Polarization & Incivility in American Politics: Is Congressional Gridlock Affecting U.S. State Legislatures?

4-H Teen Know Your Government Conference
Olympia WA  February 15th, 2020

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Washington State University
SPECIAL THANKS TO:

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ORGANIZER OF MAINSTREAM REPUBLICANS OF WASHINGTON

STEVEN D. STEHR

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ROB BOATRIGHT, CHAIR, DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, CLARK UNIVERSITY
DIRECTOR OF RESEARCH, NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR CIVIL DISCOURSE
“I wish there was a way I could wave a magic wand and put back when people were respectful of each other and the Congress was working for the good of the country and not just along party lines.”

Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg

Image source: Atlantic
Bipartisan Agreement that Incivility in Politics is Problematic (2019)

Of Americans Surveyed...

**INCIVILTY EXPERIENCES**
- 84% Experienced incivility
- 59% Quit paying attention to politics because of incivility
- 53% Stopped buying from a company because of uncivil representatives
- 25% Experienced cyberbullying

**INCIVILTY PERCEPTIONS**
- 75% Think incivility has risen to crisis levels
- 79% Describe the 2016 presidential election as uncivil
- 89% Thinks incivility leads to intimidation and threats
- 56% Expect incivility to get worse

*Why?* Politicians 75% Internet and social media 69% News media 59%

Source: National Institute for Civil Discourse, ICMA, Weber Shandwick, Powell Tate.
Poll: How concerned are you that the negative tone and lack of civility in Washington will lead to violence or acts of terror:

Source: PBS NewsHour/NPR/Marist Survey of 924 national adults, Oct. 28-29, 2018

- Very concerned: 45%
- Concerned: 34%
- Not very concerned: 12%
- Not concerned at all: 5%
Has Politics Ever Been Civil in the United States?
Recurring Cycles of Civility and Incivility a Part of U.S. History

“There is still some memory of the strict code of politeness, but no one knows quite what it said or where to find it.”

Legacy derives from courtroom decorum and the one-time high percent of legislators who were “lawyers” who crafted legislative rules, norms and traditions of respect, comity & civility
DUEL BETWEEN AARON BURR AND ALEXANDER HAMILTON, JULY 11, 1804
Polarized Politics in the 1920s in America
Remember the 1960s?
THE CYCLICAL NATURE OF POLITICAL INSTABILITY IN THE U.S.: A VERY WELL DOCUMENTED PHENOMENON
**Political Stress Index in the U.S., 1960-2010: Current Condition of High Stress Reflective of a New Cycle of Discord**

Source: Ortmans, et al., 2017 (data from Turchin)
Central Stress-Inducing Factors in Contemporary U.S. Politics

Political Polarization, Declining Trust in Public Institutions, and Declining Economic Well-being – all likely Contributing to an Increase in Contemporary Public Incivility
Increasing Polarization Among the Political Elites

Party polarization, 1879 - 2012
The ideological gap between the Democratic and Republican caucuses

SOURCE: Voteview.com and DW-NOMINATE scores
Increasing Political Polarization Among the Mass Publics

Rising partisan antipathy

Republican attitudes about the Democratic Party

Democratic attitudes about the Republican Party

Source: Survey conducted April 12-19, 2016.

What Republicans and Democrats say about each other

% of Republicans who say Democrats are more ___ than other Americans

Closed-minded 52% Open-minded 11% Moral 3% About the same 35%

Immoral 47%

Lazy 46% Hard-working 3%

Dishonest 45%

Honest 2% 52%

Unintelligent 32% Intelligent 3%

64%

% of Democrats who say Republicans are more ___ than other Americans

Closed-minded 70%

Dishonest 42%

Immoral 35%

Unintelligent 33%

Lazy 15%

Intelligent 7%

Hard-working 9%

58%

51%

54%

71%

Note: Don’t know/No answer not shown.
Source: Survey conducted March 2-28 and April 5-May 2, 2016.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER
INCIVIL DISCOURSE AND POLITICAL POLARIZATION: AN ISSUE FOR THE U.S. MILITARY
The institute is primarily working with Christian denominations in implementing its program from its Washington office.

