

The Effects of Incivility in News Media on Political Deliberation: The Mimicry of Uncivil Language in Political Opinions

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Abstract:

Much of the literature on incivility in mediated discourse focuses on how uncivil media affects the electorate's perceptions of candidates, office-holders, and politics in general, but little has been done on how exposure to uncivil media could lead individuals to mimic the behavior they witness. I hypothesize that use of media that presents uncivil political discourse leads individuals to include uncivil language when offering their own political opinions. Using methods developed in the negative political advertising literature, I develop an index to gauge levels of incivility in language--that is, use of purposefully inflammatory and superfluous descriptions and claims in political discussions. I then test the effect, using panel data analysis, that exposure to media deemed "uncivil" has on individuals' own use of uncivil language when talking politics, through use of an open-ended survey item in the 2008 Annenberg Election Survey. I find that, consistent with my hypothesis, that exposure to uncivil media use positively affected use of incivility in political opinions

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Introduction

Political deliberation, with eminent proponents including J.S. Mill, Jurgen Habermas, and Hannah Arendt, has come to be viewed as an essential component for a well-functioning democracy (Mutz 2006). Modern observers have qualified this assessment in specifically advocating for “civil” political discourse. Indeed, incivility in political talk and its purported consequences has of late become a *bête noire* of sorts for American politicians, pundits, and social commentators alike. From the calls for civility in the wake of the January 2011 shootings in Tucson, Arizona, to a rally on the National Mall hosted by comedian Jon Stewart to restore “sanity” in politics, the idea that uncivil discourse has harmful effects on American politics has many adherents. As President Obama explained in a speech during the memorial for the victims of the Tucson shooting, “...only a more civil and honest public discourse can help us face up to the challenges of our nation...” (Hayes 2011).

The idea that incivility in political discussions has a deleterious effect on how politics is conducted is not novel, nor is it refuted by political theory. Kingwell (1995) argued that the smooth interactions necessary for benefits to be derived from deliberation can only come when individuals act civil to an extent—specifically, when they are willing to hold their tongues and not say any and everything that comes to their minds, in an effort to not offend. Mutz (2006) offers empirical support for the importance of civility, finding that the benefits of exposure to oppositional views (exposure to views different from one’s own) are maximized when discussions have a civil orientation—that is, discussions that do not completely avoid conflict, but value the maintenance of social harmony.

This raises the question of what contributes to individuals abandoning civility and including caustic, antagonistic, and corrosive language in their political discussions. I argue in

this paper that exposure to uncivil media, specifically pundit-themed cable news and talk radio programming, has a positive effect on use of incivility in political discourse. I develop an incivility “index” to gauge whether or not respondents included elements of incivility in an open-ended survey item asking them to evaluate then-presidential candidates Barack Obama and John McCain. Using panel data regression methods, I find that a change in exposure to uncivil media has a positive effect on both the use of incivility and the intensity in which it is used.

Literature Review

Political and media elites are most often (anecdotally) identified as perpetrators of the supposed decline in civil discourse—and not without good reason. Scholars have demonstrated that there has been a decline in civility at the elite level, in both day-to-day discourse (Uslaner 1993) and in campaigning (but, with caveats—see Sigelman and Park 2007). Furthermore, many have argued that increased incivility in news media is the product of increased competition for audiences (pushing media figures to say more outlandish and controversial things) and the “fragmentation” of once-large network audiences into niche populations, leaving media figures free to say and do things that they could not do were it necessary to maintain a broader, heterogeneous audience (Mutz and Reeves 2005, Fallows 1996, Prior 2005, 2007; Delli Carpini and Williams 2001; Sobieraj and Berry 2010).

The literature on media effects of uncivilized television suggests exposure can induce emotional responses in its audience. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1998) find that a reliance on television and radio for political news (as opposed to newspapers, magazines, and talking with others) leads to much more negative and visceral emotional reactions towards Congress, and the more exposure to electronic media, the more negative the reaction. While habitual, steady exposure to televised media can produce negative reactions in audiences, a number of studies

suggest that even short-term exposure can produce these same types of reactions, for at least the period immediately following exposure. Forgette and Morris (2006) found that uncivil cable news coverage of the 2003 State of the Union address decreased public evaluations of political institutions, trust in leadership, and overall support for political parties and the political system as a whole. Fridkin and Kenney (2008), using an experimental method, found that exposing individuals to a campaign messages in an uncivil manner resulted in individuals having lower assessments of candidates than those exposed to similar civil messages.

Recent experimental designs have shown that short-term exposure to incivility not only activate negative, emotional reactions in viewers, but provide some insight as to what it is about television and radio news. Mutz and Reeves (2005) find that political trust in politicians, Congress, and the overall system of government is reduced by uncivil political discourse commonly featured in contemporary political television shows. Mediated portrayals of opinion emphasize strong differences of opinion, and television intensifies the negative conflictual aspects by causing viewers to experience uncivil exchanges of political views. These uncivil exchanges violate interpersonal social norms, and because viewers react to the conflict the same way they would should they be witnessing the conflict in reality, positive attitudes towards politics, political actors, and political institutions are lowered.

Furthermore, the polarizing nature of televised media may lower levels of trust in those with opposing political views. Mutz (2007) finds the combination of incivility and close-up camera angles heightens arousal and discourages mutual respect for the other side; uncivil and highly stimulating television political discourse lowers perceptions of a legitimate opposition and increases the perceptions that those of opposing political views are corrupt. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1998) suggest that the uncivil discourse commonly featured in television political

programming is also featured in on talk radio political programming, through its controversial commentators and inflammatory political rhetoric.

Collectively, these studies suggest that exposure to certain types of television news and radio—specifically those presented in an uncivil fashion--can induce emotional reactions in individuals exposed to it. As Mutz and Reeves (2005) and Mutz (2007) suggests, the exposure period needed to induce such reactions can be brief, and, even if the effects are fleeting, it can have consequences for political deliberation.

