The current presidential election has shined a light on the lack of civility in the public square. Uncivil actions, such as name calling, bullying and calls to fisticuffs, seem to take priority over respectful dialogue and the healthy exchange of diverse viewpoints. Incivility in the United States has risen to “crisis” levels, according to 70 percent of respondents in the 2016 survey, Civility in America. The last time the survey was conducted, in 2014, 65 percent of respondents felt that incivility was at “crisis” levels in the United States.

Incivility has captured the attention of the public, but what does it mean to state legislatures? This brief defines civility, examines its impact on government and state legislatures, and identifies strategies legislators use to strengthen civility in their legislatures.

Civility Defined. Merriam-Webster defines civility as “polite, reasonable and respectful behavior.” The first rule of George Washington’s “Rules of Civility and Decent Behaviour in Company and Conversation” states that “every action done in company ought to be with some sign of respect to those that are present.” Civility is being polite and respectful, but is it more?

The Institute for Civility in Government defines civility as “more than just politeness, although politeness is a necessary first step. It is about disagreeing without disrespect, seeking common ground as a starting point for dialogue about differences, listening past one’s preconceptions and teaching others to do the same. Civility is the hard work of staying present even with those with whom we have deep-rooted and fierce disagreement.”

Beyond being polite and respectful, civility also includes engaging in robust, and respectful, debate, and actively listening to various viewpoints without attacking one’s character. Civility does not mean compromising values or that agreement is certain or required.

Does Civility Matter? Incivility permeates every facet of life. Road rage, cyber-bullying and hostile work environments are all forms of incivility. The impact can be monumental in that it can cost lives and money, and incite violence.

The consequences of incivility in government are also great. In the 2016 Civility in America survey, 79 percent of respondents believe incivility in government is preventing action on important issues, 76 percent believe that incivility makes it difficult to discuss controversial issues, and 64 percent have stopped paying attention to political conversations and debates. Incivility in government inspires distrust of public institutions, including legislatures, and those who serve in them. As the late Alan Rosenthal, one of the nation’s leading scholars on state legislatures, wrote, “the most important effect of incivility is probably on the legislature
The public… has become increasingly cynical about political people, including legislators, and political institutions, including legislatures… And they are highly critical of what they perceive to be the unnecessary bickering, conflict and deadlock of the legislature. The public has lost confidence in the way the institution and the process work.”

Even with heightened awareness of incivility in government, there are examples of civility in state legislatures. Recently, Fair Vote and the Bipartisan Policy Center studied power-sharing agreements in state legislatures as a way to understand how these agreements promote bipartisanship, and legislative structures that improve collaborative policymaking. One finding from their report, “Best Practices for Collaborative Policymaking,” is that “strong, civil, and trusting relationships between co-speakers and co-presidents” contributed to the success of power-sharing agreements and bipartisan cooperation in tied chambers. The report observed that “relationships such as these facilitate the difficult process of horse-trading and tit-for-tat negotiation that is inherent in the creation of bipartisan policy.”

**Power of Relationships.** If incivility is a disease, relationship-building may be the cure. The Village Square, a civic organization that encourages civil dialogue on divisive issues through its unique and humorous programming, believes that nurturing civil relationships helps “people to develop empathy for others, then strive to reciprocate kindness, leading to the best behavior of man toward fellow man.” Relationships aren’t built in a day. They develop over time and are often seeded by a common interest and an understanding of someone’s values or life experiences.

The Next Generation program of the National Institute for Civil Discourse (NICD) seeks to create a culture of civil discourse in state legislatures by leading workshops on open communication and trust. At these state-specific workshops, participating legislators develop strategies to build relationships and strengthen civility in their legislatures. For example, as a result of the workshop in the Idaho Legislature, House Speaker Scott Bedke has encouraged social gatherings by providing snacks, a TV and a relaxed atmosphere in the House members’ lounge. Senate President Pro Tem Brent Hill and his leadership team take two to three caucus members at a time to lunch. These lunches, which take place away from the capitol, have no specific agenda. They serve as an opportunity to talk about whatever is on the members’ minds. As Senator Hill describes it, “family, church, pets, grandkids, opponents, elections” tend to be the topics of conversation.

Other legislator-developed strategies include setting ground rules for highly anticipated floor debates on divisive topics, agreeing to co-sponsor each other’s legislation, and creating mixed seating in committees and on the floor.

Rosenthal also believes that social interactions, such as legislator retreats or other facilitated meetings, help legislators develop relationships. In his view, “given the right programming, such an activity can help build trust. And great trust among members is a requisite for comity in the legislature.”

**NCSL Contact and Resource**

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NCSL, Civility Accord

**Additional Resources**

National Institute for Civil Discourse  
Institute for Civility in Government  
Civility in America: An Annual Nationwide Survey  
Best Practices in Collaborative Policymaking report  
The Village Square