

How Incivility on Partisan Media (De)Polarizes the Electorate

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Partisan media—typically characterized by incivility—has become a defining element of the American political communication environment. While scholars have explored the consequences of partisan media for political attitudes and behaviors, little work has looked at how variations in incivility moderate partisan media’s effects. Using a population-based survey experiment, we show that incivility affectively depolarizes partisans when it comes from an in-party source (e.g., MSNBC for Democrats, Fox News for Republicans). Incivility on out-party sources affectively polarizes the audience, however, and we show that the respondent’s degree of conflict aversion conditions these effects. Our results raise intriguing normative questions about the trade-offs between polarization and incivility and highlight how scholars must account for both levels of incivility and partisan slant when studying the effects of partisan media.

One of the most significant changes in the US media environment over the past quarter century is the rise of partisan outlets, which eschew objectivity and present a particular view of the day’s events. Such outlets are notable not only for their partisan slant but also for their relatively high levels of incivility. While a large literature explores the effects of partisan media, previous work cannot speak to whether variations in incivility moderate the effects of partisan outlets. We argue that it does. Specifically, we show that when partisan media comes from an in-party source (e.g., a Republican watches Fox News), incivility *depolarizes*: partisans feel less close to and trusting of their party (relative to those watching a more civil program). When individuals watch out-party sources (e.g., a Democrat watches Fox News), the opposite happens, and incivility polarizes

respondents. Our findings accentuate that studying the effects of partisan media requires attention to not only partisan slant but also levels of incivility.

THE EFFECT OF PARTISAN MEDIA INCIVILITY

Most partisan networks have clear reputations (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013, 9). When these networks attack candidates, viewers’ attitudes toward those candidates change (e.g., Smith and Searles 2014). This suggests that viewers perceive the networks as sources of partisan information. Individuals exposed to partisan media often affectively polarize, viewing their party more positively and the out-party less positively (Levendusky 2013, 58–60).

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Does the civility of partisan coverage matter? Prior research has been silent on this question (see app. sec. 1 for discussion of related work; appendix is available online). While partisan networks contain more incivility than other outlets, there is variation—by one measure, roughly 20% of segments on Fox News and MSNBC contain no uncivil language, and even when uncivil, there is heterogeneity in type and extent (Sydnor 2015, 44). Here we study what Muddiman (2017) calls personal-level incivility: violations of politeness that include slurs, threats of harm, and disrespect (also see Stryker, Conway, and Danielson 2016). We further focus on uncivil attacks on the out-party such as when Fox News (MSNBC) criticizes Democrats (Republicans) (Berry and Sobieraj 2014; Mutz 2015). Our interest lies in how incivility affects a partisan media effect, relative to coverage that is civil.

What happens when incivility comes from an audience member's own party? Consider that civility establishes standards for what constitutes normal and polite interactions. Most people therefore will perceive (at least extreme) uncivil partisan media as norm violating and have negative emotional reactions (e.g., van Kleef et al. 2015). When this violation comes from their own party, people will want to distance themselves, perhaps even feeling sadness or anxiety. Thus, relative to civil partisan media communications, uncivil partisan media from one's own party (the in-party) will lead the individual to be less favorable, be less trusting, and have lower affect toward his or her party, all else constant (**hypothesis 1**). This is an affective depolarization effect since partisans feel less attached to their own party.

This contrasts with what we expect when (perhaps anticipated) incivility comes from the other party's network, aimed at the individual's own party. This type of norm violation will likely generate anger (Gervais 2017) that leads people to "cling tightly to their prior convictions and [be] less receptive to . . . opposing points of view" (Brader and Marcus 2013, 179). Such directional motivated reasoning (Leeper and Slothuus 2014; cf. Feldman 2011) causes people to view the incivility as emblematic of why they dislike the opposition. Thus, relative to civil partisan media communications, uncivil partisan media from the out-party will lead the individual to be less favorable, be less trusting, and have lower affect toward the out-party, all else constant (**hypothesis 2**). It may even lead individuals to be more favorable, trusting, and liking of their own party as they try to clearly demarcate their partisan identity. This would generate increased affective polarization (e.g., like their party more and the out-party less).

