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**Youth Attitudes toward Civility in Politics**

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## Youth Attitudes toward Civility in Politics

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July 2010

Concerns about partisanship are as old as the American Republic, but many citizens and reporters detect rising levels of acrimony today. Political rhetoric on television and radio programs seems especially shrill. In the wake of the summer town hall meetings of 2009, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman pondered “whether we can seriously discuss serious issues any longer and make decisions on the basis of the national interest.” A few months later, a Republican congressman shouted, “You lie!” during a presidential address, and a Democratic congressman warned sick people that Republicans “want you to die quickly.”

Brookings Institution scholar Darrell West has suggested we have entered an “arms race of incendiary rhetoric, and it’s quickly reaching the point of mutually assured destruction.”

In a recent report entitled, *Nastiness, Name-calling & Negativity: The Allegheny College Survey of Civility and Compromise in American Politics*, the authors found that average citizens are upset about incivility, although they differ by ideology, gender, and media use. (For example, those who listen to talk or news radio are much more likely to perceive incivility than those who read a newspaper.) This report focuses on the newest generation of voters. We find that they differ from their older counterparts, being less likely to believe that civility is possible, less ashamed about recent incivility, but more supportive of compromise and more optimistic about higher education’s role in promoting civility.

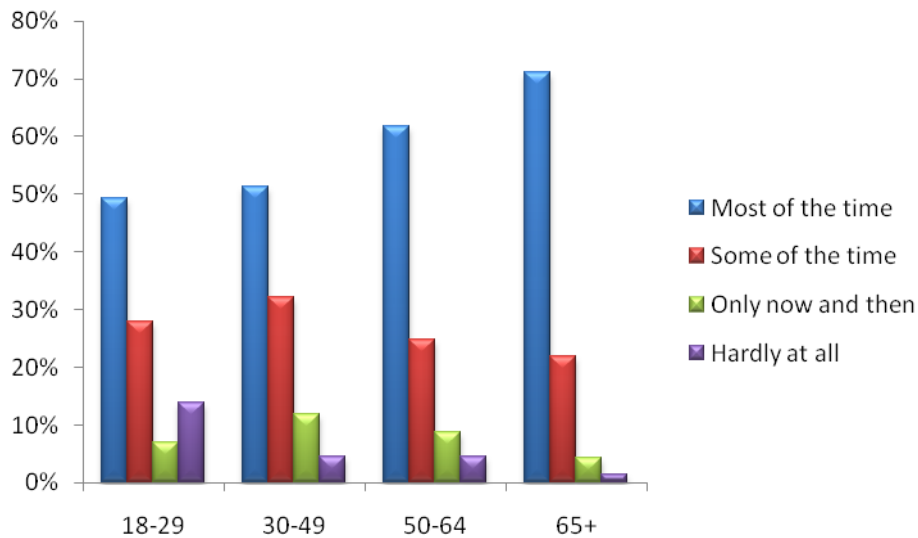
The full original report can be found at <http://sites.allegheny.edu/civility/>. The Survey was conducted in April 2010, of 1,000 nationally-representative, randomly-selected Americans to gauge attitudes and perceptions of civility in politics, with a margin of error of +/- 3.2 percentage points.<sup>ii</sup>

This study, one of the first of its kind, was intended to move beyond anecdotal evidence and punditry to get at the heart of public perceptions regarding the tone of contemporary politics. Our findings suggest nearly universal recognition of the problem and a growing concern about the implications of an uncivil body politic. Further, the findings cast blame at a number of institutions, but also give reasons for optimism. Generational differences exist in the attitudes and feelings we measured. A profile of respondents follows in Appendix A.<sup>iii</sup>

