Politics on the Offensive: Examining the State of Civil Debate in Canadian Question Period

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the effects of civility on the efficacy of communications in the Canadian House of Commons. This is accomplished through a content analysis of statements made during Question Period by Members of Parliament. I argue that civility (or incivility) and rhetoric are not mere formalities in Parliamentary discourse, but are key to the ways in which politicians represent their positions and attempt to sway opinion. I hypothesize that these forms of civility and rhetoric may have an agenda-setting effect on the issues debated in Parliament. My paper thus sets out to explore the impacts of civil and uncivil discourse on the proceedings of Question Period, as well as the implications these impacts may have for Canadians and their engagement in politics.

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Introduction

North American politics have grown increasingly polarized over the past several years. In both Canada and the United States, left- and right-wing parties have become more divided politically and more combative in their efforts to further their models of governance. This division may appear natural in a political system. Since the goal of politicians is to use discourse to "present an argument which they want the electorate to believe" (Wilson, 1990, p. 9), it follows that the strategies they use in debate and public speaking may be aggressive in order to rebuke their opponents and persuade constituents of their positions. There are, however, a number of ways in which a combative and partisan atmosphere can negatively impact the effectiveness of political debate in providing the information necessary to inform and engage the public; from endless filibusters in houses of government to attack advertisements which vilify political opponents without providing citizens with any new or useful information.

Canada's parliamentary political system has revealed its own share of issues with civility and effective communication. Few proceedings in the Canadian Parliament are publicly accessible, and one of the most openly available parliamentary proceedings, Question Period (QP), has drawn criticism in recent years due to a perceived lack of decorum and high level of aggression. Several commentators have reported that the highly partisan and aggressive style of proceedings in Question Period has led many Canadians to disengage with federal politics (Broadbent, 2010; Chong, 2010). Michael Chong (2010), a Conservative MP, has reported that a number of school teachers who took students to observe QP as a lesson in civics have complained "that the level of behaviour is such that they will not take another class to see Question Period". Since QP is one of the few views of the government that is widely accessible to Canadians, a lack of effective communication during QP would create especially significant problems with the ways that the government is represented to the public. While this issue in itself is a highly relevant topic to the state of the political and communication landscapes of Canada, there is also another issue related to a political system in which civility and communication have become a concern: the ways in which civility (or a lack thereof) may be used as a rhetorical device to advance a political speaker's agenda.

A politician's emotion and style of discourse can be used to frame a topic or argument in a particular way, drawing attention to or away from certain issues. As John Wilson (1990) argues, "language plays a role in the creation of political reality" (p. 10). In a partisan political setting, a politician's style of discourse and level of civility can be a political

strategy to sway opinion, whether the goal is to present an argument that appeals to party supporters or to present an opponent in a negative light. This function would be especially relevant to the ways in which political actions are represented to the public. The state of civility and communication in Question Period therefore presents two main issues: the effects of the civility and efficacy of communications on the public's engagement and understanding of the political process, and the potential effects of civil or uncivil discourse on the public agenda.

In this paper, I set out to examine the level of civility during Question Period in the Canadian House of Commons and its impacts on understandings of political information among the public. I perform a content analysis of statements made during Question Period by Members of Parliament during the period of November 2009 to December 2010. This is accomplished by examining variables related to civility and discourse using data from the Question Period Monitoring and Analysis Project (QPMAP) at McMaster University. QPMAP, a ground-breaking content analysis initiative, is designed to gather and analyze quantitative and qualitative data on the proceedings of Question Period in Canada. To date, the project has analyzed thousands of statements (officially known as Turns of Talk) made by Members of Parliament during Question Period in order to determine the levels of civility and styles of rhetoric present in this section of parliamentary debate. An important goal of QPMAP is to "build a database of available data about parliamentary and political communication" for future analysis (COMM-Lab, 2010). This database has made this research possible.

Using data made available from QPMAP, my goal is to provide insight into the following research questions:
1. In what ways do civility and decorum influence the effectiveness of communication and debate during QP?
2. Is there evidence that political parties use turns of talk and/or decorum during QP in order to place issues on the public and/or media agenda? If yes, how do these practices relate to agenda-setting theory and how might they inform further studies of agenda-setting?
3. Is increased civility an effective way to encourage parliamentary debate that is of value to citizens and the democratic parliamentary process? Are there situations in which it is ineffective?

These research questions are especially relevant to the study of political communication since little research has been done to date on civility, discourse and the effectiveness of communication in government (Savage & Sévigny, n.d., p. 2), nor on the agenda-setting effects of civility and discourse in politics. A study of the relationships between civility, agenda-setting and public communication in political discourse will be beneficial to furthering the understandings of both political communication practices and agenda- setting theory in the political sphere.

