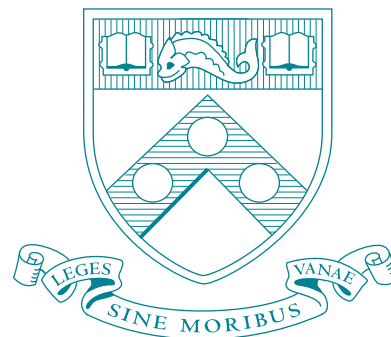


Civility in the House of Representatives: An Update

This Report, prepared by Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Professor and Dean of the Annenberg School for Communication of the University of Pennsylvania and Erika Falk, a doctoral student at the Annenberg School, was funded by the Aspen Institute with a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts.

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THE ANNENBERG PUBLIC POLICY CENTER
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

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FOREWORD

The Annenberg Public Policy Center was established by publisher and philanthropist Walter Annenberg in 1994 to create a community of scholars within the University of Pennsylvania which would address public policy issues at the local, state and federal levels. Consistent with the mission of the Annenberg School for Communication, the Center has four ongoing foci: Information and Society; Media and the Developing Mind; Media and the Dialogue of Democracy; and Health Communication. Each year, as well, a special area of scholarly and social interest is addressed. The Center supports research and sponsors lectures and conferences in these areas. This series of publications disseminates the work of the Center.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson
Director

BACKGROUND

From March 7-9, 1997, 200 Members of the House of Representatives, 165 spouses and 100 of their children attended a bipartisan retreat in Hershey, Pennsylvania coordinated by The Aspen Institute and funded by a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts. The retreat was organized by the Bipartisan Congressional Planning Committee, co-chaired by Congressmen David Skaggs (CO) and Ray LaHood (IL). The committee included Members: Rep. Eva Clayton (NC), Rep. David Dreier (CA), Rep. Jo Ann Emerson (MO), Rep. Tillie Fowler (FL), Rep. Ruben Hinojosa (TX), Rep. Arno Houghton (NY), Rep. Tom Sawyer (OH), Rep. Charlie Stenholm (TX).

According to its organizers, it was designed “To seek a greater degree of civility, mutual respect and, when possible, bipartisanship among Members of the House of Representatives in order to foster an environment in which vigorous debate and mutual respect can coexist.”

The Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania prepared a background report on civility in the House for use at the retreat. [The Executive Summary of *Civility in the House of Representatives*, March 1997, can be found on the Annenberg School Home page at: <http://www.asc.upenn.edu/appc/pubs>] That report charted words taken down and requests to take words down from 1935-1996 and mapped calls for a Member to suspend and for the House to be in order from the 99th through the 104th Congress. It also reported uses of vulgarity for the past six congresses. This report updates those findings to include the first session of the 105th and also includes data drawn from six new indices: name calling, aspersion, references to lying and its synonyms, hyperbole, language of non-co-operation, and pejorative words for speech.

Even before the Hershey Retreat occurred, rhetoric on the floor of Congress suggested that plans for the Retreat were having an impact. After the retreat, Speaker Gingrich hoped that the Hershey experience would “begin to set this House back on a track of working together, of getting things done, of recognizing we may have deep differences at times but there are other times when we have many, many things that bring us together...” House Minority leader Gephardt pledged “our best efforts to carry the spirit of that meeting forward with tangible results in trying to work together better in a variety of ways.”

FINDINGS

After the retreat, references on the floor to Hershey by Members of Congress served to:

Remind Members that civility is a norm:

“We continue to recognize that there will be deep, passionate policy differences between the parties. I think today’s debate on the House resolution was a classic example, and we have no desire to blur those distinctions. Conflict in Congress is unavoidable, and the nation is well-served by healthy and vigorous debate.... The retreat, rather, was about handling those disagreements constructively and honoring our democracy with debates that are more civil, more respectful and, ultimately, more productive....”