## Measures and Attitudes of Civility

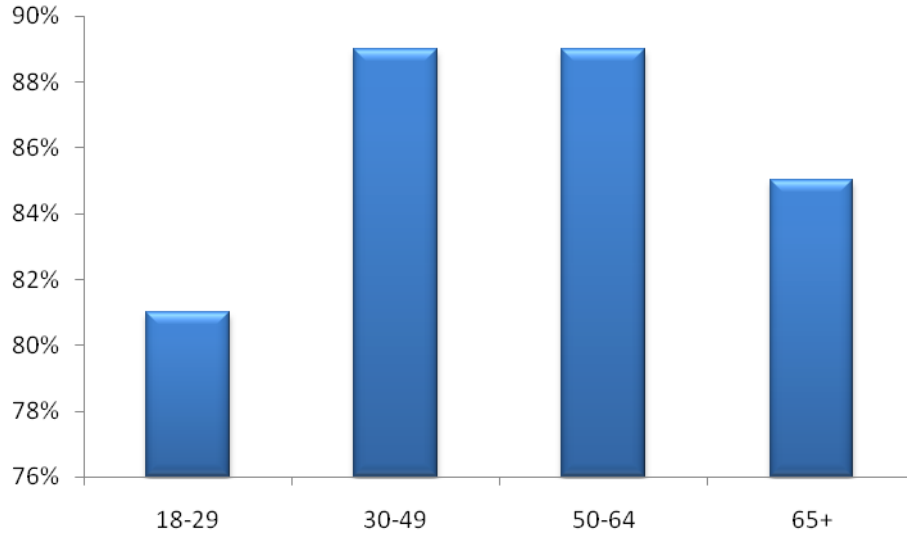
The Survey measured the extent to which the American public is paying attention to politics. Figure 1 reports the findings of this question. Overall, 58 percent of Americans suggest they follow politics “most of the time,” with another 28 percent saying they pay attention “some of the time.” Generational differences exist. Older Americans are clearly more tuned in than are those under 30. Even so, the strong figures for the younger generation buttress the notion that politics is important for all Americans.

**Figure 1: Paying Attention to Politics by Age Category**



We also asked about the possibility of civil politics, given the nature of issues and partisanship in America. Specifically, we asked, “Many people in this country—politicians included—hold strong views on certain issues. Given the difficulty and often personal nature of these issues, do you believe it is possible for people to disagree respectfully, or are nasty exchanges unavoidable?” We found some variance when the respondent’s age was introduced, as noted in Figure 2. The age group least likely to see respectful politics possible in today’s climate was young citizens. Conversely, respondents over the age of 30 were more likely to view polite politics as possible.

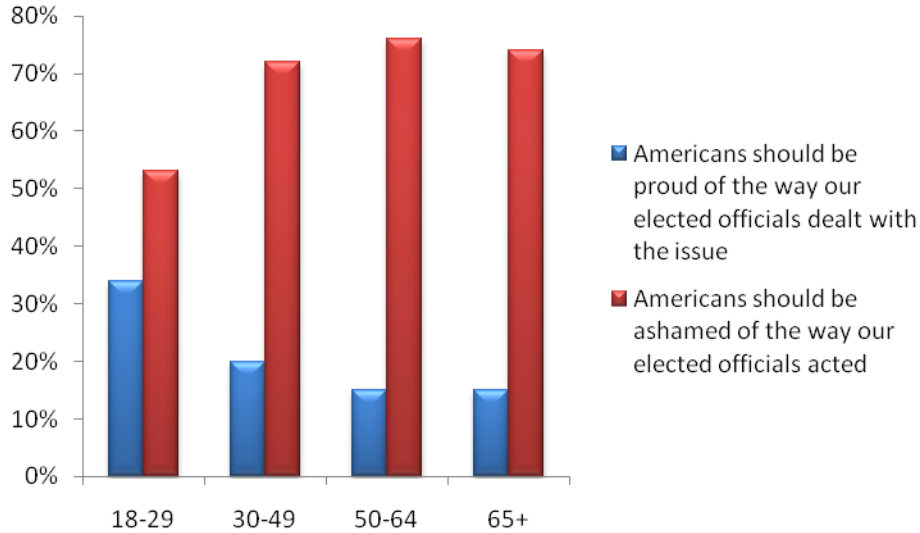
**Figure 2: Is it Possible to Disagree Respectfully? Percent Answering 'Yes' By Age Category**



The survey does not allow us to tell why young citizens are less likely to see respectful politics as possible, compared to older Americans. More research is needed to understand a generation that sees such conduct as inevitable.

