

Following the News? Reception of Uncivil Partisan Media and the Use of Incivility in Political Expression

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Partisan, pundit-based media gets blamed for making political discourse more uncivil, and studies on incivility in mediated discourse have found that uncivil political media can induce negative reactions in audiences. However, how use of uncivil media affects the way individuals express their political views has yet to receive substantial scholarly attention. I hypothesize that tuning in to uncivil political media leads to an increased propensity to use incivility in textual political expression. I develop an index to identify incivility in political expressions, and test my hypothesis using panel data analysis and an open-ended survey item in the 2008 National Annenberg Election Survey. I find that, consistent with my hypothesis, use of uncivil media—specifically pundit cable news and political talk radio—leads to an increased use of incivility when expressing text-based political opinions. Furthermore, this only occurs with reception of like-minded uncivil political media. I note the implications this has for online political discourse and effective deliberation.

Keywords incivility, partisan media, political discourse, online discourse, social media

Incivility in political discourse and its purported consequences has become a *bête noire* for American politicians, pundits, and social commentators alike (Herbst, 2010). An “incivility crisis” is thought to extend beyond the discourse on Capitol Hill to the political discussions among the general public. Much of the blame for uncivil discourse is put on polarizing, ideologically tinged political media (Jamieson & Hardy, 2012). My purpose in this article is to test this claim, and determine whether the use of uncivil political television and talk radio programs increases the propensity to use incivility among those who tune in.

The deleterious effects of uncivil political discourse among elites are well-known (Maisel, 2012; Uslaner, 1993). But non-elites utilizing incivility in their political discussions is problematic, too. For one, incivility restricts deliberation (Kingwell, 1995). When political discourse is civil, areas of agreement, disagreement, and the collective understanding of issues may be clarified (Jamieson & Hardy, 2012), and benefits of exposure to oppositional views are maximized (Mutz, 2006). As the quality of public policy is dependent on the quality of collective deliberation (Page & Shapiro, 1992, p. 363), use

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of incivility among the general public can reduce the quality of policy output. Furthermore, while the public may take cues from elites (Zaller, 1992), less willingness among non-elites (especially active partisans) to accept compromise with opposing arguments, and even regard them as legitimate, can reinforce these sentiments among elites (or bind them to them) (Saunders & Abramowitz, 2004). And when the voting public clamors for red meat, elites' efforts to please constituents can derail their negotiations with each other, and can lead to greater polarization on the issues at hand.¹

In this article, I focus on text-based political communication, as the interactive elements of "Web 2.0" potentially make the reception to uncivil political messages more significant. With online communication, people face limited social cues and a sense that there are few repercussions for their behavior, which encourages more uncivil behavior than in face-to-face interactions (Borah, 2013; Papacharissi, 2004). Moreover, the Web enables interaction with masses of complete strangers from one's own living room—including commenting on articles and social network sites. If uncivil political discourse does induce anti-deliberative behavior in the public (Wolf, Strachan, & Shea, 2012), including an increased propensity to utilize incivility, then the countless Web-based interactions that include uncivil political claims may reinforce and expand polarization. In short, while exposure to uncivil media may increase uncivil political talk generally, it is online expressions that are likely to be both particularly *affected* and *effective*.

The question as to whether use of uncivil news leads individuals to increase the presence of caustic language in their own digital political expressions is therefore an important one. As research in media and politics demonstrates, exposure to uncivil mediated political discourse can induce a number of negative political emotions and behaviors. However, a direct connection between use of uncivil political media and use of incivility when discussing politics has not been established. I develop an incivility "index" to gauge whether or not respondents included elements of incivility in open-ended panel survey items asking them to evaluate the 2008 presidential candidates. I find that a change in use of uncivil media, specifically pundit-themed cable news and talk radio programming, has a positive effect on the use of incivility, but only when individuals use "like-minded" uncivil media.

Emotion and Uncivil Political Media

Media elites are often (anecdotally) identified as perpetrators of the supposed decline in civil discourse—and not without good reason. Scholars have argued that heightened 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 pontificate in ways they could not (or would not) were it necessary to maintain a broader, heterogeneous audience (Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Prior, 2007; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). The result is a partisan "new media" dominated by bias, emotionality, ridicule, and ad hominem attacks (Jamieson & Hardy, 2012).

In a move away from the "minimal effects" theories that dominated the early years of mass media research, there has been a reinvigorated debate over media effects (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Mutz & Young, 2011; Prior, 2013). While researchers have taken different positions regarding whether attitude-discrepant media is selectively avoided (i.e., Garrett, Carnahan, & Lynch, 2013; Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011; Sunstein, 2009), there is evidence that the reception of attitude-consistent media can reinforce and intensify prior attitudes (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Jamieson & Cappella, 2009; Stroud, 2008, 2010, 2011), even among those with a heterogeneous news diet (Garrett et al., 2013). Among the effects

of (self-exposed) like-minded media use are reduced regard for out-groups and the legitimacy of their views (Barker, 2002; Jamieson & Cappella, 2009; Stroud, 2010, 2011). To the extent that certain messages, knowledge, and affect can be relayed to an audience, it follows that those who tune into uncivil partisan media will adopt some of the uncivil elements and tactics of the uncivil media. In the following, I lay out two ways in which use of uncivil partisan media might induce the use of incivility in political expressions.

Use of Uncivil Political Media

With political information, appeals to emotion can affect the political behavior of those exposed, and the manner in which they process political information (Brader, 2006; MacKuen et al., 2010; Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000). When commentators target certain individuals, groups, or ideas, this antipathy can be relayed to the audience (Barker, 2002). For at least the period immediately following reception of uncivil media, individuals have been found to have negative, visceral reactions towards political figures, institutions, and government (Forgette & Morris, 2006; Fridkin & Kenney, 2008; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1998; Mutz & Reeves, 2005).

