



THE
JUBILEE CENTRE
FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

Insight Series

Citizens' Relationships, Political Civility, and the Civic Virtue of Listening

Professor Nancy Snow

Director of the Institute for the Study of Human Flourishing

University of Oklahoma

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

Citizens' Relationships, Political Civility, and the Civic Virtue of Listening

Nancy E. Snow

Institute for the Study of Human Flourishing

The University of Oklahoma

Introduction

We live in a day and age in which incivility abounds. Not only are there incidents of incivility in everyday life, but also, incivility in the political sphere is increasingly evident. Insults are exchanged between candidates on nationally televised debates, members of ethnic groups are mocked and insulted during campaign rallies, nude photos of elected representatives are released to the public, smear tactics are used, and, in the worst cases, political violence has erupted – witness Hindu-Muslim violence in Narendra Modi's India. Against this backdrop, it is well worth asking what political civility is, and whether and how it can be attained in contemporary political life.¹

Questions about political civility prompted by its evident lack in today's world, however, point to an even deeper question: what is the appropriate relationship of citizens to one another in twenty-first century societies? Is it civic friendship, which might be conceptualized as a deep relationship of mutual respect and concern among citizens, political civility – arguably, a thinner relationship -- or something else?

A great deal has been written about civic friendship, political civility, and political incivility.² I do not plan to rehearse this literature here. Instead, I will offer reflections about alternatives to political civility in part I. In part II, I will engage with Andrew Peterson's recent conception of

¹ I do not mean to suggest that previous eras have always been characterized by political civility. See Rosenfeld (2019) for examples to the contrary. It seems that both political and everyday incivility have been exacerbated by the internet.

² See, for example, Ludwig (2020), Peterson (2019), Calhoun (2000), Boatwright, et. al. (2019), Sydnor (2019), Georgieva (2015, 2013), Stuckey and O'Rourke (2014), Brudney (2013), Woods (2013), Bentley (2013), Leontsini (2013), the excellent essays in Mower and Robison (2012), Maisel (2012), Jamieson and Hardy (2012), Hope (2013), Healy (2011), Calhoun (2000), and Orwin (1991).

political civility (see Peterson 2019), and in part III, amplify it by adding the following thesis: political civility can be recovered and nurtured by supplementation with the civic virtue of listening. A recent report by Burbidge, Briggs, and Reiss (2020) recommends teaching listening as a civic virtue. This innovative idea deserves our attention as we attempt to deepen our understanding of political civility and how to achieve it in our fractured era.

Before beginning, let us sketch some working definitions. I take ‘civic friendship’ to refer to a relatively robust relationship among citizens that is characterized by a commitment to shared values, and these values provide a normative basis for standards of social and political interaction. I take ‘political civility’ to be a ‘thinner’ relationship, characterized by interactions among citizens who do not necessarily share the same values.

Citizens’ Relationships in Twenty-First Century Liberal Democracies

What is the appropriate relationship for citizens to have with one another in the twenty-first century? Let me make clear that by this question, I mean to ask, “How, ideally, should citizens relate to each other *qua* citizens?” I do not mean to ask how citizens should relate to one another as private individuals or in their personal relationships, but as members of the same state or polity. The nature or form of the state or polity to which citizens belong no doubt will influence the answer. In a dictatorship, citizens will be expected to form very different sorts of relationships than in a liberal democracy. The appropriate relationship that I seek to clarify is that of citizens who are entitled to equal rights and responsibilities in a twenty-first century liberal democracy.

Many scholars argue that the notion of civic friendship, as sketched above, is the ideal form of political relationship that should exist among citizens. Aristotle is often invoked in attempts to delineate what civic friendship might look like. This question is tangled, for scholars of Aristotle disagree about whether he in fact had a conception of civic friendship (*koinonia philia*) or something else – for example, the belief that friendships of virtue are needed to achieve *eudaimonia* in a well-

functioning *polis*.³ One might think that, even if Aristotle did have a conception of civic friendship, it would not be *apropos* now, for the *polis* was united by a shared conception of the good, whereas today's liberal democracies are not. Moreover, traditionally "thin" liberal values, such as liberty, equality, mutual respect, toleration of differing lifestyles, and government neutrality with respect to religious beliefs, seem to be losing adherents in many democracies. The upshot of this line of thought is that we cannot easily envision citizens today united as comrades-in-arms in a common life structured by a shared set of values, be they the "thick" values of a shared conception of the good or the "thinner" values of liberal democracies. Some philosophers have mined the resources of other historical figures for inspiration as to what normatively defensible relationships among citizens might look like, and how they might be justified. For example, Hope (2013) looks to Kant's imperfect duties, and Brudney (2013) points to both Kant and Marx.⁴

