



AARP Bulletin Survey
on Civility

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AARP

Research & Strategic Analysis

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Given recent attention to the tenor of public discourse and suggestions that it has become less civil, the AARP Bulletin commissioned a nationwide survey in January 2011 to assess public opinion related to civility. In this survey, civility is defined as “showing respect for the people you deal with. For example respecting other people’s opinions, being courteous, helping others, and showing good sportsmanship.” The survey was conducted for AARP by Social Science Research Solutions (SSRS). Interviews were conducted January 19-25, 2011 among a nationally representative sample of adults at least 18 years old. The key findings are presented below followed by more detailed analysis.

Key findings

- Most adults (71%) think Americans are civil to each other.
- Roughly half (53%) of adults think Americans are less civil when they debate issues facing the country today compared to 10 years ago.
- Nearly seven in 10 Americans (69%) think politicians have a negative influence on how people get along. Roughly half of Americans think popular music (53%) and talk radio (50%) have a negative influence as well.
- Americans are divided regarding the influence of cable television and social media (such as Facebook, Twitter, and other social media websites) on how people get along. Overall, 49% of adults think cable TV has a positive influence while 47% think it has a negative influence; 47% think social media has a negative influence while 42% think it has a positive influence.
- Over seven in 10 Americans (73%) think schools have a positive influence on how people get along and over half (56%) think cellphones have a positive influence as well.
- The vast majority of Americans (85%) think that parents or guardians should primarily be held accountable for teaching civility, as opposed to schools (7%), government (5%), or religious institutions (1%).
- Adults report being most likely to lose their cool while driving (33%) or at home (32%).

Detailed findings

Civility toward each other

Most adults (71%) think Americans are civil to each other, including 63% who think Americans are “somewhat” civil to each other and 8% who think they are “very” civil to each other. Overall opinion does not vary significantly by age, although adults under age 50 (30%) are more likely than adults aged 50+ (20%) to think Americans are “not too” civil to each other. Conversely, older adults (5%) are more likely than younger adults (1%) to think Americans are “not at all” civil to each other, although both figures are very low.

Changes over time

Roughly half (53%) of adults think Americans are less civil today compared to 10 years ago when they debate issues facing the country. Nearly a third (35%) think Americans are “about as civil” as they were 10 years ago, and fewer (10%) think they are “more civil” now compared with 10 years ago. Responses do not vary by age.

Positive and negative influences

Nearly seven in 10 Americans (69%) think politicians have a negative influence on how people get along, including 42% who think they have a “somewhat” negative influence and 27% who think they have a “very” negative influence. Fewer than three in 10 (27%) think they have a positive influence. Answers do not vary by age.

Just over half (53%) think popular music has a negative influence, including 39% who think it has a “somewhat” negative influence and 14% who think it has a “very” negative influence. Just over four in 10 (42%), however, think popular music has a positive influence on how people get along. While overall sentiment is similar across ages (54% of younger Americans think popular music has a negative influence, as do 52% of Americans aged 50+), those under age 50 (43%) are more likely than those aged 50+ (34%) to think popular music has a “somewhat” negative influence on how people get along.

Half of Americans think talk radio has a negative influence on how people get along, including 36% who think it has “somewhat” negative influence and 13% who think it has a “very” negative influence. Adults aged 50+ (17%) are more likely than adults aged 18-49 (11%) to think that talk radio has “very” negative influence. Nevertheless, 42% of Americans think talk radio has a *positive* influence on how people get along. Adults under age 50 (47%) are more likely than those age 50+ (37%) to feel this way.

Americans are divided regarding the influence of cable television on how people get along. While 49% think it has a positive influence, 47% think it has a negative influence. In fact, fewer than two in 10 Americans hold extreme views: Only 8% think it has a “very” positive influence (while 38% say “somewhat” positive) and only 9% think it has a “very” negative influence (while 38% say “somewhat” negative). Adults under age 50 (53%) are more likely than those aged 50+ (40%) to say cable TV has a negative influence on how people get along.

Similarly, Americans are divided regarding the influence of social media (such as Facebook, Twitter, and other social media websites) on how people get along. While 47% think its influence is negative, 42% think its influence is positive. Again, most views cluster toward the center. Only 7% think the influence of social media is “very” positive (while 35% think it is “somewhat” positive) and 10% think it is “very” negative (while 37% think it is “somewhat” negative). Adults under age 50 (46%) are more likely than adults aged 50+ (37%) to think social media has a positive influence on how people get along.

Over seven in 10 Americans (73%) think schools have a positive influence on how people get along, including 51% who think schools have a “somewhat” positive influence and 23% who think the influence is “very” positive. Only 23% think schools have a negative influence, including 17% who say “somewhat” negative and 6% who say “very” negative. Adults under age 50 (80%) are more likely than adults aged 50+ (65%) to think that schools have a positive influence, although both figures are relatively high.

Over half of adults (56%) think cellphones have a positive influence on how people get along. This includes 44% who think they have a “somewhat” positive influence and 12% who think they have a “very” positive influence. However, close to four in 10 adults (39%) think cellphones have a negative influence on how we get along, including 30% who think the influence is “somewhat” negative and 9% who think it is “very” negative. Adults under age 50 (60%) are more likely than adults aged 50+ (50%) to think that cellphones have a positive influence on how people get along.

Teaching civility

The vast majority of Americans (85%) think that parents or guardians should primarily be held accountable for teaching civility, as opposed to schools (7%), government (5%), or religious institutions (1%). This belief did not vary significantly by age.

