

# *Deliberation Down and Dirty*

## Must Political Expression Be Civil?

DAVID M. ESTLUND  
*Philosophy, Brown University*

### CARVING OUT A QUESTION

The idea of civility can suggest perniciously narrow norms of public behavior.<sup>1</sup> In the context of political expression in particular, calls for civility run the risk of morally tolerating far too little. My hypothesis in this essay is that there are moral standards of civility in political expression but that they can accommodate much vigorous, disruptive, disturbing, embarrassing, and even illegal expressive activity. This approach may seem to defend civility by using the name to refer to something else, something more defensible. Rather, the dispute is framed here as about what the idea of civility really does require. One proposal applies the idea of politeness to the public sphere. I sketch a different view, in which civility's point is different from that of politeness and in which its content is different as a result. Politeness cannot make room for sharp and disruptive behavior, but civility can.<sup>2</sup> Calling this type of behavior "uncivil" would suggest a strong presumption against it. On the view I will defend here, wider boundaries of civility are triggered specifically as remedial responses to certain violations of the conditions needed to foster good democratic deliberation—in particular, power's interference with reason. There is no strong presumption against sharp and disruptive political expression, because there is no general reason for presuming that the conditions in which narrow civility has its place normally obtain.

Many today accept that sharp and disruptive tactics are within the legitimate repertoire of responsible citizens. At the same time, many doubt that sharp political expression of various kinds can be properly accommodated within the increasingly popular idea of "deliberative democracy."<sup>3</sup> One goal in this discussion is to