Beyond the establishment with the media and politics literature that exposure to uncivil mediated political discourse can cause emotional reactions in individuals, studying exposure to television news media rather than Internet use is appropriate, as, unlike cable news viewership, web browsing is not a passive action at all. Prior (2007) notes that with the increase in cable television choices, passive exposure to television news has declined, but news viewership “in terms of control and degree of choice...is dwarfed by the Internet...[which can be] customized to a greater extent.” (111-112). With, for instance, only a handful of television news options on cable television at any time, individuals who are general news fans may happen upon an uncivil program on any or all television news programming at any time without seeking out uncivil media in particular; this sort of passive “stumbling upon” uncivil media does not happen with internet browsing, which is far more purposeful.

The issue arises that individuals may self-select out of exposure, and thus bias results. While selection bias is not an issue I can completely rule out, a likely alternative hypothesis that explains why most individuals change their viewing habits is not apparent. In regards to the notion that individuals begin to view uncivil media because they become attracted to incivility, the question remains what caused an individual to suddenly have such a change. As the media

and politics literature provides strong evidence that exposure to media leads to emotional reactions and not the other way around, it is likely that the change in exposure is due to a number of idiosyncratic and non-systematic reasons, such as gaining or losing access to cable, having a change in schedules so certain programs can or can no longer be viewed or listened to, or the attraction to a particular news story or stories—such as the presidential election—that is covered throughout one point but not the other.

Theory

If incivility in media breeds distrust and substantially lower views of the opposing side, then it would be expected that when given the opportunity to evaluate political events, politicians, or parties, individuals exposed to uncivil media will mirror that incivility and offer a response in an uncivil, negative manner. Media elites have a significant influence on the opinions of their audiences (Zaller 1992), and when commentators—particularly those of talk radio--target certain individuals, groups, or ideas, this antipathy is relayed to the audience (Barker 2002). If the media one is exposed to villanizes and delegitimizes a political figure who takes an opposing view, such an individual is unlikely to speak about the figure in a respectful, civil manner. As Mutz (2007) argues, incivility creates disdain for opposing views, with more intense incivility correlated with views that the opposing side has insidious motives. Beyond convincing audiences that the opposition is “bad,” uncivil mediated discourse also legitimizes the use of uncivil language and behavior in discourse—after all, if elites one trusts are engaged in such behavior, it follows that such behavior is acceptable or even necessary.

I hypothesize that exposure to uncivil discourse leads individuals to mimic uncivil behavior and include uncivil language when given the chance to engage in political discussions.

My core hypothesis is that exposure to uncivil political discourse leads to an increased propensity to use and exhibit uncivil behavior (namely, language) when talking politics. Specifically, I wish to examine the effects that exposure to uncivil political news media has on political deliberation in the age of new media, where much discussion of politics takes place not in person but in the digital world.

As experimental studies have shown that emotional responses to uncivil media can be induced immediately following exposure, I hypothesize, in a similar vein, that the effect of changes in exposure to uncivil media can affect use of uncivil language in the short-term and almost immediately. A change in exposure to uncivil media will cause an increase in the propensity to use uncivil language by individuals; likewise, a change in exposure from uncivil media to no uncivil media will decrease this propensity.

Defining Incivility

A central issue in works dealing with incivility in political discourse is defining what it means to be uncivil—particularly, when it is that discourse has crossed the line of merely being negative to being uncivil. Sobieraj and Berry (2010) define civil political discourse as “political argumentation characterized by speakers who present themselves as reasonable and courteous, treating even those with whom they disagree as though they and their ideas are worthy of respect.” This vies with the definition used by Mutz (2006) that “a civil orientation [in discourse] is one that does not duck conflict entirely, but that simultaneously embraces the importance of maintaining social relationship,” (75).

A number of studies have considered the effects of incivility in campaign advertising on the electorate. Within this literature, “civil negative” campaigning is differentiated from “uncivil negative” campaigning. Fridkin and Kenney (2005), distinguishing between “mudslinging” and

“legitimate negativity,” define mudslinging as the “presentation of campaign information that is irrelevant to governing, and the presentation of campaign information in harsh, strident, and shrill manner.” Brooks and Geer (2007), differentiating civil negative claims from uncivil negative claims, define uncivil statements as those which include “claims that are inflammatory or superfluous.” In an experimental test of how exposure to mediated uncivil discourse affects individual’s level of political trust, Mutz and Reeves (2005) operationalize incivility as exchanges that include “gratuitous asides that suggested a lack of respect and/or frustration with the opposition.”

Three common themes emerge from these definitions collectively: uncivil claims must be disrespectful towards their target, must do so in a purposeful, confrontational manner, and must be presented in a hyperbolic nature. Suggesting that one does not have respect for individual is the most basic element of uncivil discourse. By this, it is simply meant that one’s claims suggest they do not hold a person or persons in high esteem. This is not equivalent to disliking someone—it is possible to dislike someone but still respect them or certain qualities they possess. Uncivil comments can be thought of as those that cannot be consistent with suggesting respect for the candidate. If an individual were to comment that, “[t]he candidate’s *policies are bad*, but I generally respect her, and believe her to generally be an honest, well-intentioned, and reasonable individual,” she is saying something negative about the candidate that is still consistent with the latter part of the sentence that suggests respect. However, if she were to comment, “[t]he candidate is a *lying, foolish radical bent on destroying America*, but I generally respect her, and believe her to generally be an honest, well-intentioned, and reasonable individual,” the negative assessment in the first part of the sentence is entirely inconsistent with the latter half.