Among those that developed **Golden Rule 2020** are the National Council of Churches, National Association of Evangelicals, Presbyterian Church USA, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, American Baptist Churches USA, Mormon Women for Ethical Government, and the US Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Cheryl Graeve, national organizer for the institute, observes that the campaign's title is rooted in the widely held value among religious and non-religious people and Christians and non-Christians of "treating another person as you expect to be treated." She notes that our democracy thrives on the diversity of ideas, but that “We’ve got to have the will to engage in those different ideas... from a place of common respect and common listening to each other.”
SERIOUS LIMITS TO THE GOLDEN RULE DEFINITION OF CIVILITY ARE EVER-PRESENT

Martin Luther King’s Warning in *Letter From Birmingham Jail* is *illustrative*:

“The Pitfalls of Decorum”

...the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.
REACTION TO “CAVOURTING WITH THE ENEMY”
LEARNING FROM THE AUTO EMISSIONS TEST GUY
MIKE'S EMISSIONS TEST SHACK
STATE STREET, BOISE, IDAHO, MAY 2018
COMPLIMENTS OF GARY MONCRIEF, EMERITUS PROFESSOR, BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY
GETTYSBURG FOUNDATION
RECONCILIATION SITE
PROGRAM: WORKING IN BADLY DIVIDED COMMUNITIES

- Renewed Relevance of Healing Messages and Civil Discourse
Declining Trust in American Political Institutions

Public Trust In The U.S. Government Has Plummeted
% of the U.S. public who trust the government always / most of the time

@StatistaCharts  Source: Pew Research Center
Household Income Nearly Flat for Most American Families
Fear of Increasing Immigration

Figure 1. Number and Percent of Immigrants in the U.S., 1900-2010; Plus Census Bureau Projections to 2060

Census Bureau: In 2023 the immigrant share of the U.S. population will hit its highest level in U.S. history (14.8 percent), and continue to rise.

Share of U.S. Population

Number of Immigrants (millions)


Link Between Rising Income Inequality and Polarization

Income Inequality and Political Polarization
1947 - 2017

$r = 0.97$

Gini Index

House Polarization

Polarization Index

1.2
1.0
0.8
0.6
0.4

Gini Index

.350 .367 .383 .400 .417 .433 .450 .467 .484
The Politics of Anger, Fear, and Resentment
After 2016 election, angry reactions overtook love reactions from the Facebook audience

% of reactions to posts that were...

Note: The chart shows the composition of reactions to the average member’s post over time, as a proportion of the total, including likes. Likes, the most common reaction, are excluded from the graph, but included in the calculation of each reaction’s share of the total. The shaded regions are the 95% confidence band for the estimated trends. Source: Pew Research Center analysis of Facebook posts created by members of Congress between Feb. 23, 2016 and Dec. 31, 2017. “Taking Sides on Facebook: How Congressional Outreach Changed Under President Trump”

PEW RESEARCH CENTER
“GRIDLOCK”
PUBLIC CONSENSUS ON IMPORTANT PUBLIC POLICIES NOT TRANSLATED INTO PUBLIC POLICY IN CONGRESS
AMONG AMERICANS...

70% support allowing DREAMers to stay in U.S.

MARGIN OF ERROR: +/- 2.6%
Support for stricter gun laws hits 10-year high

- 2008: 54% Support, 48% Oppose
- 2015: 45% Support, 54% Oppose
- 2018: 66% Support, 31% Oppose

Source: Quinnipiac University
WASHINGTON POST
Perceived Cause of Global Warming

And from what you have heard or read, do you believe increases in the Earth’s temperature over the last century are due more to -- [the effects of pollution from human activities (or) natural changes in the environment that are not due to human activities]?