Invite reflection on the content or tone of debate:

X: “I did not go to Hershey, PA at the bipartisan retreat, but if I had and would have come on the floor for this debate this evening, I do not believe I would have used words like ‘absurd,’ ‘mush,’ things of that sort.... I do not think they help us.”

Y: “If I said anything that is personal to the gentleman, I apologize. I was characterizing the ideas that are in debate....”

X: “My good friend from Y meant nothing personal toward me, nor did I take it as such....”

Personalize floor statements:

“Why is balancing the budget so important? Why should we care whether we pile up more debt on future generations? ...at our bipartisan retreat... a lot of Members in both parties brought their children. The place was overflowing with kids. It was so much fun to see these kids having a good time. We are balancing the budget for their sake.”

Call for compromise:

“The compromise that I have proposed in the spirit of this bipartisan Congress is that...we had a bipartisan retreat, and part of the retreat’s purpose was to see to it that we work together in a more civil manner....”

Remind Members of the meaning of the Hershey experience:

“This particular retreat gave us for the first time in a long time a chance for us to meet on a personal level....”

“The Chair would require all Members to be respectful of each other anywhere on the floor. Hershey was only 3 weeks ago.”

Establish common ground:

“I think it might not be necessarily easier for Republicans to kiss a Democrat or for a Democrat to kiss a Republican, but it will be easier for us all to give each other a Hershey kiss.”

Provide comic relief:

X: “The gentleman is doing real well for a new guy.”

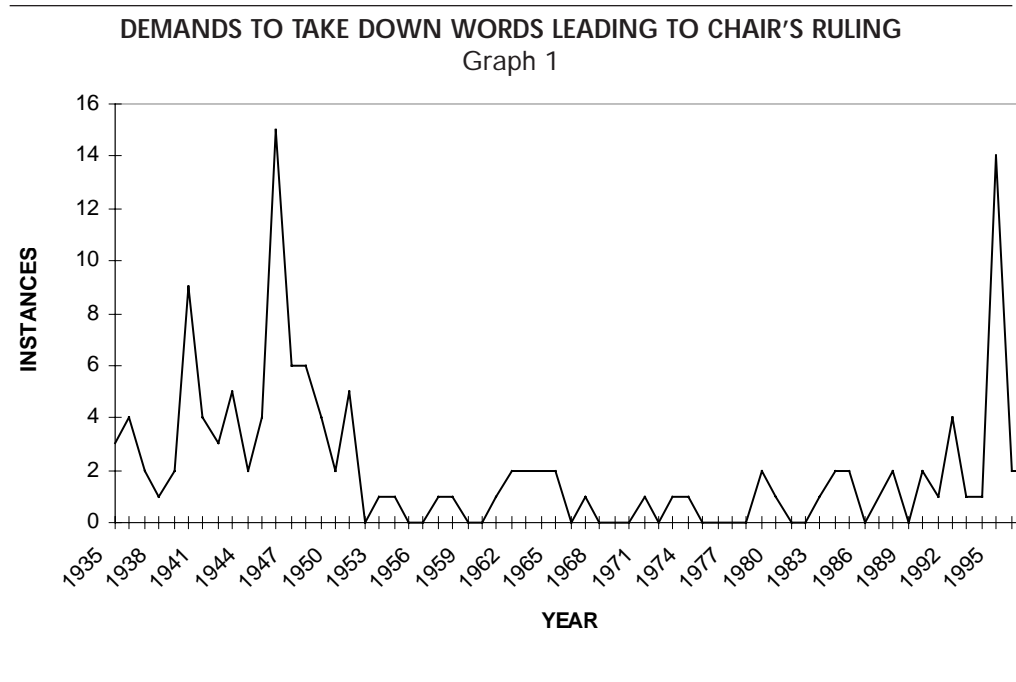
Y: “The gentleman is ,too, and I like his hair in the spirit of Hershey and comity.”

X: “I thank the gentleman.”

Allusions to the Hershey experience occurred in debates on balancing the budget, health care for children, EPA policies, Social Security, and campaign finance reform.

