CIVILITY IN AMERICA 2019:
SOLUTIONS FOR TOMORROW

WEBER
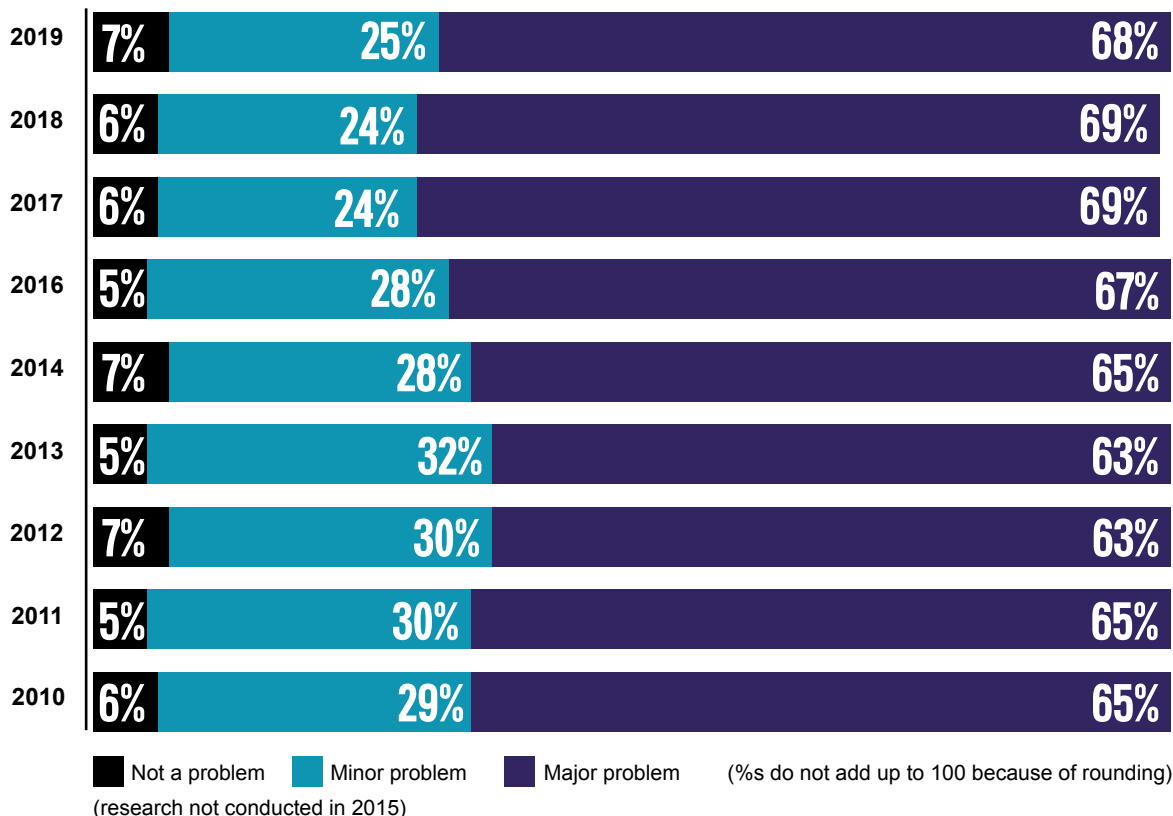SHANDWICK
WE SOLVE

powell tate

KRC RESEARCH

INTRODUCTION

Weber Shandwick, in partnership with Powell Tate and KRC Research, began exploring civil discourse in our public squares back in 2010. Even then, the perceived lack of civility in the United States had far-reaching implications and negative consequences for the nation. Over these many years, Americans continue to report that incivility is harming America's future, our standing in the world and our democracy. This year, we wanted to call out solutions to bettering our lack of civility in order to improve society and our nation's well-being.

This year's study finds once again that Americans have a deep concern about the state of civility in our nation. Our results show that the vast majority of Americans — 93% — identify incivility as a problem, with most classifying it as a "major" problem (68%). This disturbing rate has changed little since 2010.

PROBLEM WITH CIVILITY IN AMERICA TODAY

(among total Americans)

Year	Not a problem	Minor problem	Major problem
2019	7%	25%	68%
2018	6%	24%	69%
2017	6%	24%	69%
2016	5%	28%	67%
2014	7%	28%	65%
2013	5%	32%	63%
2012	7%	30%	63%
2011	5%	30%	65%
2010	6%	29%	65%

■ Not a problem   ■ Minor problem   ■ Major problem   (%s do not add up to 100 because of rounding)

(research not conducted in 2015)

Every year, we have continued to track perceptions pertaining to America's civility decline, and we have consistently found that three-quarters (74%) of Americans believe civility is worse compared to a few years ago.

Eight in 10 or more point to risks to society as dangerously high; almost nine in 10 respondents identify serious ramifications from incivility, including cyberbullying (89%), harassment, violence and hate crimes (88%, equally), intimidation and threats, intolerance, and people feeling less safe in public places (87%, equally).
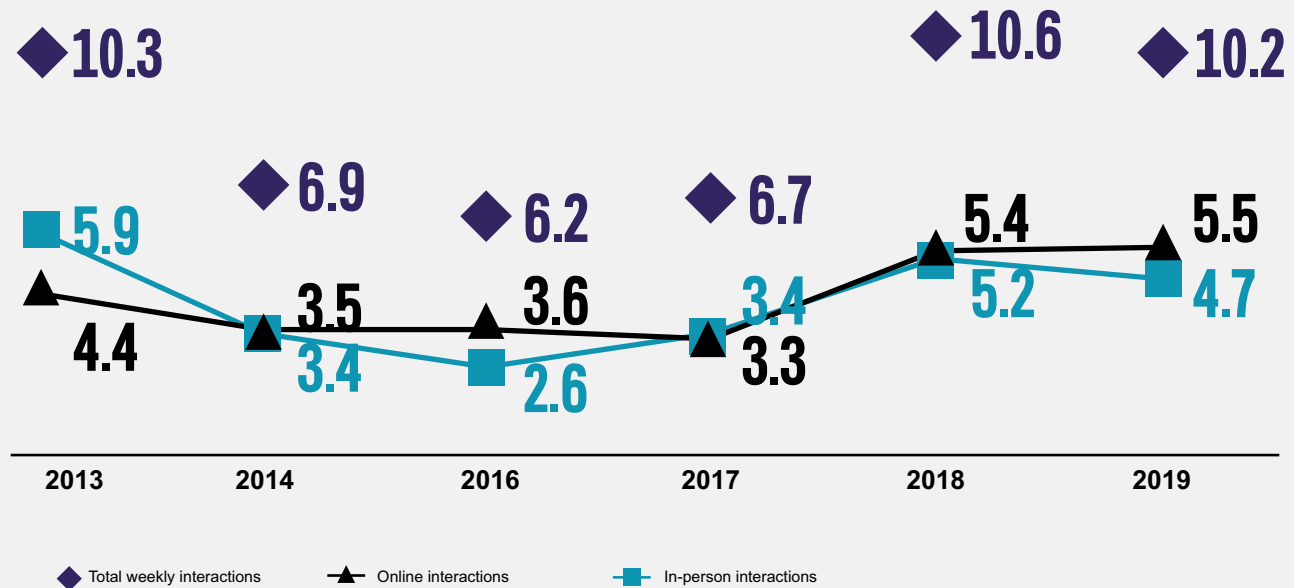
TOP 10 CONSEQUENCES OF INCIVILITY
(among total Americans)