 5 With regards to the research questions, I hypothesize that (1) increased civility in QP will have a positive relationship with the effectiveness of communication; (2) that since each party has an interest in advancing its own agenda in Parliament, statements made during QP will usually show a bias toward the agenda of the Member speaking; and (3) that attention to Parliamentary decorum and to forms of debate that encourage meaningful exchanges of information will usually lead to more relevant communication. Due to the complexities of political discourse and rhetoric, I do not expect these hypotheses to be fully demonstrated in

all cases, though I do predict that they will generally be true. Given the importance of an informed citizenry in determining the form of government effectively in a democracy, it is the goal of this research project to encourage an effective understanding of the functions of political discourse, as well as to promote forms of Parliamentary debate that are grounded in providing effective communication and relevant information to the public. Though this paper cannot discuss every aspect of Parliamentary communications, it is hoped that its findings will encourage further investigation and reflection on the nature of political discourse and its effects on public democratic engagement.

Literature Review

The study of civility in Parliamentary proceedings may seem at first like a side note to the "real" issues of party agendas, legislative processes and official government policy. In fact, civility and the discourses used during debate are key to the ways in which power and decisions are presented and negotiated in the political sphere. Several sources argue the importance of political discourse, civility and pragmatics to understanding the ways in which politicians and other individuals create and present their arguments. Other sources focus on agenda-setting in politics and its relationship to discourse, while some discuss theories of agenda-setting and its effects on the perceptions of issues in general. Much of this literature shares a common emphasis on the importance of discourse and language use to the presentation and understanding of ideas. All of it is informative to the study of civility and discourse in Parliament.

Several important works exist on the functions of discourse and civility in politics and communications in general. John Wilson's (1990) book *Politically Speaking* provides a great deal of information on the styles and strategies of communication used in politics. One of his first points is to argue against the simplistic idea that "political language functions to influence political thought" (p. 9). While it is true that political discourse is meant to be persuasive, Wilson argues that the language used by politicians does not simply affect listeners' opinions in a unidirectional and unmediated way. Rather, political language exists as part of the social environment and common understandings shared by members of a society (p. 9-10). Politicians draw on common images and ideas when presenting an argument to make their point relatable. An effective analysis of political discourse should therefore be based not simply on exposing or criticizing others' biases, but on "considering the role of language in the creation and maintenance of political and social ideologies" (Wilson, 1990, p. 12). In all, Wilson provides a detailed analysis of the pragmatics and underlying structures of political discourse which is highly relevant to any study of political communication.

In order to consider the motivations at work in political language, particularly language that uses civility as a style of discourse, it is necessary to understand the ways in which civility and politeness function in general language use. Brown and Levinson's (1987) paper *Politeness* is very useful for this purpose. They argue that politeness is not just a shallow courtesy that people attach to their interactions with others; rather, it is an important part of discourse that is based on certain universal, rational motives of human behaviour (p. 58). Their underlying theory is that all people seek to maintain "freedom of action" and "self-image" (p. 61). Politeness is used to minimize the apparent risk to another person's freedom when making a request, which can also minimize the risk that the person making the request will be denied (p. 68). As a result, polite language use can go beyond courtesy and is often used to benefit the person making the polite statement. This theory of politeness is very useful to understanding civility in political discourse and its role in the relations between opposing

viewpoints.

Another dimension is needed to understand the discourses of political debate: the role of ideology in discussions between opposing parties. If political parties seek to advance their agendas during QP, it is important for an effective analysis of this discourse to consider the ideology that informs these agendas. George Lakoff's (2002) *Moral Politics* gives an in-depth view of this topic. He discusses how both conservative and liberal politics are based on sets of common beliefs and motivations on which liberals and conservatives base their thinking. He argues that what people of any political background call "common sense" is based on subconscious ideas and understandings that are taken for granted among like-minded individuals (p. 4). Lakoff's book is based on American politics, but his models are applicable to many broader political viewpoints. His models of ideology provide a straightforward framework for understanding differing viewpoints; a useful tool when analyzing a complex and divisive political environment.

Little research exists on civility and discourse in Parliament and their functions, however a few key articles exist on the subject which have provided significant insight for this paper. Paul Bayley's (2004) collection focuses on Parliamentary talk as "a sub-genre of political language," one which represents "its most formal and institutionalised variety" (p. 1). He further distinguishes different forms of parliament and their characteristic styles of debate. Notably, parliamentary systems in which governments are formed by "majority systems" (such as in Britain and Canada), are "typified by 'adversarial' politics in which the role of the opposition is generally to oppose, at all costs. This could be a result of the rules and regulations of the House which allow the government to set the agenda [...]" (p. 5). This argument has significant implications for a study of parliamentary civility in Canada; if it applies, it may mean that confrontational discourse is an inherent trait of the Canadian parliamentary model.