Lacking respect for an individual, in it of itself, does not qualify as uncivil behavior—for a person to engage in uncivil discourse, he or she must be “actively disrespectful.” Thus, incivility is also not synonymous with disrespect—incivility is a particular type of disrespect in which contempt is made clear through actions, where something disrespectful is *done*. Being uncivil is not a passive enterprise—if uncivil discourse involves claims that are gratuitous, strident, and inflammatory, as the definitions provided above suggest, then it is expected that the nature of such claims are obvious and deliberate. This does not mean individual needs to respect person, as one can disrespect an individual but still engage them in a civil manner.

Uncivil language is words and phrases that are clearly meant to insult and demonstrate a lack of respect. It is here that the difference between disliking and disrespecting is made clear—for example, if an individual’s response when asked what she liked and disliked about Candidate A was “nothing” and “everything,” she has suggested she does not hold a favorable view of Candidate A, but has not said anything disrespectful about Candidate A. Thus, uncivil behavior is different from other types of behavior that can be considered disrespectful, such as rudeness—which may be unintentional—and passive aggressive behavior, which may not be obvious and may go unnoticed.

A third element of incivility in political discourse is that it is presented in hyperbolic nature. Deliberately saying something “bad” about Candidate A might suggest a person does not like or even respect the candidate, yet it also might be a legitimate point—it could qualify as a claim that is civil negative. With few exceptions, what differentiates a civil negative from uncivil negative claim is hyperbole—uncivil talk tends to be an exaggerated, embellished version of civil negative talk and the “disrespectful” element is made clear. For example, claiming “Candidate A lacks many of the qualities necessary to be successful in office, and his policies are

not impressive,” is negative but civil. However, adding hyperbole, the claim becomes, “Candidate A is horrible, lying, bad person who is the worst candidate in the history of the office and has the dumbest policies I have ever seen.” While the central claim that the individual does not believe the candidate is fit for office and had unimpressive policies remains intact, just *how* bad is exaggerated to an insulting and unrealistic extent.

Incivility in Media

What does the literature tell us uncivil media should look like? Sobieraj and Berry (2010) define, conceptualize, and measure examples of extreme incivility in politically-oriented news media and devise a helpful “road map” in determining if a media source tends to be uncivil, identifying thirteen manifestations in language and behavior, including name calling, misrepresentative exaggerations of views and actions, and mockery. Sobieraj and Berry also describe a method for creating an “outrage score” for four types of media (newspapers, television, radio, and blogs) and identify the “most” uncivil current examples for each type of media. The elements used by Mutz and Reeves (2005) in their “recreation” of civil and uncivil mediated political discourse to differentiate uncivil discourse from polite, civil discourse were hostility, rudeness, emotionality, and quarrelsome discussions. Together, these studies provide a theoretical guide to identifying media that include uncivil discourse. For media to include such elements as mockery, hostility, and character assassination, factors must be present for these things to take place—the programming’s host, hosts, or guests need to have opinions and need to at the very best take a negative view towards some persons, policy, or institutions. Standard news programs, for example, where news is merely read and no commentary is offered, are unlikely to include such elements.

The Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ), a non-profit research organization, formerly in association with Columbia University's School of Journalism and now with the Pew Research Center, releases annual reports featuring content analyses of different forms of media, including cable television news, network television news, local television news, newspapers, online news, magazines, and radio.

This description suggests that to find uncivil media, it is necessary to look for talk and opinion-oriented media. Sobieraj and Berry (2010) found that the most incidents of uncivil "outrage" occurred in commentary-based cable news and talk radio. The content analyses of the 2009 PEJ report (which reviews media throughout 2008) reports results consistent with this finding, noting that primetime cable news and talk radio stood out among other forms of media when it came to pundit-themed, opinionated news.

Prime-time cable news programming was dominated by shows in which "commentators and pundits dissect and magnify the one or two biggest developments that lend themselves to debate and disagreement." Talk radio programming, dominated by conservative commentators, consisted of hosts attacking policies and villainizing targeted individuals—among all the comments on conservative talk radio in 2008 made about Hillary Clinton, for example, 30 percent emphasized the idea that she did not have any hard core beliefs, and 15 percent revolved around the idea that she was personally unlikable (Project for the Excellence in Journalism 2009). The report also noted that "prime-time cable in 2008 closely resembled talk radio with pictures" in that both "placed a premium on high-octane opining and polarizing." The dominance of punditry and polarizing commentating in prime-time cable news and talk radio suggests these media fit the bill as the quintessential uncivil political programming.

Differences in tone between the three major cable news channels existed, where MSNBC and Fox News programming—specifically their primetime programming--appealed to ideological niche audiences on the left and right, respectively, while CNN remained in the middle. Furthermore, the prime-time programming of CNN, with few exceptions,² was not in the opinionated, pundit-oriented formats that primetime programming on the other two channels were (Project for the Excellence in Journalism 2009).

Data

To test my hypothesis that use of pundit-themed, uncivil cable news and talk radio induces use of incivility in those exposed to the media, I used data from the 2008 National Annenberg Election Survey Online dataset. The sample of respondents interviewed for the online dataset was drawn from KnowledgePanel, a random sample of US households who agree to complete periodic Internet-based surveys on a variety of topics, and complete the surveys over the Internet. The 2008 NAES study has a panel component which asks individuals repeatedly throughout the 2008 election season to provide verbatim examples of what they particularly like and dislike about Barack Obama and John McCain. These questions are beneficial due to their open-ended nature as well as the fact that respondents are prodded into giving at the least a civil negative response—allowing for a comparison to those offering uncivil negative responses. Respondents entered their own answers for the verbatim questions, and thus the spelling, punctuation, and capitalization of all answers were completed by the individuals themselves, providing an unfiltered and untainted collection of respondents' views as they intended them.

² The 2009 PEJ report notes that *Lou Dobbs Tonight* was the sole CNN primetime program that qualified as pundit-themed, opinionated program.