Hope (2013, 44ff) makes an intriguing argument: a just society does not require civic friendship: all it requires is an absence of hostile behavior, coupled with a commitment to perform Kantian imperfect duties of care, concern, and vigilance so that all citizens receive adequate social support. Hope's concern is to argue that we can have a just society in the absence of robust civic friendship. Even without civic friendship, he maintains, it is possible that people would still be concerned about fellow citizens whose basic needs are not being met. He draws on Kantian imperfect duties of care, concern, and vigilance that are grounded in principles that reject neglect -- a clever way of making his case. Yet, writing of volunteers who provide social support services, Hope (2013, 50) acknowledges that: "Such volunteers act from a very wide range of dispositions, including

³ See Hope (2013, 42-44) on the debate between John Cooper, a proponent of the view that Aristotle had a conception of civic friendship, and Julia Annas and Malcolm Schofield, who argue to the contrary.

⁴ For Kant, perfect duties obligate us to do our duty on every occasion on which their performance is required. For example, I must always tell the truth, no matter the situation. By contrast, we have some latitude of choice in performing imperfect duties. For example, we have an imperfect duty to contribute to charity, but we may choose to do so when and as we wish, provided that we adopt as one of our ends a general policy of charitable giving.

dispositions of disgust, prejudice, pity, and other petty vices.” While admitting that those whose motives are morally better are, perhaps, more praiseworthy, he maintains that what is most important is that patterns of action that minimize or eradicate neglect and vulnerability are being performed.

I do not think we should agree. We can readily accept the need for patterns of action that minimize or eradicate neglect and vulnerability, but I believe that we should expect more from our fellow citizens. Certainly, it is unpleasant, to say the least, to live in a society in which citizens insult and denigrate each other – in which open hostility is in full force. But it is just as degrading, if not more so, to be the recipient of services provided by citizens who have the negative views that Hope describes. If I am entitled to food stamps or unemployment benefits, it is a violation of the ‘social bases of self-respect,’ to use Rawls (1971)’s term, if the government representative with whom I interact – a fellow citizen – greets me with thinly disguised disgust or prejudice. Moreover, those attitudes are more likely to erupt into displays of open hostility than either neutral or positive attitudes toward others. What is even worse, such attitudes are liable to be aggravated into open hostility or acts of violence by unscrupulous politicians pursuing morally dubious agendas. Race baiting has been a part of recent election campaigns in the United States, and I’ve already mentioned the religious violence wrought by Narendra Modi in India. Unfortunately, other cases can be called to mind, such as the resurgence of anti-Semitism in many places around the globe.

So I do not think we can rest content with a proposal that replaces civic friendship with the rejection of outright hostility among citizens, but permits them to retain the kinds of negative attitudes that can easily foster hostility and be manipulated for nefarious ends. In other words, the social bases of self-respect – what enable citizens to conceive of themselves as full and equal members of society – do not consist solely of the provision of actions and services that rectify injustice and social need. How these actions are performed and how the services are provided matters. Am I allocated food stamps with kindness and sympathy, or disapprovingly, and with mistrust? Is my experience at the polling place positive, or am I treated rudely and with suspicion? Am I greeted with icy stares and hostile silences when I attempt to participate in school board meetings, or are my opinions respected? We are now in the realm of the adverbial – how one does things expresses one’s attitudes and

character. How one is treated as a citizen impacts the quality of one's participatory experiences, and whether one perceives oneself as being treated respectfully and as an equal to one's peers. I suggest that the kinds of negative attitudes just described fall into the category of incivility, for they clearly communicate to fellow citizens that they are unwelcome participants in political life.