Incivility leads to…	Agree a lot/a little
Online bullying/cyberbullying	89%
Harassment (verbal, physical or sexual)	88%
Violent behavior	88%
Hate crimes	88%
Intimidation and threats	87%
Intolerance	87%
People feeling less safe in public places	87%
Discrimination and unfair treatment of certain groups of people	84%
Less community engagement	79%
Feelings of isolation and loneliness	78%

Personal encounters with incivility remain high, as 80% of people report having experienced uncivil behavior at one time or another. The frequency of uncivil encounters per week rose sharply in 2018 and remains at this level, with 10.2 average weekly encounters. Notably, the location of uncivil interactions has shifted over the years. Uncivil online interactions have increased from an average of 4.4 weekly interactions in 2013 to a high of 5.5 in 2019, while uncivil in-person interactions have declined from 5.9 in 2013 to 4.7 this year.

AVERAGE NUMBER OF UNCIVIL INTERACTIONS PER WEEK

(among Americans who have experienced incivility)

◆10.3   ◆6.9   ◆6.2   ◆6.7   ◆10.6   ◆10.2

5.9   3.5   3.6   5.4   5.5
4.4   3.4   2.6   3.4   5.2   4.7
      3.3

| 2013 | 2014 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 |

◆ Total weekly interactions   ▲ Online interactions   ■ In-person interactions

In our ninth installment of *Civility in America*, conducted in February 2019 among 1,230 U.S. adults 18 years of age and older and 100 teens ages 16–17, we continue to explore Americans' perceptions of and experiences with incivility in their everyday lives. We also dig deeper into the growing role of social media as an accelerator of incivility, our political landscape, as well as promising solutions to the pernicious crisis we identified nearly a decade ago.

ANDY POLANSKY
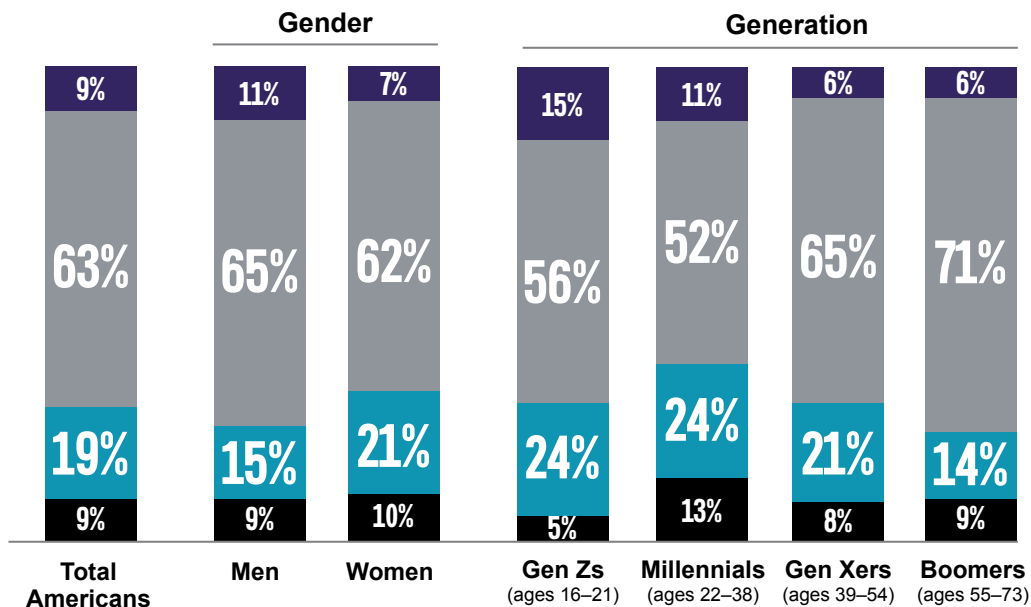**CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER**
WEBER SHANDWICK

"
It has never been more important to understand the sources and impact of America's eroding state of public discourse as Americans continue to view it as an alarming problem. From consumers in the marketplace and students in schools, to employees in the workplace and voters at the polls, few are immune to our country's civility crisis. We believe findings from this year's study provide constructive solutions for how to imbue civility back into all the ways we engage in our public squares and workplaces.
"

SOCIAL MEDIA PLAYS AN INCREASINGLY NEGATIVE ROLE

It is not surprising that more people are experiencing uncivil behavior online than in-person given our growing use of and reliance on the Internet. Contributing heavily to the cause of online incivility is social media, with 63% of Americans saying that, in their experience, the impact of social media on civility has been more negative than positive. Only nine percent say it has been more positive than negative. Negativity decidedly outweighs positivity by large margins regardless of gender or generation. Even within the generation that is native to social media — Generation Z (who in our study are 16–21 years old) — a massive gap emerges of nearly 4:1 between those who say social media's effect has been more negative than positive vs. more positive than negative (56% vs. 15%, respectively).

EFFECT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON CIVILITY

Gender

	Total Americans	Men	Women
More positive than negative	9%	11%	7%
More negative than positive	63%	65%	62%
Equally positive and negative	19%	15%	21%
Not sure	9%	9%	10%

