



IN SEARCH *of* **CIVILITY**

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ABOUT THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES

The National Association of Counties (NACo) unites America's 3,069 county governments. Founded in 1935, NACo brings county officials together to advocate with a collective voice on national policy, exchange ideas and build new leadership skills, pursue transformational county solutions, enrich the public's understanding of county government and exercise exemplary leadership in public service. www.NACo.org.

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A MESSAGE FROM NACo PRESIDENT BRYAN DESLOGE

Dear County Leaders:

As part of my term as president of the National Association of Counties, I announced the Counties Matter Challenge: Brilliant Ideas at Work initiative. Through this effort, we are identifying and sharing 100 examples of visionary county leadership bettering residents' quality of life with the hope that we all, no matter our various challenges, can learn from one another's experiences.

Yet, county innovations would be all but impossible without a fundamental value that enables us to govern well: civility. Without civility as a baseline, attempts at problem-solving would never come to fruition and instead would be buried under heaps of acrimony and distrust. We need civil discourse in order to fulfill our many responsibilities and our promise to our constituents, creating healthy, vibrant and safe counties across the country.

It is in that spirit that we offer you the following primer, which includes a brief assessment of civility today, a guide to the rules of civil engagement and a few examples and other resources. I hope you will find it valuable.



Civilly Yours,

The Honorable Bryan Desloge

Commissioner, Leon County, Fla.



WHAT IS CIVILITY?

Civility¹:

a: civilized conduct; especially: courtesy, politeness b: a polite act or expression

Civility is much more than just behaving politely. Civil behavior shows that we have respect for others and their opinions, especially when we disagree. The exercise of self-control is central to civil discourse and demonstrates an investment in the institutions we share responsibility to care for as a civil society, from the PTA all the way to Congress.

Today, civil behavior is far too rare in all aspects of our lives together. It is missing in interactions that we have in business dealings, it is missing in social interactions and, above all, it is missing in the discourse of our nation's political leaders.

A CHALLENGE AS OLD AS THE REPUBLIC

Achieving compromise between people who fundamentally disagree — and staying engaged with them despite that disagreement — is a concept central to the government form bequeathed to us by the framers of the Constitution. But maintaining civil discourse amid the complex and competing needs in a large and diverse country has never been easy and has always been a topic of considerable contemplation.

“I never considered a difference of opinion in politics, in religion, in philosophy, as cause for withdrawing from a friend”

THOMAS JEFFERSON

Our first president, George Washington, wrote, “110 Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior,” by the age of 16.² Each rule revolved around the complexity of achieving civility, from the first rule, “Every action done in company, ought to be with some sign of respect, to those that are present,” to the 49th rule, “Use no reproachful language against anyone neither curse nor revile,” and to the last rule, “Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire called conscience.”³

Early legislators — living together in regional boarding houses — quickly became entrenched voting blocks in the first years of our democracy. Thomas Jefferson's solution was to bring the lawmakers to the White House in diverse groups for good dinner and conversation.

TECHNOLOGY MULTIPLIES THE DIFFICULTY

What accounts for our current lack of civility? One of the strongest contributors is changes to media and technology, which have propelled polarization along racial, socio-economic, religious, generational and — particularly — political lines.

“The internet is the first thing that humanity has built that humanity doesn't understand... the largest experiment in anarchy that we have ever had.”

ERIC SCHMIDT, GOOGLE

We tend to operate inside likeminded silos of our own making, consuming information from sources that conform to our ideology. Over time, lack of exposure to a range of opinions leaves us with less in common with each other. In his book “The Big Sort,” Bill Bishop describes an America where we are spending less time with those unlike ourselves in every aspect of our lives. Research shows that as we increasingly find ourselves inside these likeminded groups, our views can grow more extreme and we naturally begin to demonize the “other.”⁴

In 2014, the Pew Research Center released a comprehensive landmark study of “Political Polarization in the American Public,” which showed a deepening and broadening ideological divide.⁵ The number of citizens with consistently liberal or consistently conservative views had doubled in the last two decades, as had the number of partisans who believed that the other political party actually threatened the nation’s well-being.

In his *Psychology Today* article, “Politics: Is Civility Dead?,” Dr. Jim Taylor points to the role played today by the vast scale of our communications, “Due to the emergence of cable television, talk radio and internet, ‘squeaky wheels’ now have a means of making their voices heard by millions.”⁶

Additionally, many county board meetings are broadcast on television and online, which increases the visibility of decision-making processes. The 24-hour news cycle and broader access to public discourse plays a role in exacerbating political divisiveness.

Unfortunately, polarization and the resulting lack of civility has crept into the governing process at the local level, sometimes even when the issues in front of local elected bodies seem to have little to do with the national hot-button topics that divide us. It is local leadership and government that are forced to deal directly with the consequences of these powerful national forces in our hometowns.

RULES OF CIVIL ENGAGEMENT

Because local government is closest to the people, it holds the greatest opportunity to improve the quality of public discourse by improving relationships both between leadership and citizens and between diverse groups of citizens. Local public officials should display and demand public civility, public tolerance and civil discourse. When our political leaders are rude to each other, it gives the public permission to do the same thing.

