

Denison University

## Denison Digital Commons

---

### Faculty Publications

---

2019

# 'We're Going to Impeach the MF'er': Incivility in the Pursuit of Justice

Paul A. Djupe  
*Denison University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/facultypubs>



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Djupe, Paul A., "'We're Going to Impeach the MF'er': Incivility in the Pursuit of Justice" (2019). *Faculty Publications*. 1821.

<https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/facultypubs/1821>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Denison Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [eresources@denison.edu](mailto:eresources@denison.edu).

# 'We're Going to Impeach the MF'er': Incivility in the Pursuit of Justice

---

Paul A. Djupe

February 18, 2019

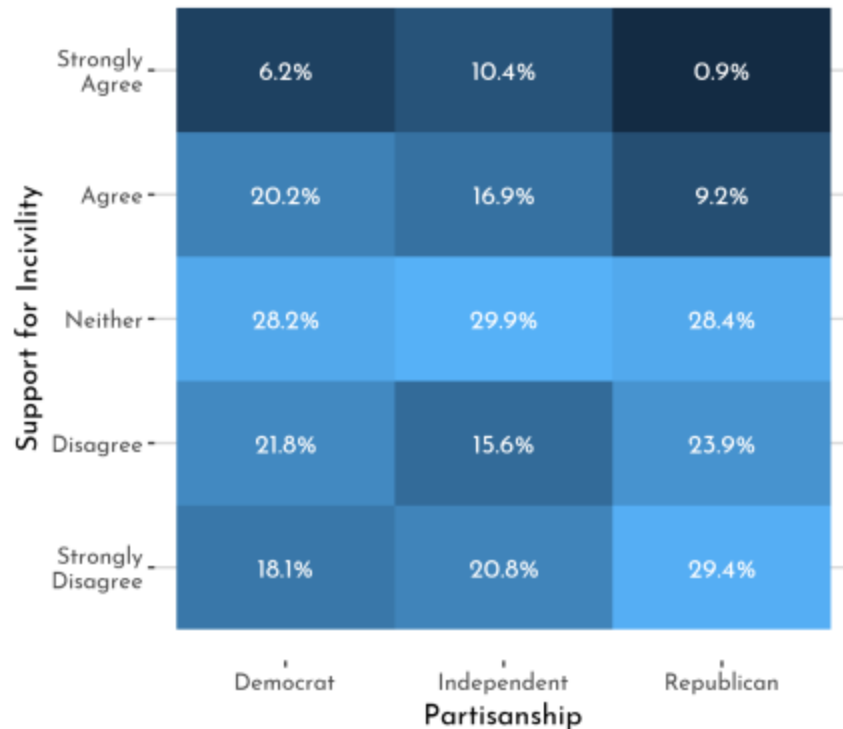
By Paul A. Djupe

"Do you think we can get it back?" This is a question that political scientists continually ask each other these days. Once a country starts to slide from a stable, robust democracy, the usual safeguards of norms governing behavior and the referees have already been sidelined. One of the principal dangers, we think, is that people start to see anti-democratic means as a (the only?) way of restoring democracy.[1] So, it set off alarm bells when Rep. Rashida Tlaib of Michigan told a crowd of progressive activists on a January 2019 night that, "We're gonna impeach the motherf\*\*\*er" (she was referring to Trump). Democracy is not imperiled by cussing to be sure, but the statement was viewed as dangerous because it suggested that removing Trump was a partisan project, not necessarily based on evidence gained from systematic evaluations through open hearings. It should be said that Rep. Tlaib is not the only one to push the democratic line – those challenges are rampant these days.

Anyway, this was the sort of question that my senior seminar last fall was engaged with and we asked Denisonians a bunch of questions linked to support for democratic norms in our October survey (just before the election). About 517 responded. One question that I found compelling asked whether respondents agreed or disagreed that, "In order to fight injustice, we need incivility." It seems to capture the moment and our angst about a democratic future very well. Of course, it's not entirely clear what "incivility" means and there are many possible definitions (same for injustice!).[2] But it seems clear to me that it marks a departure from normal, respectful democratic discourse and procedure.

So, how much support is there for ditching civility for the pursuit of justice? The figure below shows that about a quarter of the campus agrees with the incivility project; on the other side about 40 percent reject the idea. The rest (~3/10) are not sure. Incivility is more commonly supported among Democrats (and independents!). Republicans are less on board with this – only 10 percent support incivility to fight injustice. Why this pattern? Civility is a democratic good, but it also feels like it could favor the status quo by making it possible to ignore or reject civil appeals. So it would make sense that Republicans would not favor incivility and Democrats would. I would also think that even greater incivility on campus would make an already difficult social situation more challenging for the political minority. Is it possible that incivility is a tool of the majority? Put another way, can minorities afford to be uncivil?