The NAES question is suitable for evaluation due to both its open-ended nature and the fact a range of answers are possible. The interviewer has more or less engaged in a political discussion with the respondent, asking for their view on a major political event. An adequate answer does not require an uncivil response, yet some provided such nonetheless.

Furthermore, using panel data is advantageous in that, to an extent, an argument can be made for causality over correlation (Finkel 1995). As I wished to test if use of incivility in language changes when exposure to uncivil media changes, the panel data allowed me to look at individuals whose exposure changed between waves. The NAES question, defining regular use of media as occurring within the last month, provides a measure of reported media exposure immediately preceding each wave. Thus, what can be measured is the effect the *change* in media exposure between waves 4 and 5 had on use of uncivil language. While cross-sectional analyses provide estimates of the “changes” in an independent variable on “changes” in the dependent variable based exclusively on interunit variations at a single point in time, panel data analysis allows for direct detection of the determining factors of individual-level variation (Finkel 1995, 5).

The NAES survey asked panel respondents who claimed to have heard about the presidential campaign from television news or talk programs (which was around 90% of sample) which programs they watch regularly, defined as once a month. This measure is non-specific enough to avoid some of the problems generally attributed to self-reports of media use (Prior 2010, Price and Zaller 1993); while using more ambiguous questioning means less specific answers, respondents cannot greatly inflate media exposure as is typically done in self-reports. Respondents are constrained to reporting simply what they watch—and while this may mean significant more exposure for some than it does for others, it is consistent with my hypothesis

that any recent exposure is enough to have an effect. If exposure to uncivil media everyday has more of an effect than exposure once a week, then conflating all those exposed into a single “exposed” category provides a conservative estimate of the effect, given that any exposure has *some* effect. The NAES list of media is nearly comprehensive of the national programming on television on 2008 likely to feature some analysis of the 2008 election. The list also asks about talk radio exposure to nearly every major (and not so major) conservative talk radio program.

While there were five waves in all, only waves 2, 4 and 5 asked respondents about their typical media exposure. I focused on waves 4 and 5, to ensure respondents were familiar with both candidates, as the number of respondents aware of both candidates in Wave 2 was comparatively low. Wave 4 took place throughout the 2008 General Election season, with interviews conducted from August 29th through November 4th. Wave 5 took place during immediate post-election period, from November 5 through January 31.

Respondents’ interviews were spaced in thirds, to thus let time pass between wave interviews; a respondent interviewed during the first third of Wave 1, for example, was re-interviewed during the first third of all subsequent waves. Thus, at least a month passed between respondents wave 4 and wave 5 interviews.

While there were over 19,000 respondents in the complete NAES panel sample, the tediousness involved in reading through and coding the verbatim responses lead me to only use the first 1,500 in each wave, for a total of 3,000 observations. Because I only used two waves, only respondents who were surveyed in both were included, thus making a balanced panel.

Measuring Incivility

Among the studies that have considered the effects of incivility in campaign advertising on the electorate, “civil negative” campaigning is differentiated from “uncivil negative” campaigning (Brooks and Geer 2007; Fridkin and Kenney 2008) but methods of operationalizing such have been a matter of debate. Fridkin and Kenney (2006) critique the operationalization of mudslinging by Jackson and Sides (2005), arguing some topics such as references to the Washington establishment and seeming out of touch with voters qualify as legitimate negativity, as long as they are presented in an otherwise civil manner. Sigelman and Park (2007), critiquing the subjective element involved in coders judging a statement as civil or uncivil (specifically the work of Geer and Brooks 2007), use a computer program that functions as a dimensional scoring system to determine whether presidential campaign ads cross the line into incivility by rating the words in ads on how “unpleasant” and “nasty” they are.

The method of relying on a computer program to code incivility is considerably limited as it cannot, by Sigelman and Park’s own admission, take context into consideration. Because the program identifies words deemed “unpleasant” but not negation, a claim such as, “I do not think the candidate has a dishonest bone in her body,” would be deemed uncivil, due to the word dishonest being present, despite the fact that the claim was meant to be flattering. Given my wish to evaluate the opinions of individuals, which are likely to include content far more heterogeneous and dissimilar than campaign ads, accounting for context is all the more important. However, Sigelman and Park are right to point out that the “I know it when I see it” approach is not a rigorous enough test of civility.

Fortunately, studies on incivility provide some theoretical directions for how to identify uncivil discourse by describing specific elements that characterize it. Sobieraj and Berry (2010)

provide a list of thirteen distinct ways civility can be breached in mediated political discourse.³ Brooks and Geer (2007) operationalize incivility by adding pointed insults to civil-negative opponent-focused messages, including “dishonest,” “heartless,” and “cowardly.” Mutz and Reeves similarly operationalize incivility through the addition of gratuitous asides to otherwise civil exchanges.

Both of the descriptions provided by Sobieraj and Berry (2010) and Mutz and Reeves (2005) include elements that describe visual examples of incivility (i.e., eye-rolling, raised voices, violent waving of the hands, etc.). However, my concern in this study is only with use of uncivil language and emotional displays that are made through text, which is increasingly relevant in the world of new media and social networking. Thus, it is necessary to develop an index to gauge incivility that specifically applies to language. Utilizing the definitions and dimensions of incivility that apply to language developed in the studies described above, I have developed a incivility index to follow (and in fact constrain) when coding statements, which can be seen in full in Table 1.

