GU POLITICS FELLOW ED GOEAS
Discussion Group Outline
CIVILITY IN POLITICS

Discussion Group Synopsis
Is political discourse in America in a death spiral of incivility or can we bring America back from it’s destructive path? Over the course of this discussion group we will look at the various pieces of the current political environment that have played a part in the growing incivility within political discourse. Going forward will they be part of the solution or continue to be part of the problem?

Week 1 — INTRODUCTION TO CIVILITY IN POLITICS
There has been a great deal of discussion about the civility, or lack of, in political debate over the course of the last three years. Much of that discussion has focused on Donald Trump and his persona. Is Donald Trump the disease, or is he just the symptom?

Week 2 — THE CYNICAL VOTER
My personal hypothesis is that the most easily manipulated voter is the cynical voter. In recent years there has been a lot of focus on distrust of government within a very negative context. Ironically, distrust of government was a basic tenant of our country’s Founding Fathers, but within a positive context. What role has this negative focus on distrust of government had on fanning the anger of voters and leading ultimately to cynicism within large segments of the electorate? Are cynical voters most easily manipulated by demagogues, be they candidates, a political party or movement, or the media? Incivility is a useful tool of demagogues, especially if the goal is to dehumanize opponents.

Week 3 — PARTISANSHIP IN WASHINGTON
Does partisanship have to lead to incivility? Chicken and egg question . . . “Is the country divided because of partisanship in Washington or is Washington a reflection of the fact that the country has been fairly evenly divided between the two parties for almost two decades?” Would doing away with the 60-vote rule in the U.S. Senate lead to more or less partisanship in Washington?

Week 4 — THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN POLITICAL CIVILITY
What is the Media’s role in lowering the bar on civility in public debate? Impact of 24 hour news programing
and more recently selective news exposure within segments of the electorate? The weaponizing of Twitter and other social media? What are political consultants’ role in increasingly focusing their campaigns on the negatives of their opponents rather than the positives of their candidates?

Week 5 — THE ROLE OF POLLING IN POLITICAL CIVILITY
Increased use of polling to define voters’ opinions rather than capture voters’ opinions. Seems to be very little understanding today that in polling, if you ask a cynical question of the voters, you get a cynical answer. There is an assumption, or maybe a hope, that the increased incivility of today will swing back post Trump. Will those who are looking for signs of civility swinging back into the norms of accepted behavior miss it because we are asking purely cynical questions?

Week 6 — THE PROBLEM SOLVING CYCLE
Problem solving, or lack of it, seems to be one of the recurring themes surrounding voter frustration and an excuse for being uncivil in their public discourse. Is there really nothing getting done, or are voters frustrated because they hear the same general issues discussed campaign after campaign, after campaign? Basic problem solving goes through four stages; you talk about the problem, you talk about the solution, you implement the solution, and that creates a new set of problems. For many voters, the problem may have gone through all four stages so many times that all the voters hear are politicians dealing with problems coming from their solutions and not the root problem.

Week 7 — THE ROLE OF CAMPAIGN FINANCE REFORM IN POLITICAL CIVILITY
What role has campaign finance reform played in the growing incivility of our campaigns. The initial goal of campaign finance reform was to do away with “soft money” influence in state and national parties. Has the unintended consequences been the creation and dominance of “Super PAC’s” that are one step removed from the candidate’s campaign, and free to deal with issues and that candidate’s opponents in a way that is much more negative than the candidate would feel comfortable with.

Week 8 — RECAP AND A LOOK AT THE 2018 MIDTERMS
With this last discussion coming after the election, the assumption is that much of the discussion will surround the outcome of the election. There is will be a new twist to this discussion. Each week during the fall campaign the group will be asked to come up with a “Hall of Shame” nominee for a Republican and Democratic campaign or Super PAC for adding to incivility in the political debate of the 2018 campaign. The discussion about the outcome of the election will also touch on the results on those “Hall of Shame” campaigns.