

How “Civility” Became a Buzzword—and Lost All Meaning

The term recently has been used to criticize protests of the Trump administration, but these criticisms misunderstand the fundamental concept

By [Kate Knibbs](#) Jun 27, 2018, 5:40am EDT

When a word or phrase suddenly and (sometimes) unexpectedly hits our collective consciousness, you cannot stop hearing or reading it. [Lexicon](#) is The Ringer’s running guide to collecting and defining these terms, and sometimes tracing their origins. It’s a never-ending pursuit, but one we’re happy to entertain.

Over the past few weeks, several Trump administration officials have faced public protest on a more intimate level than they are accustomed. Kirstjen Nielsen, the secretary of homeland security, left a Mexican restaurant in Washington, D.C., after protesters [chanted](#), “If kids don’t eat in peace, you don’t eat in peace!” In a separate incident, protesters also [played audio](#) of crying migrant children outside of her home. Trump adviser Stephen Miller met with resistance while dining at another Mexican restaurant in D.C., where other patrons [called him a “fascist”](#) to his face. He left. Two similar incidents occurred on the same night: In Florida, that state’s attorney general, Pam Bondi, who publicly supports President Trump, [left a movie theater](#) after fellow patrons shouted at her. Meanwhile, Trump press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders was [asked to leave](#) the Red Hen, a restaurant in Virginia, after the restaurant’s owner polled her staff and determined that they did not feel comfortable serving the mouthpiece of the Trump administration.

Both Republicans and Democrats criticized these protests. The president personally excoriated the Red Hen on Twitter. *The Washington Post’s* editorial board [argued](#) that the Trump administration should “be

allowed to eat dinner in peace,” although it conceded that Trump himself is “coarsening” political debate, and that his policies at the border amounted to human rights violations. After U.S. Representative Maxine Waters (D-Calif.) urged her constituents to continue public activism against the administration, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) [criticized](#) Waters’s response. “Trump’s daily lack of civility has provoked responses that are predictable but unacceptable,” Pelosi tweeted. Meanwhile, Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) said “no one should call for harassment of political opponents” during a speech on the Senate floor. Meghan McCain [characterized](#) Waters’s call to confront public officials as “extremely dangerous.” On her morning TV show, Megyn Kelly objected to Waters’s statement. “You don’t call for incivility,” Kelly [said](#). “I’ve been critical of Maxine Waters’ call for harassing people she disagrees with,” former White House press secretary Ari Fleischer [tweeted](#). “But everyone, including POTUS, can play a part in restoring civility.” In response to Waters’s assertion that her constituents should feel free to assemble and voice their opposition to the administration, the president threatened her on Twitter, saying, “Congresswoman Maxine Waters, an extraordinarily low IQ person, has become, together with Nancy Pelosi, the Face of the Democrat Party. She has just called for harm to supporters, of which there are many, of the Make America Great Again movement. Be careful what you wish for Max!”

“Civility,” a buzzword [repeatedly invoked](#) in discussions about these protests, has become the week’s talking point. Many people [have already pointed](#) out that, in words and deeds, President Trump has done more to upend the norms of political discourse than any public figure in recent history. The recent criticisms of protests are centered on the idea that, while one boor-in-chief is bad, a chorus of boos won’t make anything right.

While politicians and pundits invoke “civility” to call for a return to decorum, they fundamentally misunderstand the original concept of the word, instead glomming on to a more shallow and recent definition. “‘Civitas’ is a juridical and political construct that Greco-Roman antiquity bequeathed to Western civilization. In Latin, it meant ‘city,’ in the sense

of city-state, the body politic, the commonwealth. Consequently, ‘civilitas’—which became ‘civility’ in English—was the conduct becoming citizens in good standing, willing to give of themselves for the good of the city,” P.M. Forni, author of *Choosing Civility* and the cofounder of the Civility Initiative at Johns Hopkins University, [wrote](#) for *The Dallas Morning News* in 2010. “Building on the notion of ‘civilitas,’ here is a possible definition of civility for our times: The civil person is someone who cares for his or her community and who looks at others with a benevolent disposition rooted in the belief that their claim to well being and happiness is as valid as his or her own.”