[Table 1 About Here]

Following Brooks and Geer (2007), I contend that in much of what is argued in political discourse, common civil claims can be identified. That is, within nearly every uncivil claim, exists a civil, central message; what differentiates civil discourse from uncivil discourse is the extent to which certain ideas are stressed or radicalized, and the use of superfluous adverbs and adjectives with the sole purpose of insulting, are added into these claims. Simply put: it’s not *what* people say but *how* they say it which distinguishes between civility and incivility (Mutz

³ The thirteen elements include insulting language, name calling, emotional display, emotional language, verbal fighting/sparring, character assassination, misrepresentative exaggeration, mockery, conflagration, ideologically extremizing language, slippery slope, belittling, and obscene language.

and Reeves 2005; Brooks and Geer 2007). As defined above, uncivil discourse is deliberately disrespectful and presented in a hyperbolic nature. Thus, uncivil claims are based on legitimate, civil negative claims that cross the line due to the addition of insulting, often emotional language and presentation. An exception is conspiracy theories (Dimension 4 in my index), which paint an individual or candidate in a negative light without any civil negative basis for such a claim; while conspiracy theories have not been included in measures used by other incivility studies, Sobieraj and Berry (2010) note, retrospectively, that they should be considered examples of incivility.

There are four dimensions in which the line can be crossed from civil to uncivil, all of which are based on civil negative claims, with the exception of Dimension 4. Dimension 1, includes claims that feature name calling, mockery, and character assassinations; to determine what qualified as such, I looked for additional superfluous adverbs and adjectives which add no new information, but are purposefully insulting, belittling, and condescending. Dimension 2 includes claims that spin and exaggerate in a misrepresentative fashion the candidates' behavior and views; I looked for use of much more extreme, inflammatory words or phrases which made the candidates seem more radical, immoral, or corrupt but did not alter the central claim. Dimension 3 includes claims that featured emotional language and exaggeration; for this dimension I looked for language that suggested the candidates or their affiliations should be feared or are responsible for sadness. This dimension also includes thoughts that are purposefully exaggerated through upperclass letters, multiple exclamation points, and profanity. The final dimension, Dimension 4, included conspiracy theories. To qualify as a conspiracy theory, claims must include accusations of very sinister motives and actions that are baseless.

Although unreasonable, these claims are presented as factual. I looked for claims that could not be turned civil negative through adjustment.

Common claims made up the bulk of uncivil answers for each dimension. Violators of Dimension 1 tended to accuse either candidate of being a liar and deceitful, untrustworthy, and of running a dirty campaign. Insults involving his race and name (such as, “I do not like his color” and “[h]is name sounds like a terrorist name”) were directed at Obama. Common themes of the second dimension included claims that either candidate made attempts to appeal to, pander to, or become ideological and religious radicals, as well as claims that they were trying to trick or fool the electorate, or do other unsavory things to get elected. Exaggerated claims of his war views (such as, “war monger” or “he wants to start WW3”), exaggerations of his fiscal conservatism (“he does not care at all about the poor” and “he sacrifices the poor for the rich”), exaggerated claims of his perceived move to the right (“sold his soul to get elected”; “caved in to the far right extremists”; “he's sold out his standards to the extreme Right”), and exaggerated claims of his temper (“volatile” and “has a dangerous temper”) were directed at McCain.

Dimension 2 incivility directed at Obama included exaggerated claims of his fiscally liberal views (“Marxist,” “socialist,” “communist”), exaggerated claims stemming from his purported choice to not wear a flag pin and a photo of Obama without his hand on his heart during the national anthem (“unpatriotic” “disrespects America”), and exaggerated claims about his social liberalism, particularly abortion (“most pro-murder candidate in the history of USA!!!”).

Common displays of Dimension 3 incivility included capitalized letters followed by multiple exclamation points; these displays also usually featured one or more examples of profanity. Common examples of the fourth dimension of the incivility index, conspiracy theories,

included claims that McCain was a “puppet” and a “Manchurian candidate,” while Obama was accused of being a “Muslim” or having “muslim ties,” was an atheist, a racist or disliked white people, was born in a foreign country, as well as a multitude of suggestions that he has a secret, hidden insidious agenda.

If a comment violated one or more of the dimensions it was deemed uncivil. In order to make the process as objective as possible, only comments that clearly and unambiguously qualified as incivility under one or more of the dimensions’ definitions were deemed uncivil. When a comment seemed borderline uncivil, I gave the benefit of the doubt to civility, thus creating a conservative measure of incivility. This is consistent with my definition of incivility, in which uncivil claims must be deliberate and obvious.

While directly measuring the intensity or level of incivility in comments (that is, determining if some comments were more uncivil than others) proved too difficult to do in a completely objective manner, looking at how many dimensions of incivility a comment violated can provide a rough measure of intensity. A comment, for example, that includes name calling (Dimension 1) and a conspiracy theory (Dimension 4), typed in all capital letters and followed by multiple exclamation points (Dimension 3), is probably a more intensely uncivil comment than one that only includes name calling; thus, looking at how exposure to uncivil media affects the number of dimensions violated can provide an indirect measure of how exposure affects the intensity of incivility.

Methodology

Using the score system developed by Sobieraj and Berry (2010) and the PEJ content analyses, I was able to delineate between what specific examples of media (i.e., particular

television shows, and radio programs) that tend to include uncivil political discourse and those which do not. The breakdown of programs by category can be seen in Table A1 in the Appendix. The media included in the NAES questioning were divided up into eight different categories. Five types of television news programs made five of the eight categories: pundit-themed cable news, non-pundit cable news, network news, network news magazines, and Sunday Morning roundtable talk shows. When it was not clear which category a program belonged in and the 2008 PEJ report did not specifically mention the program, content analyses from other sources were utilized.⁴ Talk radio, entertainment, and entertainment-hybrid programs made up the remaining categories; I created the entertainment-hybrid due to some evidence that entertainment programs that include political content, can influence public opinion about politics, and thus should be made distinct from regular, apolitical entertainment programs (Morris 2009).