Incivility can create disdain for opposing views, with more intense incivility correlated with views that the opposing side has insidious motives (Mutz, 2007). Herbst (2010) argues that incivility is used as a weapon of sorts, to rile audiences up in anger concerning the “other side” by reminding followers how “bad” the other side is; negative words and associations (e.g., “unethical”) are used strategically to mobilize like-minded individuals because they are cues the audience understands and is averse to. By connecting these concepts to opponents, elites create disdain for their targets, and urge audiences to “join in” on the targeting of opposition views and individuals in an uncivil fashion. Uncivil television programs (Mutz, 2007) and political talk radio (Owen, 1997) are particularly potent in inducing intensified, emotionally strident opinions in audiences. Talk radio commentators such as Rush Limbaugh have been implicated in attaching negative emotion to their targets by using ridicule, “caustic and primal” language, and by radicalizing their targets’ positions (Barker, 2002; Jamieson & Cappella, 2009). Pundit-dominated cable news and talk radio stand out among other forms of media when it comes to the use (and extremity) of incivility (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011).

There is also the possibility that for some, negative political emotions are preexisting, and use of uncivil political media does not generate more disdain for an out-group than that which already exists. However, the media, through priming, framing, and agenda-setting, can legitimize and promote certain political opinions without altering preexisting attitudes (Iyengar & Kinder, 2010). This is especially true of like-minded partisan media (Stroud, 2011). If the trusted like-minded others promote a certain idea (e.g., “McCain/Obama is a dangerous extremist”), then repetition of this message must be acceptable or even necessary. Furthermore, recent exposure to an uncivil political message will increase the odds that it is reused (Zaller, 1992, p. 48), and partisan “echo chambers” are particularly effective in relaying messages to audiences for reuse (Jamieson & Cappella, 2009). Thus, even if it is partisan, politically interested people with preexisting disdain for the “other side” who tune in to uncivil partisan programming, use of such can provide particular phrases and tactics to utilize and will sanction the use of incivility more generally.

In sum, there is strong reason to believe that use of uncivil political media will affect the way audience members express political views, whether use of uncivil political media generates genuine negative emotions in individuals,² spurring them to react with incivility, or individuals are merely receiving “instruction” from a like-minded media elite, along with

uncivil material to mimic—or some combination of both. Distinguishing between these processes—emotional arousal versus mimicry—is beyond the scope of this study, but in each case, audiences are being endowed with something from use of uncivil media.

Hypotheses

I hypothesize that use of uncivil political media leads to an increased propensity to use and exhibit incivility when expressing text-based political views. As previous studies have shown that behavioral and psychological responses to uncivil media can be induced immediately following use, I add to this hypothesis that a short-term change in the use of uncivil media will cause an increase in the propensity to use uncivil language; likewise, ceasing to use uncivil media use will decrease this propensity.

H1: Use of uncivil political media leads to an increased propensity to use and exhibit incivility when offering political opinions.

There is the possibility that exposure to uncivil discordant views induces offended individuals to “retaliate” against attacks on their side (Papacharissi, 2004). However, selective exposure may limit the extent to which this likely occurs.³ In all likelihood, if a person uses uncivil media, it will be uncivil media that does not conflict with their preexisting political viewpoints and is not cognitively displeasing to hear (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009).⁴ An alternative hypothesis is that tuning into like-minded political programming generates incivility merely by reinforcing preexisting views, and whether or not the program includes incivility does not matter. If partisan bias extends beyond the “opinion” shows to standard news programs on television—and there is evidence it does (Morris & Francia, 2010; but see Prior, 2013)—and, more importantly, audiences voluntarily tune into these programs because they perceive them to reflect their own views—which they appear to do (Dilliplane, 2011; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009)—then a comparison between viewership of “uncivil” and “civil” partisan news is possible. I expect that only reception of like-minded media featuring incivility will affect the use of incivility.

H2: Use of uncivil like-minded political media will induce the use of incivility when offering political opinions, but use of like-minded political media lacking uncivil elements or uncivil disagreeable media will not induce the use of incivility.

However, audiences tend to be consistent in their viewership of political media (Dilliplane, Goldman, & Mutz, 2013). Use of news media (or the lack thereof) is habitual. When changes in media use do occur, what might account for it? Two scenarios seem likely. One is that a number of idiosyncratic and non-systematic reasons, such as gaining or losing access to cable television, 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 (e.g., elections), affect whether viewers are exposed to uncivil political media. With only a handful of television and radio news options available at any time, individuals can choose the ideological orientation of a program, but they have far less choice when it comes to the tone and structural orientation of the programming—especially compared with the Internet (Prior, 2007). Under this scenario, viewers might simply be seeking partisan news (or news in general), and the effect of media use on the propensity to utilize incivility is likely to be significant.

Another possibility is that a psychological jolt (or letdown) increases (or reduces) the motivation to express political opinions *and* tune in to (or tune out) uncivil political media. In this case, when people are in a certain mood, they are more likely to self-expose themselves to uncivil political media and use incivility when expressing views, but reception of uncivil messages should still reinforce and strengthen the impetus and ability to use incivility. In both cases, the propensity to utilize incivility should increase with use of uncivil media.

Defining and Measuring Incivility

What counts as incivility in politics is said to be in the eye of the beholder (Herbst, 2010). However, theoretical directions to identifying incivility have begun to emerge over time. A number of studies in the campaign advertising and media and politics literatures have considered the effects of incivility on the electorate, differentiating “civil negative” claims from “uncivil negative” claims (Brooks & Geer, 2007; Fridkin & Kenney, 2008), and other studies describe specific elements that characterize political incivility (Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). Collectively, three common themes emerge from these evaluations and definitions of incivility: Uncivil claims must be disrespectful towards their target, must do so in a purposeful, confrontational manner, and tend to be presented in a hyperbolic nature. An extended discussion of these themes is included in online Appendix 1.

Based on these methods of operationalizing incivility, I have developed an index to follow (and constrain) when coding statements for incivility, which can be seen in full in Table 1. The index lays out four criteria by which a comment can qualify as uncivil: name-calling, mockery, and character assassination; spin and misrepresentative exaggeration; histrionics; and conspiracy theories. As my concern in this study is only with the display of incivility through text, increasingly relevant in the world of social media, the index is meant to gauge incivility that specifically applies to digital communication. A description of the index and how to identify occurrences of incivility in accordance with each of the criteria is included in online Appendix 1.

