

# POLITICAL CIVILITY IN ILLINOIS MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT

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*This paper examines political civility in Illinois municipal government. It identifies two dimensions of liberal political civility, tone and boundaries, and tests them via a survey of elected persons in Illinois municipal government. The survey reveals a high degree of compliance with liberal norms of political civility. However, women are more likely to perceive incivility in terms of tone. People of color are more likely to perceive incivility along both dimensions. The lower perceived civility by women and people of color may reflect a fracture in liberal democratic structures and norms where women and people of color feel less welcome and face greater obstacles to participation in Illinois local government. Addressing these differences in perceived civility will necessitate structural and cultural transformation within and beyond Illinois municipal government.*

## POLITICAL CIVILITY IN ILLINOIS MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT

Liberal democracy maintains that legitimate government results from the will and consent of the governed. Liberalism, in this context, dates to the 17th century and refers to a liberal understanding of the purpose and limits of politics. In this foundational sense, both sides of the current liberal/conservative debate in the United States. begin with and support a liberal framework for understanding politics and government.

Stable government in liberal democracies rests upon a general and accepted understanding of the rules of political engagement. This paper elaborates some of these rules of civil political discourse in order to examine their operation in elected Illinois municipal government. We offer an understanding of political civility indebted to philosopher John Rawls,<sup>1</sup> identify specific markers of political civility, and test for these markers via a survey of people elected to Illinois municipal government. Specifically, we ask: Is the liberal duty of civility observed by elected officials in Illinois municipal government?

Political civility refers to the norms of political discourse that best allow a consensus to emerge. As Rawls explains, political civility expresses the respect individuals should accord one another during political deliberations. We identify

two dimensions of political civility indebted to this understanding of political civility. “Tone” identifies the dimension of political civility that manifests in the maintenance of an environment respectful of all deliberators regardless of personal characteristics or inclinations. “Boundaries” identifies the dimension of political civility that manifests in the maintenance of an environment in which political deliberators frame their arguments or conclusions in terms of values and commitments that are shared by participants as a result of their membership in a liberal, democratic society.

Our survey reveals a high degree of perceived compliance with liberal norms of political civility in terms of tone and boundaries. Regarding tone, women are more likely to perceive incivility in their municipal governing body than men. People of color are more likely to perceive incivility along the lines of both tone and boundaries.

In the following sections, we articulate an understanding of Rawls’ duty of civility. We then elaborate our method and survey instrument, followed by a discussion of the findings of the survey. We conclude with suggestions for municipal officials to consider in addressing these discrepancies.

## **LIBERAL DEMOCRACY AND RAWLS’ DUTY OF CIVILITY**

One challenge for liberal democracy is addressing how people of disparate, often conflicting, lifestyles and beliefs can come together to create laws and policies that respect and express the consent of all the people. Rawls’ expression of liberalism proposed a duty of civility to meet this challenge. This duty stresses the respect people in liberal societies owe to one another as citizens and requires respectful and open deliberation on political issues. This promotes the discovery of commonalities that exist across differences.

Liberal political philosophy and liberal political societies express a shared understanding of people as free and equal. People express their freedom while identifying and pursuing personal ends. Some people want to be saved, others want to be rich, and still others want to play video games all day and night. Liberal society protects the freedom to decide one’s own private ends for oneself. People are also equal in that as members of a liberal democratic political system, citizens perceive the impossibility of an agreement about these personal ends and about what is most important: money, God, or video games. Therefore, they seek to secure a political society that maximizes the possibility of each person pursuing their own personal ends within a system that manifests

fair terms of cooperation (liberal justice). Laws and public policy originate from what we share, the perception of each citizen as free and equal, and not from what makes us different, our different life goals.

Thus, the duty of civility dictates that we explain our political conclusions in shared terms. We respect our fellow citizens by recognizing that they may have different histories, experiences, social identities, or personal ends, but we also recognize that we can deliberate together in terms of what is fair. The duty of civility requires that, in the political forum, we do not entirely found our political arguments and conclusions upon metaphysical, ethical, or religious explanations or upon arguments that rely on some ultimate truth or religious tenet (Morgan-Olsen, 2013). We frame political debate in terms of common values, and these shared political values include principles such as liberty, equality, fairness, democratic rule, equal opportunity, etc.