- % Human activities
- % Natural causes

GALLUP®
Majority of Americans Favor Political Leaders who Compromise

More Important for Leaders in Washington to Stick to Their Beliefs or Compromise?

Next, we have a question about the best approach for political leaders to follow in Washington. Where would you rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means it is more important for political leaders to compromise in order to get things done and 5 means it is more important for political leaders to stick to their beliefs even if little gets done?
HAS GRIDLOCK & HYPER-POLARIZATION TAKEN PLACE AT THE STATE LEVEL?

• ALAN GREENBLATT'S JUNE, 2017 ARTICLE IN GOVERNING POSES CORE CONCERN

“CHECKS AND IMBALANCES: WITH A CONSTITUTIONAL CRISIS CONSUMING WASHINGTON, STATE LAWMAKERS ARE UPENDING THEIR OWN NORMS AS WELL.”
WHAT IS HAPPENING IN OUR 50 STATE LEGISLATURES?

TWO NOTEWORTHY STUDIES:

• NCSL 2015-2016 STUDY – SURVEY OF STATE LEGISLATORS (N=1,620); 10 STATE CASE STUDIES

• WSU FOLEY INSTITUTE STUDY OF 2018-19 – SURVEY OF STATE LEGISLATIVE LOBBYISTS (N=1,300+); 12 STATE “OVER-SAMPLE” CASES WITH 30+ RESPONDENTS
THE NCSL STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

SETTING: 2015-16 LEGISLATIVE SESSIONS IN STATE LEGISLATURES

STUDY CONDUCTED PRIOR TO THE 2016 NATIONAL ELECTION

ELECTION ADDED TO THE ONGOING POLARIZATION OF THE POLITICAL PARTIES AND HEIGHTENED PUBLIC POLITICAL DISCOURSE INCIVILITY

HIGHLIGHTS:

1. DISTINCTION BETWEEN POLARIZATION, INCIVILITY AND RESPONSIBLE DECISION-MAKING IN STATE LEGISLATURES; PUBLIC INTEREST IS BEING SERVED

2. STATES HAVE BEEN AFFECTED, SOME MORE THAN OTHERS, BUT HAVE FOR THE MOST PART BEEN ABLE TO MAINTAIN THEIR TRADITION OF RESPONSIBLE COMPROMISE IN THE INTEREST OF THE PUBLIC INTEREST (hopefulness)

3. NOTE: GARY MONCRIEF AT BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY INVOLVED IN BOTH STUDIES
Multiple-institution effort by a team of 22 scholars located at 11 universities supported with funding from the National Institute for Civil Discourse at the Univ. of Arizona and ongoing support from the Thomas S. Foley Institute for Public Policy & Public Service, the William D. Ruckelshaus Center, and the Division of Governmental Studies & Services at Washington State University.
RESEARCH TEAM MEMBERS & THEIR UNIVERSITY AFFILIATIONS

UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS (AR) – William Schreckhise

UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS (KS) – John Pierce & Burdett Loomis

BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY (ID) – Gary Moncrief, Stephanie Witt, Luke Fowler & Jaclyn Kettler

BRADLEY UNIVERSITY (IL) – Megan Remmel, R. Craig Curtis

OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY (OR) – Brent Steel & Claire McMorris

UNIVERSITY OF UTAH (UT) – Christopher Simon

KENT STATE UNIVERSITY (OH) – Daniel Chand

UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, LAS VEGAS and RENO (NV) – John Tennert and Robert Morin

SHIPPENSBURG UNIVERSITY (PA) – Michael Moltz

DUKE UNIVERSITY (NC) – Leslie Winner and John Hood

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY (WA) – Francis Benjamin, Steven Stehr, Christina Sanders, & Nicholas Lovrich
NATIONAL SURVEY OF STATE LEGISLATIVE LOBBYISTS, 2018-19