Generation

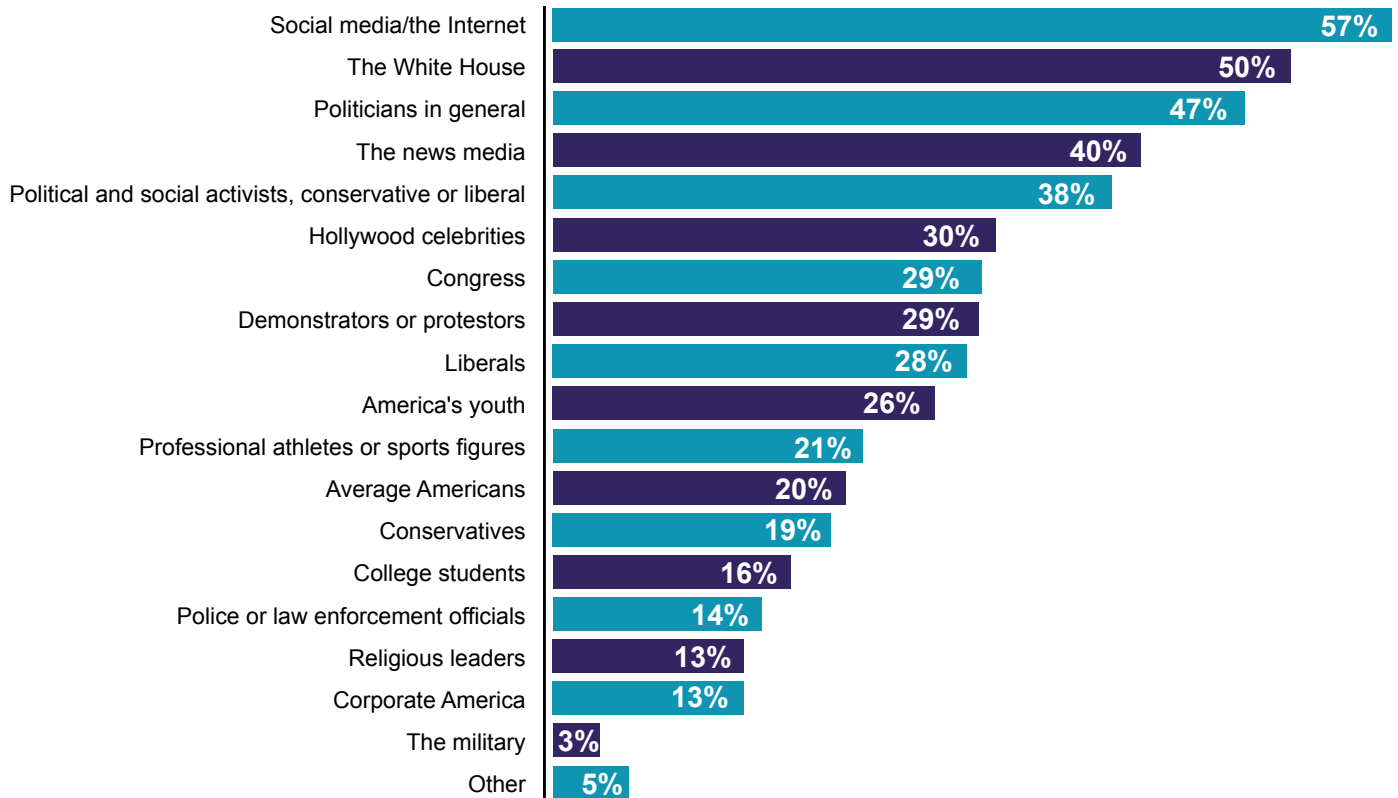|	Gen Zs (ages 16–21)	Millennials (ages 22–38)	Gen Xers (ages 39–54)	Boomers (ages 55–73)
More positive than negative	15%	11%	6%	6%
More negative than positive	56%	52%	65%	71%
Equally positive and negative	24%	24%	21%	14%
Not sure	5%	13%	8%	9%

■ More positive than negative   ■ More negative than positive   ■ Equally positive and negative   ■ Not sure

More than one-half of Americans (54%) expect the general tone and level of civility in the country to decline even further during the next few years. Among this group, 57% believe that the Internet and/or social media are to blame — a factor that tops a list of 19 possible choices measured this year.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE EROSION OF CIVILITY IN AMERICA

(among Americans who expect civility to get worse)

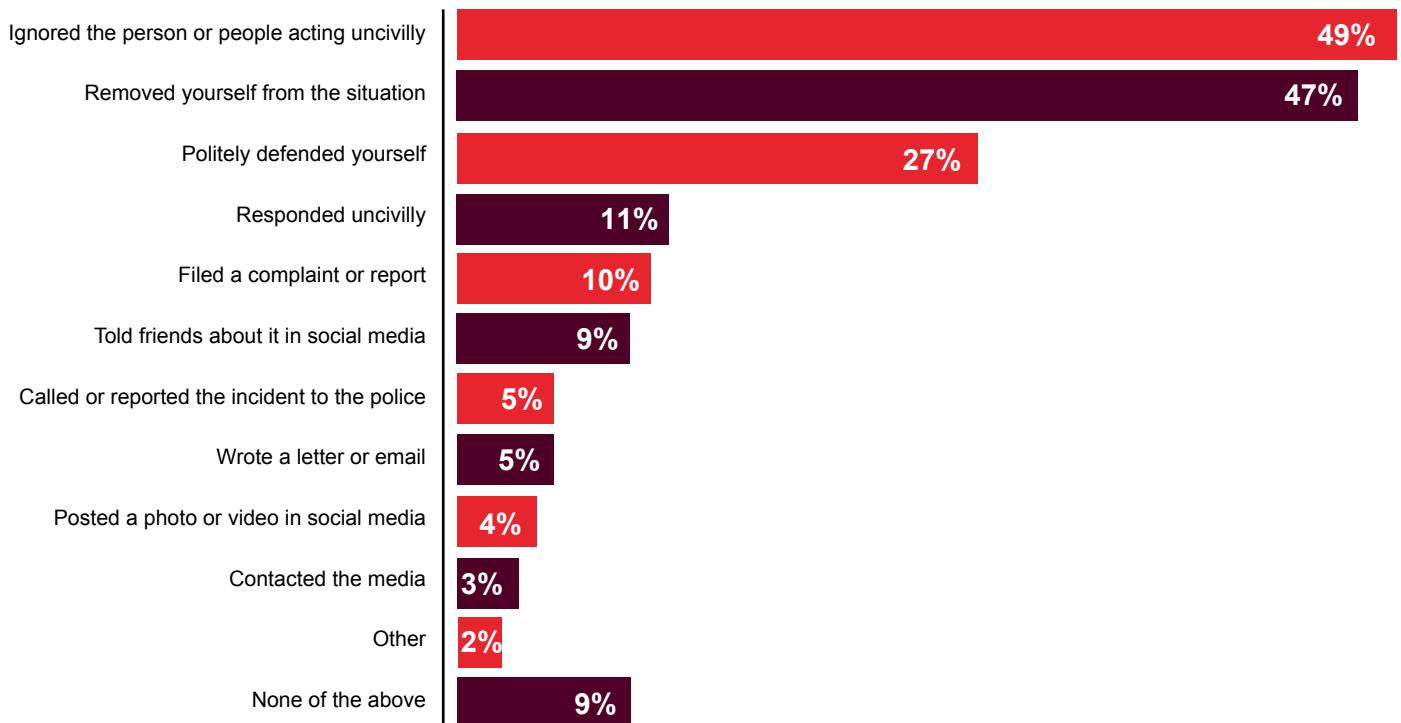| Factor	Percentage
Social media/the Internet	57%
The White House	50%
Politicians in general	47%
The news media	40%
Political and social activists, conservative or liberal	38%
Hollywood celebrities	30%
Congress	29%
Demonstrators or protestors	29%
Liberals	28%
America's youth	26%
Professional athletes or sports figures	21%
Average Americans	20%
Conservatives	19%
College students	16%
Police or law enforcement officials	14%
Religious leaders	13%
Corporate America	13%
The military	3%
Other	5%

We first presented the Internet and social media as a potential cause of civility erosion in 2012. At that time, just 24% who saw civility declining identified it as a cause. The increase in blaming the Internet and social media for civility's demise has more than doubled since we began investigating its role (from 24% in 2012 to 57% in 2019).