Not everyone will react equally to incivility, however. Some people are less averse to conflict and, therefore, react less strongly. This is captured by conflict orientation: "an

individual's willingness to make interpersonal conflicts explicit" (Mutz 2015, 81). Conflict-seeking, as opposed to conflict-avoidant, individuals have weaker reactions to incivility, sometimes even finding it entertaining (Sydnor 2015, 73). They are therefore less affected by uncivil communications, on average (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013, 144–45; Mutz 2015, 82); the in-party incivility will be less bothersome, and the out-party incivility will be less disconcerting since these people do not mind conflict. In sum, the effects of uncivil communications, relative to civil communications, posited by hypotheses 1 and 2 will be smaller for conflict-seeking individuals compared to conflict-avoidant individuals, all else constant (**hypothesis 3**).¹

EXPERIMENT

We conducted an experiment, in March 2017, embedded in a nationally representative survey in the United States with a total of 5,031 participants. Details of our sample can be found in appendix section 3. All respondents began the survey with a few basic demographic questions that included a standard partisanship question and, to test hypothesis 3, a five-item conflict orientation measure from which we created a scale ($\alpha = 0.76$).

To test our hypotheses, we randomly assigned respondents to one of four conditions that varied two factors: partisan source (either Fox News or MSNBC) and level of civility (either civil or uncivil). Three points are relevant. First, we opted for Fox News as the "Republican network" and MSNBC as the "Democratic network," and thus, for Democrats, MSNBC (Fox) is the in-party (out-party) source whereas for Republicans Fox News (MSNBC) is the in-party (out-party) source (e.g., Levendusky 2013). Second, our stimuli were text segments that we told respondents were from *All in with Chris Hayes* for MSNBC or *Tucker Carlson Tonight* for Fox (our stimuli are derived from those used by Druckman, Levendusky, and McLain [2018]). The substantive focus was on Republican attempts to resurrect the Keystone XL and Dakota Access Pipelines. The segments provided some background, and then the MSNBC segment, consistent with partisan leanings, opposed the pipelines (focusing on environmental risks) while the Fox segment supported the pipelines (focusing on economic benefits).

Third, we introduced variations in civility. In the civil treatment, the host disputes the other side's claims in a realistic (negative) partisan manner but does so respectfully—with some complementary language (e.g., "we can respect them") and acknowledgment of attempts to bridge interests

1. We preregistered versions of our hypotheses at [Aspredicted.org](https://aspredicted.org) as study no. 3326 (see <https://aspredicted.org/366pi.pdf>).

(see Sydnor 2015, 43–44). The uncivil segments, by contrast, (severely) invoked the aforementioned aspects of incivility with language such as “idiotic,” “parasitic,” “reckless,” “despicable,” and so on. Each segment also was accompanied by an appropriate/consistent picture—the civil picture had the host looking relatively content while the uncivil picture displayed the host as being seemingly outraged. To maintain realism, our civil segments contained some elements of incivility and thus they should be thought of as simply relatively more civil than the uncivil segments. The full stimuli are provided in appendix section 10. For the purposes of analyses and presentation, we consider respondents as being in one of four conditions: (1) in-party civil (i.e., Republicans exposed to Fox News, Democrats exposed to MSNBC), (2) in-party uncivil, (3) out-party civil (i.e., Republicans exposed to MSNBC, Democrats exposed to Fox), or (4) out-party uncivil (see app. sec. 2 for pretests of our stimuli). Our analytical focus, then, is *relative comparisons between the civil and uncivil communications holding the source constant*. We do not have predictions across sources, and our hypotheses make no statement about comparisons against a no-exposure baseline (which was not included).

Following their exposure to the stimuli, we measured respondents’ (1) party net favorability, which took the difference between how favorable a respondent’s thoughts were toward each party minus how unfavorable they were; (2) affective thermometer ratings of each party; and (3) trust in each party to do what is right for the country. Respondents were then debriefed. Full question wordings, the stimuli (and motivation for the stimuli), and data from manipulation checks that were on the survey are all in the appendix (secs. 2, 4, and 10).

RESULTS

Hypothesis 1 predicts that exposure to in-party uncivil media depolarizes—that is, individuals come to like their party less and report a lower feeling thermometer score and a lower trust score. Hypothesis 2 suggests out-party incivility will do the opposite and polarize. In the interest of simplicity, we present our results in figure 1, and we put the accompanying regressions in appendix section 5. In figure 1, all variables have been rescaled to the [0, 1] range for ease of presentation.² We also present results for reactions to both parties (i.e., the in- and out-parties), even though our main focus is on responses toward the party of the network in the given condition (e.g., what do people think of the in-party in the in-party conditions?).

2. We treat leaning partisans as partisans (results for pure Independents are in app. sec. 7). In app. secs. 6 and 9 we present results separated by party and results on issue attitudes.