HIGHLIGHT: MORE PESSIMISTIC VIEW THAN LEGISLATORS REGARDING PROSPECTS FOR GRIDLOCK AT THE LEVEL OF STATE LEGISLATURES IN EVIDENCE AMONG THOSE WHOSE JOB IT IS TO MOVE LEGISLATION THROUGH STATE LEGISLATURES

SURVEY CHARACTERISTICS:

• COMPLETED SURVEYS = 1,200+ (on-line Qualtrics + mail follow-up)
• RETURNS FROM ALL 50 STATES
• AVE. RESPONSES PER STATE = 25+
• OVERSAMPLES (30+) for AR, KS, ID, WA, UT, CA, NV, IL, IA, OH, PA, OR & NC
• MANY FORMER STATE LEGISLATORS; DIVERSE GROUP, INCLUDING AGENCY LIAISON PERSONNEL, NON-PROFITS, PUBLIC INTEREST GROUPS, ETC.
• RICH COLLECTION OF COMMENTS AND COMMENTARIES
HIGHLIGHTS FROM LOBBYISTS’ SURVEY

QUESTION: HOW IMPORTANT ARE CIVILITY AND THE MAINTENANCE OF CIVIL DISCOURSE NORMS IN LEGISLATIVE DEBATE TO PRODUCING GOOD PUBLIC POLICY? [Mean Response]

NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT (1)    UNCERTAIN (5-6)    ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL (10)
Natl. average                      8.33
WASHINGTON (N=59)                 8.35
OREGON (N=79)                     8.30

WASHINGTON: National average 8.35
OREGON: National average 8.30

NOTE: EXTRAORDINARILY HIGH RESPONSE RATES IN WASHINGTON AND OREGON

VERY STRONG AGREEMENT THAT CIVIL DISCOURSE IS IMPORTANT FOR LEGISLATIVE EFFICACY

QUESTION: OVERALL, HOW WOULD YOU CHARACTERIZE THE GENERAL LEVEL OF CIVILITY AMONG MEMBERS OF YOUR STATE’S LEGISLATURE DURING THE TWO MOST RECENT LEGISLATIVE SESSIONS?

VERY UNCIVIL (1)                  UNCERTAIN (5-6)                  VERY CIVIL (10)
Natl. average                     5.44
WASHINGTON                       5.92
OREGON                            4.43
OKLAHOMA                          2.9
MARYLAND                          7.3

NOTE: CONTRASTING RESULTS

OKLAHOMA: National average 2.9
MARYLAND: National average 7.3
QUESTION: DO YOU THINK THAT NORMS OF FAIR PLAY ARE BREAKING DOWN IN THE STATE IN WHICH YOU LOBBY OR ADVOCATE FOR CLIENTS?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>NOT OCCURRING (1)</th>
<th>UNCERTAIN (2)</th>
<th>OCCURRING (3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natl. average</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Dakota</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

QUESTION: IN YOUR STATE, ARE THERE FEWER, THE SAME, OR MORE NON-PARTISAN AREAS TODAY THAN IN THE PAST?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>FEWER (1)</th>
<th>SAME (2)</th>
<th>MORE (3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natl. average</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
QUESTION: COMPARED TO WHEN YOU FIRST BECAME INVOLVED IN LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY, HAVE LEGISLATORS WITH WHOM YOU WORK BECOME MORE PARTISAN OR MORE BIPARTISAN (i.e., WORK WITH LEGISLATORS IN THE OPPOSING PARTY ON SOME LEGISLATION OF COMMON INTEREST)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MORE PARTISAN (1)</th>
<th>UNCERTAIN (4)</th>
<th>MORE BIPARTISAN (7)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natl. average</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WASHINGTON</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OREGON</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEVADA</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MARYLAND</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