That said, I do not believe that we should forego articulating a conception of civic friendship that is appropriate for twenty-first century liberal democracies, though examining what that might look like is beyond the scope of this paper.⁵ Nor do I believe we need accede to Hope's view that all that is needed for a just society is the absence of open hostility, plus a commitment to Kantian imperfect duties. Instead, we should look to an intermediate path – cultivating political civility – as a “second best” to robust civic friendship (whatever that might look like in liberal democracies today), and a preferable alternative to a society that settles for appropriate patterns of action among citizens while allowing attitudes that convey negativity and disrespect.

Peterson's Account of Political Civility

Peterson (2019, 7) first distinguishes political civility from everyday civility, which has to do with manners, common courtesy, and basic decency in how we interact with others in our daily lives. Political civility is the virtue that regulates our actions and interactions in the specific sphere of political engagement. Peterson suggests that everyday civility is a prerequisite for political civility. Drawing mainly on the work of Howard Curzer, he adopts a broadly Aristotelian conception of civility as a civic virtue.⁶ According to this conception, civility is a mean between the excess of unfailing civility on one hand and incivility on the other. Political civility consists of two elements: (a) civil conduct, which is sincere engagement and interaction with others showing a commitment to open-mindedness; and (b) the emotional states of fellow-feeling and mutual well-wishing. These latter emotional states, Peterson (2019, 8) thinks, are essential for civic friendship. When citizens understand themselves in terms of civic friendship, he believes, civility is nourished.

⁵ See Ludwig (2020) for a magisterial work on recovering civic friendship.

⁶ See Peterson (2019, 9). Hereafter, I use the terms ‘civility’ and ‘political civility’ interchangeably.

Peterson is sensitive to many of the potential pitfalls surrounding political civility. For example, he argues against the notion that civility can be reduced to other concepts, such as tolerance or respect, and notes well that civility can be used to silence and further subjugate marginalized groups. He allows for cases of justified incivility, that is, situations in which the lack of sincere responsiveness and engagement with marginalized groups on the part of those in power can warrant uncivil responses (see Peterson 2019, 30-32). He also astutely comments on ‘spirals’ of civility and incivility. He notes that studies show that civil engagement begets more civil engagement. In addition, civil engagement can catalyze civil meta-interventions, that is, comments on the incivility of discourse. For example, civil meta-interventions in online discussion forums can sometimes prevent incivility from fomenting further incivility (Peterson 2019, 46).

Peterson (2019, 38-43) discusses civic friendship, and clearly understands his conception of political civility as capturing civic friendship or important elements of it. However, given the working definitions noted in the introduction, I want to suggest that Peterson’s conception can be viewed not as instantiating civic friendship, but as depicting a weaker type of relationship. In its weakness, I suggest, lies its greatest value.

Earlier I suggested that we understand ‘civic friendship’ to refer to a relatively robust relationship among citizens characterized by a commitment to shared values that provide a normative basis for standards of social and political interaction. I took ‘political civility’ to be a “thinner” relationship, characterized by interactions among citizens who do not necessarily share the same values. It seems to me that political civility, understood as an approach to political relationships in the absence of a commitment to shared values, is precisely what we need in today’s fractured world. Though political civility falls short of robust civic friendship as I’ve understood that relationship, the former can be an important pathway toward the latter.

Maisel (2012, 405-406) provides numerous examples of uncivil interactions among Tea Party Republicans and Democrats in the United States during the late 2000’s. Many of these remarks had to do with simple disagreements on policy issues; others were nasty personal attacks. Still others had to do with the propriety of questions about politicians’ religious commitments and how those

commitments impacted their policy stances. Maisel (2012, 406-407) raises the question of whether increased incivility violates basic American values. This question, I think, is too simplistic. We can and should recognize that incivility impacts values at several levels. First, it is true that the lack of mutual respect and decorum in public life violates what Maisel calls ‘American’ values, but they are values that he traces to the roots of liberal democratic theory. As such, the violation of these values has implications that are broader than so-called ‘American’ values. In short, incivility can damage the basic values of any liberal democracy. Name-calling, rudeness, personal attacks, and so on are just as detrimental to democratic life in the U.K. as in the U.S., in India, or in any other democratic society. They are detrimental precisely because they bespeak a lack of basic respect, not only for fellow citizens who are engaged in public discourse, but also for the public forums within which deliberative discourse and debate take place. Ideally, these forums are places for the serious discussion of policy issues and political principles, not sites for personal bullying and aggression.

