

Democratic Expeditions

Against Polarisation: Reconstructing Civility

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The Problem of Civility

Lost Civility

Appeals to civility may seem quaint and old-fashioned in our moment of democratic crisis. Many on the left see it as unacceptably conservative, a regressive tool of “respectability politics” (Cherry 2021; Eltahawy 2019). Similarly, those in the far-right, “post-liberal” Catholic movement known as “Integralism” describe civility as a misguided obstacle to the power politics they practise (Ahmari 2019). Meanwhile, right-wing authoritarians like Donald Trump replace civil rhetoric with threats to use state power to punish rivals and persecute critics, whom Trump describes as the “enemy from within” (Hubbard, Rosen, and Huey-Burns 2024).

Presumably, gestures of unity and tolerance have no place in such apocalyptic politics. Is civility obsolete? On the contrary, we believe it’s a vital resource for civic renewal in challenged democracies.

Polarisation and Conflict

Today’s growing partisan divides threaten democracies. As they become more rigidly polarised, citizens’ trust in government and each other erodes (Schedler 2023). As a result, communication between opposing groups breaks down, normalising chronic conflict and dysfunction and increasing the likelihood of violence. This process reinforces partisan identity, which increasingly dominates how citizens understand every aspect of their lives, from religion to lifestyle choices. Such political “mega-identities” stifle civility and dialogue (Levendusky 2023, 30) and even undermine like-minded political movements through internal division and gridlock (Talissee 2021).

When everything is politicised, compromise between and within groups is perceived as capitulation to the enemy. Unlike “adversaries,” “enemies” no longer see each other as legitimate opponents. Politics comes to be seen as war by other means. What seems needed, then, are “partisan strategies that cut across social identities” in order “to avoid the tribal lock-in that makes partisan identity such an anti-democratic force” (Ruckelhaus 2022).

Reimagining Civility

Civility can help redress the crisis of polarisation. It can serve as an antidote to the paralysing monopoly of partisan identity and help to reinvigorate democratic culture: “the key to the establishment of stable political institutions lies in civil society, and specifically in the presence of a ‘civic culture’ in local communities” (Sakwa 2012).

So, what exactly is civility?

By being civil, citizens express their commitment to democracy as a valuable way of life and not only as a system of government. Civil citizens don’t always agree, nor are they always pleasant or courteous. But they share an aspiration to live and work together as equals in a free society despite their many differences, even when it’s difficult.

The main purpose of civility is to *sustain relationships among citizens that leave room for the possibility of change*. Such relationships make effective communication and compromise possible. Citizens who value them therefore refrain from treating their differences as being absolute or set in stone.

Those who practise civility may still see and treat each other as competitors. What makes them civil is their commitment to seeing and treating each other as co-creators of a shared, undecided future. This creates strong reasons to tolerate challenges to one’s views or values that might otherwise provoke uncivil responses.

In contrast, the essence of *incivility* is the refusal to treat someone as capable of being or acting differently. To treat another as lacking the capacity for change is to deny that they qualify as a whole person, as someone who is never hopelessly defined by their past actions or by the perceptions of others.

Practical Steps

In deeply divided societies, some of the best practices of civility involve cross-cutting strategies for building connections, especially between political opponents, that bring them back into relationship with each other.

Relational Organising

Effective civic action often seeks to build and leverage strong relationships across citizens’ differences. One example is a style of grassroots activism called “relational organising,” or peer-to-peer, “word-of-mouth activism” (IGNITE National 2022). It is a method for mobilising voters, recruiting donors, and activating volunteers.

Relational organisers use existing communication channels to grow a movement by nurturing connections between its supporters and their fellow community members (NAACP 2020).

Such techniques demonstrate the centrality of relationships to democratic life. But relational organising tends to focus on forging connections among like-minded people. Civility draws on many of the techniques of relational organising, such as deep and active listening (LWV 2020), but widens the lens. It seeks to build relationships not just among like-minded citizens but across political divides. Research shows this to be feasible even in deeply polarised societies (Levendusky 2023).

Co-operatives

The value of civility is also illustrated by the co-operative movement of nineteenth-century socialist workers. Consider the Belgian socialist co-operative “Vooruit” (Forward), which began in 1881 as a co-operative bakery. Through shrewd financial management, the co-operative expanded its activities to include a health fair, clothing stores, and pharmacies. In its heyday before the economic crisis of the 1930s, the co-operative offered its members maternity allowance and supplementary pensions.