Interestingly, while nearly six in 10 Americans have personally experienced uncivil experiences online, they are not likely to respond in kind on social media. The largest share of incivility victims do not choose retribution, but instead ignore those who act uncivilly (49%) or remove themselves from the situation (47%). Fewer than one in 10 say they respond online — either by telling friends on social media (only 9%) or by posting photos/videos on social media (only 4%). Turning the other cheek to online incivility can curb social media's multiplier effect.

ACTIONS TAKEN THE LAST TIME EXPERIENCED INCIVILITY

(among Americans who have experienced incivility)

Action	Percentage
Ignored the person or people acting uncivilly	49%
Removed yourself from the situation	47%
Politely defended yourself	27%
Responded uncivilly	11%
Filed a complaint or report	10%
Told friends about it in social media	9%
Called or reported the incident to the police	5%
Wrote a letter or email	5%
Posted a photo or video in social media	4%
Contacted the media	3%
Other	2%
None of the above	9%

# POLITICAL LANDSCAPE TAKES A HIT AND INFLUENCES AMERICAN ACTIONS

The vast majority of Americans agree that civility is important to our democracy (89%), and civility among our elected officials at all levels, including the presidential level, is equally important (92% and 91%, respectively). When asked about the way members of Congress debate issues facing this country compared to 10 years ago, about seven in 10 (69%) believe they are less civil, and only 8% view Congress as more civil.

The impact of incivility on our politics is significant. A majority believes that incivility leads to political gridlock (73%), less political involvement (71%) and fewer people running for public office (61%).

Politics plays a role at a micro level as well. Americans respond to incivility differently, depending on their political affiliation. Democrats are significantly more likely than Republicans and Independents to have stopped communicating with someone during the past year because they had a different political point of view (50% vs. 38% and 35%, respectively).

However, when it comes to specific topics Americans avoid discussing for fear the conversation will turn uncivil, Republicans avoid more topics on average than Democrats and Independents (5.0 vs. 4.3 and 4.1, respectively). Politics tops the list of topics Americans, in total, avoid. The top three avoided issues are consistent for Democrats and Republicans: President Trump (first for Democrats, second for Republicans), politics (second for Democrats, first for Republicans) and the border wall with Mexico (third for both Democrats and Republicans). Independents are also most likely to avoid discussing President Trump and politics (tied at first), but also place LGBTQ equality among their top topics to avoid discussing.

TOP THREE TOPICS AMERICANS AVOID DISCUSSING FOR FEAR CONVERSATION WILL LEAD TO INCIVILITY (among total Americans)

Politics
47%
President Trump
43%
The border wall with Mexico
35%

Republicans

President Trump
50%
Politics
44%
The border wall with Mexico
32%

Democrats

President Trump and Politics
41% (tie)
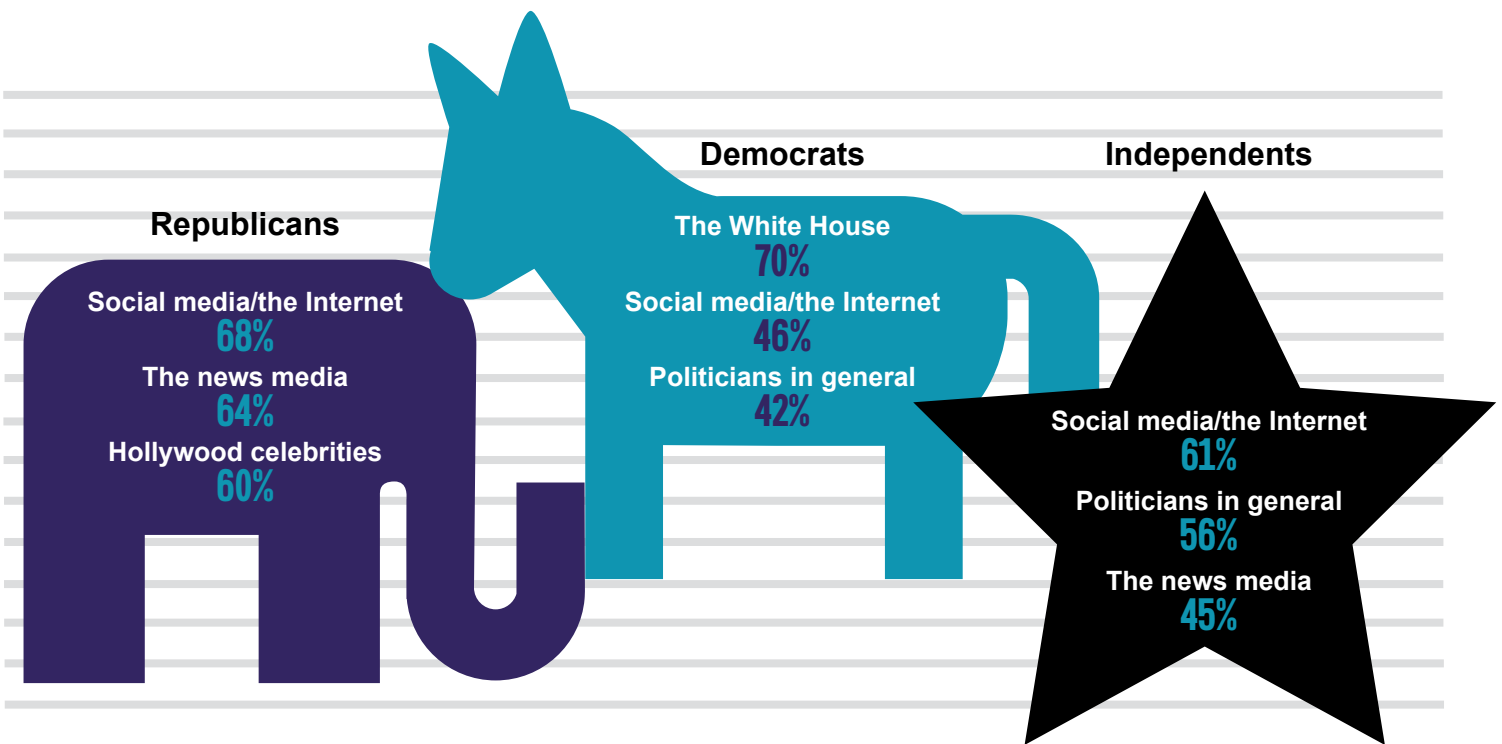**LGBTQ equality**
30%