A second level at which incivility impacts values is raised by the concerns about religious questioning that Maisel (2012, 405-406) reports. Americans are deeply divided on questions of religious identity, so much so that even raising questions about religion can seem deeply offensive to some citizens. Incivility, then, not only violates respect for persons and the democratic process (simply in virtue of its nastiness), but also exposes and expresses deep divisions over values. Incivility is at once a cause and a manifestation of social fragmentation, and an indication of far deeper disagreement over the basic values that citizens hold.

Given the value disagreements that incivility reflects and exacerbates, I believe that Peterson’s conception offers important guidance for moving toward political amity in the absence of shared agreement about basic values. In other words, we can view Peterson’s account of political civility as charting a course in the direction of civic friendship in the absence of widespread agreement about basic values.

Peterson’s conception of political civility consists of two elements: (a) civil conduct, which is sincere engagement and interaction with others showing a commitment to open-mindedness; and (b) the emotional states of fellow-feeling and mutual well-wishing. Consider first civil conduct. This is

not merely polite interaction, which can be civil, yet dismissive. It is, by contrast, sincere engagement and interaction with others. Doing this requires that I take you seriously as my interlocutor, that I neither denigrate nor politely dismiss your contribution to a discussion or debate. Moreover, my engagement with you must be committed to open-mindedness – I must not be antecedently disposed to dismiss your view out of hand without giving it a fair hearing. This does not mean that I am not entitled to views of my own, which can oppose yours. What it does mean is that I must genuinely seek to understand your perspective, even if I do not or cannot agree with it. If I cannot understand your perspective, despite my best efforts, I must still respect it. In brief, political civility forbids me from approaching your views with a denigrating or dogmatic mindset. It does not forbid me from disagreeing with you, but enjoins me to try to understand and at least to respect where you are coming from – your worldview, beliefs, values, goals, and so on.

Consider now the second element of Peterson’s view – the emotional states of fellow-feeling and mutual well-wishing. This adds an important dimension to political civility, and, as I will argue, can remedy what is lacking in Hope’s account, which allows negative attitudes among citizens to prevail as long as patterns of action address social injustices and vulnerabilities. One might think that the requirement that citizens have fellow-feeling and mutual well-wishing renders otiose the comments I made in the preceding paragraph – that one will not be denigrating or dogmatic in their approaches to fellow citizens if they have such positive feelings. But I do not think this need be the case, unless we specify that these emotional states incorporate the notion that others are to be regarded as moral equals. Consider pity, which might be regarded as a kind of fellow-feeling that involves well-wishing toward another. Pity typically entails a stance of superiority toward another who is less fortunate, as in the phrase, “There but for the grace of God go I.” We might pity a fellow citizen who has fallen on hard times, and wish her well, but in doing so, regard ourselves as immune to the kind of misfortune that has befallen her. But we then regard ourselves as unequal to her in an important respect – we regard ourselves as insulated from her plight. We might hold this view for any number of reasons, for example, we could regard ourselves as smarter, as morally superior, as favored by God, and so on. A pitying attitude, I suspect, is held by more privileged citizens when confronted with the

plight of less fortunate citizens. Though it is a form of fellow-feeling and well-wishing, pity does not contribute to political civility, because those who pity regards the less fortunate as morally unequal to themselves. Pity is not quite a remedy for the negative attitudes that Hope's view allows because it incorporates a form of condescension that could be deeply offensive to less privileged members of society. What is required for political civility is emotional states of fellow-feeling and mutual well-wishing according to which others are regarded as moral equals who are deserving of equal concern and respect. Compassion, instead of pity, is a fellow-feeling that incorporates viewing the other as a moral equal. Compassion requires some form of identification with the other who experiences misfortune, and is expressed in the phrase, "That could be me."⁷

One might wonder what moral equality and viewing others as moral equals has to do with political civility. In liberal democracies, citizens are considered to be moral equals. Moral equality is the basis of political equality. When some citizens do not regard others as moral equals, they undermine the basis of political equality, and, through attitudes such as pity, that might appear to be civil but in fact are not, damage the fabric of social relationships. So we need to qualify Peterson's second element of political civility in one important respect: the emotional states of fellow-feeling and mutual well-wishing that are part of political civility must incorporate and express the view that other citizens are moral, and thus, political equals.