Data

To test my hypotheses, I used data from the 2008 National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) online data set.⁵ The sample of respondents interviewed for the online data set was drawn from KnowledgePanel, a random sample of U.S. households who agree to complete periodic Internet-based surveys on a variety of topics. The 2008 NAES study has a panel component that asked individuals repeatedly throughout the 2008 election season to provide verbatim examples of what they particularly like and dislike about Barack Obama and John McCain.⁶ These questions are beneficial due to their open-ended nature; as respondents entered in their own answers, the spelling, punctuation, and capitalization of all answers were completed by the individuals themselves, providing an unfiltered and untainted collection of respondents’ responses as they intended them. Furthermore, the anonymity that the online survey environment provides mirrors the anonymity (or false sense of such) that pervades general online communication (Borah, 2013; Derks, Fischer, & Bos, 2008; Papacharissi, 2004). It is fitting, therefore, to make inferences about everyday online political discourse based upon analyses of the panel data.

Table 1
Incivility index

Criteria of incivility ^a	Example claim	Type	Example statement
Criterion 1: "Namecalling, mockery, and character assassination" (additional superfluous adverbs and adjectives that 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." ^b
Criterion 2: "Spin and misrepresentative exaggeration" (use of a much more extreme, inflammatory word or phrase that makes individual or action seem more radical, immoral, or corrupt)	Candidate's issue positions were out of sync with those of the electorate	Uncivil negative	"The <i>unethical</i> and <i>deceitful</i> candidate has not told the truth to the American people about his voting record." ^a
Criterion 3: "Histrionics" (language suggests individual or group should be feared or is responsible for sadness; also includes thoughts that are purposefully exaggerated through uppercase letters, multiple exclamation points, and obscenity)	Candidate's election is somewhat worrisome	Civil negative	"The candidate had effective and convincing advertisements and more money to spend." "The candidate <i>manipulated the public</i> and <i>essentially bought the election</i> ."
Criterion 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 election of the candidate has me <i>worried</i> about <i>the direction of the country</i> ." "I <i>fear</i> for what will happen to this country if the candidate is elected. It will be a <i>sad</i> day for America." —and— "WE SHOULD ALL BE SCARED!!!!!" "The candidate is a <i>Manchurian candidate</i> , controlled by foreigners bent on <i>destroying America</i> ."

^a Phrasing of criterion elements adapted from Brooks and Geer (2007), Mutz and Reeves (2005), and Sobieraj and Berry (2011).

^bThe civil/uncivil claims are adapted from an example used by Brooks and Geer (2006); Brooks and Geer used "my opponent" where I used "the candidate."

The NAES question is suitable due to both its open-ended nature and the fact that a range of answers is possible. An adequate answer does not require an uncivil response, yet some provided one nonetheless. Furthermore, using panel data is advantageous in that an argument can be made for causality over correlation (Allison, 2009; Finkel, 1995). As I wished to determine if use of incivility in language changed when use of uncivil media changed, the panel data allowed me to look at individuals whose use changed between waves. The NAES question, defining regular use of media as occurring within the last month, provides a measure of reported media use immediately preceding each wave. Thus, what can be measured is the effect of the *change* in media use between waves. While cross-sectional analyses provide estimates of the “changes” in an independent variable on “changes” in the dependent variable based exclusively on inter-unit variations at a single point in time, panel data analysis allows for direct detection of the determining factors of individual-level variation (Allison, 2009; Finkel, 1995, p. 5).

The NAES asked panel respondents who claimed to have heard about the presidential campaign from television news or radio programs (which was around 90% of sample) which specific programs they watched in the last month. This measure has been found to be very reliable by Dilliplane et al. (2013), and generally avoids many of the issues that plague self-reports of media use.⁷ Respondents are constrained to reporting simply what they have recently watched—and while this may mean significantly more viewing for some than it does for others, it is consistent with my hypothesis that any recent media use is enough to have an effect. If use of uncivil media every day has more of an effect than use once a week, then conflating all of the exposed into a single category provides a conservative estimate of the effect, given that any use has *some* effect. The NAES list of media is nearly comprehensive of national television programming in 2008 likely to feature some analysis of the election, and also asks about tuning in to close to all nationally broadcast conservative talk radio programs.

While there were five waves in all, only waves 2, 4, and 5 asked respondents about their typical media use. Wave 2 took place from January 1, 2008, to March 31, 2008, and wave 4 took place throughout the 2008 general election season, with interviews conducted from August 29 through November 4. Wave 5 took place during the immediate post-election period, from November 5 through January 31. Respondents’ interviews were spaced in thirds, in order to let time pass between wave interviews; a respondent interviewed during the first third of wave 1, for example, was reinterviewed during the first third of all subsequent waves. Thus, at least a month passed between respondents’ wave 2, wave 4, and wave 5 interviews.

Methodology

To make reading through and coding the verbatim responses a feasible task, I randomly selected 15% of these observations to use, ultimately resulting in 2,514 units included in the analysis, and a total of 6,387 verbatim answers.⁸ To control for experimenter bias, two research assistants and I independently evaluated the open-ended responses.⁹ Unlike previous studies of political incivility that have gauged its presence in text and speech, this study is not evaluating campaign materials, candidates’ speeches, or media coverage—which are all more or less the polished work of professionals and generally rather homogeneous in scope and topic. Rather, the raw, unfiltered quality of the textual responses that make the data so compelling also includes misspellings, poor grammar, limited punctuation, and incomplete thoughts. Use of computer programs that cannot take context into consideration is therefore impractical. Human coders can take context into account, however, and

calculations of intercoder reliability of our coding indicate substantial agreement concerning what comments qualified as uncivil: The percentage agreement between all three coders was 91%, and a calculation of Krippendorff's alpha, which is a conservative estimate of intercoder reliability beyond that which can be ascribed to mere chance, produces a coefficient of 0.72. This is acceptable, especially considering the heterogeneous and crude nature of the responses (Krippendorff, 2004).