Independents
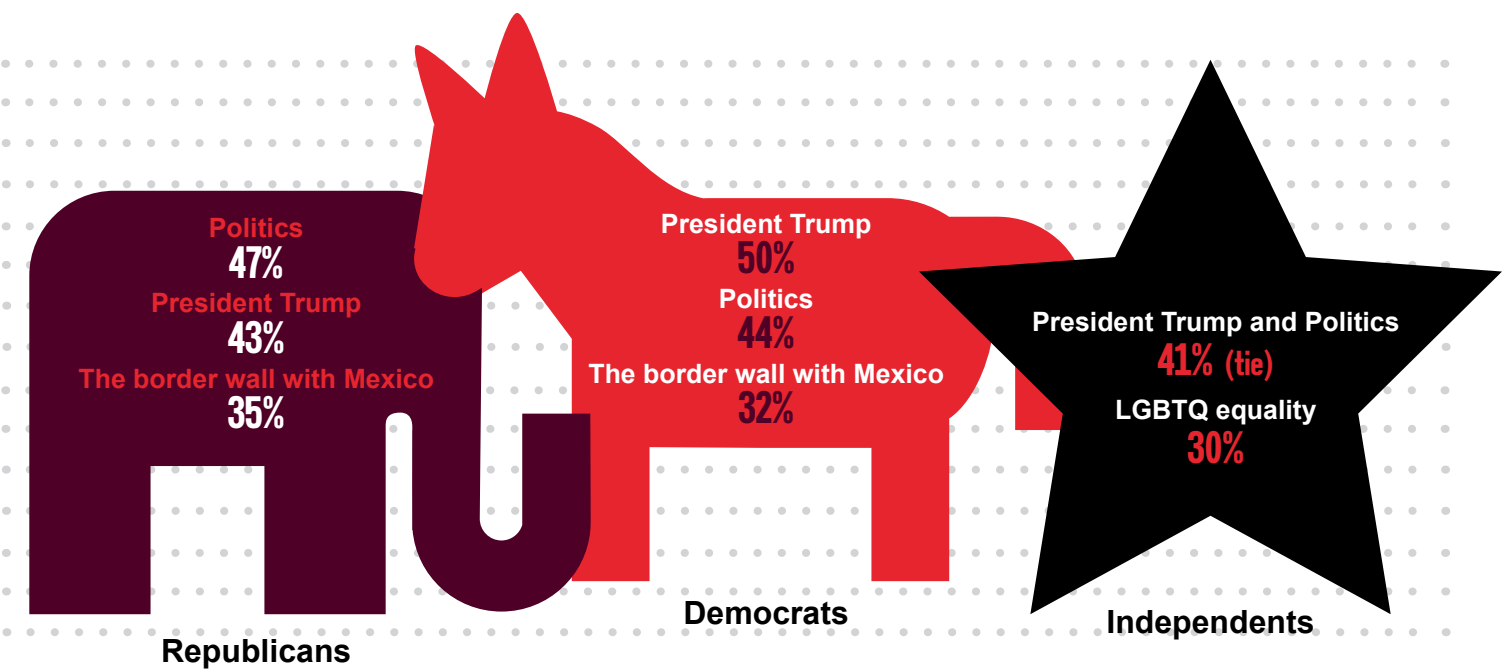
Among those who believe America's level of civility will get worse over the next few years, blame is placed on social media and the Internet (57%) followed by the White House (50%). Least likely to get blamed are the military, corporate America and religious leaders. As we discuss later in this report, places of employment offer a respite from incivility, so the fact that corporations are ranked low in the blame game offers an opportunity for businesses to share their best practices on a broader level and continue to provide a safe haven from uncivil behavior.

Social media and the Internet are among the top three perceived causes of incivility across political parties. Hollywood celebrities is unique to top three factors for Republicans and the White House is unique to the top three for Democrats.

TOP THREE FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE EROSION OF CIVILITY IN AMERICA

(among Americans who expect civility to get worse)

Republicans

Social media/the Internet
68%
The news media
64%
Hollywood celebrities
60%

Democrats

The White House
70%
Social media/the Internet
46%
Politicians in general
42%

Independents

Social media/the Internet
61%
Politicians in general
56%
The news media
45%

In fact, Republicans cite a higher number of reasons why civility will decline further, choosing 6.8 reasons out of 19, on average, vs. 4.2 by Democrats and 5.2 by Independents. Republicans are significantly more likely than Democrats and Independents to blame a number of sources, including: social media/the Internet, the news media, political activists, Hollywood celebrities, Congress, demonstrators/protestors, liberals, America's youth, professional athletes/sports figures and college students. These themes are sure to play out during the 2020 election.

CIVILITY'S WAY FORWARD: SOLUTIONS FOR TOMORROW

Although Americans express deep concern about the state of civility in our country, we also find that many are hopeful about the outlook for our public discourse. Nearly nine in 10 (86%) believe it is possible for people to disagree in a civil way, and 60% express hope about the future of civility in the U.S.

To gain deeper understanding into what is needed to achieve greater civility, we explored a range of solutions, and those reflecting strong support among survey respondents involve four themes:

1) POWER LIES WITH THE INDIVIDUAL

Among those who expect civility to get better (17% of those surveyed), the average American is perceived as the top driver of improved civility (42% say average Americans are improving overall civility). Similarly, average Americans are among the lowest drivers of incivility when respondents are asked to choose what is causing the nation's civility erosion; 20% say average Americans are making civility worse, far lower than the top factor of social media and the Internet at 57%.
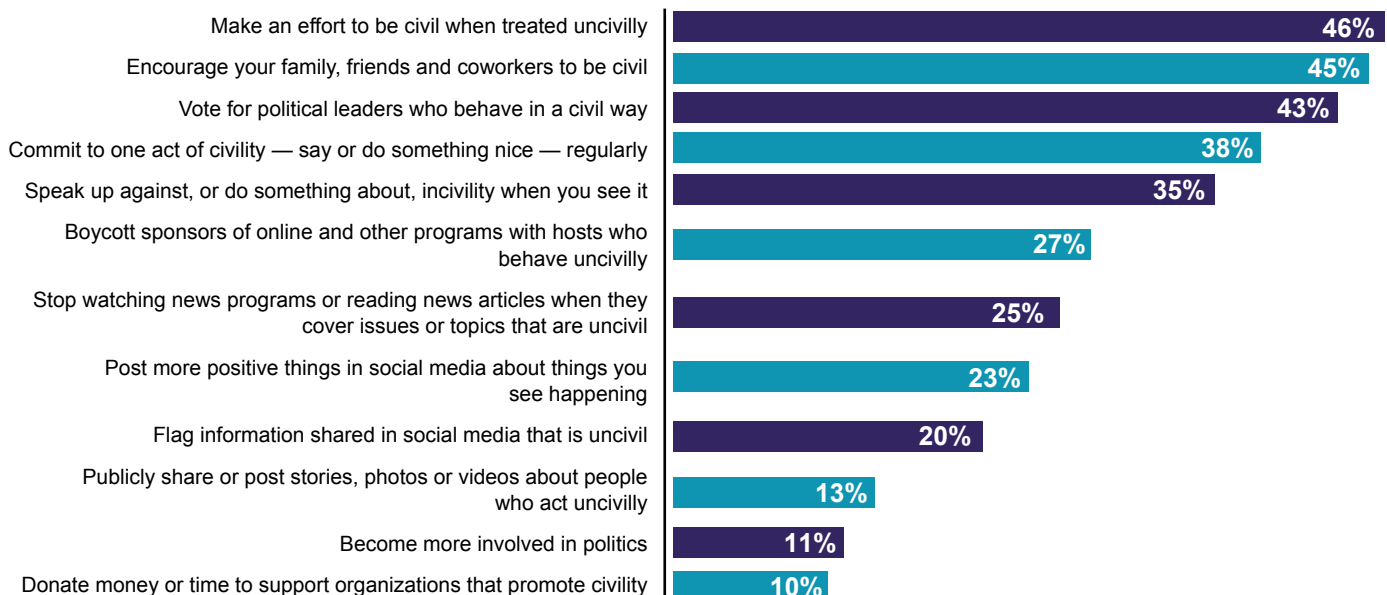
Americans are willing to take personal responsibility to improve civility in our nation. The vast majority — 88% — selected at least one action they would be willing to take, and they chose 3.4 actions on average. Topping the list are: making an effort to be civil when treated uncivilly (46%), encouraging family, friends and coworkers to be civil (45%), and voting for political leaders who behave in a civil way (43%).