The “Ten Commandments of Public Civility” offers this practical guidance:⁷

- Do not rudely interrupt a colleague midsentence; nor “speak over” a colleague while she or he is speaking
- Do not assume that shrillness of tone is a substitute for substantive dialogue
- Do not resort to “zingers” designed solely to embarrass your target
- Do not allow legitimate critique of policy and practice to become a personal attack aimed at the person who devised the policy or implements the practice
- Always recognize that your colleagues were also elected, just as you were, and deserve the same level of respect for having run and won, and
- Do not ridicule or belittle a colleague, or a member of the public, simply because he or she disagrees with you on an issue.

Civility is like a muscle that needs to be exercised far ahead of a contentious debate arising. It is necessary to pursue intentional strategies in order to create a community with the capacity to disagree constructively and that views diverse opinions as a valuable asset.

COMMUNITY MODELS FOR IMPROVING CIVILITY

Many counties are working to improve civility. Some are adopting codes and ordinances on decorum in public meetings, while others have adopted a set of core values for civility and ethical behavior and still others are ramping up opportunities to engage citizens meaningfully in the life of our communities.

The models below are examples of different approaches to growing civil discourse in your community. Organizations promoting civility can be found around the country.

Howard County, Md. and Choose Civility

Howard County, Md. had one of the first civility projects of its kind. Choose Civility aims to enhance respect, empathy and tolerance in Howard County. The project was launched in 2006 by Howard County Library System and partnered with Howard Community College and Leadership Howard County. More than 100 government agencies, nonprofits, businesses and schools located within the county have since become partners.

“It is time to rethink our relationships for the sake of the common good.”

DR. P.M. FORNI

Grants and sponsorships helped make the program a success, including donations from various businesses and leadership organizations in the county. This financial support helps with promotional materials (e.g. magnets, posters, stickers), events and program components like Choose Civility Workplaces.

The Choose Civility initiative is led by Howard County Library System and guided by a Board of Advisors comprised of 15 to 20 people from diverse segments of the community. A structure of working committees, comprised of Alliance Partners, market the overall initiative and plan events.

Since the initiative’s inception, Choose Civility has distributed tens of thousands of materials like car magnets, window decals and other items promoting civil behavior. The program has also been adopted by other jurisdictions, with chapters in Washington County, Md.; a region of three counties in Southern Maryland; Portland, Maine and Freeborn County, Minn. **Find Choose Civility online at <http://choosecivility.org/>.**

Leon County, Fla. and the Village Square

Another strategy for alleviating the consequences of the angry national civic debate inside communities is to offer expanded opportunities for citizens to engage with both elected leaders and with each other, inviting people out of their silos and back into conversation with their neighbors. Leon County, Fla. uses this model in its partnership with the independent nonprofit, the Village Square.

The Village Square was created by a bipartisan group of community leaders, including NACo President Bryan Desloge, concerned about the worsening tone of political discourse. They offer a broad range of unique civic programs to revive the American town hall, drawing large audiences devoted to vibrant civil discourse and the notion that disagreement is good for democracy.



Leon County's nationally recognized Citizen Engagement Series "has provided opportunities to build trust through meaningful engagement."⁹ The series offers sessions on various topics featuring county departments, programs and/or services including libraries, public safety and the budget process. The sessions "enhance transparency through immersive hands-on exercises that offer a glimpse into the decision making process that shapes the community."¹⁰

One staple of the Citizen Engagement Series has been Leon County's national award-winning Let's Balance!, a budget exercise that presents citizens with real-life challenges of county governments when determining how to invest limited dollars while balancing often-competing priorities. Other unique and entertaining programs include "Speed Date Your Local Leaders," which builds civic relationships community-wide.

Leon County and the Village Square also offer county residents the annual Club of Honest Citizens series. Modeled after Ben Franklin's gatherings in pre-revolutionary London – gatherings that resulted in great ideas like public libraries, volunteer fire departments and paved roads – the Club of Honest Citizens series inspires active citizen partnership with government to address

"In a neighborhood dispute there may be stunts, rough words and even hot insults, but when a whole people speaks to its government, the dialogue and the action must be on a level reflecting the worth of that people and the responsibility of that government."

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

issues and connects citizens to the high ideal of American democracy. The Village Square makes its programming available to communities across the country. **Find Village Square online at** <http://villagesquare.us/>.

CODES AND GUIDELINES

In addition to civility initiatives, local governments have established rules, regulations and ordinances that govern civility and decorum in county meetings and interactions with the public.