Figure 1A shows support for hypothesis 1. The figure shows that, relative to civil in-party media, uncivil in-party media decreases in-party net favorability, thermometer ratings, and trust. Interestingly, we also find that it affected reactions to the out-party, leading to more net favorability, affect, and trust for the opposing party. The main point is that exposure to in-party incivility affectively depolarizes partisans (they are less positive toward their party and more positive toward the out-party). We show in appendix section 6 that this holds for both Democrats and Republicans. Figure 1B shows the effects of out-party incivility. Here, we find, consistent with hypothesis 2, the opposite effects from in-party civility: incivility polarizes making individuals less favorable, trusting, and liking of the out-party. We further see, as we had suggested, that respondents move in a positive direction toward their own party.

Hypothesis 3 predicts that conflict avoidant individuals—those who especially dislike incivility—will have even stronger reactions to these segments. This implies an interactive model whose output we present in figure 2 (the underlying regressions are in app. sec. 5). Here, we call those in the bottom 25% of the conflict avoidance scale conflict avoidant, and the remainder are conflict seeking (Mutz 2015, 105–6; results with a continuous measure are in app. sec. 5).

We find some, but not definitive, support for hypothesis 3. Specifically, figure 2 shows that the confidence intervals for the two groups overlap in most cases, and there are few statistically significant differences. However, we do consistently find that uncivil partisan media have a larger effect on conflict-avoidant individuals. Figure 2 also makes clear, however, that there are still important—and statistically significant—effects of incivility even for those who are conflict seeking. This is a notable finding given that these individuals are most likely to tune into partisan networks. The finding is consistent with earlier studies (also see Arceneaux and Johnson 2013, 133; Sydnor 2015, 91; see app. sec. 3 for evidence on watching and conflict orientation). While we cannot speak to questions of selective exposure more broadly, these findings illustrate that incivility has the potential to shape the attitudes of those more likely to view partisan media.³

CONCLUSION

Our work shows that the degree of civility shapes the effects of partisan media outlets. The precise impact is contingent

3. We note that, while significant, the effect sizes are small to moderate (see the regressions in app. sec. 5). Also, in app. sec. 6, we report that conflict orientation significantly moderates the effects for Democrats but not Republicans (also see Mutz 2015, 106). We also investigated heterogeneous treatment effects by partisan extremity and knowledge and found none (see app. sec. 8).

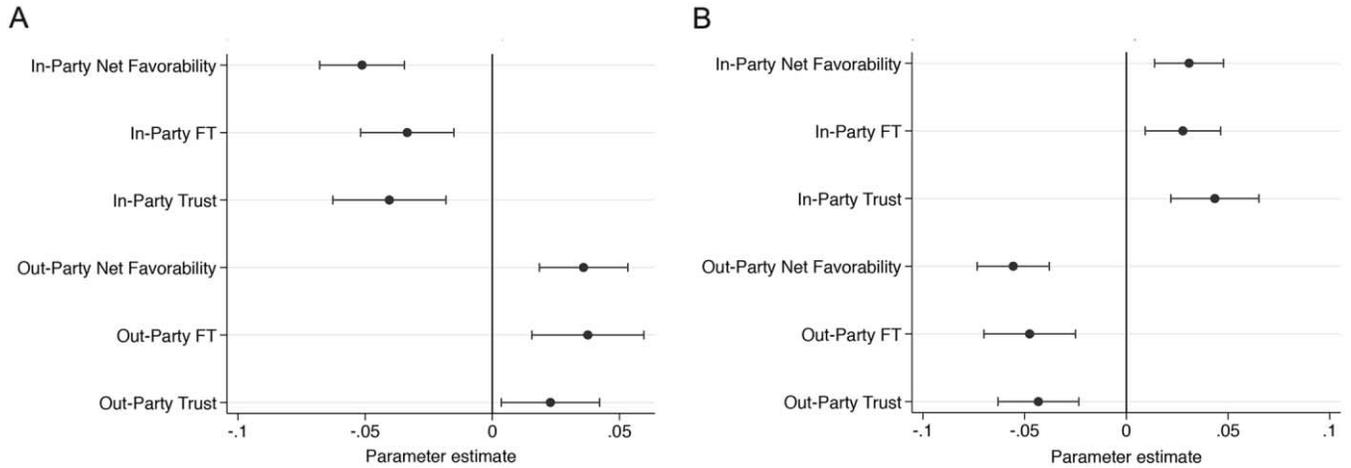


Figure 1. Difference between civil and uncivil media, estimated for both in-party (A) and out-party (B) sources; dots represent point estimates, and bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Associated regressions are presented in appendix section 5.

on the partisan media source, and the size of the effect depends on an individual’s conflict orientation. Perhaps the most intriguing finding is that exposure to in-party incivility (relative to exposure to in-party civility) works to move people away from their party, even for those who are conflict seeking and likely to watch these outlets.

