapists,” he paired his derogatory description of immigrants with plaudits for his supporters.<sup>59</sup> “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best,” Trump told the crowd. “They’re not sending you.”

There are, to be sure, some decent Mexican immigrants—as Trump himself acknowledged, “some, I assume, are good people.”<sup>60</sup> From Trump’s perspective, however, the mistake is to stipulate that all immigrants should automatically be given the same degree of consideration. To say that we are “a nation of immigrants” (a phrase that the Trump Administration has scrubbed from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services mission statement)<sup>61</sup> is to treat all immigrants, regardless of country of origin, as having the same standing in public life. Yet, in a world with so-called “shithole” countries, immigrant status should not be associated with decency and good character across-the-board.<sup>62</sup> In differentiating

---

<sup>58</sup> Daisy Murray, “Donald Trump Has Just Responded To Michelle Wolf’s White House Correspondent’s Dinner Roast,” *Elle*, May 1, 2018, <https://www.elle.com/uk/life-and-culture/a20110719/donald-trump-responded-michelle-wolf/>.

<sup>59</sup> “Trump’s Presidential Announcement Speech.”

<sup>60</sup> “Trump’s Presidential Announcement Speech.”

<sup>61</sup> Ryan Devereaux, “U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services will Remove ‘Nation of Immigrants’ from its Mission Statement,” *The Intercept*, February 22, 2018, <https://theintercept.com/2018/02/22/u-s-citizenship-and-immigration-services-will-remove-nation-of-immigrants-from-mission-statement/>.

<sup>62</sup> Josh Dawsey, “Trump Derides Protections for Immigrants from ‘Shithole’ Countries,” *Washington Post*, January 12, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-attacks-protections-for-immigrants-from-shithole-countries-in-oval-office-meeting/2018/01/11/bfc0725c-f711-11e7-91af-31ac729add94\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.152fa8ae7a37](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-attacks-protections-for-immigrants-from-shithole-countries-in-oval-office-meeting/2018/01/11/bfc0725c-f711-11e7-91af-31ac729add94_story.html?utm_term=.152fa8ae7a37).

between immigrants, Trump gives voice to a kind of speech common among many Americans yet castigated by arbiters of polite society.<sup>63</sup> His is a new brand of civility that promises to pick out the wheat from the chaff. “The forgotten men and women of our country will be forgotten no longer,” Trump announced in his Inaugural Address. “Everyone is listening to you now.”<sup>64</sup>

## VIII. Conclusion

The unconventionality of Donald Trump as a candidate and President has been widely noted. In this article, I have assessed Trump’s unconventional behavior from the perspective of civility, the most basic form of manners that governs public life. I have explained what civility is, its strategic use, and its development over time. I have also explored the ways in which civility can be said to be trivial and unimportant, and as well as the ways in which it can be said to be powerful and repressive. Ultimately, I have argued that Trump and his supporters should be seen as the latest in a line of movements that have sought to alter civil norms in order to communicate the character and decency of new groups of people. The sense of crisis that surrounds civility today is not because Trump is undermining the very idea of appropriate behavior and ushering in an age of universal insults. Instead, the sense of crisis stems from the

---

<sup>63</sup> John Bowden, “Fox Host on Trump ‘S---hole’ Remark: This is how ‘the Forgotten Men and Women’ Talk,” *The Hill*, January 11, 2018, <http://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/368631-fox-host-on-trump-s-hole-remark-this-is-how-the-forgotten-men>. Andrew Prokop, “Trump Backers Hate ‘Political Correctness.’ That’s Why Gaffes Don’t Hurt Him,” *Vox*, February 29, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/2016/2/29/11133796/donald-trump-political-correctness>.

<sup>64</sup> Donald J. Trump, “Inaugural Address,” *Whitehouse.gov*, January 20, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/>. Many commentators have argued that Trump’s attack on political correctness and his talk about “forgotten” Americans are veiled appeals to racism and white nationalism. The question of what a speaker “really means” by their speech and actions is a question that has long bedeviled debates over the standards of appropriate behavior. For an extended analysis of the relationship between civility and authenticity, see Bybee, *How Civility Works*.

way in which Trump's actions work to re-define what appropriate behavior means and the status such behavior will confer.

The examples I have drawn from the framing of the Constitution, conflict over the propriety of women in politics, and the struggle over civil rights all show that rules of everyday interaction are subject to substantial change. Although there were prominent leaders in each of these periods of change, the revolutions in manners that occurred were the labor of many hands. And, indeed, the success of any campaign for a new code of conduct necessarily depends on multitudes. This is so because the enforcement of civility, like the enforcement of all forms of good manners, is personal. Individuals are obliged to police etiquette by watching for rudeness and chastising offenders. The first party to be monitored is oneself: the civil individual should be on the lookout to ensure she is conforming to the rules. Public shaming then serves as backstop whenever self-supervision lapses. To inaugurate a new form of civility, many people must agree to demand new kinds of appropriate behavior from themselves and from others.

The ultimate effect of Trump's efforts thus depends on the larger community. Trump's supporters delight in seeing proprieties flouted and get a subversive thrill from hearing Trump say what other public figures will not. To change civility, his supporters must adopt a deeper defiance of convention and seek to advance new manners as the preferred means of communicating good character and respect. In their everyday speech and action, they will have to model their understanding of appropriate behavior and to admonish anyone who fails to conform. Trump has opened up symbolic space for the re-valuing of new groups and provided these groups with a template for negotiating the interactions that make up ordinary life.

Looking forward, one question is the degree to which the template will be translated into everyday encounters and exchanges.

A second question is the degree to which the push for new manners will spawn pushback. As Mill observed, spirited contestation is the hallmark of a free society. We argue over many things, including the threshold definition of decent public behavior. It is true that civility was, at its medieval origins, derived from the relatively fixed model of conduct employed in royal courts. Yet, as we have seen, there is no longer a central model of appropriate conduct, and manners are fashioned and re-fashioned from the assortment of different beliefs and practices found in modern society. Without an established rule of behavior handed down from an aristocracy, we employ many different methods to establish rules for ourselves and we frequently disagree about the results. This process of shaping civility through political conflict will not stop with the rise of Trump. His breaches of decorum have won enthusiastic praise from supporters and drawn blistering criticism from opponents. To the extent Trump's example extends to the daily interactions of ordinary life, we can expect those interactions to become increasingly contested and controversial.

Such disputes over the meaning of good manners can be difficult, and proponents of more egalitarian manners may find the fight against Trumpism to be particularly trying. After witnessing the spread of more equitable and inclusive forms of acceptable behavior in recent decades, it can be aggravating to be confronted with a movement advocating a new pecking-order. Unfortunately, progress toward equal treatment in one period is no guarantee of enduring success. The effort to advance egalitarian manners is nonetheless worthwhile in order to prevent inegalitarian alternatives from gaining ground. If we recall that civility forms the



baseline of decent behavior, and that its rules communicate the terms of social belonging and identify the basic forms of consideration we owe one another in public life, then we will see that the work of improving civility is of great importance, even if this work is challenging and never completely finished.

### **Acknowledgements**

I presented an early version of this article at the Law and Politics Under Stress Workshop at University of Oregon Law School. I thank Stuart Chinn and Dan Tichenor for organizing the workshop, and I thank the workshop participants for their constructive criticism. The anonymous reviewers and Jesse Allen helped to improve and strengthen my argument in a number of places. MaryAnn Spencer and Laura Jenkins provided excellent research assistance.

**Word Count:** 8,940