Ngeow, Hei and David's (2011) work on the Malaysian Parliament analyzes the functions of civility and confrontation in samples of debate during parliamentary sittings. They perform a content analysis focusing on instances of attacks and incivility between MPs and parties, especially cases of ethnic sensitivity (Ngeow, Hei, & David, 2011, p. 6). Like Bayley's work, their results demonstrate a political tactic of distancing between parties through uncivil language, through which MPs attack their opponents' positions as inferior (p. 19). Further, Malaysian MPs are shown to use such divisive comments to create solidarity among their constituents against opponents, or in the case of ethnically insensitive comments, to insinuate ethnic or cultural superiority (p. 35). While Canadian MP's do not show such explicit prejudice in Parliament, this study is very useful for this paper because of its well-developed method and systematic analysis of discourse, civility and rhetoric.

A final aspect of political communication, agenda-setting, is also important to this study. The concept of agenda-setting was initially theorized as an aspect of the mass media which affects popular perceptions of political and other issues. Shanto Iyengar and Adam Simon's (1993) study of media coverage and public opinion surrounding the first Gulf War, however, expands the field to include political influences on the public agenda, particularly the framing of certain issues according to specific ideologies. They argue that because few opportunities existed for media coverage of the conflict outside of government-organized embedded journalism, most media sources relied heavily on information made available through government sources (Iyengar & Simon, 1993, p. 381-82). As a result, news coverage of the war tended to reflect the ideology of the United States government (p. 382). Although the information presented in Question Period is different in a number of ways from official information on the Gulf War, the framework of media effects presented in this study may be

relevant to the analysis of agenda-setting effects in Parliament. Like the case of the US government and the Gulf Crisis, the debate conducted in Question Period is one of the few publicly available sources of debate in the Canadian Parliament, meaning that MPs may be able to use it to frame certain issues according to their political goals and thus set the public political agenda. If agenda-setting strategies are being used during Question Period, they will likely involve MPs attempting to discuss certain issues based only on the information that best supports their own partisan agendas. Given QP's status as one of the most publicly visible Parliamentary functions, this would allow MPs to present their parties' official positions to the media and the public in hopes of swaying public opinion toward their particular perspectives.

Other sources examining agenda-setting and parliamentary debate suggest that the salience of particular issues on the media and public agendas may influence topics of debate in Parliament. Walgrave, Soroka and Nuytemans' (2008) study of Belgian Parliament suggests a discursive model of agenda-setting, demonstrating "reciprocal links among virtually all media and political agendas" (p. 826). The authors also nuance their analysis by studying the power of agenda-setting on debate around specific topics, finding evidence that "media power on Parliament systematically differs across issues" (p. 828). These more complex and discursive models of political agenda-setting are useful for examining the many factors which may influence discourse and civility in Parliament.

Research for this paper has yielded a variety of sources that are relevant to the study of civility and discourse during Question Period in the House of Commons. Each work is informative to one or more research questions in this study. In all, these sources form a well-developed framework for the analysis of political communication, providing insight into several ways in which such an analysis can be done. Taking this information into account, this paper follows a methodology designed to further explore the relationships between civility, rhetoric and agenda-setting functions in a Canadian political setting.

Methodology

To investigate the relationship between civility and efficacy of communications during Question Period, this study will conduct a content analysis of statements made in Question Period by Members of Parliament. Turns of Talk (TOTs) will be analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively to provide both a statistical and pragmatic understanding of discourse in the House of Commons. Although the data available from statements made during Question Period is linguistically based and therefore qualitative, a carefully designed quantitative analysis will provide reliable and generalizable data on current trends in Parliamentary communications. Such data will work together with a qualitative analysis of the language used during Question Period to provide a more in-depth understanding of MPs' debate. Combining these two forms of analysis promises innovative results on the state of debate in the House of Commons during Question Period.