> "Americans have been loud and clear since the inception of our study — our national incivility is degrading our country — and they are ready to boot strap and take responsibility for stemming the civility divide. A variety of options are on the table, with particularly promising ones that engage individuals supported by employers and public as well as private institutions."
>
> **PAM JENKINS**
> **PRESIDENT OF GLOBAL**
> **PUBLIC AFFAIRS**
> **WEBER SHANDWICK**

PERSONAL ACTIONS TO IMPROVE CIVILITY
(among total Americans)

Action	Percentage
Make an effort to be civil when treated uncivilly	46%
Encourage your family, friends and coworkers to be civil	45%
Vote for political leaders who behave in a civil way	43%
Commit to one act of civility — say or do something nice — regularly	38%
Speak up against, or do something about, incivility when you see it	35%
Boycott sponsors of online and other programs with hosts who behave uncivilly	27%
Stop watching news programs or reading news articles when they cover issues or topics that are uncivil	25%
Post more positive things in social media about things you see happening	23%
Flag information shared in social media that is uncivil	20%
Publicly share or post stories, photos or videos about people who act uncivilly	13%
Become more involved in politics	11%
Donate money or time to support organizations that promote civility	10%

Importantly, a significant 62% of Americans say that if an organization existed to make it easier to support civility or get involved, they would be likely to participate or support it. We have identified a segment of the population —16% — who would be very likely to participate in this type of organization. We profile this group, whom we have dubbed Civility Advocates.

Compared to the average American, Civility Advocates are more likely to be:

- Gen Zs and Millennials
- Parents of kids under 18 years old
- African American or black
- From the Midwest, and less likely to be from the West
- Urban, and less likely to live in suburban areas

Civility Advocates have **experienced more incivility** compared to the average American. They are more likely to have been the victim of incivility both online and in-person.

AVERAGE NUMBER OF UNCIVIL EXPERIENCES PER WEEK
(among those who have experienced incivility)

Online

5.5 — 8.7

In-Person

4.7 — 6.5

■ Total Americans ■ Civility Advocates
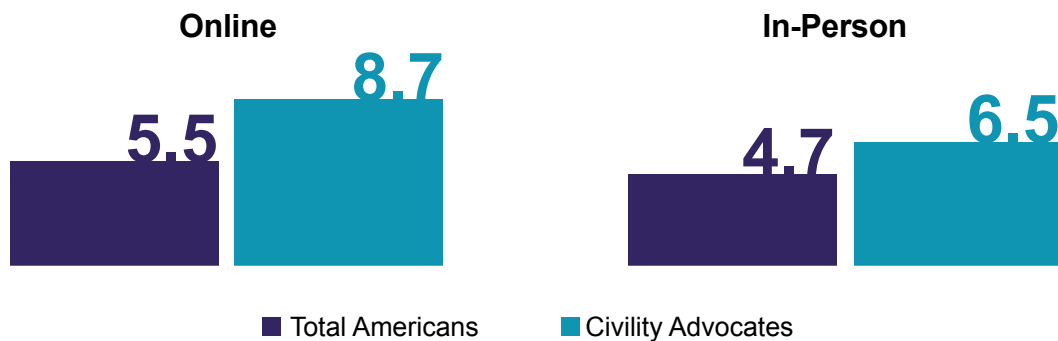
Civility Advocates are **action takers**. When confronted with uncivil behavior, they are more likely than average to respond, including: politely defending themselves (46% vs. 27%, respectively), filing a complaint or report (21% vs. 10%), telling friends on social media (19% vs. 9%), and the more passive response of removing themselves from the situation (53% vs. 47%).

Civility Advocates have a **positive outlook**. Civility Advocates are much more likely than other Americans to be very hopeful about the future of civility in the U.S. (42% vs. 17%, respectively). Another 34% are somewhat hopeful.

One reason Civility Advocates may be interested in an organization to support civility is that they are **strong proponents of community and nonprofit organizations** working toward solutions for the nation's incivility crisis. Seven in 10 Civility Advocates (69%) would like community and nonprofits to play a larger role in helping improve civility vs. 42% of average Americans.

2) WORKPLACES OFFER A BLUEPRINT

Another silver lining in our ongoing research is the workplace. Americans continue to identify their place of work as a civility safe zone, with 89% of those who work with others describing their place of employment as very or somewhat civil. Additionally, the level of workplace civility continues to improve compared to a few years ago. The share of Americans who have experienced incivility at their job has declined for the second consecutive year to an all-time low of 23%.

PERSONALLY EXPERIENCED INCIVILITY AT A PAST OR PRESENT JOB
(among total Americans)

