Prepared Remarks from James Mullen, President of Allegheny College
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Thank you.

It is an honor to join you this afternoon to discuss attracting the best of America's young people to government service. I thank Bill Galston and Brookings for leading this important conversation.

This morning, Director Berry alluded to the moment that inspired so many of us to the love of public service – John Kennedy's call to young people across the nation to believe in their potential and their responsibility to serve – and to believe that there was a vocational worthiness in a life of government service. For many of us who were Irish, it became almost as virtuous to serve in government as to become a priest! Public service in all its forms was seen as honorable – whether one was an elected official, a career civil servant or a political appointee.

A lot has happened since – Vietnam, assassinations, Watergate, Monica Lewinsky, hanging chads, and the advent of a new era in political journalism, fueled both by unimagined technology.

As the last century closed, we watched young people pull back from politics. The withdrawal was rapid, deep and broad. Robert Putnam, in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* summed up the issue this way:

> "Very little of the net decline in voting is attributable to individual change, and virtually all of it is generational…"

And most of us agreed with Bill Galston when he wrote,

> "The withdrawal of a cohort of citizens from public affairs disturbs the balance of public deliberation—to the detriment of those who withdraw, and to the rest of us as well."

Thankfully, the political marketplace responded. . By 2004, youth-centered political mobilization efforts were having a meaningful impact. Many of you

played a role in this process. And the results in enhanced political participation are relevant for our discussion today. I would argue that youth voting rates are a valid proxy for assessing the overarching environment for your efforts. They are a basic measure of the core willingness of young people to consider public service.

Interest among young citizens swelled in the 2004 and 2008 elections. In 2000, election turnout for those under 30 was just 35 percent, but by 2008, it had increased to 51 percent.

Time labeled 2008 the "Year of the Youth Vote." Young people had rediscovered the power and potential of politics.

I fear, however, that it was a temporary surge, rather than a sea change. The first indicators were the 2009 gubernatorial elections in New Jersey and Virginia. In both contests young voters stayed home. Voters under 30 accounted for just nine percent of voters in New Jersey (compared with 17 percent in 2008) and ten percent in Virginia (down from 21 percent in 2008).

They also stayed home during the critically important special election to fill the Massachusetts Senate seat vacated by the death of Ted Kennedy. As you all recall, this race was over the so-called "60th seat." On Election Day turnout was high for a special election-- a robust 54 percent. Yet, generational differences were stark: turnout for those older than 30 was nearly 60 percent, but for those under 30 it was a scant 15 percent.

By the 2010 midterm election it became clear that the youth engagement bubble had burst. Turnout for those under 30 declined, while turnout for ALL voters rose. The gap between young and older voters once again was growing.

How could this happen? What is going on with young voters these days? We know they have not grown apathetic or indifferent. We know from campuses and from a host of survey data that young Americans do care – they are involved in their communities, they are making a difference.

So why are they once again turning their back to politics?

I think it be the disgraceful stew of invective that is now our political process. It is no great revelation to say that ours has become an uncivil, dysfunctional and mean-spirited politics; that it is a zero sum game of winners and losers; that it is a continuing contest in which each side of the partisan divide sees itself as right and the other as evil, uncaring or, worst of all, unpatriotic. As Brookings' own E.J. Dionne recently wrote, "When politicians and their supporters believe that the other side is pursuing policies that would destroy all they cherish, compromise becomes not a desirable expedient but "almost treasonous. '"

David Brooks wrote a wonderful column a few months ago, that spoke to the essence of civility. Brooks wrote that civility comes "from a sense of personal modesty and from the ensuing gratitude for the political process. Civility is the natural state for people who know how limited their own individual powers are and know, too, that they need the conversation."

We are losing that sense of modesty, that sense of gratitude, that understanding of the need for conversation.

I fear that we are becoming a nation where in politics we only want to speak to those who agree with us. At the extremes, Conservatives only want to talk to conservatives; liberals only want to talk to liberals – with conservatives berating liberals as elitists and socialist engineers; liberals talking about how narrow and selfish conservatives are.

At our worst, we are becoming self-righteous – all too ready to question the intelligence, the motives and the patriotism of the other side, much less see merit in anything our opponents have to say.

We are becoming a nation where "compromise" is no longer the foundation of our politics, but a sign of weakness and lack of character. In polling that Allegheny College's Center for Political Participation carried out last year on the subject of civility, 52% of those polled said standing firm on principles is more important that the ability to find compromise positions. Think about the implications of that finding. Our subsequent polling indicates this number has only increased in recent months.

This politics is feeding on itself and, as it does so, and I am convinced that it cannot but do grave damage to our future – and to everything this conference seeks to achieve.

Now you might say to me that it is really no worse than it has ever been. In her wonderful book, Dirty Politics, Kathleen Hall Jamison reminds us that Timothy Dwight – who was president of Yale at the time of Allegheny's founding in 1815 -- said, that should Thomas Jefferson be elected, "we may see our wives and daughters the victims of legal prostitution, soberly dishonored and speciously polluted." (At Allegheny, we saw a much more civil side of Jefferson – more on that in a moment). Lincoln was described as an ignoramus, a despot and a butcher. Al Smith said his former friend Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal would compel America "to don the mask of Lenin and Marx…"

However, while such voices are not new – the technologies that power them have grown tremendously more potent – with the result, that incivility has become the foundation for our political discourse – as Congressman Joe Cooper, who has served in the House since 1982, has said, "We've gone from Brigadoon to Lord of the Flies."