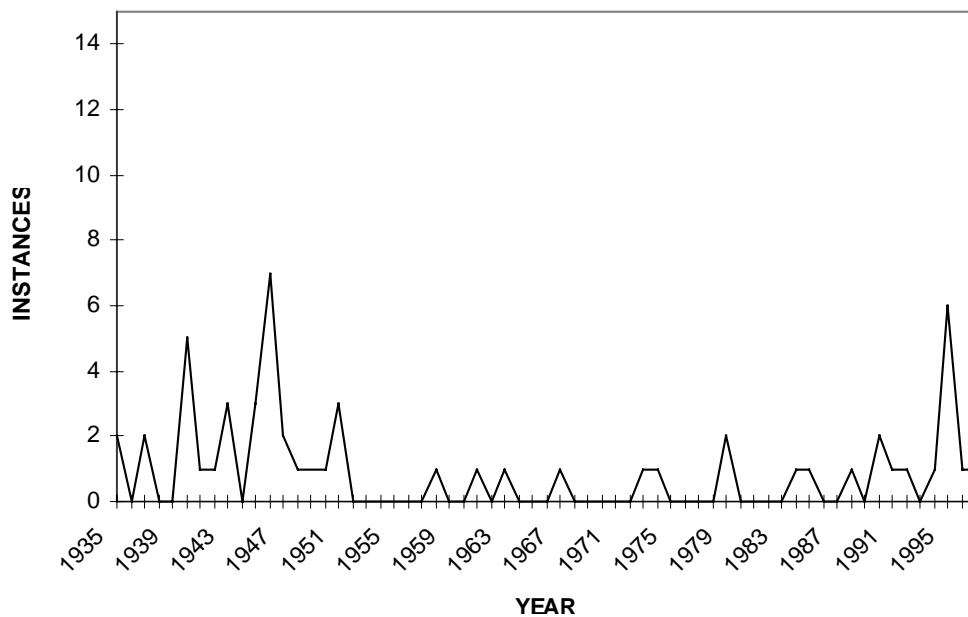
By a number of measures the first session of the 105th sustained the improvement in civility that had occurred in the last session of the 104th. In some respects, the first session of the 105th improved on its immediate predecessor.

- 1 Both demands to take down words leading to a ruling by the chair (Graph 1) and words ruled out of order (Graph 2) returned to their historical median point. In each case this is a substantial improvement over the first session of the 104th and consistent with the second session of the 104th.