Over time, “civility” became more associated with order than justice. In his 2016 book *How Civility Works*, political scientist Keith J. Bybee summarizes how the term evolved to its current close association with courtesy, starting in the Middle Ages. “By the mid-1500s, an understanding of civility as ‘behavior proper to the intercourse of the civilized world’ had been cemented in the English-speaking world,” Bybee writes.

The tension between the idea of civility as decorum and civility as a moral imperative is apparent in what is one of the earliest American documents about it. As a teenager, George Washington [transcribed](#) his “Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation.” The first rule emphasizes etiquette: “Every Action done in Company, ought to be with Some Sign of Respect, to those that are Present.” The last, however, focuses on the original meaning of the term: “Labour to keep alive in your Breast that Little Spark of Celestial fire Called Conscience.”

Bybee emphasizes that contrasting notions of civility have fueled clashes between activists and opponents throughout American history. “Anti-Federalists, nineteenth-century female abolitionists and suffragettes, and twentieth-century Civil Rights activists were all castigated for violating codes of behavior that favored specific elites,” Bybee writes. “In each of these instances accusations of blatant rudeness and outright barbarism were deployed to intimidate those contesting the status quo.”

(Several [recent responses](#) to the current civility brohauhau have pointed out, correctly, that Martin Luther King Jr., who is [frequently evoked](#) as an

avatar for civility, was in his lifetime viewed as “the opposite of a model of civility,” as *Vox*’s Nicole Hemmer [noted](#). Segregationists lambasted King for publicly protesting racial and economic injustice.)

Tracing the recent evolution of this status quo–upholding version of civility, in 2014 *New Yorker* writer Hua Hsu examined what he called the “civility wars” in politics, on college campuses, and on the internet, arguing that calls for civility are often coded calls for activists to step back. “The language of civility has always been a code of sorts, a way of holding life’s quotidian messiness up against lofty, sometimes elitist ideals of proper behavior. Perhaps, in the most practical sense, we might agree that some basic understanding of civility is what compels us to hold doors open for strangers or to avoid cussing out the elderly,” Hsu [wrote](#). “Over the past decade, however, civility has come to assume a more prescriptive dimension. At a time when our ideological divides feel wild and extreme, civility has become our polite-sounding call to fall back in line.”

But civility does not have to equal genteel silence. As Bybee concludes, “civility itself is a subject of political struggle and debate, a mode of behavior that is developed and perpetually refashioned in the democracy of everyday life.” Although it is frequently conflated with polite behavior, civility’s earliest and most cogent definition, as outlined by Forni, is concerned with moral behavior. Adhering to a code of appropriately deferential language (or not) should be a secondary concern to the far greater point of acting out of duty to community.

Obscured by the fussy calls for proper discourse, this argument over civility in regard to the Trump administration’s public treatment is about *how citizens are permitted to address their public servants*, particularly when they feel that those servants have forsaken their duty to humane governance—by locking children in cages, by treating people like the enemy based on their religious beliefs, race, and where they were born. It is an old argument: What should protest look like?

Due to the frequent conflation of politeness and civility, it may seem incongruent to call people who shout and heckle avatars of civility, but

they can be. Confronted with the decision to silently stand aside while public servants disrespect and endanger their communities, the protesters of the Trump administration have chosen to speak out. While their strategies for doing so may be considered rude, protesters who do speak out against inhumane politics are often actually guarding civility of government, as institutional civility is, at root, an issue of treating fellow human beings with dignity.

“Civility is the shape that care takes,” Forni [wrote](#). Protest is a profoundly civil action, even when the act of protest involves raising one’s voice, or politely refusing service on ethical grounds. It may not be mannerly to scream during a circus, but frequently it is the only way to be heard.