If a comment violated one or more of the criteria, 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 criteria definitions were deemed uncivil. When a comment seemed borderline uncivil, the benefit of the doubt was given to civility, thus creating a conservative measure of incivility. A description of common uncivil claims by criterion can be found in Appendix 1. Overall, about 20.7% of the responses evaluated qualified as uncivil. Having one wave in the analysis take place early in the election year during primary season, a second during the heart of campaign season, and the final after the election raises the question of whether there are differences in pre- and post-election tendencies to be uncivil; that is, people might be generally less attentive to the election earlier in the year, and partisans from both sides might begin the "healing process" after the long and bitter campaign following the election. The percentage of respondents who used incivility in each wave suggests this is the case. In wave 2, about 13% of respondents used incivility in their answers. The percentage nearly doubled to 25% in wave 4 before dropping to 22% in wave 5.

It is also possible the levels of incivility in political media are not constant throughout the election year. Yet, it is likely that some amount of incivility is constant in certain types of media all of the time, and that individuals exposed to it will react to the incivility with some consistency. Still, while the "uncivil media" effect is constant, it may be nonlinear, and it would then be unlikely that media elites will produce the same amount and type of uncivil political talk throughout the panel study period, or that those exposed will react to it the same throughout these periods. I cannot rule this out. It is necessary, then, to control for campaign season effects.

Use of Uncivil Political Media in 2008

As the emotionality and opinion-oriented formats of pundit cable news and talk radio have been found to be particularly effective in inducing reactions in audiences, it is appropriate to make distinctions between formats. To make distinctions between the various television programs featured in the NAES survey, I utilize two studies that have previously dichotomized the programs into political and non-political categories (Dilliplane et al., 2013) and grouped the programs by partisanship (Dilliplane, 2011). An extended explanation of the categories is included in online Appendix 2, and the programs by category can be seen in Table A3 in online Appendix 5. To determine whether each type of political programming qualified as uncivil media, I utilized two measures. A full explanation of both measures is included in Appendix 2, but I will overview them here. The purpose of these measures was to simply divide the political media into civil and uncivil groupings, not to compare levels of incivility between uncivil programs; use of the scores as a continuous explanatory variable is not an option. That is, the measures were meant to divide up political programming by looking for elements likely to be prevalent in uncivil political media, but not gauge the overall level of incivility in each program.

The first measure involved searching via Lexis Nexis for reports in major world publications of particular types of uncivil incidents occurring on the various programs, which

were examples of the modes of incivility found to be most common in political television (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). By tabulating the number of unique uncivil events reported throughout the panel survey period and dividing the total by the amount of hours of a program's estimated airtime, a sense of the prevalence of incivility on each program can be made. Eight programs that had scores above average were marked as uncivil under this measure.

There are some problems with relying on "hearsay" to determine if a program is typically uncivil. For one, if a program is usually uncivil, it might not be newsworthy if something uncivil occurs, but it would be if the same event occurred on a typically civil program. Furthermore, this measure does not help to determine if the levels of incivility on programs differed between periods during the election year. Thus, I used a second measure to evaluate the level of incivility in the actual content of the programs during each wave. Using Lexis Nexis, I searched the transcripts of the various programs for some common examples of incivility that fell under criteria of the incivility index. Although complete transcripts were not available for some of the programs, this measure allows me to evaluate the accuracy of the "hearsay" measure and determine if incivility in political media varied over the course of the election year. For each program, I tabulated the occurrences of incivility and divided them by the average amount of words in each transcript per hour of programming, to get a standard score of the amount of incivility per hour. Programs with above-average scores across the waves were marked as uncivil. The six programs marked as uncivil under this measure were the same six (minus two shows for which transcripts were unavailable) that were marked as uncivil under the hearsay measure. This consistency gives me confidence in the accuracy of the measures.

The averages across programs for each wave indicate that there were differences in the amount of incivility on these programs between waves, with wave 4, taking place during the heart of campaign season, featuring the highest average. Wave 2, which took place during the primaries, had a slightly lower average, and wave 5, which took place in the period following election day through January 2009, averaged the lowest level of incivility. Nonetheless, even during the periods in which waves 2 and 5 took place, the programs marked as uncivil were not devoid of incivility, and were consistently the top six "perpetrators" within each period. Thus, use of the programs during each period likely had the hypothesized effect. A change from no use in wave 4 to use in wave 5 will still have an effect—albeit perhaps with not the same potency as a change from no reception in wave 2 to reception in wave 4.

Based on these two measures, six pundit cable news programs and two partisan talk shows were marked as uncivil. In addition to the television programs, I designated 12 talk radio programs as uncivil; the listing of these programs is included in Table A4 in online Appendix 5, and the rationale for coding them as uncivil is included in Appendix 2. While two talk shows were found to be uncivil under the hearsay measure, reviews of available transcripts and episode guides reveal frequent levity and an intermittence of purely political content. Given its dependence on negative political emotions, this likely limits the effect that these shows have on incivility use (see Appendix 2 for an extended discussion of uncivil talk shows). To measure the impact of a change in use of different types of programs, I created dichotomous variables for reception of *uncivil pundit cable news*, *uncivil talk radio*, *uncivil talk shows*, *civil cable news*, *network news*, *satirical news*,¹⁰ *National Public Radio*,¹¹ and *entertainment programs*.¹² I expect use of both uncivil pundit cable news and uncivil talk radio to affect the use of incivility.