WORDS RULED OUT OF ORDER

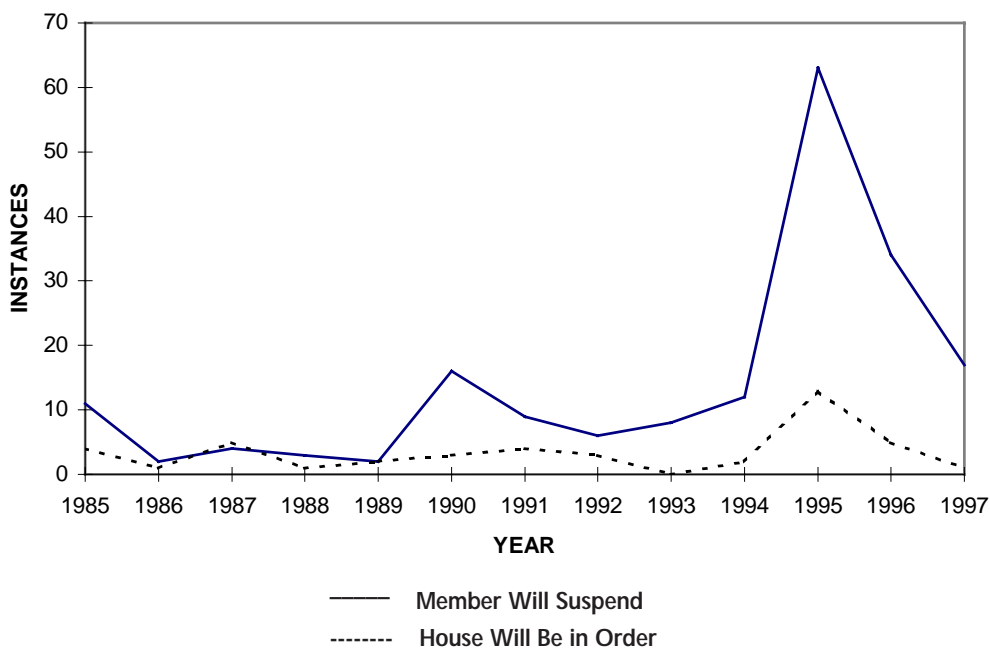
Graph 2



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- 2 Calls for a Member to suspend dropped from the second session of the 104th to the first session of the 105th (Graph 3).

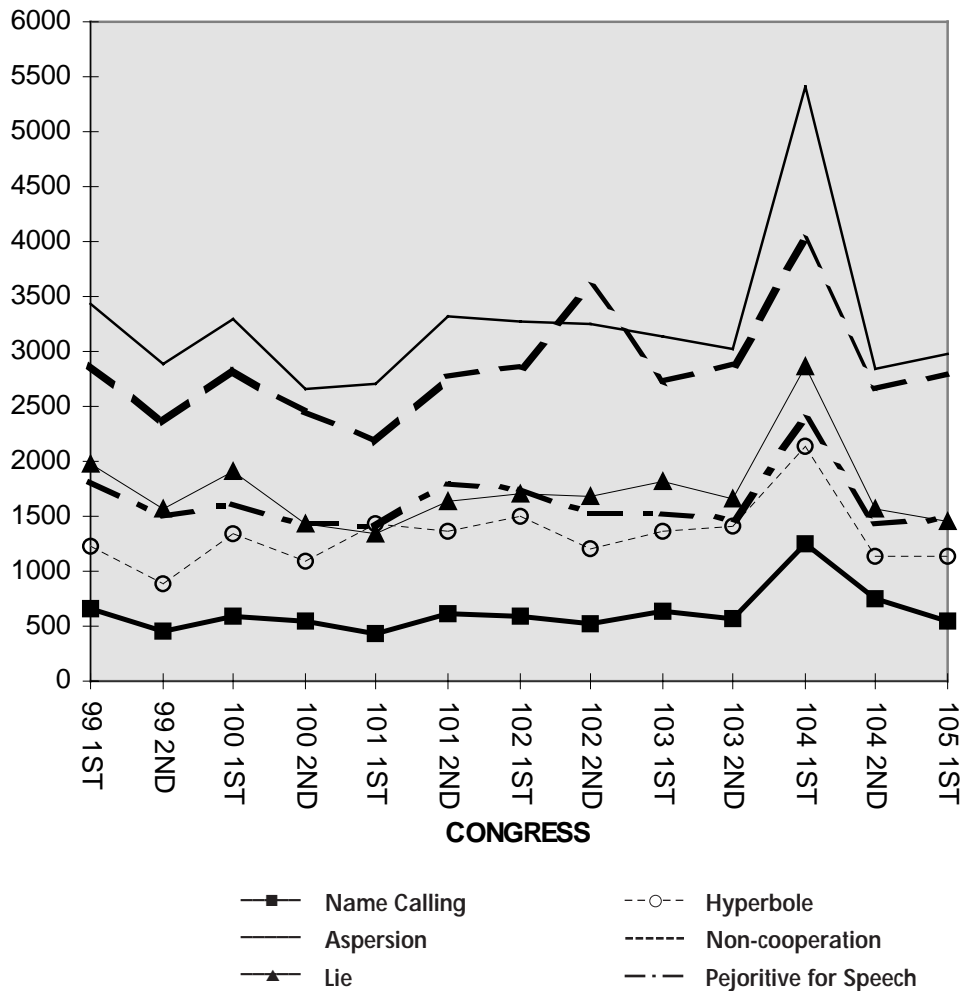
CALLS FOR A MEMBER TO SUSPEND & FOR THE HOUSE TO BE IN ORDER