I am not arguing for a pristine environment in which no feelings are hurt or tough rhetoric employed. I am not looking for perfection in how we act. No one in the arena is free of sin; no one is pure; no elected official, political consultant or opinion writer has a perfect record of civility.

What I am saying is that we need to understand our own moment in history and the implications of our behaviors. Can we imagine younger generations anxious to join *this* process? Ours is a time when there are forces at play that reinforce and expand the impact of our incivility. In Jefferson's time there was no 24 hour news cycle; during Lincoln's era, no FOX or MSNBC; during Roosevelt's presidency, no blogging, emailing, texting or tweeting.

With the extraordinary technologies and means of instantaneous communication available to us – technologies never envisioned by the founding fathers as they designed our model of governance –comes a responsibility to reflect deeply about

how we will engage each other in the rough and tumble of our politics. In our current national dialogue, we are falling far short in meeting that responsibility.

And the result is a diminishment of government and the people who serve in it. The incivility of our political rhetoric, the polarization of our politics and the inability of elected officials to address the policy demands of our times – is turning more and more young people off.

It is having powerfully negative effects on the perception of government – negative effects that span generations.

Just this week, Gallup polling indicated that 81% of Americans are dissatisfied with the way the country is being governed.

Fifty-seven percent feel little or no confidence in the federal government's capacity to solve domestic problems.

Fifty-three percent have little or no confidence in the men and women who seek or hold elected office.

Forty-nine percent of Americans believe that the federal government has become so large and powerful that it poses an immediate threat to the rights and freedom of ordinary citizens. (Less than 30% believed this in 2003.)

The bottom-line, according to Gallup is, and I quote "Americans' various ratings of political leadership in Washington add up to a profoundly negative review of government – something that would seem unhealthy for the country to endure for an extended period

I would respectfully argue that all the efforts discussed at this conference are destined to underachieve – or even to fail – if we do not together address this negative environment. And, I would argue we should begin by tackling the issue of incivility.

But there is good news in all this. There still are leaders who exemplify civility. There is a deep-rooted and discernable public desire for civility. There is

opportunity to change the environment. But only if we resolve together, not just to bemoan the situation – but to do something about it.

That is why Allegheny College established the Center for Political Participation, which under the direction of political scientist, Dan Shea, focuses on research and programming related to the participation of young people in American politics.

And that is why, over the past two years, Allegheny and the Center have focused on the issue of civility in American politics. We are one of the oldest colleges in the nation. We have a rich history of civility. And we have been its beneficiaries. In the archives of our library rests a letter from Thomas Jefferson to our founder, Timothy Alden, commending Allegheny College on its extraordinary library. Jefferson told Alden that he hoped someday his University of Virginia would have a library to rival Allegheny's.

As my own demonstration of civility, let me say that Virginia has done quite well in that regard.

At Allegheny, we believe we have a special responsibility to address an issue of such generational importance; that as a liberal arts college it is appropriate that we take on the question of how we debate each other in an informed, passionate and civil manner. We feel that we have a special responsibility to help foster a political environment that will encourage young people to engage in the political process in all its guises, and seek to make a difference through government service.

In a few weeks, we will announce the recipients of the first Allegheny Award for Civility in Public Life. Our recipients will be from the political arena – the arena where elected officials and opinion writers meet in the day-to-day of politics and policy-making. They will be proudly partisan, passionate in their convictions and civil in bringing those convictions to the fore. In short, they will be worthy examples for our students and students across the nation; examples that we hope will inspire young people to politics and government service. We can rest assured that they will not be saints. At some point in their careers they will have said something they now wish they hadn't about an opponent or an idea. But in the

sum and substance of their careers and in this time of rampant incivility they will stand as examples of how we should engage each other and how this rough and tumble democracy can work.

This is our opportunity. Critiquing incivility is important. But we will not change the environment unless we put just as much energy into lauding civility. Yet such positive voices are almost absent from our political arena. Allegheny will do its part to fill that void. We will shine a bright light on civility – and we will call on others to do the same. And I will foreshadow to this group that we intend to start our efforts by focusing on the unique opportunity of political journalists to reshape the debate.

I want to thank one of those journalists -- E.J Dionne – both for serving on the advisory panel that has helped Allegheny in this process and for the example he has set of passion for politics, deeply felt convictions and civility in bringing his views to the arena.

There is hope – our polling indicates that 95% of Americans believe civility is important to the future of American politics and 90% believe that it is possible for candidates to run for office in aggressive, but respectful ways. Disappointingly, our polling indicates that young people are considerably less optimistic about these two issues than are older Americans. But that just underscores the importance of our work. At Allegheny, we seek to build on that sentiment – particularly among the young people who are heirs to our political process.

The 2012 presidential campaign is underway – just in case you haven't noticed. If you expect that campaign to be one that inspires young people to engage the process, you are more optimistic than I am. The challenge we face is not easy; the path we face is hard and blocked by many entrenched interests and bad habits.

But I would argue that the effort is not only worthwhile, it is indeed our responsibility to those who will follow us. Those of us who believe that we can have a politics that is vibrant, partisan and civil; who believe that government can function and make a difference for the good; that we can have an environment

that calls people to government service – we owe it to young people across the nation to fight the good fight.

Each of us in this room has a responsibility to change the dynamic of our political environment …"not," as John Kennedy once said, "because it is easy, but because it is hard.." and because it is a generational responsibility as great and important as any we face. We owe it to our democracy – and to public servants like David Ueijo and to every young person who will inherit it.

Thank you.