We operationalize political civility as the respect citizens, legislators, and public officials in liberal democracies should accord each other during political deliberations. This understanding of political civility grounds many thoughtful but less philosophical definitions offered by public organizations focused on political civility. The Institute for Civility in Government (n.d.), for example, defines civility as “disagreeing without disrespect, seeking common ground as a starting point for dialogue about differences. . . . Civility is the hard work of staying present even with those with whom we have deep-rooted and fierce disagreements.”

Survey research demonstrates that large numbers of people are concerned about rising incivility in the United States (Weber Shandwick et al., 2019). Local government officials also report experiencing instances of incivility in their public lives, with nearly 90% of respondents in one survey having experienced hostility and threats while in office (Anthony et al., 2021). This type of bad behavior and norm breaking has been well-documented in the U.S. Congress, with scholars raising concerns about incivility in the nation’s legislature (Dodd & Schraufnagel, 2013; Heseltine & Dorsey, 2022). One of the most vivid examples occurred in 2009 during a joint session of Congress, when U.S. Rep. Joe Wilson interrupted President Barack Obama, declaring, “You lie!”

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The items used in this study are part of a larger survey conducted by the authors through 2018 and 2019. This larger survey investigates political civility across

a variety of dimensions in municipal settings. Participants for the survey were elected officials — mayors, city council members, and alderpeople — from Illinois municipalities.

**TABLE 1**  
DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE RESPONDENT SAMPLE, N= 321

	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS (%)
<b>GENDER</b>	
Male	211 (65.7)
Female	110 (34.3)
<b>RACE</b>	
White	282 (88.4)
Latino	9 (2.8)
Black	17 (5.3)
Asian	5 (1.6)
Other	6 (1.9)
<b>PARTY IDENTIFICATION</b>	
Democrat	75 (25.5)
Independent	125 (42.5)
Republican	94 (32.0)
<b>POLITICAL IDEOLOGY</b>	
Very Liberal	13 (4.1)
Somewhat Liberal	37 (11.7)
Slightly Liberal	24 (7.6)
Moderate	102(32.3)
Slightly Conservative	43 (13.6)
Somewhat Conservative	82 (25.9)
Very Conservative	15 (4.7)

An invitation to complete an online survey was emailed to 3,229 elected officials from municipalities in 46 of the 102 counties in Illinois. The counties themselves were semi-randomly selected to represent regions from across the entire state as well as both rural and urban/suburban regions. Our study targets

seven questions from our larger survey. These seven questions tie to the two identified dimensions of tone and boundaries:

Dimension 1, the tone dimension, refers to political civility as it is manifested in an environment respectful of all deliberators. The survey items measuring tone were these:

- My current board/council maintains an environment respectful of all — regardless of race, gender, religion, or other private affiliations or personal characteristics.
- Members of my board/council refrain from any sort of diminishing or derogatory remarks/behavior.
- I feel respected by my fellow board/council members.
- I feel comfortable sharing my views during board/council meetings.

Dimension 2, the boundaries dimension, refers to political civility as it is manifested in an environment respectful of the differences between deliberators. These survey questions examined the survey participant's perceptions of the deliberative environment as one that is grounded in shared liberal values and commitments. This requires that deliberators refrain from referencing private, comprehensive doctrines or that when they do not refrain, they also subsequently ground their conclusion in shared political conceptions. The survey items tied to boundaries were these:

- Board/council members frame their arguments or conclusions in terms of values and commitments that are shared by all participants. Such values include, for example, commitments to freedom, equality, equal opportunity, free speech, individual rights, democratic rule, etc.
- Board/council members refrain from relying solely on private conclusions and commitments to defend their political conclusions. For example, board/council members do not depend solely on religious or personal moral conclusions to support their political/policy conclusions.
- Members of my board/council have different views and goals, but we manage to “work things out” in a constructive, respectful manner.

This current analysis also included a more general question about civility overall.

RESULTS

As a first step, we established the perceived level of civility among elected officials. Participants scored civility by rating their council using a feeling thermometer from 0 to 100, with higher numbers indicating more civility.<sup>2</sup> On average, the participants thought their boards and councils were quite civil with a mean civility score of 86.13 (standard deviation=17.76).