Let us take stock. I have endorsed Peterson's conception of political civility as a "second best" option and a pathway toward more robust civic friendship, and as preferable to a society such as that allowed by Hope, in which negative attitudes toward fellow citizens are permitted. Peterson's conception consists of two elements, civic conduct and emotional states of fellow-feeling and mutual well-wishing. Following Peterson, I have explicated civic conduct in terms of sincere and open-minded engagement and interaction, and have explained that disagreement is allowed, though denigration and dogmatism are not. In addition, I have added a qualification to Peterson's views on

⁷ On the differences between pity and compassion, see Snow (1990).

fellow-feeling and mutual well-wishing: to be *bona fide* parts of civility, those emotional states must incorporate and express the view that fellow citizens are moral, and thus, political equals.

Listening as a Civic Virtue

Burbidge, Briggs, and Reiss (2020) recommend teaching listening as a civic virtue. This is an important suggestion that deserves our attention. In the last section of this paper, I address its strengths and limits.

The authors link the virtue of listening to attention, writing that:

Human attention has become a precious resource, and where your attention is, there your desires will be also. In the midst of this new market for attention, we have to realize that giving quality attention to others is the most important form of self-giving we can engage in as citizens. In other words, the civic burden is not so much on being a good speaker as on being a good listener – finding a way to understand others and what they say, and in so doing go against the tide of our polarisation (Burbidge, Briggs, and Reiss 2020, 7).

Listening as a civic virtue requires attentional focus, but, to my mind, far more. It requires the genuine desire to understand another's perspective, and is thus bound up with intellectual virtues such as open-mindedness, curiosity, intellectual humility, and the love of learning. As for open-mindedness, one must be open to the other's perspective. As for curiosity, one must be genuinely interested in the other's views. As for intellectual humility, one must not assume that one already has all the answers about what the other thinks. One must listen to another in the attitude of a learner who is attempting to discern the other's point of view and know more. Empathy is also required, for to listen deeply and seriously to another, we must attempt to see life from her perspective – to put ourselves in her place, and understand the world through her eyes. Herein lies the value of listening for cultivating political civility – we must make a genuine attempt to *identify* with fellow citizens – to see the world from their perspective – in order truly to understand their lives. Genuine and sincere attempts to engage with others by identifying with them fit well with the conception of political

civility discussed here, as well as with more robust ideals of civic friendship. Attentive, respectful, and open-minded listening seems crucial to the process of identification and engagement. So, positively speaking, listening appears to be essential for true political civility and, beyond that, civic friendship. Another bonus is that listening requires other virtues, so that she who truly seeks to listen develops in herself a suite of virtues such as those mentioned above. Consequently, listening as a civic virtue has multiple benefits – not only the development of political civility and possibly civic friendship, but also, the cultivation of a suite of personal virtues possessed by the listener.

Yet there are downsides, or at least, questions that should be raised. When does listening cease to be a civic virtue, or, alternatively, are there cases in which listening isn't warranted? One can wonder whether we must listen to neo-Nazis, or white supremacists, to those who seek to exclude or discriminate against other people or perpetrate violence against them. I would suggest that some degree of listening is needed to ferret out what is actually going on in particular cases. Is a particular white supremacist truly evil or malicious, or has she fallen in with a bad crowd, perhaps because they have taken advantage of her feelings of alienation and social isolation to draw her in? In other words, through listening to that person, might we find ways to reach her – to break through and reintegrate her into a more mainstream political view?

Another question about listening is this. Must we listen to those who are ill-informed? As Burbidge, Briggs, and Reiss are well aware, we live in a world of “fake news,” “filter bubbles,” and “alternative facts.” Is it a civic virtue to listen to someone whose information is skewed, or incorrect? Must we seriously listen to climate change deniers, “anti-vaxxers,” and others who adhere to falsehoods or are otherwise ill-informed? Listening alone will not correct their misinformation, and it might do more harm than good by seeming to give falsehoods undeserved credibility. Witness those who seek to give the views of scientists who deny climate change – a small minority – parity of place with the vast majority of scientists who acknowledge the peril our planet faces.