Use of Like-Minded and Disagreeable Uncivil Media

I also hypothesized that a change in use of like-minded uncivil media would lead to an increased propensity to use incivility, but a change in use of both like-minded civil media and disagreeable uncivil media would not. To test this hypothesis, I divided the uncivil media programs into “conservative uncivil media” and “liberal uncivil media” subgroups (programming qualifying as either is indicated as such in Table A3 of Appendix 5). Then, using individuals’ partisan identification (partisans were those who identified as a “strong,” “weak,” or “leaner” partisan), I identified if they used media that aligned with their partisan orientation, contrasted with their views, or was neutral. I created dichotomous measures for use of *like-minded uncivil media*, *like-minded civil media*, *disagreeable uncivil media*, *disagreeable civil media*, and *neutral civil media*.¹³

Fixed-Effects Approach

To test the effect of change in uncivil media use between the waves on the propensity to offer an uncivil response, I employed a fixed-effects model. The standard for panel data analysis, fixed-effects models ensure that the results are not biased by an omitted variable, and will minimize the chances that the relationship between changes in uncivil media use and changes in use of incivility is misidentified as causal when it is in fact an endogenous relationship (Allison, 2009). While questions of spuriousness limit the ability of cross-sectional analyses to establish causality, fixed-effects models focus on the change occurring within individuals, allowing for a much stronger case for causal effects. Time-invariant variables are differenced away in such models, as they cannot help to predict a change in the dependent variable (Hausman & Taylor, 1981). The fixed-effects method instead controls for any confounding effects of unobserved time-invariant variables by using each person as his or her own control (Allison, 2009).

However, fixed-effects logistic regression results in significant observations being dropped from the analysis when there is a lack of within-group variation (Allison, 2009; Hausman & Taylor, 1981), and is less efficient (compared to random effects and GEE models) as between-individual variation is ignored. Allison (2009), however, sees the sacrifice of efficiency to reduce bias as well worth it, as fixed effects provide the best test for causality, excepting experimental methods. My analysis is focused on individuals who differed between waves, which allows for a test of the hypotheses. As I show below, the stable cases that are dropped have the expected relationship with uncivil political media use.¹⁴ Additional information on the inappropriateness of random-effects and dynamic models can be found in online Appendix 3.

Results

The raw means provide evidence of the campaign affecting the use of incivility, but differences persisted among those exposed to uncivil political media in all three waves.¹⁵ Among those who were consistently exposed to uncivil media, the average rate of incivility was 22.3% in wave 2, 40.1% in wave 4, and 32.7% in wave 5. Each of these rates were higher than the rates for all respondents in each wave (12.6 in wave 2, 24.9 in wave 4, and 22.0 in wave 5), and much higher than the rates of those who remained unexposed to uncivil pundit news and talk radio throughout each wave (7.7 in wave 2, 17.4 in wave 4, and 12.8 in wave 5). This suggests that a consistent relationship between uncivil media use and use of incivility existed across waves, but that overall rates of incivility were the

lowest before the start of the general election campaign and the highest during the time immediately preceding the election.

Among those who were consistently uncivil across the waves, the mean rate of uncivil media use was 33%—meaning about one-third of all of the comments featuring incivility across the three waves corresponded with uncivil political media use. The same rate for those whose comments did not feature any incivility across all three waves was 12%, less than 1 in 8. Unsurprisingly, given the theoretical expectations, the rate of uncivil media use for those who varied in their use of incivility throughout the waves fell in between the rate of the two consistent groups, at 21%. The differences in means were statistically significant.

To evaluate the relationship between use of incivility, uncivil media use, and the wave periods further, I conducted a series of cross-sectional analyses to see if a relationship between use of uncivil news and use of incivility existed in the waves independently and in pooled form. One set of analyses treated incivility use as the dependent variable. A second set, however, evaluated whether use of incivility in a prior wave predicts uncivil media use in waves 4 and 5. An extended description of both sets of models and their results can be found in online Appendix 4. The results of the incivility use prediction models are included in Table A5, and the results of the uncivil media use prediction models are included in Table A6, both in Appendix 5.

The former set of models indicates that a connection exists between use of *uncivil pundit news* and *uncivil talk radio* with incivility use, but not between *uncivil talk shows* and incivility. In the latter models predicting uncivil media use, pre-wave incivility use is not significant, but pre-wave uncivil media use is; this is in line with previous research that finds partisan media use to be very habitual (Dilliplane et al., 2013; Stroud, 2008, 2011). While the cross-sectional analyses suggest that people who use these types of media tended to also use incivility, and prior uncivil views are not driving uncivil media use, the models cannot determine whether uncivil media use impacts the propensity to use incivility.

Fixed-effects models, however, allow me to evaluate the relationship between changes in media use and changes in the propensity to use incivility, eliminating many spurious associations. As consistency across waves was common, and a lack of within-group variation results in those units being dropped from the analysis, the number of observations decreases to 2,051 and the number of groups to 751. While this is a smaller sample, the analysis is focused on individuals who underwent some “change” between waves in the variables included in the model, and hence on how changes in uncivil news use affect use of incivility in political expressions. Additionally, I do not find any evidence of this biasing the effects in any way; given that those who remained consistently unexposed to uncivil partisan media had the lowest levels of incivility, and those who were consistently exposed to incivility had the highest rate, the removal of stable cases should underestimate the effect of reception, if there is any bias at all.

Included in the first fixed-effects model, which tests the impact of general uncivil media use, are the dichotomous measures of using *uncivil pundit cable news*, *uncivil talk radio*, and *uncivil talk shows*, as well as measures of reception to *civil talk shows*, *civil cable news*, *civil network news*, *satirical news*, *National Public Radio*, and *entertainment programs*. As noted, time-invariant demographics (gender, age, and education) do not need to be controlled for in the fixed-effects models.¹⁶ The NAES, however, asked respondents about their partisan and ideological orientations to politics in each wave, which results in varying identifications over time. I include both party identification and ideology in the models.

To control for the differences in the levels of incivility in political media at different points in the election season, as well as reduced interest in the election and politics among

the electorate during the wave 2 and 5 periods, I include dummy variables for both of these waves in the model.¹⁷ This technique can efficiently control for a number of time-varying influences (Dilliplane et al., 2013). As political interest, which likely varies, was not measured in each wave, I interact the measure taken before the first wave of interviews began with the waves.¹⁸

The results of this model supply support for my first hypothesis. Column 1 of Table 2 shows the effects of changes in the various types of media use, along with party identification, ideology, and controls for waves 2 and 5, on the use of incivility. Use of both uncivil pundit media and talk radio had a significant positive effect on the propensity to utilize incivility. None of the other media variables in the model were close to significance, including, notably, viewing *uncivil talk shows*. This is not especially surprising—despite the fact that programs like *The View* and *Fox & Friends* can feature uncivil partisan displays, they also include lighthearted segments and significant amounts of apolitical information (see discussion in online Appendix 2). This idea is supported by the data, in that the size, direction, and significance of the “uncivil” talk show coefficient are very similar to that of “civil” talk shows. Additionally, civil cable news, NPR, and satirical news use were insignificant. While people who use these programs might use incivility (as reflected in the cross-sectional analysis), changes in reception do not have an effect on individuals’ propensity to do so. This reflects the fact that the civil cable news programs included in the analysis, while partisan at times, include less emotionality and uncivil behavior to mimic.