In 2012, **Charles County, Md.** passed a resolution that established a code of civility. The resolution states,

Civility is synonymous with courtesy, politeness, graciousness, tolerance, consideration and respect. Civility requires that all members comport themselves in a manner that permits honest efforts at understanding the views and reasoning of others. ... [It] promotes a process that is fair and effective in both appearance and fact.¹¹

Ware County, Ga. established rules that govern public meetings and included a section on decorum in these rules. Ware County's section says:

Members of the public who wish to speak at official meetings and work sessions of the Ware County Commission are expected to adhere to the rules of decorum as outlined herein. Unless otherwise directed by the Chairman, all remarks should be directed to the Chairman and not to individual commissioners, staff or citizens in attendance. Personal remarks are inappropriate. There should be no vocal, boisterous or other disruptive demonstrations which will disrupt the orderly flow of the meeting. Any person engaging in this type of behavior shall be ruled out of order by the Chairman, and at the Chairman's discretion, be removed from the assembly hall.¹²

Smith County, Texas established “Rules of Procedure, Conduct and Decorum at Meetings of the Smith County Commissioners’ Court” as part of its county code and empowers the county judge, as the presiding officer, to enforce these rules. The code also states that the sheriff, or a designated deputy, is present at all meetings acting as the bailiff.¹³

OTHER PROGRAMS AND PROJECTS

The Institute for Local Government in Sacramento, Calif. published “Promoting Civility at Public Meetings: Concepts and Practice” as part of its series Everyday Ethics for Local Officials. The series was created in response to questions that have been raised by local officials. The discussion centers on the role that disagreement can play in a governmental setting and analyzes civility. <http://www.ca-ilg.org/>

The Davenport Institute for Public Engagement (Pepperdine School of Public Policy) promotes participatory policymaking through its annual Public Engagement Grant Program. The Davenport Institute recently launched a new program – “How are We Doing? A Public Engagement Platform” – to help local governments self-evaluate and apply for recognition of the work they are doing to engage residents. It offers training and consulting. <http://publicpolicy.pepperdine.edu/davenport-institute/>

The Bridge Alliance is national network of organizations with a commitment to civility, respect and goodwill. It has different points-of-view and is diverse in age, color, faith and preferences. The alliance welcomes “transpartisan” Democrats, Republicans, Independents, Libertarians and nonvoters committed to working through differences and extending trust to fellow citizens across the political spectrum. <http://www.bridgealliance.us/>

The National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation is a network of thousands of innovators who bring people together across divides to tackle today’s toughest challenges. <http://ncdd.org/>

National Institute for Civil Discourse (NICD) is dedicated to supporting elected officials working to solve the biggest issues facing our country and meet the public demand for civil discourse. Next Generation, a project of NICD, trains elected leaders to engage with each on issues that can be divisive. NICD recently created the National Civility Network, which leverages resources from academic centers and university-based institutes around the country to develop projects that will address dysfunction and incivility. <http://nicd.arizona.edu/>

Jefferson Dinners, a project of the Village Square, encourages citizens across America to host their own dinners in the style and tradition of Thomas Jefferson’s dinners. <http://jeffersondinner.org/>

Living Room Conversations offers tools to host an intimate conversation with a small group of people with different views on key topics. Their materials include comprehensive topic-by-topic guidance. <http://www.livingroomconversations.org/>

Civility strengthens communities by bridging divides, offering training and support to leaders to build relationships across differences. <http://www.civility.org/>

Nextdoor.com is free and allows neighbors to connect with each other and allows governments to communicate with residents. <https://nextdoor.com/>

American Public Square is a national organization that offers a variety of programs to promote fact-based conversations between people of opposing backgrounds and ideologies surrounding current issues. <http://americanpublicsquare.org/>

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

National Civility Center. <http://www.civilitycenter.org/>

The North Carolina Association of County Commissioners. <http://www.ncacc.org/486/Civility-in-Government>

University Network for Collaborative Governance. <http://www.policyconsensus.org/uncg/members.html>

Village Square. villagesquare.us

ENDNOTES

¹ Merriam Webster Online Dictionary, "Civility," available at www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/civility.

² George Washington, "Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior: In Company and Conversation," available at wwwFOUNDATIONSmag.com/civility.html.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: How the Clustering of Likeminded America is Tearing Us Apart* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008).

⁵ Pew Research Center, "Political Polarization in the American Public: How Increasing Ideological Uniformity and Partisan Antipathy Affect Politics, Comprise and Everyday Life." (Washington, DC: 2014), available at www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/.

⁶ Jim Taylor, "Politics: Is Civility Dead?" *Psychology Today*, November 16, 2009, available at www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-power-prime/200911/politics-is-civility-dead.

⁷ John C. Gillespie, "Ten Commandments of Public Civility," available at www.ncacc.org/DocumentCenter/View/1111.

⁸ Choose Civility, Howard County, available at www.choosecivility.org.

⁹ Citizen Engagement Series, Leon County, available at <https://cms.leoncountyfl.gov/Home/Engaging-Citizens-Partnering-With-Our-Community/Citizen-Engagement-Series>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ County Commissioners of Charles County, Maryland, Code of Civility (Resolution No. 2012-70), available at www.charlescountymd.gov/sites/default/files/commissioners/2012-70%20Code%20of%20Civility.pdf.

¹² Ware County, Georgia, "Commission Meetings," available at www.warecounty.com/residencecommissionmeetings.aspx.

¹³ Smith County, Texas, "Rules of Procedure, Conduct, and Decorum at Meetings of the Smith County Commissioners Court," available at www.smith-county.com/Commissioners/Codification/documents/RulesOfDecorum10-16-12.pdf.





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