I employed two xtlogit models to determine the factors affecting the within-respondent and between-respondent variability in use of uncivil language—a model which accounts for changes in the same individuals over time elapsed between waves 4 and 5. Use of xtlogit models has been used in studies using similar panel data where the change in the independent variable has taken place between waves and the dependent variable is dichotomous (Richey 2010; Mutz 2010). The model, conventionally, is written as :

$$y_{it} = \alpha + X_{it} \mathbf{B} + \alpha_i + e_{it} \quad (1)$$

where \mathbf{B} is a matrix of parameters to be estimated. The first and second xtlogit models are the same, with exception that the second model employs a lagged version of the dependent variable

⁴ It was determined that the morning MSNBC talk show Morning Joe and the CNN program Out in the Open (anchored by Rick Sanchez) belonged in the pundit-themed cable news category by reviews of the shows content and presentation in *The New York Times* and *The New York Observer*, respectively.

from Wave 4, in the instance that the previous orientation towards incivility influences the orientation during the second wave (Finkel 1995).

I also employed a panel regression model with the “multiple measures” variable to see the effect that exposure to uncivil media had on violating multiple dimensions of incivility. The first model is a change-score model, which are appropriate when it is believed the independent variable changes between waves. It is written as:

$$Y_t - Y_{t-1} = (\beta_{0t} - \beta_{0t-1}) + \beta_1 (X_t - X_{t-1}) + (e_t - e_{t-1}) \quad (2)$$

or

$$\Delta Y = \Delta \beta_0 + \beta_1 \Delta X + \Delta e \quad (3)$$

Where the change in Y is regressed on the change in X.

As it is possible that respondents’ previous use of uncivil language influences continued use of incivility, regardless of media use, I also created a static-score model, which includes a lagged dependent variable. The model is written as:

$$Y_t = (\beta_0 + \beta_1 X_t + \beta_2 Y_{t-1}) + e_t \quad (4)$$

or

$$\Delta Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_t + (\beta_2 - 1) Y_{t-1} + e_t \quad (5)$$

Where Y_t is predicted from its earlier value Y_{t-1} , as well as the independent variables from the same time.

Additional control variables included demographics (age, education, and gender), political views (party identification and ideology) and dummy variable for whether or not the respondent “endorsed” a candidate by trying to convince someone else to vote for the candidate—this variable served as a proxy for general interest in politics and the campaign, as those ambivalent about the election are not likely to endorse candidates.

Results

I first conducted a cross-sectional analysis to see if a correlation between exposure to uncivil news existed in both waves independently and in pooled form. As can be seen in Table 2, the exposure to pundit-themed cable news had a statistically significant positive correlation with use of incivility in waves 4 and 5 as well as the pooled data. Talk radio had a statistically significant positive effect on use of incivility in wave 4 and in the pooled data, but not in wave 5. These results are consistent with my hypothesis.

[Table 2 About Here]

I then estimated the two xtlogit models. To make interpretation of the models easier, I combined the pundit-themed cable news and talk radio variables into a single, uncivil media variable (called “Pundit-Talk Exposure”).⁵ Model 1 of Table 3 shows the results of the model without a lagged dependent variable; as consistent with my hypothesis, a change to exposure in between waves 4 and 5 had statistically significant positive effect on use of incivility. The results of the second model with the lagged dependent variable are reported in Model 2 of Table 3, which show that, even with the lagged incivility variable, becoming exposed to pundit-themed cable news and talk radio programming between waves had a statistically significant positive effect on use of uncivil language.

[Table 3 About Here]

Finally, I estimated the change-score and static-score models. The change-score model results, shown in Model 1 of Table 4, again show that becoming exposed to uncivil discourse had a positive, statistically significant effect on being uncivil in multiple dimensions. Model 2 in Table 4, showing the results of the static-score model with the lagged dependent variable, also

⁵ This also makes sense at a substantive level, as many of the

strongly suggest that exposure to uncivil news is positively related to using multiple dimensions of incivility. Together, these two models suggest that being exposed to media which includes uncivil, hyperbolic content, leads to an increased intensity of use of incivility.

Conclusion

The results reported speak strongly to the effect that exposure to uncivil media has on use of incivility when the exposed are given the opportunity to provide a political opinion. As hypothesized, those who became exposed to uncivil media were more likely to use uncivil language in communicating beliefs. As established in literature on uncivil media, exposure can lessen the perceived legitimacy of opposing views (Mutz 2006, 2007). Thus, it is no surprise that those exposed to such were more likely to exhibit behavior which exemplifies disrespect in an active purposeful manner. Exposure to uncivil media legitimizes use of incivility when talking about those with opposing views, as it delegitimizes the opposing views themselves.

This study, following media and politics theory that purports that elites affect mass opinion, takes into account the role media elites have in imposing incivility into the political conversations which take place between members of the public. What it does not do, however, is to take into account the effect that interpersonal political conversations and interactions have on use of incivility. While elite influences may cause an individual to post an uncivil message on a comment board or social media site, the effect that that comment may have on other individuals' use of incivility in response cannot be determined by this study, but can and should be pursued through experimental methods.

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Tables

Table 1. Incivility Index

Dimensions of Incivility	Example Claim	Type	Example Statement
Dimension 1: “Namecalling, Mockery, and Character Assassination” Additional superfluous adverbs and adjectives which add no new information, but are purposefully insulting, belittling, and condescending	The candidate may not have been completely sincere	Civil Negative	“The candidate has not told the truth to the American people about his voting record.” ·
		Uncivil Negative	“The <u>unethical</u> and <u>deceitful</u> candidate has not told the truth to the American people about his voting record.” ·
Dimension 2: “Spin and Misrepresentative Exaggeration” Use of a much more extreme, inflammatory word or phrase which makes individual or action seem more radical, immoral, or corrupt	Candidate’s issue positions were out of sync with those of the electorate	Civil Negative	“The candidate had effective and convincing advertisements and more money to spend.”
		Uncivil Negative	“The candidate <u>manipulated the public</u> and <u>essentially bought the election.</u> ”
Dimension 3: “Emotional Language and Exaggeration” Language suggests individual or group should be feared or is responsible for sadness. Also includes thoughts that are purposefully exaggerated through upperclass letters and multiple exclamation points	Candidate’s election is somewhat worrisome	Civil Negative	“The election of the candidate has me <u>worried</u> about <u>the direction of the country</u> ”
		Uncivil Negative	“I <u>fear</u> for what will happen to this country if the candidate is elected. It will be a <u>sad</u> day for America. -and- “WE SHOULD ALL BE SCARED!!!!!!!”
Dimension 4: “Conspiracy Theory” Accusations of very sinister motives/actions/background. Although unreasonable, presented as factual	No base claim; claim made without merit	Uncivil Negative	“The candidate is a <u>Manchurian candidate</u> , controlled by foreigners bent on <u>destroying America.</u> ”