Changes in reception to civil network news and entertainment programs did not have any impact on the use of incivility. The insignificance of network news (as well as NPR) suggests that becoming exposed to more traditional journalism does not induce more civil political views—although this finding deserves further analysis. The insignificance of entertainment viewership is not surprising—although it is unclear how this relates to Prior’s (2007) thesis that entertainment viewing is attached to reduced interest in politics. Although campaign effects have been found to influence partisanship, and in turn political behavior and attitudes (Gerber, Huber, & Washington, 2010), changes in political orientation did not affect the propensity to use incivility. However, both the dichotomous wave variables were significant, indicating that respondents were less likely to utilize incivility in waves 2 and 5 compared to wave 4, which took place during the heart of election season. Also significant was the political interest–wave interaction, which had a positive effect on the use of incivility; having an interest in politics early in the election year influenced the propensity to use incivility as the campaign wore on.

To interpret the substantive significance of the fixed-effects coefficients, I calculated the predicted probabilities¹⁹ of using incivility when a change in use of uncivil pundit cable news, talk radio, or both took place. Figure 1 displays these changes in graphic form. With viewership of uncivil pundit news, the probability of using incivility increases from about 38% to a probability of 51%—a change of 13 percentage points. For talk radio, the probability of using incivility increased by 8 percentage points, moving from about 41% with no reception to 49% with reception. It follows that a change in use of both of these types of programs should impact incivility even more. Displayed in Figure 2 is the effect that a change in use of both talk radio and uncivil pundit cable news has on incivility use. The effect of this change is indeed quite large, with the probability of using incivility increasing from about 36% with no reception to over 57% with reception. This is a difference of over 21 percentage points, and represents a 58% increase in the use of incivility.

These effects are significant for a number of reasons. First of all, media effects are notably hard to detect, even with samples significantly larger than this (Zaller, 2002).

Table 2
Effects of changes in uncivil media reception on use of incivility

Variables	Change model 1	Change model 2
Uncivil pundit news	0.55** (0.20)	
Uncivil talk radio	0.36* (0.23)	
Uncivil talk show	-0.14 (0.20)	
Civil talk show	-0.28 (0.21)	
Civil cable news	-0.05 (0.18)	
Civil network news	-0.16 (0.18)	
Like-minded uncivil pundit news		0.48** (0.18)
Disagreeable uncivil pundit news		0.06 (0.20)
Like-minded civil cable news		0.12 (0.22)
Disagreeable civil cable news		-0.22 (0.21)
Neutral civil news		-0.18 (0.18)
Satirical news	0.06 (0.22)	0.08 (0.22)
National Public Radio	-0.12 (0.22)	-0.11 (0.22)
Entertainment programs	0.06 (0.16)	0.08 (0.17)
Party identification strength (4 categories)	-0.06 (0.11)	-0.06 (0.11)
Republican-Democrat binary	-0.06 (0.31)	-0.24 (0.39)
Ideology (7 categories)	0.00 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)
Political Interest × Wave	0.03* (0.02)	0.03* (0.02)
Wave 2	-0.94** (0.13)	-0.95** (0.13)
Wave 5	-0.40** (0.12)	-0.42** (0.12)
Observations	2,051	2,051
Groups	751	751

Note. Standard errors are in parentheses.
* $p < .10$; ** $p < .01$.

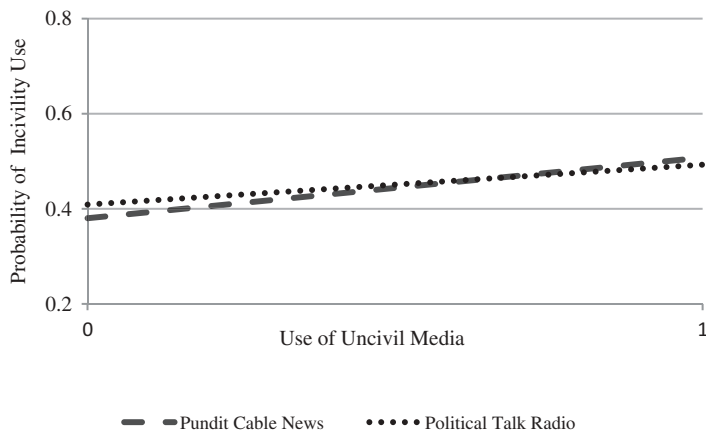


Figure 1. Effects of change in uncivil pundit news and talk radio reception on probability of using incivility. Predicted probabilities are calculated using the observed value approach (Hanmer & Kalkan, 2013). Probabilities reflect intra-group change in the propensity to utilize incivility with use of pundit cable news and talk radio (separately).

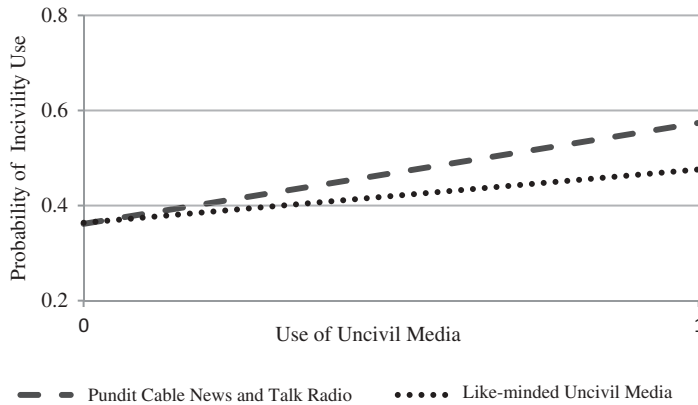


Figure 2. Effect of change in general uncivil media reception and like-minded uncivil media reception on probability of using incivility. Predicted probabilities are calculated using the observed value approach (Hanmer & Kalkan, 2013). Probabilities reflect intra-group change in the propensity to utilize incivility with use of general uncivil political media (pundit cable news and political talk radio) and like-minded uncivil media (uncivil media that expresses views in accordance with an individual's partisanship).