Two scales were designed to measure the two identified dimensions of civility, tone and boundaries. As with the overall civility score, participants rated the tone of the interactions very positively with a mean score of 6.01 out of 7 (with 7 being a more positive tone).

**TABLE 2**  
DISTRIBUTION OF TONE DIMENSION MEASURES  
CELL VALUES ARE PERCENT OF RESPONSES TO EACH QUESTION

QUESTION/RESPONSE	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	NEITHER	SOMEWHAT AGREE	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
I feel respected	0.6	2.5	1.9	6.6	10.7	41.5	36.2
I feel comfortable sharing my views	1.3	1.3	2.2	4.7	7.2	38.2	45.1
Board/Council maintains respectful environment	1.9	1.3	2.5	4.1	7.0	27.0	56.2
Members refrain from derogatory remarks	1.6	3.8	7.6	2.5	8.9	33.1	42.4

The second dimension, boundaries, indicates somewhat lower civility, with a mean score of 5.5.

Finally, two separate factorial analyses of variance (ANOVA) tests were run to see if gender and/or race interacted to impact the perception of civility (both tone and boundaries). Tone varied by both gender and race, with women and people of color<sup>3</sup> perceiving lower levels of the tone of civility on their governing body (see Table 4). Women respondents perceived the tone of discourse of their municipal boards and councils to be lower than men. There was no main effect

**TABLE 3**  
DISTRIBUTION OF BOUNDARIES DIMENSION MEASURES  
CELL VALUES ARE PERCENT OF RESPONSES TO EACH QUESTION

QUESTION/RESPONSE	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	NEITHER	SOMEWHAT AGREE	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
Despite different goals and views, can work things out	1.3	3.8	3.1	5.6	16.6	42.6	27.0
Arguments framed in terms of shared values	0.6	3.8	4.2	19.8	15.3	31.0	25.2
Members refrain from relying on personal views	1.6	2.2	5.7	14.6	11.8	40.8	23.2

on the boundaries dimension for gender. People of color perceived civility to be lower for tone and boundaries than white participants.

There was no significant interaction effect between gender and race on either tone ( $F[1, 303]=2.41, p=0.122$ ) or boundaries ( $F[1, 303]=0.210, p=0.641$ ). There was no significant difference between how women of color and white women perceived either the tone or boundaries of political civility. Similarly, there was no significant difference between white men and men of color. Instead, the results indicate two separate main effects for race and gender.

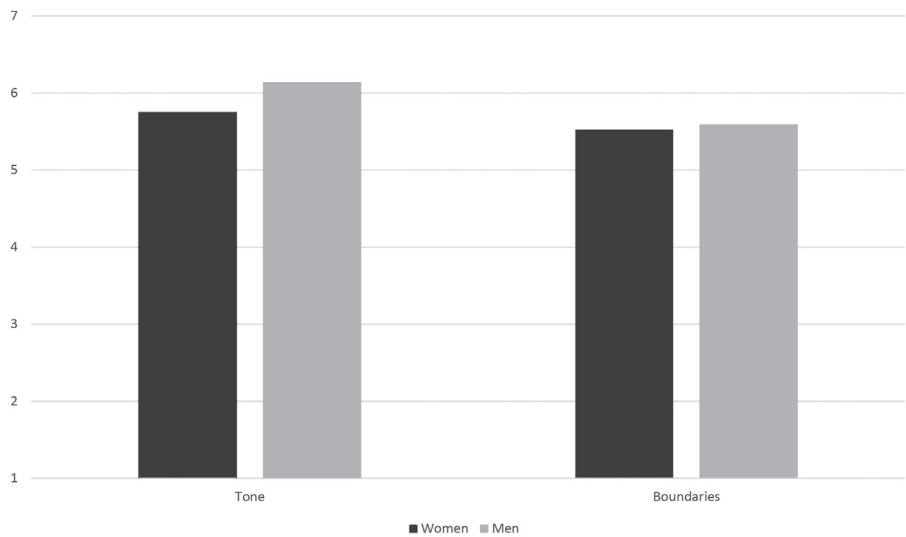
A final one-way ANOVA was run to test if there was a perceived civility difference for the different political ideologies (liberal, conservative, and moderate), but no significant difference was found.