Our findings make several important contributions. First, our theory posits distinct mechanisms for in-party as opposed to out-party incivility. This highlights the need for scholars to isolate the psychological processes that underlie incivility effects (e.g., Gervais 2017) and understand how these connect to emotional reactions and partisan-motivated reasoning. Because exposure to incivility generates downstream uncivil behavior—a sort of two-stage flow of incivility (Gervais 2017)—understanding the effects of uncivil media, including whether such effects spread or endure, is

especially important. Second, our results call for broader interrogation of incivility. We examine one particular instantiation of incivility here, but there are certainly others. Do people view incivility differently on news programming as opposed to direct comments from politicians? Are perceptions of incivility changing over time, as politics and society change (see Berry and Sobieraj 2014)? Do the effects depend on whether an election is occurring? Third, our findings point to an intriguing counterfactual world where affective polarization could actually be even higher than what we observe today. Given that most partisan media exposure is to in-party outlets (Stroud 2011), one might interpret our findings to suggest that partisan media exposure should affectively depolarize the electorate, in contrast to earlier findings that it polarizes viewers. This is not correct, however. Our experiment holds slant constant and varies

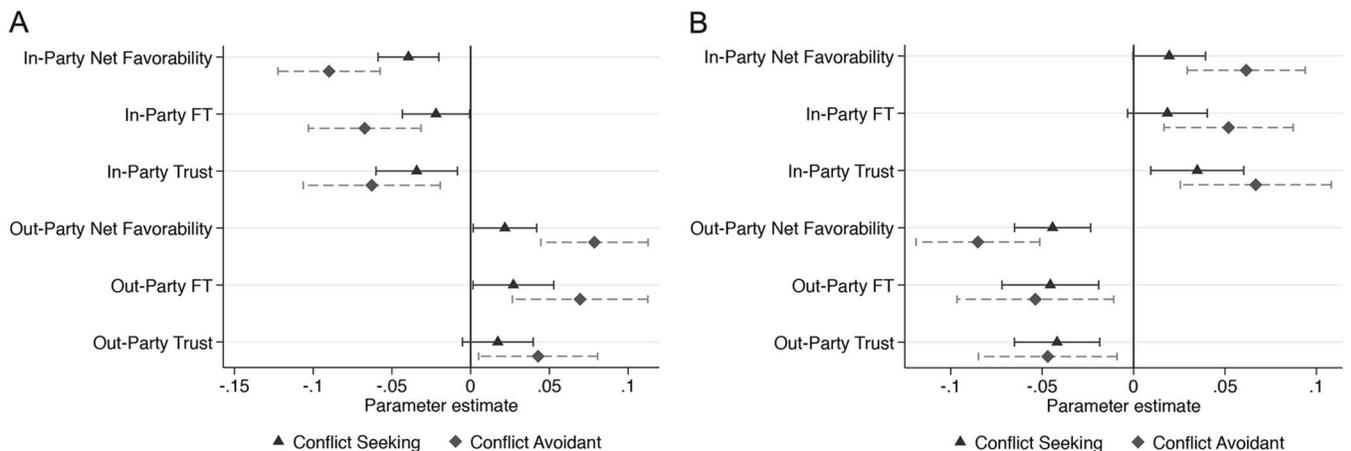


Figure 2. Moderating effects of uncivil media (relative to civil media): A, in-party media; B, out-party media. Symbols represent point estimates, and bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Triangles and solid lines depict those who are conflict seeking; diamonds and dashed lines depict those who are conflict avoidant. Associated regressions are presented in appendix section 5.

civility, whereas other studies simultaneously vary both civility and slant relative to a neutral (mainstream) baseline (i.e., Levendusky 2013). By doing so, these studies miss how incivility shapes the effects of partisan media. Our data show, for example, that differences between in-party and out-party sources would be even larger with a civil tone rather than the more typical uncivil tone. Note, however, that since in our study everyone is exposed, it is possible that even civil exposure polarizes relative to no exposure.

So why then do Fox and MSNBC appear to be so uncivil? A complete answer is beyond our purview, but these outlets are businesses, and uncivil discourse is attention grabbing (Berry and Sobieraj 2014; Mutz 2015). So even if incivility lessens the attitudinal effects, it might enlarge the audience—and hence channel profits—making it an attractive strategy for profit-maximizing networks. This strategy also (perhaps unintentionally) generates larger aggregate opinion effects—these outlets might polarize more with less incivility, but they would affect fewer viewers doing so. More generally, our findings suggest that scholars of political communication need to consider how variations in civility condition the effects of partisan media. Especially when comparing the effects of different partisan media segments, scholars need to consider how they differ in civility, not simply in partisan slant. Earlier studies miss an important nuance by failing to account for the differences in civility across different partisan media segments and, as such, present an incomplete picture of the effects of partisan media.

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