This study is based on research conducted by COMM-Lab through the Question Period Monitoring and Analysis Project, as discussed earlier. Philip Savage and Alexandre Sévigny, Co-Directors of COMM-Lab, are responsible for the design of the content analysis and its variables, along with Shelagh Hartford, former Lab Manager. Through early analysis and testing, it was determined that the most practical unit of analysis for the project was the Turn of Talk (TOT); one full statement, whether a question or answer, made by an MP during Question Period. This allowed for the full pragmatic meaning of a statement to be analyzed. Every TOT within a daily sitting of Question Period was coded in order to provide

complete data on how Members interacted with and responded to one another's questions on any given topic. The sittings of Question Period to be studied were chosen by random sample and assigned to groups of volunteer coders for analysis. The period of study for the data used in this analysis ranged from November 2009 to December 2010, with a total of 1,548 valid cases. Data were entered using an online coding form in order to enhance efficiency and convenience for coders. Their input was then processed remotely by Cormex Research.

The data generated by COMM-Lab include a variety of variables related to the civility and efficacy of political speech. The quantitative section of this study will focus specifically on the relationships between three variables measuring civility and five variables related to efficacy to determine how these factors interact and influence one another in debate during Question Period. The three civility variables are: politeness, supportive speech, and complimentary speech. The five efficacy variables are: level of satisfaction, relevance, credibility, informativeness, and non-partisan speech. All eight of these variables are measured according to five point ordinal scales ranging from very negative to very positive (in the case of politeness, for example, the scale ranges from "very rude" to "very polite," with a neutral category in the middle). These two sets of variables will be cross-tabulated to determine their relationships using SPSS, providing insight into the effects of civility on the efficacy of communications during Question Period.

In addition to these variables, the study will also include aggregated data from all civility and efficacy variables included in COMM-Lab's research to provide an overall metric of civil behaviour during QP. Savage and Sévigny have developed a Civility Index (CI) whose value is based on the average of all other variables related to civility and efficacy. This value ranges from 0 (extremely rude) to 100 (extremely civil) and has been calculated for each valid case in the data set. This metric allows for a broader view of civil and uncivil behaviour in QP. Data related to this variable will be used to calculate the mean CI for each topic discussed in the data set, as well as the mean CI of MPs in different roles in the House. This will return information on the different factors which may affect an MP's civility and provide insight into areas where civility in QP may be improved.

The question of agenda-setting requires a slightly more complicated method to answer. In order to determine whether agenda-setting strategies are being used by MPs during Question Period, this study will analyze the number of TOTs that each party dedicates to discussing particular topics during the episodes sampled. Because QP is structured largely around Opposition parties asking questions of the Government, one would expect that in a balanced Parliamentary debate the number of TOTs concerning a particular topic would be evenly distributed between Government and Opposition parties. An imbalance between the Government and Opposition might mean that the Government has avoided addressing an issue when questioned about it, or that the Government is emphasizing an issue as important if it holds a disproportionate share of the discussion. Either case would suggest evidence of agenda-setting by the Government. Conversely, a disproportionate emphasis on a topic by an Opposition party might indicate that the party's agenda is heavily focused on the subject.

The qualitative section of this study will focus on analyzing a sample of statements and exchanges made during Question Period in order to determine the linguistic, social and political factors that contribute to making them civil or uncivil. The goal is to provide insight into how civil and uncivil communications function during Question Period, as opposed to how often they occur. Such an analysis is crucial to developing an understanding of parliamentary debate practices. It is intended that the qualitative analysis will contribute to

such an understanding by providing some examples of these practices, creating greater insight into the state of parliamentary discourse by complementing and enhancing the quantitative analysis.

Findings

Overview

The analysis of turns of talk during Question Period returned a great deal of information significant to the state of discourse and civility in the House of Commons. Overall measurements of civility suggest that on average, Members speaking during QP are close to neutral in their decorum, but skew slightly toward incivility. Since this is an average index of all statements analyzed, this figure may indicate a wide range of civility in the statements of MPs, from very rude to very polite. Correlations between measures of civility and efficacy indicate complicated relationships between the behaviour of MPs and the perceived efficacy of their discussions.

The question of agenda-setting in QP is more difficult to answer directly using the data available, as mentioned above. Comparisons of the topics discussed in each turn of talk and a qualitative analysis of several TOTs, however, indicate several cases where MPs appear not to address the topic of debate or to focus more heavily on some topics than other Members or parties. These results may suggest attempts to set the agenda of debate towards certain topics at certain times.

Finally, while civil behaviour in TOTs is likely to be associated with effective debate, there are several areas of the results where it is not, suggesting a dynamic relationship between discursive styles and the effectiveness of parliamentary debate. In all, the results indicate that civility and discourse play significant roles in the character of proceedings during Question Period.

Quantitative Findings

Overall Civility Indexes for the sittings analyzed show that MPs were somewhat neutral in their discourse, with a mean Civility Index (CI) of 48.7. This figure, based on a scale of low to high civility (with 0 being extremely uncivil and 100 being extremely civil), includes turns of talk from Members of all parties and all House roles who spoke on record in the data sampled, as well as all topics discussed in the sample. The standard deviation of 23.1 indicates a range of civility levels throughout the sample, which is demonstrated when the results are analyzed more closely.