**TABLE 4**  
GENDER AND RACE EFFECTS ON BOTH TONE AND BOUNDARIES

		TONE		BOUNDARIES	
		MEAN	STANDARD DEVIATION	MEAN	STANDARD DEVIATION
Gender	Male	6.14*	0.911	5.59	1.05
	Female	5.75*	1.22	5.52	1.09
Race	Person of Color	5.56*	1.65	5.09*	1.52
	White	6.06*	0.951	5.75*	1.03

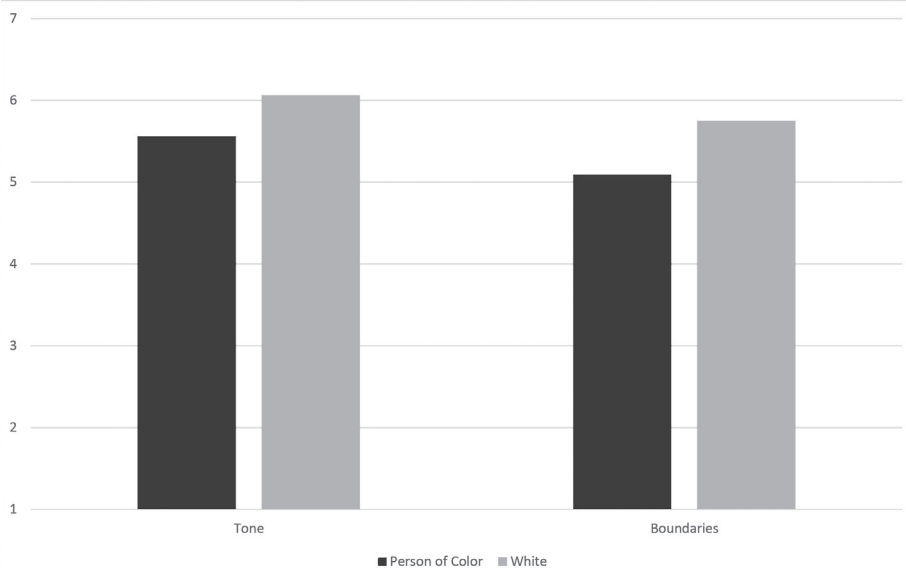
Note: \* indicates a statistically significant effect

**FIGURE 1**  
GENDER EFFECTS ON TONE AND BOUNDARIES



*Note: Boundaries comparison was not statistically significant*

**FIGURE 2**  
RACE EFFECTS ON TONE AND BOUNDARIES



## DISCUSSION

Local elected officials in Illinois perceive deliberations on their boards and councils to be, by and large, civil. Municipalities appear to generally comply with both dimensions of political civility. Participants report a perception of a high level of compliance in terms of tone. For example, 88.4% of members somewhat agree, agree, or strongly agree with the statement “I feel respected by my fellow board/council members.” Only 5% somewhat disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree. Perception of compliance with the boundaries dimension is not quite as high, but respondents generally perceived their municipal board or council to operate within the boundaries of liberal political civility. For example, 86.2% of participants perceive that members of their board or council have different views and goals but also perceive that their board or council manages to “work things out” in a constructive, respectful manner.

High levels of perceived civility at the local level may be tied to the nature of municipal governments, where boards and councils are smaller, and members may have many neighborhood connections. In our study, 63.6% of respondents indicated that they socialized with other members on their municipal bodies outside of official meetings frequently or occasionally, 30.5% rarely, and 6.0% never. Overall, stronger personal and social ties may promote civility because deliberators relate to their interlocutors on multiple levels (see Mutz & Reeves, 2005). The high degree of face-to-face interaction on these smaller government bodies may provide the foundation for respectful interaction between interlocutors — respect that transcends personal and policy differences.

The greater perception by women of incivility in terms of tone may reflect an overall greater concern by women about issues of civility as well as a greater awareness of the importance of civility in healthy political debate. In 2018, a Pew Research Center survey discovered several differences between men and women in their perceptions of the importance of civility in politics: 75% of women viewed “civility and respect in politics” as important, compared to only 61% of men (Gramlich, 2018). If women perceive civility to be more important than men, they are also probably more likely to note breaches of civility. Our survey indicates variance in perception of civility in terms of gender for tone, not for boundaries. This supports the possibility that this variance in terms of gender results from an increased awareness of interpersonal breaches of civility.