Using a larger sample, then, might reveal even larger effects. Furthermore, time-variant exposure to other sources of political incivility—most obviously via the Internet and interpersonal discussions—is not possible to control for with these data, so there may be cases where those who are deemed “incivility” free were being exposed to some type of political incivility. Additionally, some programs deemed “civil” were not completely devoid of incivility, meaning tuning in to such programs could have impacted the propensity to use incivility without reception of uncivil programs. Moreover, the measure of media use is accurate but conservative, in that it cannot take into account the effect that the *amount* of use has on the use of incivility (Dilliplane et al., 2013)—recent reception could mean once or twice within the last month, or nightly use. On top of all of this, if we assume it is mostly strongly partisan, politically interested people who self-select in uncivil partisan media exposure,²⁰ the size of the change in probability is even more impressive—given that they are the least likely to have their political attitudes influenced by change-inducing political messages, even when the message is congenial (Zaller, 1992, pp. 127–128). What these changes in probability of using incivility reflect, then, is a strong connection between uncivil political media use and increased use of incivility in textual political expressions.

One question is why talk radio seems to have a smaller impact than pundit news. The small amount of within-person change in talk radio reception likely makes it difficult to detect the effect—only 18% of respondents included in the fixed-effects models (and just 15% in the entire subsample) underwent a change in talk radio use throughout the three waves. The measurement of exposure time may be too imprecise (i.e., many only have briefly tuned in during a commute), and something may be said for the visual stimuli that are a part of uncivil political television in inducing uncivil reactions (Mutz & Reeves, 2005). A larger sample with more precise measurement of reception might detect a larger effect.

As my second hypothesis states, it should only be use of like-minded uncivil political media that affects the likelihood of using incivility, as individuals should select into uncivil media that reinforces preexisting views. A change in use of civil like-minded media should not have an impact. To test this hypothesis, I estimated the effect that changes in use of

uncivil like-minded media, *uncivil disagreeable media*, *civil like-minded media*, *civil disagreeable media*, and *civil neutral media* all had on the propensity to use incivility. Tuning in to *satirical news*, *NPR*, and *entertainment programs* was also included in this model, as were the time-varying political orientation measures, wave dummies, and the political interest variable interacted with the waves. Column 2 of Table 2 displays the results. Use of *like-minded uncivil media* was the only media measure to reach statistical significance, indicating that reception of attitude-consistent uncivil media had a positive effect. This supports my hypothesis that it is use of like-minded uncivil political media that influences the use of incivility. The wave dummies were again significant, indicating that early in the campaign season (wave 2) and in the post-election period (wave 5), the propensity to use incivility was lower. The coefficient on political interest interacted with the waves was also again significant and positive.

A change in reception of “civil” like-minded media was not significant at conventional levels, suggesting that the reinforcement of preexisting views alone does not lead to a greater propensity to use incivility. This is despite the fact that the partisan media qualified as “civil” included some incivility by my measures—some more than others. Yet less uncivil behavior to mimic—in both scope and volume—makes use of these like-minded “civil” programs less potent in producing incivility as uncivil media. It is worth noting that few pundit-themed programs—where the program’s host offers opinions—qualified as “civil” under my measures. It is likely that the emotionality of political punditry is particularly effective in influencing the opinions and behavior of audiences. As in comedy, the *delivery* of the message matters. Given the unlikelihood that people choose to use media that leads to discomfort, the insignificance of a change in reception of uncivil disagreeable media makes sense; another context, in which individuals are involuntarily exposed to uncivil attacks on their “side,” could provide insight into how individuals react to uncivil political messages about their in-group.

The change in the predicted probability of using incivility when becoming a user of like-minded uncivil political media is shown in Figure 2. A change in use produces a 12-percentage-point increase in the probability of using incivility, rising from about 36% to about 48%. Again, in the context of the impreciseness of the exposure measure, the difficulty in detecting media effects in smaller samples, and the consistency in attitudes among politically aware individuals, this change is large.

Discussion

I hypothesized that reception of uncivil political media induces an increased propensity to use incivility when offering (text-based) political opinions. Moreover, I predicted that only use of like-minded uncivil media would induce the use of incivility, and not disagreeable uncivil media or like-minded “civil” media. To test these hypotheses, I designed an index that included four criteria of incivility, and identified open-ended responses from a 2008 Web-based panel data set that included one or more of these criteria. Measuring the effect of within-group changes in media use on within-group changes in the use of incivility, I find support for both hypotheses.

This study has some limitations. First and foremost is the question of how much of the change in the propensity to use incivility that media use alone accounts for. Certainly, most people will not tune into uncivil political media if it does not appeal to their political sensibilities. Likely, a person needs to have some level of preexisting intense views to voluntarily use intensely vitriolic media. But, as previous studies of media effects have shown, reception of uncivil political media can reinforce and intensify preexisting views, while framing

arguments and issues of concern. Uncivil messages delivered by trusted, like-minded elites grant them legitimacy, and recent exposure to such makes them readily available for recollection and reuse. All the same, while the fixed-effects methods used are uniquely effective in controlling for spuriousness, it cannot be ruled out that the impact comes from the stimulation of uncivil “attitudes” by another source, and the resulting change in uncivil media use is largely endogenous to the use of incivility in political opinions.²¹

Relatedly, this study does not take into account the effect that interpersonal political conversations and interactions have on the use of incivility, or if non-digital reactions differ. Likely, people will be more restrained in their use of incivility in face-to-face interactions than they are when typing on a computer. Furthermore, if use of incivility is indeed impacted by uncivil media, this study is unable to determine whether reception simply legitimizes and increases the salience of uncivil views, leading those exposed to mimic this behavior, or if the use of incivility by those exposed represents true emotional reactions—or some combination of both. Finally, future research in this area should further investigate the characteristics of audience members who choose to tune into uncivil political media, and the emotions they feel prior to use.