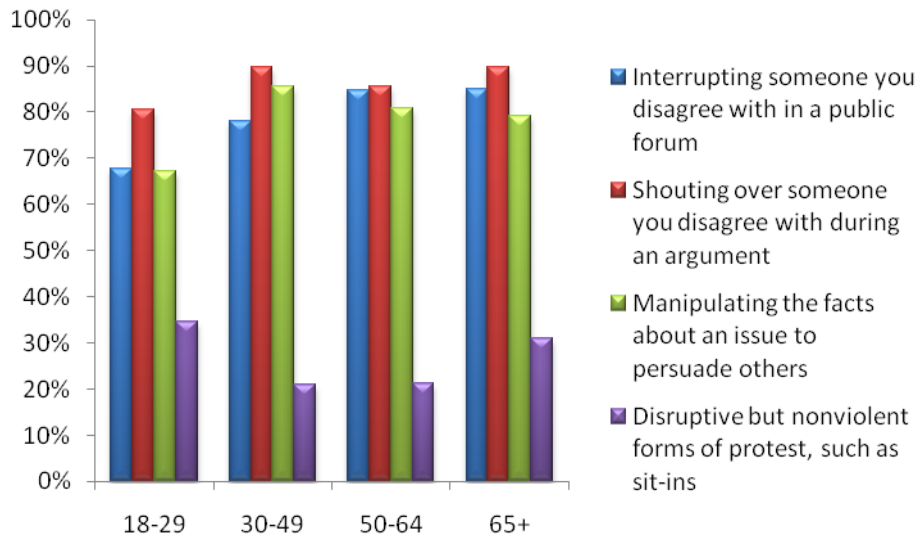
We also asked respondents about the recent health reform debate. Respondents in the older generations were much more likely to feel that Americans should be ashamed of the recent health reform process, as Figure 3 shows.

**Figure 3: Perception of Recent Health Care Debate, by Age Category**



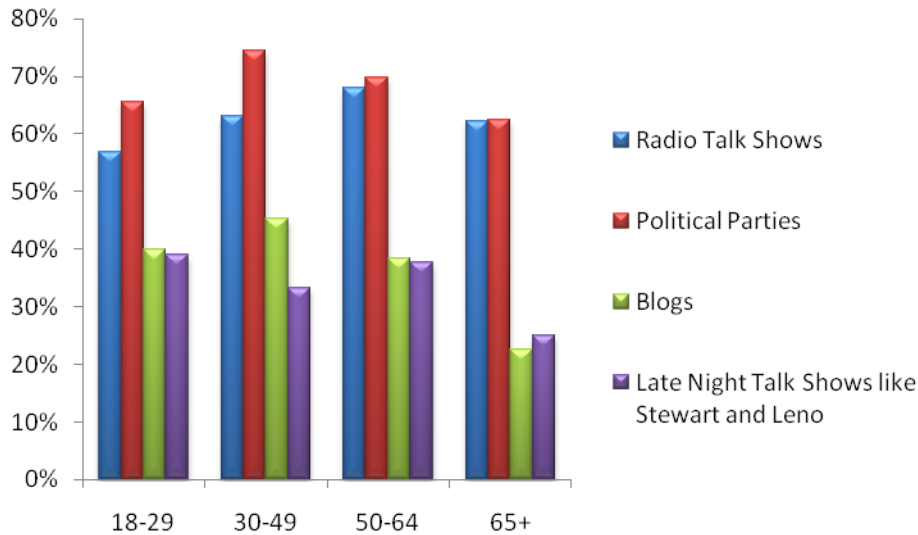
We also asked respondents to categorize public behaviors as civil or uncivil. Age group differences exist in their responses, as suggested in Figure 4. The youngest respondents were the least likely to characterize some of the public behaviors (interrupting, shouting, and manipulating others) as uncivil. Yet this age group, along with the oldest respondents, were the most likely to view disruptive yet nonviolent acts, such as sit-ins, as uncivil.

