



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, and the policies, process and politics that shape them.

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Exploring Civility | July 18, 2021 | OAS Episode 136

Ed: Hello and welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast from the National Conference of State Legislatures. This podcast is all about legislatures: the people in them, the policies, process and politics that shape them. I’m your host, Ed Smith.

“There is less and less engagement actually going on. There’s this kind of peculiar phenomenon in American politics now where very often we’ll seem to be engaging and more specifically disagreeing with those with whom we differ in politics, or let’s say religion, or even culture. The politics of popular culture now is increasingly controversial terrain. But we seem to be engaging, we seem to be having a disagreement, but in fact we’re not actually addressing our opponents. We’re sort of speaking over their heads to our imagined co-partisans.”

Ed: That was Teresa Behan, an associate professor of political theory and a fellow at Oriel College at the University of Oxford. Bejan is my guest on the podcast. Bejan has written extensively on the notion of civility in politics and is the author of *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration*, published in 2017.

Bejan, who will be the keynote speaker at NCSL’s online Base Camp event in August, discussed how civility works in politics, how she differentiates between civility and talking about civility, the polarized state of our politics, and more. Here’s our discussion.

Dr. Bejan, welcome to the podcast.

Bejan: Thanks for having me.

Time Marker (TM): 01:48

Ed: Well first, thanks for taking the time to be on the podcast and also thanks for being my first transatlantic guest with you in the UK and me in Colorado. You'll be speaking at NCSL's Base Camp event on August 4th. Your topic is civility. But after reading several of your articles and watching a TED Talk you did, your view of civility is probably a little different than many in the audience might think.

So, why don't we start there. What do you mean by civility?

Bejan: Well, firstly, I just want to congratulate you on a great question because I find that very often, we'll talk a lot about civility and never really bother to ask what it is we're talking about.

When I talk about civility, I have in mind a conversational virtue; that means a kind of ideal or sort of aspirational standard of behavior between people having a conversation. But unlike other conversational virtues maybe like respect or politeness, civility has three peculiar features.

The first feature is that it pertains to disagreement in particular. So, we want conversational partners to be civil when they're disagreeing first and foremost. Secondly, it applies to people who stand in a peculiar kind of relation.

So, the word civility comes actually from Latin, which means civil society or state. We should think then of the people who are meant to be engaging in civil disagreement as those who are sharing a civil society or state. So, they might be co-citizens, or they might just be neighbors or cohabitants, but they're sharing a particular kind of society.

And then the third feature of civility, which I think is really crucial, is that it has a decidedly minimal character. To be merely civil is to be something less than polite or nice or respectful. It's a low, but solid, bar that we expect from people when they're participating in a disagreement with their co-citizens. It's a floor, not a ceiling, but nevertheless it's crucial for all that.

TM: 03:58

Ed: So, to follow up on that, I want to quote you to you from an article you wrote for the *Washington Post* shortly after the inauguration of Donald Trump, whose presidency, of course, has prompted a lot of discussion about civility.

Referring to Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island, you said what he saw as *"necessary to hold a tolerant society together was less a matter of avoiding insult than cultivating the mental toughness to tolerate what we perceive as our opponent's incivility; to live with them and continue to engage even when we think them irredeemable."*

So, civility is not about being nice. It's about being willing to engage with those we disagree with. Aren't we doing that in American politics today?

Bejan: I think the answer to that question depends on what we understand by engagement. I agree with you that, in theory and certainly in practice, engaging with those with whom we disagree very seriously is what we should be doing in American politics. Very often it seems to be what we're doing, but I would argue that, in fact, there is less and less engagement going on.

There is this kind of peculiar phenomenon in American politics now where very often we'll seem to be engaging and more specifically disagreeing with those with whom we differ in politics, or I'll say religion, or even culture. I mean, the politics of popular culture now actually is increasingly controversial terrain.

