

# parlez-vous civility?

by julie walters

**“Yo, Taylor, I’m really happy for you... I’ll let you finish. But Beyonce had one of the best videos of all time! One of the best videos of all time!”**

Kanye West, during Taylor Swift’s award acceptance speech, MTV Video Music Awards, September 2009

**“You lie!”**

Representative Joe Wilson (R-South Carolina), to President Barack Obama during televised congressional address, September 2009

For time immemorial older adults have lamented the declining character of each successive generation. With wagging fingers, they’d admonish, “When we were that age, we never would have spoken to our teachers like that,” or “Whatever happened to ‘please’ and ‘thank you?’” Today, however, poor manners are no longer the exclusive domain of adolescents. Rudeness and—even worse—mean-spirited snarkiness seem to be the stuff of daily life. In grocery store lines, at the workplace, in coffee shops, and on the nightly news, the lack of civil discourse is truly equal opportunity. Has politeness become a foreign language for Americans?

Scholars of both contemporary and historic social and political behavior have studied civility—behaviors that show respect for others. The social life of U.S. citizens was a source of fascination for Alexis de Tocqueville, the young 18th century Frenchman whose observations, recorded in *Democracy in America*, have informed social scientists for more than two centuries. de Tocqueville took meticulous notes on American political culture, relating it to the success of the young democratic republic. As the country stumbled out of infancy and pursued nation-building as an identity-forming

project, de Tocqueville noted that Americans were adept at the “art of association,” in which they formed groups for purposes ranging from political to moral to business and beyond. de Tocqueville’s observations on the art of association—as captured in notions of social capital today—resonate with contemporary concerns about dwindling civility. If civility truly is taking a nosedive in America today, the art of association must be similarly imperiled.

Scholars have a hard time tracking trends in civility over time because repeated, standardized measures of public attitudes toward civility—drawn from large and representative populations—are difficult to find. Still, a number of surveys conducted since the mid-1980s show growing concerns about civility, as illustrated below.

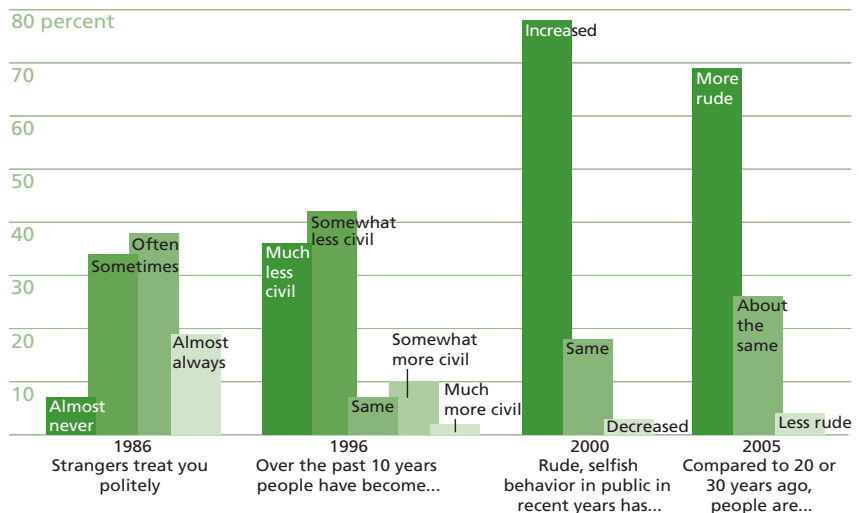
For example, a 1996 *U.S. News & World Report* survey revealed that nearly 80 percent of Americans felt that people had become either “much less civil” or “somewhat less civil” over the over preceding ten years. Similarly, in a 2000 survey by the Gallup Organization, 78 percent of Americans surveyed said that “rude,

selfish public behavior” has increased in recent years. In a 2005 Associated Press survey, 69 percent of respondents felt that people were “more rude” today than they were “20 or 30 years ago.”

These findings are striking when compared with a 1986 Roper Center survey in which the vast majority favorably assessed the politeness of strangers. In short, over the last twenty years, Americans have noticed the disappearance of our collective Ps and Qs, and they are concerned.

What is contributing to this growing trend of rudeness and disrespect? The *U.S. News* survey provides some insights into the origins of this rudeness trend. Survey participants were asked about institutional influences on civility, including political campaigns, primetime television, talk radio, rock music, and schools. All but schools received ratings indicating a “somewhat negative” or “very negative” influence on civility. A number of studies reveal a lengthy list of negative influences on citizen behavior including partisan politics, physical isolation and anonymous communications technologies, a deep-seated culture

## Civility in America



Sources: Roper (1986), U.S. News and World Report (1996), CNN/USAToday/Gallup (2000), Associated Press (2005)

of consumerism and competition, insufficient parental direction in fostering respect for others, a highly mobile population accompanied by a declining sense of community, and a lack of appropriate role models.

In response to the perceived decline in polite behavior, communities have developed civility initiatives across the country. In 1998, Pier Massimo Forni and Giulia Sissa of Johns Hopkins University formed the National Civility Project (now the Johns Hopkins Civility Initiative) to research civility in institutional contexts ranging from high schools to prisons (where the consequences of incivility can

be life-threatening). In recent years, non-profit organizations and communities have mobilized and formed groups such as the Speak Your Peace Civility Project of the Duluth-Superior Area Community Foundation in Minnesota, Leadership Montgomery's Choose Civility in Maryland, and the National Civility Center in Michigan. These initiatives provide consultants to businesses and governments to teach courtesy to employees and others—often conveying lessons that were once considered basic to the socialization of new generations.

In sum, public opinion data clearly show that the majority of Americans are

concerned that we are losing, or consciously choosing to ignore, fundamental lessons of respect for others. Though civility may now seem long gone, concerned citizens and organizations are dusting off their copies of "Miss Manners" and working together to revive our national niceties.

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