Of course, it is also possible that women perceive incivility more readily because they are more likely to be the targets of incivility or because the environment

is actually less welcoming to their participation. Karpowitz et al. (2012) found that women are “often disadvantaged, whereas men are never disadvantaged” in situations involving political deliberations, especially where women are in the minority. Indeed, women are in the minority across national, state, and local legislative bodies. The 2018 International City/County Management Association’s (ICMA) survey of U.S. local governments reported that 72.8% of council and board members are male and 27.2% are female. The breakdown by gender of board and council members who responded to our survey of Illinois elected officials was 65.7% men and 34.3% women. Respondents in leadership positions (mayor/president) were 80.9% men and 19.1% women. This underrepresentation of women as members and in leadership roles on local municipal bodies may help explain their increased perception of incivility.

Our results indicate that people of color are more likely to perceive breaches of political civility on their municipal governing bodies in terms of both dimensions of tone and boundaries. People of color are significantly underrepresented in local governments. The 2018 ICMA survey indicates that descriptive representation in local government reflects only about half of the actual presence of people identifying as Black in the United States as a whole. The Latino population suffers even more in terms of descriptive representation, with 3% of local council and board members identifying as Hispanic or Latino even though Hispanic/Latino people constitute over 18% of the overall population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

Underrepresentation of racial and ethnic groups holds true for Illinois. A 2015 report released by the Chicago Lawyers’ Committee (Greenwood et al., 2015), identified hundreds of Illinois municipalities, county governments, and school boards that underrepresent people of color. The breakdown by race/ethnicity of local board and council members who responded to our survey was 88.4% white and 11.6% people of color (2.8% Latino, 5.3% Black, 1.6% Asian, and 1.9% other). The demographic distribution among participants in our survey very closely mirrors that of the ICMA survey of local municipalities across the United States.

These kinds of underrepresentation may help explain the variance in perception of tone of civility. Recall that tone measures the perception of an environment respectful of all deliberators. Perhaps board and council members who belong to racial and ethnic groups that are underrepresented on the very boards and councils to which they are elected feel less respected and welcome as a result of that underrepresentation. The dominance of white faces and voices may create

an environment that is less welcoming to people of color and diminish the perception of the tone of civility.

People of color are not only underrepresented on local governing bodies but are also less likely to hold leadership positions. Collecting data from several organizations and across several years, Hajnal and Trounstein (2016) estimated that of all the nation's mayors, only 2% were Black and fewer than 1% were Latino. This underrepresentation of people of color in leadership roles is consistent with our survey results. Leaders on municipal bodies in our study were 94.1% white and 5.9% people of color. Although 11.6% of the respondents in our study identified as a person of color, this amount drops to 5.9% for those in leadership roles. The persistently white leadership on local governmental bodies may contribute to members of color feeling less comfortable sharing their views, less connected to the proceedings, and less respected as deliberators.

This lower perception of the tone of civility by people of color may result from the underrepresentation of people of color in the composition and leadership on the boards and councils on which they serve. In the present study, while there was a significant difference in terms of race/ethnicity in terms of responses to "I feel comfortable sharing my views during board/council meetings," with people of color reporting less comfort, there was no significant difference to questions such as "Members of my board/council refrain from any sort of diminishing or derogatory remarks/behavior" and "I feel respected by my fellow board/council members."

People of color on Illinois municipal boards also differed from people who identified as white in their perceptions of their boards' or councils' adherence to the boundaries dimension of civility. Remember that the boundaries dimension of liberal political civility requires that deliberators frame their arguments or conclusions in terms of shared political values and commitments. People of color are more likely to perceive references to private commitments and bias than white members overall or women overall.

This may result from differing perspectives among racial and ethnic groups on the meaning and status of those shared political commitments. Consider a 2019 Pew Research Center Study on views of racial inequalities that finds 78% of Black people and 37% of white people say the country has not gone far enough in terms of equal rights for Black people. Black people are considerably more likely than white people to perceive unfairness and inequalities in the United States along many political, societal, and policymaking lines (Horowitz

et al., 2019). As an example, even though a majority of people across racial and ethnic lines value diversity in the United States, Black and Latino people place more value on diversity in the workplace and in schools — 67% of Black Americans, 52% of Latino Americans, and 43% of white Americans say that it is very important for companies and organizations to promote racial and ethnic diversity in the workplace (Horowitz, 2019).