Table 1: *Civility Index (CI) Scores by Parliamentary Role*

Speaker Role	Mean CI (out of 100)	N	Std. Deviation
Government Minister	52.3	689	24.2
Government Backbencher	60.5	138	27.3
Opposition Party Leader	42.5	157	17.5
Opposition Party Critic	42.8	547	19.8
Total	48.7	1531	23.1

Source: COMM-Lab; Data from 40th Parliament, Nov. 2009-Dec. 2010.

An analysis of the civility of Members in different parliamentary roles shows that MPs in different positions behave differently in terms of discourse and politeness (see Table 1). A breakdown of each role's mean CI by topic discussed shows a greater range of civil and uncivil behaviour within each subject discussed. Similarly to the overall CI results for different parliamentary roles, Government Backbenchers were on average the most civil MPs, followed by Ministers, Opposition Critics and Opposition Leaders, in this order. In the case of public safety, Backbenchers had an average CI of 53.6, Ministers had an average of 52.3, Opposition Leaders scored 37.1 and Critics scored 33.8 (out of a total of 101 TOTs) (The pattern is not entirely consistent but is nonetheless similar). On the topic of gun control, however, the trend is reversed, with Critics showing a mean CI of 45.8, followed by Opposition Leaders with 44.4 and Ministers with 39.6 (out of a total of 27 TOTs).

The relationship between measures of civility and measures of communication efficacy are complicated. The results indicate a moderate but statistically significant correlation between politeness and levels of efficacy in a given TOT, with greater politeness associated with a greater sense of efficacy according to most metrics (see Table 2). Levels of satisfaction, credibility, and informativeness all show similar relationships with politeness, while relevance shows a much weaker yet significant correlation. Analyses of the relationships between the same measures of efficacy and levels of supportive and complimentary speech show consistently weaker yet significant correlations (see Table 2). Correlations between supportive speech and measures of efficacy are especially low, indicating that the difference between supportive and attacking speech has little effect on the effectiveness of debate. Interestingly, politeness shows a stronger relationship with non-partisan speech, along with supportive speech and complimentary speech (see Table 2). Overall, these results indicate that the level of politeness in political discourse has the closest

relationship to efficacy of debate on average, while partisan discourse is associated with greater incivility.

Table 2: *Correlations Between Indicators of Civility and Efficacy (Kendall's tau-b)*

	Satisfaction	Relevance	Credibility	Informativeness	Non-Partisan
Politeness	0.140	0.089	0.131	0.141*	0.245
Supporitve	0.075	0.083	0.059	0.052*	0.284
Complimentary	0.132	0.117	0.100	0.095	0.215

N= 1,595 (* N= 1,540); p < .05 Source: COMM-Lab; Data from 40th Parliament, Nov. 2009-Dec. 2010.

Analysis of topics discussed during Question Period show numerous instances where MPs appear to direct discussion to or away from certain topics. While many topics in the data set show a fairly even distribution pattern, a number show an uneven distribution of TOTs. These instances could indicate agenda-setting strategies within Question Period. The Conservative Party of Canada, which formed the Government during the time period studied, shows imbalances in its Members' discussion of several issues. Out of 42 TOTs concerning crime as their primary topic, Government MPs account for roughly 64%. The Government also accounted for about 55% of discussion on the Constitution (141 total), 54% (of 35 TOTs) on health and medicare, 57% (of 28 TOTs) on Afghanistan, and 74% (of 27 TOTs) on international relations with Europe. Conversely, Government TOTs make up approximately 42% of 211 statements about elections and 42% of 21 statements on provincial and federal infrastructure. Several topics contained too few TOTs to be statistically significant, while several others showed a more even balance between Government and Opposition statements. These topics which do not follow an even balance may demonstrate either cases in which the Government or the Opposition has preferred to focus on areas of policy or current affairs which fit its agenda, or in which Members have deferred away from another topic.

Qualitative Findings

In order to better illustrate the state of civility during Question Period, it is helpful to examine statements made during QP qualitatively. A quantitative statistical analysis of civility is useful for its ability to reveal and compare trends in parliamentary behaviour, but it is limited in its ability to demonstrate the many nuances of language and behaviour which make a statement civil or uncivil. Transcripts of the statements analyzed in this data set reveal numerous instances of impolite or otherwise ineffective discussion. Such cases include deferring to another topic, excessive partisan bias, and downplaying the issue in question.