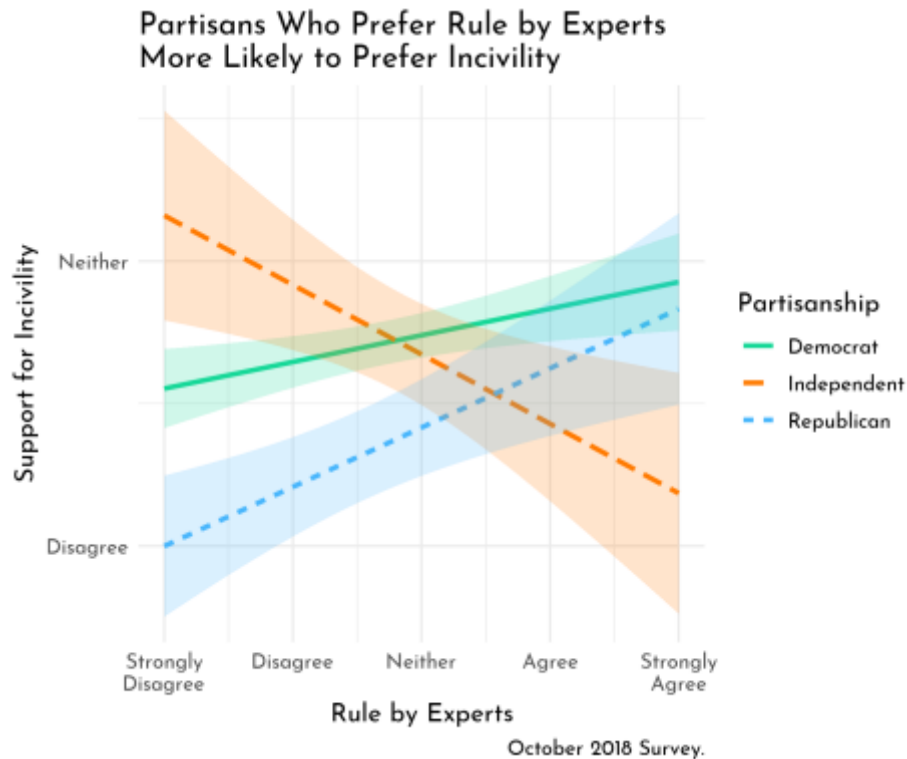
## In order to fight injustice, we need incivility.



Source: October 2018 Survey

Since ‘incivility’ has an ambiguous meaning, we should see what those attitudes are related to as a way of figuring it out. For us, the critical question is whether those who favor incivility are also hostile to the democratic process. In this case, that hostility is represented by agreement that “Our government would run better if decisions were left up to nonelected, independent experts rather than politicians or the people.”<sup>[3]</sup> That answer appears to be yes in the figure below, but it depends on partisanship. For both Democrats and Republicans, incivility is linked with more rejection of the democratic process in favor of rule by independent experts – they want to get their way and somehow think those independent experts would agree with them. The relationships are not extraordinarily strong, but do give us a sense of the dangers of going down the uncivil path.

But what about those independents?! I think that the aversion to political conflict is driving this pattern. Those independents who prefer rule by experts also reject incivility, suggesting they want the messiness of politics out of the way. On the other end (left side) are those who reject experts and embrace incivility, suggesting a preference for disruption.



By the way, if you think this is an outlier, those who prefer incivility also cast a dim view on compromise – they are more likely to agree (~30% do) that, “What people call ‘compromise’ in politics is really just selling out one’s principles.” This sort of view does not make politics easier. It reminds me of a conversation on twitter I was having with a former student who thinks we should teach more appreciation for the difficulties of doing politics (this was specifically about ACA/Obamacare).



I don't disagree – we could use more reverence for and skill in generating collective action. While there's no open revolt against the democratic process among Denison students right now, there are large portions who waver, and sizable blocs who have no position on the matter (!). That's not reassuring for the potential to keep the republic. I think we should engage some new initiatives to build appreciation for just how hard it is to do democracy and how civility is at the core of coalition building.

*Paul A. Djupe is a local cyclist who coincidentally has taught research methods at Denison for millenia. He started onetwentyseven.blog a few years ago in a bid to subsidize collective action.*

---

## Notes

1. There are loads of other dangers and most of them are appearing in the current administration. Check out [\*How Democracies Die\*](#) by Ziblatt and Levitsky for more.
2. For instance, this [\*Vice article\*](#) has the same title as the survey question and takes a very, very particular definition of incivility, "'Civility' means white liberals telling people of color to empathize with Trump supporters." I think civility is much broader than that; I also think civility is an essential tool of coalition building.

3. Here's a look at how much support there is for Philosopher Kings at Denison (won't work – The Simpson's already tried this out and failed). However, reinvigorating the advisory process in the federal bureaucracy should be a very priority in the next administration (see Michael Lewis' *The Fifth Risk*).