This cross-cutting strategy helped mobilise impoverished Belgian workers to defend themselves against the dominant Catholic party that effectively demonised the workers’ movement through the church. The co-operative’s services cut across entrenched divisions between “good Catholics” and “unbelievers.”

Such initiatives address the populist complaint that “elites don’t show up here or care about us.” They restore the kind of interpersonal contact across partisan identities that invites engagement and fosters empathy.

Co-operative Service Centres

Today’s challenged democracies could benefit from a similar approach. Pro-democracy organisations could establish co-operative service centres dedicated to meeting the concrete needs of those who are vulnerable to partisan or populist radicalisation in underserved areas. For example, through a network of health care services, co-operatives could provide members with medical check-ups, health consultations, or access to prescription drugs at reduced, affordable prices.

Another need that these centres could focus on is food, which is especially important in so-called “food deserts.” Co-op members could be offered quality baked goods, fresh fruits and vegetables, and access to nutrition information and cooking classes.

Such community outreach could create conditions for civility by restoring contact between members of politically opposing groups, thereby undercutting the corrosive politics of enmity on which authoritarian movements rely.

Such outreach efforts would extend civility across the differences that exist in the communities served. The emphasis would fall on preserving the possibilities of ongoing relationships between citizens seen as whole persons, based on the hope of future partnership.

Restarting Conversation

Two case studies dramatise the ethical spirit of these interventions.

Case 1: Daryl Davis

Daryl Davis is a Black American musician who has spent decades building personal relationships with members of the Ku Klux Klan, a notorious white supremacist organisation with deep and violent roots in post-Civil War American history (Brown 2017). For thirty-five years, Davis has used the tools of persuasion through respectful, often intense dialogue to convince hundreds of Klansmen to leave the insular hate group. Davis proudly owns more than two hundred hooded white robes, the Klan's ceremonial garb, which former members have surrendered to him as a token of respect.

Davis models civility and its limits, too. He is an avowed non-pacifist cautiously prepared to defend himself against possible physical harm. And he's hardly open to being convinced that his interlocutors' racist views are sound. What makes him civil is his openness to changing his mind about his interlocutors and about his relationship with them. By demonstrating to his interlocutors that he sees them as capable of being something other than his enemies, he invites them to take the same risk.

Davis's case is extraordinary. Most opportunities for civility in non-violent social situations do not involve such extreme risks or rewards. But his successful record reminds us that democracy as a way of life is an everyday possibility, and that practising civility means seeking relationships of equality across deep differences.

Case 2: Hand in Hand

Hand in Hand is a bilingual Arabic-Hebrew school located in Jerusalem (Beardsley 2024). Its multicultural curriculum brings Jewish and Arab students together to share knowledge and experiences in defiance of the strict separation between Jews and Arabs typical within

Israeli society. The forms of intergroup contact practised at Hand in Hand are those that have proven effective in breaking down stereotypes and reducing prejudice in many other contexts (McLeod 2023).

Hand in Hand's approach to education embodies the spirit of civility by building relationships of mutual concern across dangerous divides through active habits of careful listening and learning. Competing cultural stories and identities are brought into conversation with one another. Through face-to-face dialogue, students learn that stories other than their own are believable, and that rewarding relationships with those who are different are possible. The school's Principal proclaims, "We're strengthening shared values, the possibility of a different life." This is the essence of civility.

Conclusion

Polarisation encourages and rewards incivility, which in turn undermines democratic practices, values, and institutions. Its corrosive effects can therefore be reduced by strengthening the habits of civility. The strategy we propose builds relationships across partisan divides both by using institutions and by challenging citizens to listen and learn across their differing views and values. Relationship-oriented activism, labour movements, and everyday examples of intergroup contact offer inspiring and effective models for promoting democracy through civility in action.

Habits and Practices of Civility

- Deep and active listening across differences
- Treating perceived differences as changeable (not set in stone)
- Tolerating or welcoming challenges to one's political position or perspective
- Bringing contrasting stories and identities into open conversation
- Valuing opportunities to build relationships across differences over opportunities to defeat, sideline, or silence dissenting voices

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