

POLITICAL SCIENCE CONVOCATION 2015: CIVILITY IN POLITICS

This weekend a lot of people are probably telling you to go out and make a better world. But how? You have acquired a first-class university education with a specialization in political science, so I think you have some knowledge and skills that should be useful in that endeavor. You know something about government and governance; about democratic processes and politics, and how these vary a lot over time and across different political systems. You know something about what determines how people think and act in politics, you know about legislation, policy-making, judicial decision-making, executive action, and something about the differences and interactions among these.

So here's a problem I've been thinking about that you will face as citizens (regardless of where you hold your citizenship) and that you might be prepared to help solve.

Civility. Civility in politics. We don't have much of it around.

Look at the US Congress. They can't seem to communicate with each other in a civil fashion either in public, where they are supposed to engage in some amount of partisan shadow play, or in private, where they traditionally work together more constructively. Supreme Court decisions over the past decade sometimes show a stunning lack of judicial decorum. We have seen a

brehtaking lack of respect by some members of the US Congress for the President of the United States.

But my biggest concern is the lack of civility – almost the disdain for civility – in so-called civil life today. The *advocacy press* from which so many people derive their information about politics promote this --Fox and MSNBC and much worse, where good news coverage is people screaming at each other or giving one-sided, snarling coverage filled with loaded words and symbols. But it's not just them – it's us.

Look at any electronic news or information outlet – and not just the one-sided advocacy press -- that allows blogging and commenting you see people bashing each other in the most uncivil way within a couple of responses. It doesn't matter where – the high quality press, *BU Today* -- within a couple of comments, they quickly turn nasty, even venomous. Social media in all of its varieties allows people to say just about anything in just about any way to just about any one, and immediately without careful thought or consideration for the other and other ideas, and they do. One person sends out a Tweet someone else finds objectionable, and a war breaks out. We are facing a battleground culture in public discourse in which people respond to each other with visceral reactions to any idea, observation, or interpretation with which they disagree at first encounter.

Democratic deliberation -- the real foundation of democracy -- depends on the ability to listen and interact, on acting as though reaching a decision together across difference is the goal. Democratic politics is our messy, difficult, often frustrating process for reaching conclusions together as a people over consequential things when we don't agree on all the important elements.

So, with your education, can you help promote civility in politics to raise our level of democratic deliberation? How can you do this, in your lives and in your future professions?

The real answer is that I'm not going to give you an answer because I can't. Other than saying don't participate in communication by flaming, we have to struggle together for an answer

Civility in politics is not a simple matter of being polite and discussing things nicely. Here's why not:

First, we can't limit ourselves to discussing things nicely in politics. Social movements, strikes, boycotts, symbolic action – a host of important forms of political action are based on more vigorous actions than talking nicely.

And second, civility has always been in the eye of the beholder. At one time (and still in some places today), if a woman merely made a speech

about politics in public, in mixed company, no matter how politely she might speak, her mere presence in the public arena was regarded as uncivil. Cultures and subcultures differ in their definition of civility.

"Civility" is not easy to achieve, not because people get hot-tempered in politics (which they do) or because they haven't learned all the rules "properly" (which they haven't). Civility is difficult to achieve in any setting in which people have differences of status, history, culture, or interests. In other words, civility is difficult when we most need it for political deliberation.

Promoting political civility does not mean finding a method of decision-making that transcends clashes of interests and viewpoints. We can't. But we need to find a way to have those tough arguments and debates in a way that still allows listening and learning – decision-making together that will allow our existence together to be sustainable. Achieving civility, for better or worse, requires engaging in political process of deliberation to be able to deliberate. In real life, there is no meta-language for politics. Civility is of politics; not above it.

Political Science Class of 2015, congratulations and good luck with all that!

