Much effort is focused on the importance of civility in legislative discourse and debate. Civility is intended to create an environment of respect and collaboration, but the electoral process and legislative political posturing often work contrary to the maintenance and reinforcement of this norm. What is it about these processes which enhances or hinders civility and bipartisanship collaboration? The Legislative Service Project examines individuals involved in the Washington State Legislative process and seeks to determine how changes to this process have affected legislative civility. Participants include legislative interns from the last ten years, legislative staff, members of the media, lobbyists and legislators who served during the 1990 to 2009 legislative sessions. Participant responses provide insight into the legislative process, changes affecting this process, and provide considerable insight into the dynamics of legislative civility and bipartisanship from the perspectives of student interns, staff, media, lobbyists and legislators.

The ultimate goal of the Legislative Service Project is to improve the current Washington State legislative process and better prepare the next generation of leaders for public service in the Evergreen State.

This part of the research looks specifically at the civility norms and perceptions of Washington legislators. It is based on the responses of legislators who served during the 1990 to 2009 legislative sessions and focuses on whether civility is an important factor in the legislative process. It also looks at whether, during the course of last 20 years, the level of civility has changed for the better or for the worse. What is the current level of legislative civility experienced and what are factors which lead to an increase or decrease in civility?

The Washington State Legislature is a citizen legislature tasked with reaching consensus on a wide range of issues affecting citizens and the future of Washington State. Every year the Legislature meets to make significant decisions intended to promote the public interest. This process, however, often degrades from legislators working together to produce good policy to a competition between political parties, individual legislators and special issue advocates. This competition commonly referred to as partisanship, can turn the legislative process from one emphasizing respect and mutual collaboration to one featurning incivility and personal attacks.

Methods

Participants: Participants included 141 legislators who served from January 1, 1990 through the 2009 legislative session.

Procedure: Of the 458 legislators who served during the two year period, addresses were determined for 374 current and past legislators. Survey questionnaires were mailed during the fall of 2009, and a follow-up mailing was sent to those who did not respond to the initial mailing. Responses were received from 145 current and past legislators, with 141 participating and 4 choosing not to participate.

Survey questions included the areas of: legislative preparation and experiences, legislative interns, legislative process, partisanship, bipartisanship collaboration, civility, election experiences, interaction with other legislators, the effect of televising the legislative process, the effect of technology on the legislative process, and personal background. A rate of response of 38% was achieved of both current and past legislators responding. Legislators who responded represented a broad range of attributes with respect to party affiliation, political viewpoints, gender, legislative districts, state geography, urban and rural jurisdictions, and background prior to serving in the state legislature.

Results

Figure 1 represents legislators’ rating of changes in legislator civility during their time in the legislature. It shows that while almost 50% of the legislators feel that civility has ‘stayed about the same’, more legislators feel that legislator civility has decreased than increased. While not presented here, this overall indication of decrease in legislative civility is also seen in the Legislative Service Project non-legislator participant data.

Figure 1. Change in Legislative Civility

Figure 2. Legislature Civility Rating

Figure 2 highlights that legislators feel on average (M= 6.82) that the legislature is more civil than uncivil. While a majority of legislators indicate that legislators tend to be civil in their conduct, the trend indicated from figure 1 is that civility is perceived to be declining. While changes are happening in the level of civility, does this change have any impact on the work of the legislature? Is civility important to the legislative process?

Figure 3. Importance of Civility

Figure 3 indicates how legislators answered two questions: 1) How important is civility in legislative discourse and debate to fostering bipartisanship? 2) How important is civility in legislative discourse and debate to producing good policy outcomes? Legislators feel very strongly that civility in legislative discourse and debate is important in fostering bipartisanship (M=9.09) and producing good policy outcomes (M=8.48). If civility is essential to producing good policy outcomes, then a reversal to the trend of declining civility is a problem requiring attention. The next step is to identify factors which influence civility changes.

Discussion

The results of this research document the importance and highlight the complexity of the legislative civility issue. Legislative civility is seen as important to the legislative process, but it is on the decline. Many factors expected to affect legislators’ perception of civility found not to be significant. These factors included legislator demographics (gender, election vote %, years in office, party), district demographics (turnover rate, geographical location, party representation, population density) and session demographics (when they served, strength of party, position).

The factor found to be strongly related to civility perceptions was how legislators believed they were treated during their election. Legislators who reported a higher level of hostility during campaigns reported a lower level of civility while they were a legislator. This could be indicative of a self fulfilling prophecy whereby a hostile campaign pre-conditions legislators to approach the legislative process in a guarded way. This guarded approach would likely reduce the number of relationships developed and lead to less trust, and guarded behavior could beget guarded responses from others and ultimate outcome would be lower aggregate levels of civility. This study highlights the importance of further research to better understand the relationships between the election process and the legislative process, and to determine what things might be done to improve the legislative process.