2011	2012	2013	2014	2016	2017	2018	2019
43%	34%	37%	38%	33%	34%	29%	23%
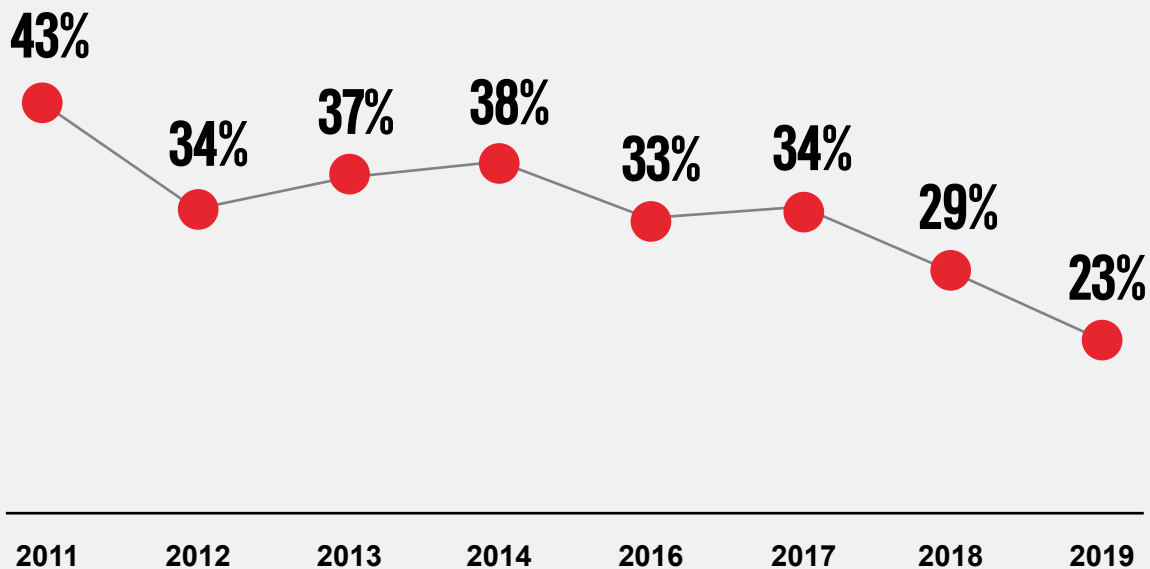
KATE BULLINGER
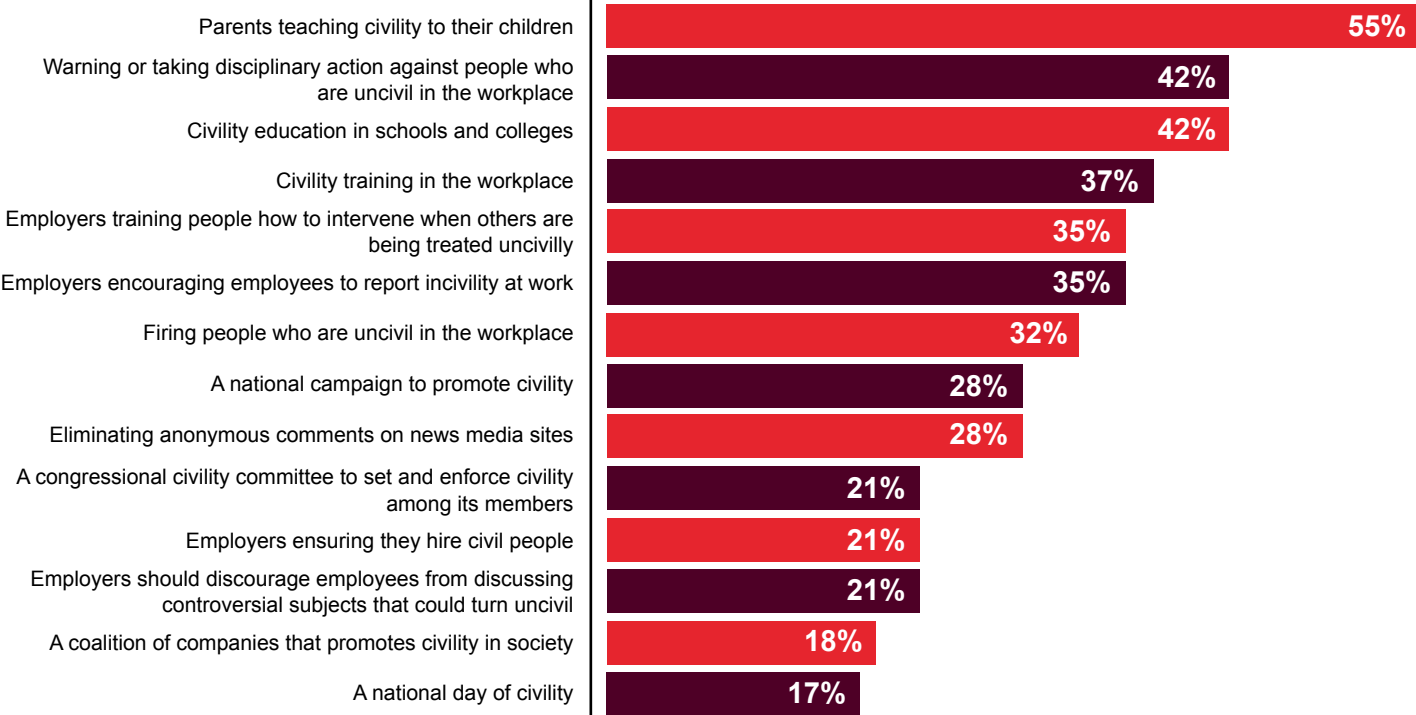**PRESIDENT OF UNITED MINDS, A WEBER SHANDWICK CHANGE MANAGEMENT CONSULTANCY**

"The workplace can serve as a safe haven from the incivility that confronts many Americans in everyday life. It is where employees with diverse backgrounds and opinions can work together to pursue shared objectives. Leaders are increasingly being held responsible for creating civil workplaces and demanding that people treat each other with respect. Civility training and zero tolerance for incivility is fast becoming commonplace.

Survey respondents give strong support to workplace solutions aimed at resolving the nation's incivility crisis. While the largest share of Americans believe civility starts in the home, with 55% saying they would like to see parents teaching civility to their children as a way to improve overall civility, workplace solutions make up the majority of the other top remedies.

ACTIONS TO IMPROVE CIVILITY
(among total Americans)

Action	%
Parents teaching civility to their children	55%
Warning or taking disciplinary action against people who are uncivil in the workplace	42%
Civility education in schools and colleges	42%
Civility training in the workplace	37%
Employers training people how to intervene when others are being treated uncivilly	35%
Employers encouraging employees to report incivility at work	35%
Firing people who are uncivil in the workplace	32%
A national campaign to promote civility	28%
Eliminating anonymous comments on news media sites	28%
A congressional civility committee to set and enforce civility among its members	21%
Employers ensuring they hire civil people	21%
Employers should discourage employees from discussing controversial subjects that could turn uncivil	21%
A coalition of companies that promotes civility in society	18%
A national day of civility	17%

Understanding the characteristics of civil workplaces is an important step in designing broader strategies for building a national civility culture. A significant number of survey respondents who work with others believe that workplace civility starts at the top: 43% agree that leadership has a responsibility to enforce civility in the workplace, and 33% agree that leadership has a responsibility to speak out against uncivil behaviors in society that impact employees. Women are particularly supportive of business leader activism: 41% vs. 27% of men, a significant difference.

3) SOCIAL MEDIA HOLDS A REMEDIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Given its role as a top driver of incivility according to our survey respondents, social media could also be used to help turn the tide. Nearly four in 10 Americans (38%) say they would be willing to personally engage with social media to improve civility by taking at least one of the following actions:

• Posting more positive things on social media about things they see happening **(23%)**

• Flagging information shared on social media that is uncivil **(20%)**

• Publicly sharing or posting stories, photos or videos about people who act uncivilly **(13%)**

The public also wants social media companies to help mitigate the uncivil behavior their platforms are perceived to be encouraging. Nearly six in 10 Americans (57%) are of the opinion that social media companies should take a larger role in helping improve the level of civility in our nation. While this isn't as high as the responsibility Americans believe elected officials should take — the top-ranked institution for taking on a larger role at 64% — it is on par with the responsibility expected from state and local governments (57%).