Given the stakes, answers to these questions should be pursued. The nature of political programming of the “new media” era, designed to be hyperbolic, intense, and to emphasize conflict, allows various shows to compete for ratings in a disaggregated and competitive media market. If the uncivil elements used to do this have effects on the way many express political views—especially in online communication—then we can expect incivility to beget more incivility. As with the NAES panel survey, online social media platforms provide a means for individuals, emboldened by a sense of anonymity and stimulated by uncivil media, to express uncivil political messages. However, unlike the survey, social media enables people to spread these messages to their own (potentially large) audiences, affecting (or infecting) others in the same manner. If smooth interactions are necessary for any benefits to be derived from political discourse, and if fruitful negotiations among elites require some openness to alternative views among the public, then understanding the impact of uncivil partisan media use on political discourse is critical to understanding 21st-century democracy.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed on the publisher’s website at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2013.852640>

Notes

1. Scholars have found that the transparency of debate among elites affects policy decision-making; because representatives feel pressure to placate their partisan base when speaking in public, openness in elite deliberation has been shown to increase partisan polarization (Stasavage, 2007).

2. Whether uncivil political programs can generate negative emotions might also depend on whether the program consistently takes a negative tone. The inclusion of lighthearted segments and jocularity, as one might expect to see on “soft news” programming, might neutralize the effect of incivility by inducing positive emotions.

3. While studies have shown selective use of partisan media to be limited (Garrett et al., 2013; Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011; Prior, 2013), differences in hostility have not been considered. That is, certain media might be equally partisan but not equally provocative. Partisan audiences may watch more traditional newscasts from both conservative and liberal viewpoints, but selectively avoid strident shows professing disagreeable views.

4. If selective exposure theories adequately explain patterns in media use, then it is unlikely that someone who identifies as a liberal will choose to watch Bill O'Reilly, unless they do not become upset by O'Reilly when watching him—in which case they would not feel the need to retaliate.

5. The NAES online panel started in October 2007 with a random probability sample of about 30,000 people. Respondents were reinterviewed another four times throughout 2008, during the primary, election, and post-election periods. Retention rates between the waves averaged about 82%.

6. The exact wordings of the questions were: "Is there anything in particular that you like or dislike about [Barack Obama/John McCain]? If so, please fill in the boxes below." All respondents who gave a thermometer ranking score for the candidates (on a scale of 0–100) in response to a previous question were asked this question.

7. The 2008 NAES was designed to avoid the problems with self-reports that Prior (2007, 2013) presents. The analysis of self-report measures in the 2008 NAES by Dilliplane et al. (2013), which finds the measures to be reliable predictors of increases in political knowledge, should provide some confidence that overreporting is not a big factor. Dilliplane et al. (2013) also compare the most popular programs according to 2008 NAES self-report measures to the most popular as indicated by Nielson "people meter" data, finding the two to be strongly correlated—however, they caution that researchers' ignorance of Nielson's methods makes it difficult to verify self-reports with their people meter data. Generally, that self-reports of media use may change due to factors such as interest in the election, but actual viewership does not, is always a possibility. Should this be the case, connections between reported media use and use of incivility will be spurious.

8. As the subsample was random, the panel is unbalanced; as discussed below, this is not problematic.

9. The research assistants were told that the goal was to have a conservative estimate and were thus instructed to give the benefit of the doubt to civility—comments they felt were on the borderline should not be marked as uncivil. To ensure that there were three independent analyses of the responses, the research assistants were instructed not to discuss specific responses or types of responses among each other or with me during the coding process.

10. See online Appendix 2 for a theoretical discussion as to why satirical news should be separate from other partisan media.

11. Specifically, listening to the program *All Things Considered*. See online Appendix 2 for more information.

12. Breaking these media categories into smaller groups has little effect on the size and significance of coefficients. Therefore, I use these larger groupings for the sake of parsimony.

13. Because party identification was measured over time, these measures can take into account how individuals' attachment to a party may have shifted over the course of the campaign and panel study.

14. Individuals who consistently used uncivil media had the highest rate of incivility use, and those consistently unexposed had the lowest incivility use, with "changers" falling in the middle.

15. For the wave 2 period, a familiarity factor with the candidates and campaign may influence the propensity to offer uncivil comments. A Pew Research Center (2007) study in the fall of 2007, taken 2 months before wave 2 began, found that only 62% could name Barack Obama as a Democratic presidential candidate, and a mere 24% named John McCain as a Republican candidate. The visibility of both candidates most certainly increased thereon.

16. Additionally, including these variables interacted with the waves has little impact on the size and direction of the other coefficients in the model. None of the demographic interactions were close to significance.

17. Dummy variables for the two waves allow me to gauge the impact of the particular time periods. Wave 4 is left as the baseline wave to avoid collinearity. Including dummies for any two of the waves has no impact on the model.

18. The political interest measure was part of a public affairs profile in which nearly all NAES participants partook, usually before their wave 1 interview. It ranges from 0 (no interest) to 3 (very interested). Essentially, it gauges how interest, uninfluenced by the campaign, affected the propensity to use incivility as election season wore on.

19. I calculate the predicted probabilities using the observed value approach (Hanmer & Kalkan, 2013), which involves holding each of the other independent variables at the observed values for each case in the sample, calculating the relevant predicted probabilities for each case, and then averaging over all of the cases.

20. The descriptive statistics included in Table A7 in online Appendix 5 show that uncivil political media users tend to be more partisan and ideological than non-users, and are overall more politically active.

21. Note, however, that the election does not seem to have influenced viewership of uncivil media. Virtually the same percentage of Republicans (just under 60%) and Democrats (just under 40%) tuned in to uncivil political media in each wave. This is not to say that feelings about the candidates, the election, and politics did not change with the events of the election—but the election did not appear to systematically affect mass viewing habits.

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