

The Decline of American Civility

Moving from market to political competition exchanges initiative, prudence, and efficiency for favoritism, subsidy and protection. And civility falls among the casualties.

W I L L I A M R . A L L E N

HAVE WE become more nasty and brutish over the last generation or two, or have the media just developed a keener eye for beastly behavior and now report it more fully? Steven Knack, while a doctoral candidate in economics at the University of Maryland a few years ago, cited evidence that civility has in fact declined. "... think of voting as just one particular type of socially cooperative behavior," he suggested. But the proportion of eligible voters actually going to the polls has fallen dramatically in recent decades.

There are other signs. Crime rates are higher now than 40 years ago. A smaller fraction of adults read newspapers and magazines or even watch television news, which may mean that today's citizens are less well informed. The proportion of young scholars on college campuses who cheat on exams reportedly has doubled since the 1960s. Charitable contributions, adjusted for income and other factors, have been declining since the late 1940s. Income tax compliance has fallen. All this, along with casual impressions of rudeness on the highway and crudeness in public expression, suggest a dismaying decline in civility.

Why? Mr. Knack suggests a weakening of traditional sanctions on abusive, self-indulgent behavior. Families, neighbors, and community institutions like churches have less influence today. And greater urbanization and mobility make it easier for individuals to escape accountability for the costs they inflict on others. Still, he overlooks another likely, and perhaps even more pervasive cause: a marked increase in political competition.

Competition in various manifestations occurs in all societies, for people want more than available resources can supply. The pie is smaller than combined appetites,

William R. Allen, of UCLA, is about as civil and otherwise cuddlesome as economists ever are.

so people compete for slices. But while competition is inevitably a fact of life in a world of scarcity, the *method* of competition varies widely among communities and over time. In *market* competition, people compete for a slice of the social output pie by offering something in exchange. But an individual will have more to offer in exchange — and thus be able to acquire more — by first *producing* more that the community values. Market competition induces people to *produce*, contributing to others' wellbeing. By competing for some of the pie, people end up baking a bigger one for the community.

Political competition is basically different. Here, rivals try to persuade government to *give* them slices of the pie produced by *others*. This method of competition brings forth belligerent conflict, for it directs efforts from producing the pie to demanding its political redistribution. The essence of the competitive game shifts from market initiative, calculated prudence, and economic efficiency to seeking selective favoritism, wasteful subsidization, and inhibiting protection by Big (and Little) Brother. Insidiously, political competition subverts respect for other people and their property rights and appreciation of their productivity. Victims, too, are manners and morals, which share with formal property rights the task of controlling and coordinating individuals' behavior for the community's benefit.

Civility pertains to more than personal gentility. At the societal level, civility must be made manifest in institutions, rules of the game, and processes which lead aggressive, grubby people to mesh and meld their self-interested efforts in such manner that community wellbeing is enhanced.

Political competition has been persistently edging out market competition for much of this century. Perhaps we should pay attention to this lamentable encroachment when trying to comprehend the decline of American civility.

CPR

A Steady Lot, the Californians

*The state's journalistic establishment shows it is still nimble enough,
when the mood hits it, to turn on a dime.*

T I M W . F E R G U S O N

PETER SCHRAG'S book, *Paradise Lost*, is no best seller, but it did help shape a lot of the primary analyses of California's electoral system. Result: more negative spins on the cynical initiative process from liberals who don't like having power taken away from public officials. Whoops! Poor timing for all concerned. The election results seemed to confound the conventional view — most of the propositions were defeated, school bonds passed, the biggest bucks (except for the California Teachers Association's) were rebuked, and career politicians prevailed. The journalistic establishment turned on a dime. "A steady lot, the Californians," hailed the lead item in *The Economist's* U.S. section. "It is perhaps California's relative nonchalance toward money in politics that matters most," said the Brits. "Just when you were beginning to lose faith in American politics, the voters surprised you." You? *The Economist*, a supporter of Prop. 227, did take a richly-deserved swipe at Rep. Xavier Becerra for accusing teach-English sponsor Ron Unz of "immigrant bashing." Becerra, recognized in these columns as a cut above the usual political product of hollow minority districts, looked like just another ethnic interest-group hack with his attack on the immigration-backing Unz.

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Untold criticisms were made of the broadcast-media coverage of the primary campaign — and certainly it was barren, including the election night analysis. (Ever notice how you have to read a newspaper, or at least somewhere in a newspaper, to get reportage that actually understands the significance of a pattern of results? The same pattern that is so obvious to a politically

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aware person — but not to the clueless talking heads — the night of an election?) But for all that, the state's newspapers themselves provided scant coverage of most races outside of the governorship and, once the knives came out, the GOP Senate primary. The other statewide offices got the obligatory roundup story apiece, too often an unsophisticated job that dutifully recorded the candidates' expressions of purpose but didn't explain what was really motivating their efforts. And for the Legislature, fuhgettaboutit.

One specific lapse was in the school superintendent race. The various last-week rundowns gave a paragraph or two to the hopefuls other than incumbent Delaine Eastin and anti-bilingual sponsor Gloria Tuchman. But listeners to at least one radio interview program ("Which Way, LA?") might have been surprised to discover that the most articulate free-market candidate in the race was one Mark Isler, a San Fernando Valley businessman who has a cable talk show. That experience evidently honed his act, because he was point-blank in challenging the convention that more money was the salvation of the schools, or that government was necessarily the best provider of schooling. He advocated real choice, including charters, vouchers, and home teaching, with no apologies. Isler managed to get 12 percent of the vote and finish fourth. Maybe the guy has a future if he can at least get some ink.

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Speaking of schools, the *LA Times* published a three-part series on what it found to be the alarming condition of the state's K-12 system. The most striking aspect was a set of survey questions that found students and especially parents (most of all, black parents) giving low marks to the instruction offered, while most teachers thought the instruction is just dandy but the pay is too low. This perception gap went undiscussed