Many cases of ineffective communication in Parliament involve one MP failing to address another MP's question adequately. The MP may focus on another issue entirely, diverting attention away from the original issue discussed. An example of this form of inadequate exchange occurred between the Honourable Charlie Angus (NDP), and the Honourable John Baird (Conservative), Then-Leader of Government in the House, on September 22, 2010:

The Hon. Charlie Angus: Mr. Speaker, winter is coming fast and the senior citizens of

northern Ontario are now having to pay HST on their outrageous fuel costs thanks to this government. Day after day I meet seniors who are falling below the poverty line, seniors who cannot afford to live in their homes, seniors who are travelling hundreds of kilometres to get medical treatment because there are no local doctors. This government has turned its back on rural Canadians. I would like to ask the minister why he is blowing billions of dollars on prisons and fighter jets while telling the seniors of northern Canada that the cupboard is bare.

The Hon. John Baird: Mr. Speaker, I think people in the member's constituency will rightly see this for what it is: an attempt to change the channel. I have a brochure that the member ... sent to his constituents: "Fighting for the North - Working for you". In it he says, "Promise made: promise kept. [MP] fulfills commitment to vote down the long gun registry." The member has a chance. He can stand with his constituents. He can stand with his principles and he can do the right thing at 5:30 today.

In this exchange, attention is turned away from the question about housing and fuel costs in northern Ontario to an issue higher on the Parliamentary agenda at the time: the vote on the Government's bill to discontinue the Canadian long gun registry. Interestingly, in this case Baird not only implies that the registry vote is more important, but also accuses Angus of deferring from the issue at hand. He says next to nothing about the issues raised in the question, instead criticizing the other member's character for mentioning them at this time. This is a sophisticated example of agenda-setting in that it not only draws attention to a specific issue but also questions the opposing MP's responsibility by referring to a prior campaign promise.

Examples of agenda-setting and partisan bias can be found in exchanges where both members discuss an issue in a way that derides one party while promoting another. Instances such as these may not appear uncivil on the surface, since both Members may be favourable to one another, yet the statements involved imply a partisan criticism of other members. Such an exchange took place on October 1, 2010 between the Hon. Ed Fast (Conservative) and the Hon. Rob Nicholson (Conservative), Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada:

The Hon. Ed Fast: Mr. Speaker, the Liberal leader offers very few solutions when it comes to getting tough on crime. He panders to the drug users rather than joining our government in getting tough on traffickers and producers of drugs. On Monday he said he would reintroduce a bill to decriminalize marijuana. This just shows that he values scoring political points over getting tough on the serious crimes that threaten the safety of our communities. Would the Minister of Justice tell us what he thinks of the Liberal leader's recent announcement?

The Hon. Rob Nicholson: Mr. Speaker, I do not think very much of it. This is exactly why we instituted the national anti-drug strategy. We did it to specifically discourage people from getting involved with drugs but the Liberals obviously have a different approach. This is why I always say that when it comes to standing up against criminals standing up for victims and fighting crime in this country there is only one party and one government that people can trust and it is this Conservative government.

This exchange is an example of agenda-setting in that both Members are from the

same party and have chosen to discuss an issue that is relevant to the party agenda. Furthermore, the question is framed in order to criticize the Liberal Party's position on drug control while promoting the Conservatives' position. No meaningful debate or input from other political perspectives is mentioned. Instead, the exchange emphasizes the issue in question and the Conservatives' specific position on it as important. This exchange can therefore be considered an example of agenda-framing as well as agenda-setting, since it ignores any possible alternative view in its argument.

This qualitative analysis has chosen only a few examples of problematic discourse. It is not representative of the entire data set but is rather meant to illustrate some of the rhetorically complicated ways in which Members of Parliament may choose to promote their views and/or deride opponents. In most of these cases, uncivil discourse is not made explicit; instead it is implied through strategies such as avoidance of certain questions, highly accusative language and loaded or rhetorical questions. Perhaps the most important finding of this qualitative analysis and the data overall is that civil and uncivil communications do not have just one form in the Canadian Parliament. Like all forms of discourse, they take many forms, change often and require a significant amount of work to identify and address at a practical level. Nuances such as these are extremely difficult to examine using quantitative techniques, meaning that a qualitative content analysis such as this enhances the quantitative analysis discussed above. Quantitative and qualitative research methods thus provide a clearer picture of the state of civil discourse in Parliament when used together.