· The civil/uncivil claims are adapted from an example used by Brooks and Geer (2006); Brooks and Geer used “my opponent” where I put “the candidate.”

Table 2: Cross-Sectional Analysis on Determinants of Use of Incivility

VARIABLES	(1) Wave 4	(2) Wave 5	(3) Pooled
Pundit-themed Cable News	0.29*** (0.102)	0.34*** (0.110)	0.30*** (0.074)
Talk Radio	0.25** (0.110)	0.13 (0.120)	0.20** (0.081)
Non-pundit Cable News	0.06 (0.098)	-0.06 (0.108)	0.02 (0.072)
Entertainment/news Hybrid	-0.06 (0.094)	0.14 (0.102)	0.03 (0.069)
Sunday Morning Roundtable	-0.01 (0.100)	-0.24** (0.107)	-0.13* (0.073)
Network News	0.04 (0.100)	-0.04 (0.115)	0.01 (0.075)
Network News Magazines	-0.23** (0.098)	-0.09 (0.109)	-0.17** (0.072)
Pure Entertainment	-0.04 (0.087)	0.01 (0.095)	-0.02 (0.064)
Gender	0.07 (0.082)	0.09 (0.086)	0.08 (0.059)
Age	-0.00 (0.003)	-0.00 (0.003)	-0.00 (0.002)
Education	0.10*** (0.024)	0.08*** (0.026)	0.09*** (0.018)
Party Identification	-0.03 (0.024)	-0.07** (0.026)	-0.05*** (0.017)
Ideology	-0.02 (0.035)	0.02 (0.038)	-0.00 (0.025)
Endorsement	0.60*** (0.081)	0.64*** (0.088)	0.60*** (0.059)
Constant	-1.11*** (0.317)	-1.31*** (0.339)	-1.18*** (0.230)
Observations	1,300	1,295	2,595
Pseudo R-squared	0.0900	0.1045	0.0904

Note: Unstandardized coefficients from logit regression models reported, with standard errors in parentheses.

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.10

Table 3. Panel Analysis of the Effect of Change in Media Exposure on Use of Incivility

VARIABLES	(1) Model	(2) Model
Pundit-Talk Exposure	0.860*** (0.166)	0.801*** (0.193)
Non-pundit Cable News	0.0252 (0.159)	-0.146 (0.185)
Entertainment/news Hybrid	0.0375 (0.161)	0.308 (0.189)
Sunday Morning Roundtable	-0.200 (0.170)	-0.276 (0.196)
Network News	0.000134 (0.174)	0.0501 (0.205)
Network News Magazines	-0.384* (0.169)	-0.328 (0.197)
Pure Entertainment	-0.0205 (0.151)	0.0279 (0.173)
Gender	0.180 (0.146)	0.191 (0.163)
Age	-0.00732 (0.00538)	-0.00843 (0.00602)
Education	0.209*** (0.0447)	0.183*** (0.0498)
Party Identification	-0.105* (0.0411)	-0.134** (0.0470)
Ideology	0.00379 (0.0605)	0.0535 (0.0701)
Endorsement	1.211*** (0.140)	1.327*** (0.174)
Lagged Incivility		6.816*** (0.573)
Constant	-2.723*** (0.576)	-3.576*** (0.674)
Lnsig2u	0.680*** (0.206)	0.0780 (0.493)
Wald Chi ²	156.22	168.88
Observations	2,595	2,595
Number of Individuals	1,319	1,319

Note: Unstandardized coefficients from xtlogit regression models reported, with standard errors in parentheses.

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Table 4. Panel Analysis of the Effect of Change in Media Exposure on Use of More than One Dimension of Incivility

VARIABLES	(1) Model	(2) Model
Pundit-Talk Exposure	0.123*** (0.0274)	0.0714*** (0.0214)
Non-pundit Cable News	0.0275 (0.0270)	0.0107 (0.0210)
Entertainment/news Hybrid	-0.00645 (0.0266)	0.0203 (0.0206)
Sunday Morning Roundtable	-0.0324 (0.0287)	-0.0318 (0.0222)
Network News	-0.0230 (0.0291)	-0.0136 (0.0227)
Network News Magazines	-0.0458 (0.0284)	-0.0198 (0.0221)
Pure Entertainment	-0.0128 (0.0254)	-0.00983 (0.0195)
Gender	0.0216 (0.0249)	0.0148 (0.0185)
Age	-0.00100 (0.000920)	-0.000871 (0.000687)
Education	0.0336*** (0.00769)	0.0178** (0.00573)
Party Identification	-0.0163* (0.00686)	-0.0129* (0.00521)
Ideology	0.0141 (0.0102)	0.0152 (0.00783)
Endorsement	0.210*** (0.0236)	0.154*** (0.0184)
Lagged Incivility		0.996*** (0.0253)
Constant	0.0871 (0.0944)	0.0263 (0.0713)
Observations	2,595	2,595
Number of Individuals	1,319	1,319

Note: Unstandardized coefficients from xtreg regression models reported, with standard errors in parentheses.