Graph 3

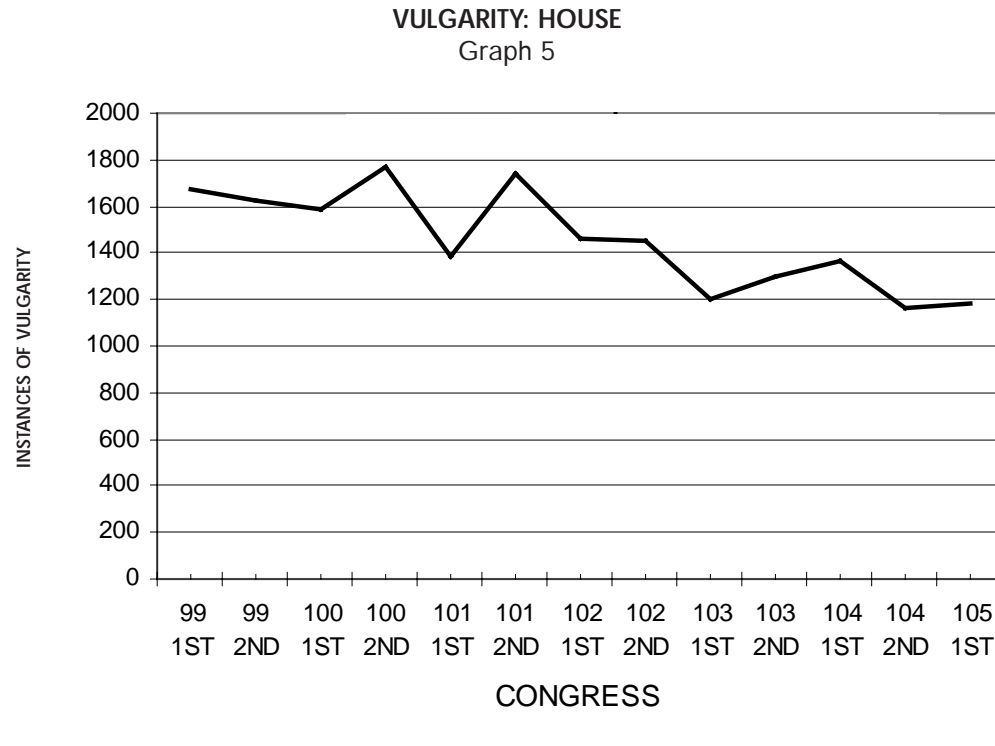


- 3 Calls for the House to be in order showed a similar pattern (Graph 3).
- 4 Name calling, aspersion, use of the word lie and its synonyms, hyperbole, language of non-co-operation and pejorative words describing speech all peaked in the first session of the 104th, dropping in the second session.
- 5 Of these, name calling and synonyms for lie dropped again in the first session of the 105th.
- 6 Hyperbole and the pejorative characterizations of speech remained at roughly the level of the second session of the 104th's level.
- 7 Aspersion and the language of non-co-operation increased slightly but remained below the average of the earlier sessions excluding the first session of the 104th (Graph 4).

INDEX BY CONGRESS: HOUSE
Graph 4



- 8 Use of vulgar words remained virtually unchanged in the first session of the 105th (Graph 5).



- 9 In the 105th, during the taking down process of both parties, there was individual awareness of an obligation to defuse the tensions of the situation in the interest of comity. Two instances are illustrative:

X: “Mr. Speaker, I regret to ask that the gentlewoman’s words be taken down. She just issued a false statement.” “Mr. Speaker, I will be happy to withdraw the request in the spirit of civility.”

X: “I ask that the gentleman’s words be taken down....”

Y: “I ask unanimous consent to withdraw my words about specifically mentioning the President....”

X: “Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman for making the correction and that saves us a trip back to Hershey.”