We seem to be having a disagreement but, in fact, we're not actually addressing our opponents. We're sort of speaking over their heads to our imagined co-partisans in the background. So, instead of engagement, what we get is a kind of talking past or talking at, which is usually about signaling to those with whom we agree that we are on the right side, or some indicating to them what side we're on.

Now, I think that this is true especially of just citizens in American democracy today, but I think you see the same phenomenon among representatives, where they're sort of performing for the audience at home even when they're nominally engaging face-to-face with an opponent.

TM: 06:14

Ed: In another article you wrote, you suggest that the Greek word stasis might be the best way to describe political polarization in the U.S. As I understand it, this is the notion that our partisan identities are more important than any other relationships. Can you talk about that notion and how we got here?

Bejan: Absolutely. It's been my lifelong dream to have the sort of job which allows me to draw on ancient Greek concepts and distinctions and then try to convince my co-citizens that they're nevertheless relevant to 21st century politics. This is one of those attempts.

The concept of stasis comes from ancient Greek. Actually, in modern Greek it's just the word for bus stop. It means standing or standing still, but in the sense that you alluded to, in politics stasis is a state of affairs where those who should be standing together as part of one political community are, in fact, standing apart and have become partial, separate political communities.

And yes, I would argue that we see this today with American partisanship and polarization. We no longer have one polity; we have two. And people feel themselves to be members of a party over and above being members of a society or state.

In terms of how we got here, I'm very clear in my book and elsewhere that I don't see the sort of crisis of civility particularly on social media, let's say. I don't see that as the cause of our ills. I rather see it as a symptom that then intensifies a kind of preexisting ... You know, as with any political phenomenon, it's multicausal and complicated. But I do think what built the ship called the big sort is crucially at work here, the idea that American partisans over the past few decades have increasingly begun to sort themselves geographically in terms of their ideological belonging.

So, effectively you have a kind of geographical segregation of the United States. Sometimes this is fashioned as a rural/urban divide. In any case, the end result is that members of one particular party will just not really have much to do every day with a member of a different party. We just don't really interact with one another except through this kind of representation of television, other media and, more and more today, through social media and online.

So, we're no longer sort of sharing a society together. We are sharing a society with those we see as the likeminded. There's another good Greek word for that, which is *homonoiia* – likeminded. That imagined community is the one which we increasingly feel that we owe our allegiance.

Ed: Thanks, Dr. Bejan. We're going to take a quick break and then come back with the rest of our discussion.

MUSIC and Gene VO

NCSL's Legislative Summit is back. Connect with your colleagues November 3rd through the 5th in sunny Tampa, Florida to gain unique insights and practical knowledge to drive results for your state. Early-bird pricing is available through August 31st. Register today at nctl.org.

TM: 09:40

Ed: I'm back with Dr. Teresa Bejan. You've written about the idea that incivility in our public discourse is nothing new. In fact, you point to Martin Luther and his invective against the Pope and Catholics as a 500-year-old example.

Is what we're experience in the U.S. now simply a continuation of a centuries-old trend, or is something about it unique to our times?

Bejan: Certainly, as an historian of political thought as well as a political theorist, I'm in the business of pointing out continuities and saying that there's nothing new under the sun and perhaps there is some wisdom yet to be gleaned from these more ancient sources.

That isn't to say though that just because a problem is precedented, that it's nonetheless not a problem or that there aren't peculiar features of the modern situation. Certainly, I do think that technologies like social media intensify problems that we've encountered before.

In my book, I talk about the disruptive effects of the printing press in the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe, and I think that you see an analogous destruction today with social media. But I would argue that the historical perspective, it doesn't show that our problems are exactly the same as those that have come before, but it should nevertheless encourage us to see the problems we're encountering as features rather than bugs of the human condition, if you will.

They're the sort of problems that continually recur and therefore we have to find means of managing or mitigating rather than sort of flagellating ourselves for somehow failing to have solved something that actually is pretty intractable. Maybe we can give ourselves a bit more credit then, when we encounter problems that really are difficult.