Personal experience

Adults report being most likely to lose their cool while driving (33%) or at home (32%). Fewer adults say they are most likely to lose their cool at work (13%), in stores or restaurants (8%), or at sporting events (6%). Adults under age 50 (17%) are more likely than adults aged 50+ (8%) to be most likely to lose their cool at work.

Survey methodology

The survey was conducted for AARP by Social Science Research Solutions (SSRS), an independent research firm. Interviews were conducted January 19-25, 2011 among a nationally representative sample of 1,051 adults age 18 and older. The margin of error for total respondents is $\pm 3.09\%$ at the 95% confidence level.

Bulletin Survey - Civility
Annotated Questionnaire
(n=1,006)

The study was conducted for AARP via telephone by SSRS, an independent research company. Interviews were conducted from January 19–January 25, 2011 among a nationally representative sample of 1006 respondents 18 years of age or older. The margin of error for total respondents is +/-3.09% at the 95% confidence level. Significant differences between age groups are indicated by “sig” in the tables below.

I'd like to ask you a few questions about civility in our society. By civility, I mean showing respect for the people you deal with. For example; respecting other people's opinions, being courteous, helping others, and showing good sportsmanship.

CI-1 How civil do you think Americans are to each other...very civil, somewhat civil, not too civil, or not at all civil?

Age	CIVIL			NOT CIVIL			Don't know	Refused
	NET	Very	Somewhat	NET	Not too	Not at all		
Total	71%	8%	63%	28%	25%	3%	*	*
18-49	69%	6%	62%	31%	30% ^{sig}	1%	*	*
50+	73%	10%	63%	25%	20%	5% ^{sig}	1%	1%

CI-2 In general, when most Americans debate issues facing the country do you think they are more civil today compared to 10 years ago, less civil, or about as civil as they were 10 years ago? [ROTATE more/less]

Age	More civil	Less civil	About the same	Don't know	Refused
Total	10%	53%	35%	1%	*
18-49	12%	48%	38%	1%	*
50+	8%	58% ^{sig}	31%	2%	*

CI-3 Now I'd like to talk about the positive or negative influences on how people get along. I'm going to read you a list of institutions, and for each I would like you to tell me whether its influence on civility is very positive, somewhat positive, somewhat negative, or very negative. [RANDOMIZE]

a. Popular Music

Age	POSITIVE			NEGATIVE			Don't know	Refused
	NET	Very	Somewhat	NET	Somewhat	Very		
Total	42%	10%	32%	53%	39%	14%	5%	*
18-49	44%	9%	34%	54%	43% ^{sig}	11%	2%	*
50+	39%	10%	29%	52%	34%	18%	8%	1%

b. Politicians

Age	POSITIVE			NEGATIVE			Don't know	Refused
	NET	Very	Somewhat	NET	Somewhat	Very		
Total	27%	3%	24%	69%	42%	27%	3%	1%
18-49	29%	3%	27%	69%	40%	29%	2%	*
50+	24%	2%	21%	71%	45%	26%	4%	2%

c. Cable television

Age	POSITIVE			NEGATIVE			Don't know	Refused
	NET	Very	Somewhat	NET	Somewhat	Very		
Total	49%	8%	41%	47%	38%	9%	4%	1%
18-49	46%	8%	38%	53% ^{sig}	45% ^{sig}	8%	1%	*
50+	52%	7%	45%	40%	30%	9%	8% ^{sig}	1%

d. Schools

Age	POSITIVE			NEGATIVE			Don't know	Refused
	NET	Very	Somewhat	NET	Somewhat	Very		
Total	73%	23%	51%	23%	17%	6%	4%	*
18-49	80%	27% ^{sig}	53%	19%	13%	6%	*	*
50+	65% ^{sig}	18%	48%	27% ^{sig}	21% ^{sig}	6%	7% ^{sig}	*

e. Talk radio

Age	POSITIVE			NEGATIVE			Don't know	Refused
	NET	Very	Somewhat	NET	Somewhat	Very		
Total	42%	8%	35%	50%	36%	13%	7%	1%
18-49	47% ^{sig}	7%	40% ^{sig}	49%	38%	11%	3%	1%
50+	37%	9%	29%	51%	34%	17% ^{sig}	11% ^{sig}	1%

f. Social media (such as Facebook, Twitter, and other social media websites)

Age	POSITIVE			NEGATIVE			Don't know	Refused
	NET	Very	Somewhat	NET	Somewhat	Very		
Total	42%	7%	35%	47%	37%	10%	11%	*
18-49	46% ^{sig}	9%	37%	50%	41% ^{sig}	9%	3%	*
50+	37%	5%	32%	43%	31%	12%	19% ^{sig}	1%

g. Cellphones

Age	POSITIVE			NEGATIVE			Don't know	Refused
	NET	Very	Somewhat	NET	Somewhat	Very		
Total	56%	12%	44%	39%	30%	9%	5%	*
18-49	60% ^{sig}	12%	48% ^{sig}	38%	32%	6%	2%	*
50+	50%	13%	38%	41%	29%	12% ^{sig}	8% ^{sig}	*

CI-4 Who should primarily be held accountable for teaching civility? [RANDOMIZE]

Age	Parents or guardians	Schools	Government	Religious institutions	Don't know	Refused
Total	85%	7%	5%	1%	1%	*
18-49	82%	9%	6%	1%	1%	1%
50+	88%	5%	3%	1%	2%	*

CI-5 Where are you most likely to lose your cool? [RANDOMIZE]

Age	At home	At work	At sporting events	In stores or restaurants	While driving	Don't know	Refused
Total	32%	13%	6%	8%	33%	6%	1%
18-49	32%	17% ^{sig}	6%	7%	34%	3%	*
50+	31%	8%	6%	9%	32%	10% ^{sig}	3% ^{sig}