Thus, people of color tend to have differing perspectives on the meaning of “shared” values and may be more likely to detect when these shared values, such as equality or diversity, are expressed or pursued in biased ways to promote what they perceive to be private, special interests. In sum, the meaning of core, shared values may vary in relation to racial and ethnic identity, and this is reflected in our study in the varying perceptions of adherence to the appropriate boundaries of liberal, political deliberation.

## **PRESCRIPTIVE POSSIBILITIES**

Local elected officials in Illinois generally perceive that their local political bodies comply with liberal principles of political civility. Most participants viewed deliberations on these municipal governing bodies to respect members as free and equal as legitimate and welcome members of the elected body. Participants perceived deliberations to maintain an environment that brings members of their political community together while also respecting what makes them equal and free.

However, women elected officials on these municipal governing bodies perceive greater levels of political incivility in terms of the tone, and people of color perceive greater levels of incivility in terms of both the tone and boundaries of deliberation. This indicates that both women and people of color are more likely to perceive a less respectful and less welcoming deliberative environment. And people of color are more likely to perceive that deliberations step outside the boundaries of shared political principles to defend political conclusions.

This may demonstrate a continuing inequality on these local political bodies, where women and people of color of any gender feel less welcome and face greater obstacles to their participation in deliberations. This study suggests that the dangers of underrepresentation of racial and ethnic minorities, which include the possibility of poorer policy outcomes for underrepresented populations (Sances & You, 2017; Hajnal & Trounstone, 2016), may be exacerbated by the dynamics of civility in local government.

Differences in how women and people of color perceive civility on their municipal boards results from historical, sociological, and economic forces well beyond the structural and interpersonal dynamics that manifest in the boards themselves. But municipal boards could consider proactive measures as they continue to strive for a more inclusive understanding of civility. By improving an organization's culture and actively pursuing strategies that model civil behavior, municipal governments will likely be viewed as more accessible and welcoming to people that have historically felt unwelcome and closed off from participation in public life.

This study suggests that underrepresented populations may feel less welcome on these local boards in part because there are fewer members and leaders on the board who share their identity. Consider that research indicates both women and people of color are less likely to run for political office and more likely to underestimate their qualifications (Lawless & Fox, 2022; Motel, 2014). Municipalities may consider actively soliciting and encouraging candidates from a variety of the demographic communities they serve. They might also consider personally reaching out to and mentoring particular potential candidates.

Leadership can play a critical role in shifting an elected board's culture. Recruitment should extend not just to new members but also occur with an eye to identifying and mentoring leadership from among underrepresented people. A further strategy would include a system by which meeting leadership rotates between meeting facilitators. Each board member would have the recurring opportunity to chair meetings. This would create a more welcoming environment and spread the power dynamic across the body.

Finally, another structural improvement would be the development by each board of a conduct pledge that each board comes together to create and endorse, resulting in better discussion about civility and an explicit concern for its enforcement. This type of action has been implemented in Carlsbad, California, for instance, with its city council identifying a set of values and norms outlined in a detailed code of ethics (City of Carlsbad, 2022).

Our research also suggests that members may not always share the same foundational interpretation of the importance of civility in deliberative democracy and of the meaning of core liberal principles such as liberty and equality. Municipal boards would benefit from implicit bias training and interactions that engage members in discussions about the meaning of

deliberative democracy and the core values we share in liberal societies. This would include making civility and diversity, equality, and inclusion topics regular meeting agenda items and strengthening the board's commitment to and understanding of the highest Open Meetings Act standards. Activities that engage members in discussions of shared values can build bridges across difference, better welcome members, improve civility even further, and increase insight by members into the diverse perspective of their fellow members and their constituents.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 John Rawls framed what is arguably the most prominent contemporary expression of the liberal tradition. See *A Theory of Justice*.
- 2 A feeling thermometer is a visual analog scale used to gauge a respondent's "feelings" about a given issue. Respondent's rate from cold (zero) to hot (100). Being a visual scale, it is easier to quantify a construct that is normally difficult to verbalize.
- 3 Only 37 participants did not identify themselves as white; therefore, analysis of the data using specific racial groups was not possible.

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