TM: 11:32

Ed: Our audience, of course, is state legislators, legislative staff and others interested in state policy. For people involved in the day-to-day work of legislating and governing, what's the most important idea they should take away from this discussion?

Bejan: Firstly, I'm just really honored and excited to be able to claim the attention of this audience, even if only for 20 minutes. I think I would want to emphasize two things, two related things.

One is a distinction that I make in my work between civility as a conversational virtue and what I call civility talk. Civility talk is something that we have quite a lot of in our public discourse now. On the one hand, we claim that there's a crisis of civility, and yet on the other hand, we talk about civility all the time.

But what I find really is that all of this talking about civility is very often an excuse for not practicing the civility. It's a way of accusing our opponents of somehow failing to be civil and therefore implicitly or explicitly justifying our own incivility in return.

So yes, that distinction, and it's related to another distinction that I highlight in my work and that I think is common sensical once you notice it, is that there's a reason that in English, the word disagreeable is a synonym for unpleasant. So, there's a kind of closed connection between disagreeing and having a kind of fractious, unpleasant feeling.

I mean, yes, there are those exceptional individuals and perhaps many of them are in state legislatures, who actually enjoy the kind of pugilistic cut-and-thrust of partisan disagreement. But I say for many of us, and I include myself in this, disagreement is uncomfortable. We sort of shy away from it. We don't seek it out.

There's also a reason why agreeable is a synonym for pleasant – we seek out the more agreeable company of the likeminded. And so, I just want to encourage your audience: talk less about civility. Do more civility. And I would identify doing more or practicing civility with cultivating the tolerance needed to withstand the disagreeableness of disagreement, to cultivate the habits of mind and the kind of character that allows us to enter the fray and tolerate the unpleasantness without immediately concluding the absolute worst about our opponents, which is also a very tempting thing to do.

Ed: I think the point you make is that being civil is actually a difficult process. You have to work at it. As you wrote about Roger Williams, he said you had to deal with people all the time you disagree with. I think you also wrote he thought a lot of them were going to hell. That's a pretty harsh view of the people you disagree with, but I guess the point is you have to deal with them.

TM: 14:49

Ed: So, before we wrap up, is there anything else you'd like to share with our audience?

Bejan: Well, I mean beyond the fact that in all things political, we could do worse than looking to the founder of Rhode Island, Roger Williams, as a kind of model... I do, as you say, point to him a lot in my work and I encourage your listeners to go read up on him. He's fascinating.

I think that the main thing I want to say to your audience is that this goes back to the idea of stasis that we talked about earlier and the idea that you put your partial identity above that of the kind of comprehensive identity; so, you put the party above the whole, i.e., the polity. But

there's something really curious about American democracy in that we're a federal republic. Right?

Federalism complicates that kind of relationship between parts and wholes. And I would just say again it is a feature, not a bug and it does I think allow for something in-between the whole and the part, which is the state. It's that kind of middle level, sort of meso level institution. And I would say that I think state politics is absolutely crucial for how most Americans kind of live in their experiences day-to-day.

I say to your listeners: thank you for your labors and also do your best to remember there's something really distinctive and special about this mesa level and try to resist the kind of seductive call of nationalizing our state politics. There be dragons.

I think the hope we have is on the state level and so, again, I'm just so excited to be able to address your audience.

TM: 16:33

Ed: The role of federalism is, of course, of keen interest to this audience, so I think they'll be very interested in what your take is on it.

Bejan: Preaching to the choir then.

Ed: Thanks again for your time. Take care.

MUSIC

Ed: And that concludes this edition of our podcast. We encourage you to review and rate our episodes on iTunes, Google Play or Spotify. You may also go to Google Play, iTunes or Spotify to have these episodes downloaded directly to your mobile device when a new episode is ready. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, this is Ed Smith. Thanks for listening and being part of "Our American States."