QUESTION: COMPARED TO TEN YEARS AGO, ARE LEGISLATIVE LEADERS MORE OF LESS CIVIL TODAY?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LESS CIVIL (1)</th>
<th>UNCERTAIN (5)</th>
<th>MORE CIVIL (9)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natl. average</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WASHINGTON</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OREGON</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAINE</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEW MEXICO</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**HIGHLIGHTS** *(CONTINUED)*

**QUESTION:** HOW DOES THE FOLLOWING TEND TO PLAY OUT IN YOUR STATE LEGISLATURE?  
“LEGISLATORS REFLECTING THE POLARIZED ENVIRONMENT OF THE U.S. CONGRESS”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STRONGLY AGREE (1)</th>
<th>AGREE (2)</th>
<th>DISAGREE (3)</th>
<th>STRONGLY DISAGREE (4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natl. average</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WASHINGTON</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OREGON</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KENTUCKY</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAWAII</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**QUESTION:** COMPARED TO THE U.S. CONGRESS, TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU FEEL PARTISAN POLARIZATION IS TAKING PLACE IN YOUR STATE LEGISLATURE?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MUCH LESS POLARIZED (1)</th>
<th>SAME (3)</th>
<th>FAR MORE POLARIZED (5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natl. average</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WASHINGTON</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OREGON</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MARYLAND</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OKLAHOMA</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
HIGHLIGHTS (CONTINUED)

QUESTION: HOW DOES THE FOLLOWING HYPOTHESIZED CAUSE OF INCIVILITY TEND TO PLAY OUT IN YOUR STATE LEGISLATURE? “LEGISLATORS’ RESPECT FOR LEGISLATIVE TRADITIONS AND NORMS AND CUSTOMS IS LOW”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STRONGLY AGREE (1)</th>
<th>AGREE (2)</th>
<th>DISAGREE (3)</th>
<th>STRONGLY DISAGREE (4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natl. average</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WASHINGTON</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OREGON</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALASKA</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MASSACHUSETTS</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

QUESTION: “REACHING ACROSS THE AISLE (trust-building)”: FAVOR VISITING OTHER LEGISLATORS FROM THE OPPOSING PARTY IN THEIR LEGISLATIVE DISTRICT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POOR IDEA (1)</th>
<th>UNCERTAIN (3)</th>
<th>EXCELLENT IDEA (5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natl. average</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WASHINGTON</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OREGON</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEW HAMPSHIRE</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INDIANA</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: PACIFIC NORTHWEST LEGISLATORS VIEWED AS OPEN TO ACROSS-THE-AISLE TRUSTING BUILDING
I feel that legislators from "safe" districts occasionally behave too forcefully; however, I feel this is much less of a problem in WA than at the Federal level.

Legislative testimony seems to be much more subjective and less based on fact now than was the case in the not so distant past. There is a considerable amount of “performing for the camera” because TVW video-taping is taking place at all major hearings.

In the same way that the political parties have moved to the Left and to the Right nationally, that is happening in Washington too. There is less middle ground visible to both sides today than was the case in the past.

The “Statesman” is all but extinct; contemporary legislators seem much more concerned with pending elections and mere appearances than in crafting good public policy than was once the case.

It seems as though younger lobbyists, legislators and staff do not fully respect the "institution" of the legislature.
ONE MAJOR AREA OF CONCERN NOT FEATURED IN THE SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

Insight from sharing survey results with group of experienced Washington state legislative lobbyists; concern have been raised, genuine efforts underway to sustain the tradition of collaborative public policy making being made in Washington

- Negative effects reported on collaborative public policy processes
  - Good faith bargaining actors more difficult to engage
  - Less inclination of legislative committees to accept negotiated legislation
  - Less deference to the process, and more “grand-standing” by legislators
  - Less reliance on legislative staff “institutional memory” for guidance
FURTHER READING: WSU PRESS

Civility and Democracy in America
A Reasonable Understanding

Edited by Cornell W. Clayton and Richard Elgar
THANK YOU FOR YOUR KIND ATTENTION

QUESTIONS? COMMENTS?

CONTACT INFORMATION

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