**Figure 4: Uncivil Behaviors, by Age Category**

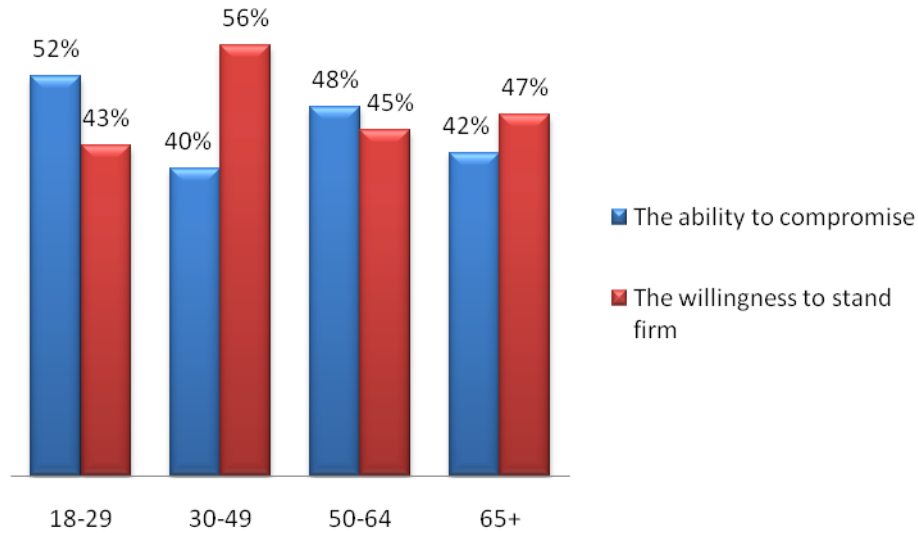


We also found notable age group differences in assigning who is to blame for a rise in incivility. For example, as shown in Figure 5 below, respondents in the oldest age category do not blame blogs as readily as the younger generation. As well, younger respondents do not blame radio talk shows as heavily as older respondents. This may be a reflection of the age of the audience of these two outlets.

**Figure 5: What's to Blame? By Age Category**

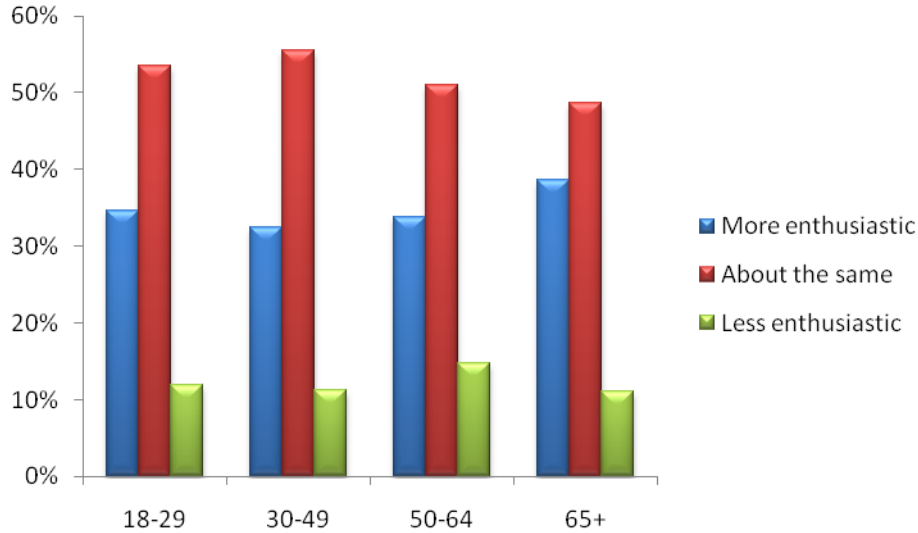


Compromise is another key issue in contemporary politics that the Survey measured. We asked, "Which do you think is more important in a politician: the ability to compromise to get things done, or a willingness to stand firm in support of principles?" The respondent's age was quite important for this issue, as highlighted in Figure 6. Our survey suggests that young people (ages 18–29) were considerably more likely to prefer compromise than members of older generations. More than 52 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds chose compromise, compared to 39.9 percent of 30- to 49-year-olds, 47.7 percent of 50- to 64-year-olds, and 42.5 percent of those 65 and older.

**Figure 6: Compromise or Stand Firm by Age**

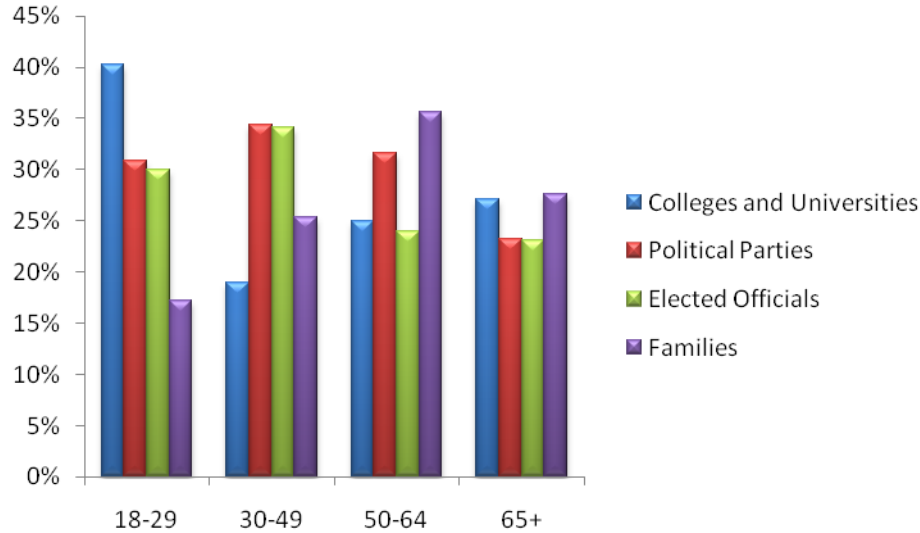
Whether this difference was truly generational, or potentially related to ideology (young people were considerably more likely to self-identify as liberal or progressive than members of other age groups) remains unclear. But given the other unique characteristics of the Millennial Generation—e.g., their strong commitment to volunteerism and community service and overwhelming 2008 preference for Obama, whom they saw as a consensus-builder—a generational tendency toward compromise is certainly possible.