Discussion

The results of this analysis suggest that the presence of civility and its effects on the efficacy of communications in Parliament are somewhat mixed phenomena. Results generally support the hypotheses established, indicating a somewhat positive relationship between measurements of civility and efficacy; the presence of agenda-setting practices during Question Period based on the topics discussed by each party; and some evidence of opportunities for reform to QP and the level of debate in Parliament. Data related to all three research questions reveal that Question Period shares a complicated relationship with decorum, one which includes a good deal of room for improvement.

The data produced provide a slightly complicated answer to the question of how civility affects the efficacy of communications in Parliament. Results seem to support Hypothesis 1 overall, showing a generally positive relationship between measures of civility and efficacy. Correlations between specific variables, however, show more varied relationships. One of the strongest relationships in the data set exists between civility and non-partisan speech, indicating that statements biased towards a particular party are more likely to be rude.

Results related to agenda-setting offer some interesting data on the use of such strategies in Parliament. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses provide evidence of a number of strategies used by MPs to further political goals. Such techniques seem to be related strongly to the issues of civility and discourse. A party's tendency to focus on or avoid discussing a particular topic may reflect an effort to steer debate toward topics which are expedient for that party's immediate or long-term goals. For instance, the Conservative government's frequent discussion of issues related to crime (about 64% out of all parties), is likely based significantly on the subject of the federal long gun registry, which the Conservatives had introduced legislation to terminate. The party invested a great deal in mobilizing support around the motion, deferring to it as a key concern for constituents when

other parties attempted to argue for the importance of other issues, as in the exchange between Charlie Angus and John Baird (see above). Although in cases such as this the parliamentary agenda seems to match the media agenda of the day, it is unclear from the results whether a party's focus on particular topics at particular times influences the media's coverage of those topics, or vice versa. It is very likely that the agendas of QP and the media influence one another discursively, as in the model suggested by Walgrave, Soroka and Nuytemans' (2006) study of Belgian Parliament (p. 826).

While a good deal of agenda-setting and other forms of discourse in QP appears to be based on partisan promotion, results from this research indicate that partisan discourse is often associated with rudeness and less effective communication. It therefore appears unlikely that partisan promotions of a party will persuade an uninitiated viewer to take that party's stance. Instead, it may be that self-promotion during Question Period is designed to appeal to those already affiliated with a member or party's ideologies, assuring supporters that the MP speaking is representing their views. These appeals to insular partisan ideologies can lead to a lack of understanding between those of different political viewpoints, just as Lakoff argues in his book *Moral Politics* (p. 11-12). In cases such as the exchange between Conservative MPs Ed Fast and Rob Nicholson, MPs seem more interested in promoting their own political platforms than in engaging in meaningful debate. Such information suggests that improving the level of communications in Parliament must involve efforts to communicate across ideological differences and promote genuine understandings of different perspectives.

The question of whether increased civility is useful for encouraging effective debate in Parliament is challenging to answer, as discussed earlier. While the data do not provide sufficient information to answer RQ #3 conclusively, given that increased civility is associated with greater measures of effectiveness (see Table 2), it would be advisable to encourage the use of debate strategies which lead to greater levels of civility. The results which show greater civility among Opposition Members indicate that such civility need not always be supportive or non-confrontational, since the Opposition by nature has different political views than the Government. Rather, this civil discourse can be associated with more effective and relevant debate. Unfortunately, overall results suggest that these more effective strategies are less common on average compared to confrontational and aggressive forms of debate. Improvements to the level of discourse during Question Period will therefore require a shift away from adversarial and insular partisan debate toward more well-reasoned and open forms of discussion in the public interest.

Care has been taken to ensure a high standard of validity in this research; however there are limitations to the findings that it has returned. Data related to mean Civility Indexes measured by topic may be limited due to variations in the number of Turns of Talk associated with different topics. While the topics discussed in this paper were selected based on their higher frequency in the data set, the CI scores of topics that received less discussion may have lower external validity due to their limited representation.

The measurements developed to analyze agenda-setting during Question Period have their limitations as well. First, the analysis of the frequency with which each party discussed each topic is based only on the number of times a topic was discussed as the primary subject. The number of times a topic was discussed as a secondary subject was not included. Including an analysis of these data, however, might have provided a fuller picture of the ways in which certain topics are avoided or pushed higher on the agenda during Parliamentary debate. A topic may shift from being the primary subject of an exchange to the secondary subject, whether due to an attempt by the speaker to avoid discussing it or

because another topic has become relevant to the debate. For this reason, the analysis of primary topics by party in this paper may not be an entirely valid or reliable measure of agenda-setting. Furthermore, the measurement of agenda-setting practices based on balances between the Government and Opposition's number of TOTs for a given subject may be effective for analyzing the Government's agenda during QP, but it is less effective for studying agenda-setting among the Opposition. Each party is allotted a number of TOTs for each sitting of Question Period based on the size of its representation. As a result, a lower number of TOTs associated with a topic for a smaller party may not be based on a lower interest in that topic, but rather on the party's limited number of available statements. This, however, was not taken into account during the analysis.