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Appendix.

Table A1. Media Programs by Category

Pundit-Themed Cable News	Network	Talk Radio	
The Rachel Maddow Show	MSNBC	The Rush Limbaugh Show	
The O'Reilly Factor	FNC	The Sean Hannity Show	
Hannity and Colmes	FNC	Michael Savage, The Savage Nation	
Hannity's America	FNC	The Glenn Beck Program	
Hardball with Chris Matthews	MSNBC	Bill O'Reilly, Radio Factor	
Morning Joe	MSNBC	Dr. Laura Schlessinger	
Out in the Open (Rick Sanchez)	CNN	Laura Ingraham	
Special Report with Brit Hume	FNC	The Neal Boortz Show	
Lou Dobbs	CNN	The Mike Gallagher Show	
Geraldo at Large	FNC	The Jim Bohannon Show	
Countdown with Keith Olbermann	MSNBC	The Clark Howard Show	
Your World with Neil Cavuto	FNC	The Mark Levin Show	
Fox and Friends	FNC	Bill Bennett's Morning in America	
		The Jerry Doyle Show	
Non-Pundit Cable News	Network	Sunday Morning Roundtable	Network
Campbell Brown's Election Center	CNN	Face the Nation	CBS
CNN Headline News / Newsroom	CNN	Meet the Press	NBC
America's Election Headquarters	FNC	This Week with George Stephanopoulos	ABC
Late Edition with Wolf Blitzer	CNN	McLaughlin Group	Syndic.
MSNBC Live	MSNBC		
Studio B with Shepard Smith	FNC	Network News	Network
The Fox Report with Shepard Smith	FNC	ABC World News	ABC
Anderson Cooper 360	CNN	NBC Nightly News	NBC
Larry King Live	CNN	The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer	PBS
Reliable Sources	CNN	CBS Evening News	CBS
Beltway Boys	FNC	CBS Morning News	CBS
Larry King Live	CNN	America This Morning	ABC
		CBS Sunday Morning	CBS
Pure Entertainment	Network	Network News Magazine	Network
CSI: Miami	CBS	ABC News Nightline	ABC
The Simpsons	FOX	60 Minutes	CBS
Ellen DeGeneres Show	Syndic.	Frontline	PBS
Brothers and Sisters	ABC	20/20	ABC
Oprah	Syndic.	Dateline NBC	NBC
Law and Order	NBC		
Big Love	HBO		
Scrubs	NBC		
Family Guy	FOX		

Entertainment-News Hybrid	Network
The Early Show	CBS
The Today Show	NBC
Good Morning America	ABC
The Tonight Show with Jay Leno	NBC
The Daily Show with Jon Stewart	COM
The Late Show with David Letterman	CBS
The View	ABC
The Colbert Report	COM

Table A2. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Description	Scale	Wave 1	Wave 2	Pooled
Incivility	Provide an uncivil answer	0=Civil 1=Uncivil	0.258 (0.438)	0.192 (0.394)	0.226 (0.418)
Ideology	R's ideological orientation on 5-point scale	1=Very liberal 7=Very conservative	4.205 (1.431)	4.17 (1.458)	4.189 (1.444)
Age	R's age; continuous variable	Range: 18-94	57.493 (14.387)	57.493 (14.387)	57.493 (14.384)
Education	R's highest educational attainment on 9-point scale	1=Grade 8 or lower 9=Graduate or professional degree	4.260 (1.602)	4.260 (1.602)	4.260 (1.601)
Endorsed Candidate	R tried to convince others to vote for a candidate	1=Endorsed 0=Did not Endorse a Candidate	0.396 (0.489)	0.424 (0.494)	0.410 (0.492)
Gender	R's gender; dummy variable	2=Female 1=Male	1.464 (0.499)	1.464 (0.499)	1.464 (0.499)
Party Identification	R's partisan orientation; 7-point scale	1=Strong Republican 7=Strong Democrat	4.319 (2.181)	4.337 (2.159)	4.328 (2.170)

Talk Radio	Dummy of exposure to network news magazines	0=No Exposure 1=Exposure	0.170 (0.376)	0.157 (0.364)	0.163 (0.370)
Entertainment-News Hybrid	Dummy of exposure to network news magazines	0=No Exposure 1=Exposure	0.517 (0.500)	0.551 (0.498)	0.534 (0.499)
Network News Magazines	Dummy of exposure to network news magazines	0=No Exposure 1=Exposure	0.528 (0.499)	0.562 (0.496)	0.545 (0.498)
Non-pundit Cable News	Dummy of exposure to non-pundit cable news	0=No Exposure 1=Exposure	0.406 (0.491)	0.363 (0.481)	0.385 (0.487)
Network News	Dummy of exposure to network news	0=No Exposure 1=Exposure	0.578 (0.494)	0.614 (0.487)	0.596 (0.491)
Sunday Morning Roundtable	Dummy of exposure to Sunday Morning Roundtable shows	0=No Exposure 1=Exposure	0.285 (0.451)	0.308 (0.462)	0.296 (0.457)
Pundit-themed Cable News	Dummy of exposure to pundit-themed cable news	0=No Exposure 1=Exposure	0.360 (0.480)	0.363 (0.481)	0.361 (0.481)
Pundit-Talk Exposure	Dummy of exposure to pundit-themed cable news and/or talk radio	0=No Exposure 1=Exposure	0.426 (0.495)	0.418 (0.493)	0.422 (.494)
Pure Entertainment	Dummy of exposure to pure entertainment	0=No Exposure 1=Exposure	0.581 (0.494)	0.618 (0.486)	0.600 (0.490)
Lagged Incivility	Lagged variable of incivility from Wave 4	0=Civil 1=Uncivil			0.126 (0.332)

Note: Cells are means, standard deviations in parentheses.