- 10 Comparing the discourse surrounding controversial events in the first session of the 105th with parallel events in past Congresses suggests restraint on the part of Members of both parties. Although the level of name calling and related uses of uncivil language did increase in each instance in the 105th, the discourse surrounding ethics charges against Speaker Wright was less civil than that surrounding ethics charges against Speaker Gingrich in the first session of the 105th; the discourse surrounding determination of the victor in California’s 46th

Congressional District in the first session of the 105th was more civil than that surrounding the decision involving the seating of Democrat Frank McCloskey rather than Republican Richard McIntyre in a close and disputed election in the 8th Congressional District of Indiana in 1984.

- 11 The resolution banning a former Member from the chamber after an uncivil outburst was supported by the leadership of the party to which he belonged. Two hundred eighty nine Members voted to bar that Member from the Capitol sanctuary until his challenge to the outcome of the election in his district was resolved. One hundred eleven of those were Members of the offending former Member's party. That session was chaired by the Speaker of the House—also a Member of the former Member's party. The process took place without eliciting the sorts of rancorous exchanges that had characterized tense moments in the first session of the 104th.

METHODOLOGY

We charted demands to take down words and rulings on words taken down from 1935-1997. This was done by copying the reports on words taken down from the House Journal appendices, checking that record against the one gathered in two Congressional Research Service reports by Ilona Nickels and one report by Republican leader Bob Michel, and conducting a Lexis-Nexis search of the Congressional Record from 1985-1997.

For the 99th through the first session of the 105th Congress (1985-1997) we also searched the Record for indications that the debate had been disrupted. The two indicators we chose were uses of “The gentle/man/lady/Member will suspend” and “The House will be in order.”

In addition to these measures, we developed and validated seven other word-based indices of incivility. Taken together, these indices tracked 294 words across six congresses and the first session of the 105th.

Name calling (nouns such as weirdo, traitor, crackpot and bitch), 92 words in the index.

Aspersions (words that insult but do not call names including such words as irrational, reckless, and un-American), 71 words in the index.

Synonyms for “lie” or a person who lies (e.g., hoax, farce, prevaricate), 58 words in the index.

Hyperbole (e.g., outrageous, cataclysmic, heinous), 15 words in the index.

Non-Co-operation (e.g., polarized, filibuster, inflexible), 28 words in the index.

Pejorative words for speech (e.g., bellyache, doublespeak, gibberish), 19 words in the index.

Vulgarity (e.g., damn, shit, hell), 11 words in the index.

These indices were developed inductively. First we generated a list of each word used in the 103rd and 104th Congresses. We then read these decontextualized lists, isolating words that might indicate incivility. Additional words were generated using a thesaurus. All of the words were then randomized. Four coders were asked to resort them back into the six indices. The coders were given the option of indicating that a word did not belong in any of the indices. A word was included in an index if three out of four of the coders reliably placed it there. Words that did not pass this reliability test were dropped.

In interpreting these findings, readers should observe the following cautions:

- 1 The counts reported on the graphs are raw word-in-conversation counts unadjusted for the number of words uttered in a session or congress. A congress with more days in session will produce more language. We have relied on raw word counts because until the second session of the 105th is complete we have no way to determine how many words were spoken in the 105th.
- 2 The raw counts under-estimate incivility because if a word is used repeatedly in a conversation it is counted as a single use.
- 3 The raw count over-estimates incivility because our searches are decontextualized. We have not located each word in context to determine whether the speaker was speaking disapprovingly of the concept or endorsing it. So, for example, if a Member says of another “You are not a liar” that statement is given the same weight on the lying index as a statement that “You are a liar.”

This report was prepared by Kathleen Hall Jamieson, dean of the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, and doctoral student, Erika Falk, with support from undergraduates Shirley Zilberstein, Wendy Tepperman, and Richard Cardona.

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The Annenberg Public Policy Center
3620 Walnut Street
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**THE ANNENBERG PUBLIC POLICY CENTER
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA**

3620 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104-6220

Telephone: (215) 898-7041 • Fax: (215) 898-2024
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