We also found that the excitement generated by Barack Obama’s campaign may again bring young voters to the polls in 2010. As highlighted by Figure 7, the percentage of 18- to 29- year-olds who responded that they were “much more enthusiastic” and “somewhat more enthusiastic” about the 2010 elections than previous elections was on par with the older age groups.

**Figure 7: Interest in Voting in 2010, by Age Category**

Identifying problems related to incivility is one thing; solving them is another. Near the end of the survey, we asked respondents a series of questions regarding which institutions are responsible for ameliorating political incivility. Age affected perceptions regarding who should play leading roles in making politics more civil, with respondents between 18 and 29 more likely than any other age group to select educational institutions as most important (Figure 8). It seems that today's young adults feel that campuses are crucial arenas in which Americans can learn to participate in politics respectfully.



**Figure 8: Who Should Take a Lead Role in Making Politics more Civil? By Age Category**

## Conclusions

Hearteningly, there is near universal agreement that civil politics is essential for a healthy democracy. The Survey did find strong evidence of generational differences in attitudes toward civility in politics. As our results show, younger survey respondents are much less likely to feel that disagreeing in a respectful manner is possible, and less likely to think Americans should be ashamed about the way the health reform process was handled. Younger Americans felt the strongest that politicians should compromise, and were much more likely to have faith in educational institutions as a solution to incivility.

## Appendix A

### Profile of Respondents

Within the Survey, 196 respondents were under the age of 30. Our sample of young respondents fairly represented a cross-section of the American public. Approximately 38 percent of the respondents were women and 61 percent men. A strong majority of our young respondents did not have a college degree (74%), while approximately 25% had a college degree. The college degree rate for the entire sample follows in a table.

Age		% Holding College Degree	
18-29	196	18-29	25%
30-49	393	30-49	43%
50-64	226	50-64	31%
65 +	167	65 +	19%

Clearly, party identification and ideology among our respondents is an important consideration.

#### Party Affiliation and Ideology – 18-29 year-olds

Democratic	42%	Liberal	41%
Republican	19%	Conservative	29%
Independent	28%	Moderate	29%

#### Party Affiliation and Ideology – 30-49 year-olds

Democratic	36%	Liberal	30%
Republican	34%	Conservative	38%
Independent	26%	Moderate	33%

#### Party Affiliation and Ideology – 50-64 year-olds

Democratic	35%	Liberal	20%
Republican	32%	Conservative	50%
Independent	30%	Moderate	30%

#### Party Affiliation and Ideology – 65+

Democratic	45%	Liberal	22%
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Republican	34%	Conservative	50%
Independent	18%	Moderate	28%

The racial and ethnic make-up of our sample follows in these tables:

Race / Ethnicity, 18-29 year olds

White	58%
African-American	17%
Asian	6%
Other	6%
Hispanic/Latino	13%

Race / Ethnicity, 30-49 year olds

White	74%
African-American	11%
Asian	1%
Other	1%
Hispanic/Latino	13%

Race / Ethnicity, 50-64 year olds

White	83%
African-American	10%
Asian	1%
Other	2%
Hispanic/Latino	5%

## Race / Ethnicity, 65+

White	75%
African-American	18%
Asian	1%
Other	0%
Hispanic/Latino	6%

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<sup>ii</sup> Zogby International conducted a telephone survey written by Allegheny College's Center for Political Participation of 1,000 randomly selected Americans between March 24-29, 2010.

Weighting by region, party, age, education, race, religion and gender was used to adjust for non-response. The overall margin of error is +/- 3.2 percentage points.

<sup>iii</sup> In Appendix A and throughout the report, the results of weighted data are reported.

CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) conducts research on the civic and political engagement of Americans between the ages of 15 and 25.

CIRCLE was founded in 2001 with a generous grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts and is now also funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, and several others. It is based at the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service at Tufts University.