The qualitative analysis of exchanges performed in this paper is limited in scope due to time and space constraints. A more comprehensive qualitative analysis of the various forms of civil and uncivil discourse would be beyond the scope of this project and require a much deeper focus on pragmatics, semiotics and discourse. The purpose of the qualitative section of this analysis, as discussed earlier, has been to offer examples of the forms which uncivil debate may take during Question Period, emphasizing that incivility and ineffective debate is not always obvious and may take numerous forms. Further research focusing more specifically on a qualitative content analysis of Question Period could provide more detailed insight into the rhetorical and pragmatic nuances of debate in the House of Commons. Despite its limitations, however, this methodology has provided interesting and complex data on the forms of discourse and levels of civility present during Question Period. These data are likely to be useful as a basis for future studies of Canadian politics.

Conclusion

The state of civility and debate in the House of Commons has remained a topic of concern on either side of the political spectrum in Canada for the past few years. While both the right and left have called for reforms to political decorum, however, the research discussed in this paper indicates that all sides engage in uncivil and ineffective discourse on many levels during Question Period. Metrics of civility such as politeness, complimentary speech and supportive speech all reveal high instances of uncivil behaviour by MPs. Further, this uncivil behaviour is associated with ineffective communication. Examples of effective and meaningful debate during Question Period are much less common in the data set studied than cases of uncivil and excessively partisan discourse. The evidence suggests that QP does not often live up to its ideal as a time for democratic debate in the service of Canada's public interest, but has instead become a time for political posturing and antagonism.

The data on the civility of MPs in different House roles support Paul Bayley's (2004) model of parliaments based on "majority systems" (p. 5), in which the Opposition sets out to oppose the Government constantly, while the Government has no real need to debate the decisions it intends to pass. Although the data collected for this research are from a period of minority government, the results indicate similar trends: the Government shows little interest in debate or compromise with the Opposition, while the Opposition is on the offensive constantly against the Government's policy. Overall Civility Indexes show that Opposition Members are less civil than Government Members, due likely to their position of criticizing and probing the Government for information. While the Government may appear more civil, however, this does not mean that its Members necessarily communicate more effectively. The qualitative section of this study demonstrates some of the ways in which

Turns of Talk during Question Period may not appear particularly rude on the surface and yet may be dissatisfying and ineffective overall. There are many cases in which a Government MP answers a question in a way that provides no relevant information on the subject. The MP's statement may sound civil and non-confrontational, yet may still leave an observer frustrated. For this reason, it is important to recognize the many pragmatic and semantic complexities that contribute to making a statement effective or ineffective. Such complexities are important to the ways in which politicians and other people may frame arguments according to certain perspectives and ideologies that are not immediately apparent.

It is hoped that this research will encourage further investigation of the state of discourse and civility in the House of Commons. Due to the very limited amount of research that exists on parliamentary communications, this is an area of study with great potential for new insight. Further research may include analyses of the ways in which parliamentary debate and Question Period are discussed in the media, whether (and how often) MPs support their arguments with accurate information during QP, and the extent to which MPs are held accountable for their uncivil remarks during Points of Order in the House. These are all highly interesting subjects that would contribute to a better understanding of parliamentary discourse, yet are beyond the scope of this paper.

There is no quick solution to the problems associated with highly adversarial systems of political debate. Strategies of debate in the House of Commons that are based on promoting a party's agenda to the exclusion of other views have become deeply entrenched. For this reason, changing the practices of debate in Parliament will require a sustained effort from MPs on all sides, as well as the public, to encourage new and more productive forms of debate. The odds may seem against this level of change, but the evidence of different trends in civility levels within this data set offers hope that uncivil discourse need not always be the norm during Question Period.

The greatest motivation for change may come from awareness that civility and effective debate are not simply formalities attached to parliamentary procedure, but are a matter of public interest. As representatives of the Canadian people, it is the duty of MPs to discuss, examine and provide information on the political affairs that are relevant to their constituents' needs. Uncivil and excessively antagonistic discourse works against this goal. It is important for this reason that further attention be paid to this issue by researchers and the wider public in order to ensure that Parliament and all levels of government act in the interest of the people they represent. There is ultimately hope for positive change in parliamentary debate, largely because language and discourse, like political agendas, are never permanently set, but change with the ways in which members of society interact. The question is therefore whether Canadians are ready to start such a change.

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