These questions illustrate the perils of recommending listening as a civic virtue in societies in which social and political trust has been eroded. We find that we cannot trust those who hold immoral, noxious views, nor can we trust those who have abandoned fact for fiction. A crucial

question is how trust can be restored. Answering this question is well beyond the scope of this paper, but it is clear to me that robust civic friendship cannot be attained unless trust is warranted. Before trust can be warranted, we must have some assurance of the good will of our fellow citizens.

Listening, as a path toward political civility, could be an important first step in generating mutual good will. Establishing and sustaining norms of political civility could be important ways of assuring it. As political civility deepens and grows, we could find our way toward more robust social and political relationships – perhaps even toward civic friendship as here understood. We can only hope that the ideas discussed here chart a path forward.

References

Bentley, R. K. (2013). 'Civic Friendship and Thin Citizenship', *Res Publica* 19 (1): 5-19.

Boatwright, R. G., *et al* (eds.)(2019). *A Crisis of Civility? Political Discourse and its Discontents*. New York: Routledge.

Brudney, D. (2013). 'Two Types of Civic Friendship', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 16 (4): 729-743.

Burbidge, D., Briggs, A., Reiss, M. J. (2020). *Citizenship in a Networked Age*. University of Oxford.

Calhoun, C. (2000). 'The Virtue of Civility', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 29 (3): 251-275.

Georgieva, M. (2013). 'The Forgotten Ideal of Friendship in Modern Political Theory', *Res Publica* 19 (1): 95-102.

—— (2015). 'Stability and Congruence in Political Liberalism: The Promise of an Ideal of Civic Friendship', *Political Studies* 63 (2): 484-491.

Healy, M. (2011). 'Civic Friendship', *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 30 (3): 229-240.

Hope, S. (2013). 'Friendship, Justice, and Aristotle: Some Reasons to be Sceptical', *Res Publica* 19 (1): 37-52.

Jamieson, K. H., Hardy, B. (2012). 'What is Civil Engaged Argument and Why Does Aspiring to it Matter?', *PS: Political Science & Politics* 45 (3): 412-415.

Leontsini, E. (2013). 'The Motive of Society: Aristotle on Civic Friendship, Justice, and Concord', *Res Publica* 19(1): 21-35.

Ludwig, P. W. (2020). *Rediscovering Political Friendship: Aristotle's Theory and Modern Identity, Community, and Equality*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Maisel, L. S. (2012). The negative consequences of uncivil political discourse. *PS: Political Science & Politics* 45(3), 405-411.

Mower, D. S., Robinson, W. L. (eds.). (2012). *Civility in Politics and Education*. New York: Routledge.

Orwin, C. (1991). 'Civility', *The American Scholar* 60(4): 553-564.

Peterson, A. (2019). *Civility and Democratic Education*. Singapore: Springer.

Rawls, J. (1971). *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Rosenfeld, S. (2019). *Democracy and Truth: A Short History*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Snow, N. E. (1990). 'Compassion', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 28 (3): 195-205.

Stuckey, M., O'Rourke, S. P. (2014). 'Civility, Democracy, and National Politics', *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 17 (4): 711-736.

Sydnor, E. (2019). *Disrespectful Democracy: The Psychology of Political Incivility*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Woods, K. (2013). 'Civic and Cosmopolitan Friendship', *Res Publica* 19(1): 81-94.



THE JUBILEE CENTRE FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

www.jubileecentre.ac.uk

Insight Series

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Values is supported by the John Templeton Foundation.

- ◆ *Pioneering interdisciplinary research of international standing focussing on character, virtues and values in the interest of human flourishing.*
- ◆ *Promoting a moral concept of character in order to explore the importance of virtue for public and professional life.*
- ◆ *A leading informant on policy and practice in this area through an extensive range of research and development projects contributing to a renewal of character and values in both individuals and societies.*

Jubilee Centre for Character and Values

University of Birmingham | Edgbaston | Birmingham | B15 2TT

www.jubileecentre.ac.uk

s.cooke@bham.ac.uk 0121 414 5770