4) THE NATION'S INSTITUTIONS MUST PLAY A ROLE

Americans are decidedly open to institutional involvement in addressing the country's civility deficit. Americans believe there is a larger role for many institutions to play in helping improve the level of civility in our nation, including government, media, educational and business entities. Very few want less involvement from any institution, which is interesting, since some — including social media and government officials — are seen as drivers of incivility. Clearly, everyone is expected to take ownership for their own contributions to the crisis and change the course of its trajectory.

THE ROLE INSTITUTIONS SHOULD PLAY IN HELPING TO IMPROVE CIVILITY

(among total Americans)

Institution	Larger role	Similar role to what they play now	Smaller role	Not sure
ELECTED OFFICIALS	64%	19%	9%	8%
THE MEDIA	59%	21%	12%	8%
THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT	59%	23%	10%	8%
PUBLIC SCHOOLS	58%	26%	8%	8%
STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS	57%	24%	10%	8%
SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES	57%	22%	13%	8%
COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES	53%	29%	10%	8%
BUSINESSES AND CORPORATIONS	48%	32%	10%	10%
RELIGIOUS OR FAITH-BASED INSTITUTIONS	47%	32%	10%	10%
COMMUNITY AND NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS	42%	39%	9%	9%

■ Larger role ■ Similar role to what they play now ■ Smaller role ■ Not sure   (%s do not add up to 100 because of rounding)

THE CIVILITY GENDER GAP

Women in America are more likely to react to displays of incivility and to expect institutions to take greater responsibility for educating people at home, at work and in our nation's schools about how to act respectfully and treat others with dignity.

WOMEN ARE MORE SENSITIZED TO INCIVILITY

■ Significantly lower than men   ■ Significantly higher than men

	% Women	% Men
Civility is a major problem today	73	64
Uncivil language is becoming more common	87	82

	% Women	% Men
While the majority of women and men find their current workplace civil (89% and 90%, respectively), fewer women find it "very" civil	38	47

	Women	Men
Number of topics to avoid for fear it will lead to incivility	4.8	4.2

WOMEN FAVOR MORE ACTIONS TO IMPROVE CIVILITY

Incivility remedies (reflecting largest difference in reaction between women and men)

	% Women	% Men
Parents teaching civility to children	62	49
Warning or taking disciplinary action against people who are uncivil in the workplace	48	36
Civility education in schools and colleges	48	36
Civility training in the workplace	43	31
Employers training employees how to intervene when others are being treated uncivilly	40	31
Employers encouraging employees to report incivility at work	40	31

	Women	Men
Average number of actions selected	4.8	3.9

WOMEN ASSIGN LESS BLAME, EXCEPT TO THE WHITE HOUSE

What will make civility worse (Top 10)

	% Women	% Men
Social media/the Internet	56	58
The White House	54	46
Politicians in general	48	46
The news media	37	44
Political and social activists	34	43
Hollywood celebrities	27	34
Congress	29	30
Demonstrators or protesters	24	33
Liberals	21	35
America's youth	24	29

IN CLOSING...

Our nine years of exploration into this topic highlights the intractable challenge that incivility affects the lives of everyday Americans. Yet, they continue to maintain hope that our nation can turn a corner. As another election cycle kicks into high gear, we believe Americans are willing to try anew at building a civility culture, and we offer some solutions for jumpstarting a nationwide effort.

Social media companies can play a central role by continuing to root out nefarious online behavior and protect users. Importantly, online initiatives should be clearly and frequently communicated so that stakeholders understand the work of Internet companies, both to gain support for these efforts and also educate users on how to utilize them. An industry-wide civility campaign to promote positive stories online and offline could also be impactful and empower individual users to get involved by sharing their own acts of kindness. Clearly, there is work to be done beyond what we already know is under way in terms of safeguarding our elections and protecting consumer privacy.

American corporations and business owners can contribute to a national effort by sharing their best practices in building civil workplace cultures. Examples in corporate training and disciplinary standards can be used to design programs that other institutions can implement to foster more incivility-free zones. CEOs can take their leadership on civility beyond their own corporate walls and advocate for the kinds of values — buttressed by diversity and inclusion — that make their companies positive places to work. Partnering with other companies and worker-oriented organizations will give corporate leaders a powerful voice in making civility culture accessible to more Americans.

In fact, it is time for a coalition of like-minded organizations to form a national civility initiative. There are numerous smaller and local groups organizing for a kinder America, such as the Detroit Regional Chamber Civility Project, Employment Learning Innovations, Inc. and the Johns Hopkins Civility Project. In addition, there is the National Institute for Civil Discourse (NICD), a non-partisan organization founded on the principles of promoting healthy and civil political debate, as well as the Honor and Civility Caucus started by U.S. Representatives Charlie Crist (D-FL) and Mike Johnson (R-LA), as well as the Congressional Civility and Respect Caucus created by Congresswoman Joyce Beatty (D-OH) and Congressman Steve Stivers (R-OH).

Combining those efforts with other institutions — including government entities, religious groups, businesses and educational bodies — will bring diverse points of view to bear on developing solutions. A National Civility Day shows some promise in our research, and a broader campaign could incorporate awards for outstanding acts of civility conferred by Congress or a media outlet. It would be important to enlist political forces in this initiative, perhaps at a more local level, to connect members of opposing parties and offer support for a constructive exchange of ideas. Indeed, the civility gender gap foreshadows a demand on 2020 candidates to respond to the incivility crisis, as women are especially concerned and expect solutions from the public sector.

Finally, these programs should all be designed around **empowering the individual** to get involved. Americans are willing to take action and contribute greater civility in their day-to-day conduct. Communicators can offer tools through social media, as well as through traditional and local outlets, to foster positive dialogue and celebrate good deeds. Mobilizing **Civility Advocates** and supplying them with actionable programs for promoting civility in their communities would be effective in advancing a nationwide civility initiative.

**CAROLYN LUKENSMEYER
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
EMERITA, NATIONAL
INSTITUTE FOR CIVIL
DISCOURSE**

"
Across the country, there is universal recognition that the decline in our civil discourse has reached a crisis point. For our American system of democracy to work, we have to talk and listen to each other. It is heartening to see the data showing that people of all ages see solutions, starting with speaking out when they see incivility to giving their votes to leaders who pledge to be civil. With the 2020 presidential campaign accelerating, civility will be tested, and we're hopeful that voters will speak out and demand more of the people, political parties, and institutions that can shape our discourse. "

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT
CIVILITY IN AMERICA 2019: SOLUTIONS FOR TOMORROW OR OUR OTHER CIVILITY STUDIES, PLEASE CONTACT:

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