

Instability of Incivility: How News Frames and Citizen Perceptions Shape Conflict in U.S. Politics

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Problem and Research Question

Ninety-five percent of United States citizens report that civility is necessary for a healthy democracy.ⁱ Yet journalists dubbed both the 2012 and 2010 campaigns the most uncivil ever.ⁱⁱ Even the U.S. Founding Fathers were not immune to incivility: political opponents labeled Thomas Jefferson “the son of a half-breed Indian squall” and John Adams a “hideous hermaphroditical character.”ⁱⁱⁱ Despite its long history in U.S. democracy, however, researchers, journalists, and citizens know little about political incivility.

The intersection of news coverage and political incivility is particularly important. Citizens who pay close attention to the news are “four times more likely” to think the tone of politics has gotten worse than people who pay little attention to the news.^{iv} In my dissertation, I focus on news, politics, and incivility by asking three questions. First, to what extent does news coverage portray political conflict as uncivil? Second, what political behaviors do *citizens* perceive as uncivil? Finally, how are citizens affected by news that portrays politics as uncivil? Addressing these questions will give researchers a better understanding of incivility, help journalists make better decisions when they cover political incivility, and, ultimately, can help citizens better interpret political conflict.

Background

Incivility, at its most basic, is a violation of social norms.^v Beyond this baseline, however, incivility holds many different meanings. Some researchers equate incivility with interpersonal-level conflict, arguing that disrespect, name-calling, and acting rudely constitute incivility.^{vi} Others, however, define incivility more broadly as anything that harms the political process, such as refusing to compromise and spreading misinformation, which I call public-level conflict.^{vii} Thus, when researchers study “incivility,” they focus on very different phenomena. Without a precise understanding of incivility, its effects are hard to determine.

Two approaches can help us to better conceptualize incivility. On one hand, it is important to ask *citizens* what they believe to be uncivil political behavior. A survey conducted by researchers at Allegheny College, found that citizens perceived as uncivil everything from using insulting language to calling a member of Congress to express an opinion.^{viii} Beyond this survey, however, research probing citizens’ beliefs about incivility is limited. Most notably, no research has examined whether citizens are more likely to think that people from their own political party are more civil than political figures with whom they disagree. Putting citizens’ perceptions of incivility in context is an important step in understanding incivility and its effects.

On the other hand, researchers must examine the ways in which political *elites* discuss politics as being uncivil. Since most citizens experience politics through the media, elite voices influence citizens’ perceptions of politics.^{ix} Take perceptions of bias in the news media: Many citizens began to think there was liberal bias in news coverage not because there was a change in news content but because political elites argued publicly that the news leaned left.^x Similarly, citizens may perceive political behaviors as being uncivil or civil based not only on the behaviors themselves but also on how political figures *label* the behaviors. Are protestors uncivil or champions of free speech? Are politicians who refuse to compromise adding to the dysfunction of Washington or bravely standing their ground? Research has not taken such an approach toward incivility.

News Coverage of Conflict: Method and Results

First, I looked at elite messages by conducting a content analysis examining news coverage of four political conflicts (health care town hall protests, Occupy Wall Street protests, 2010 mid-term campaign, and the debt ceiling debate). Specifically, I collected 437 news texts and 69 news images to explore how the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, ABC World News Tonight, Time.com, and the two top rated primetime programs on each of the cable news channels (CNN, MSNBC, Fox News) covered the conflicts.^{xi}

From this study, three findings stood out:

1. Journalists and politicians quoted in the media presented high-conflict events as uncivil by using interpersonal-level conflict frames (82% of texts; e.g., showing yelling, obscenities, name-calling),

public-level conflict frames (72% of texts; e.g., showing lack of compromise, spreading misinformation, shady backroom deals), and often both conflict frames (65% of texts).^{xii}

2. Further, these conflicts were not always described negatively. Eighty-six percent of the texts included a journalist or political figure describing the conflicts as uncivil, but another 56 percent of the news texts described the conflicts as civil, consisting of real Americans, or otherwise supporting the conflicts.
3. Use of the conflict frames differed by the news format, with opinionated news heavily showing both conflict frames (91% of texts) more often than non-opinionated news (48% of texts), and non-opinionated news more likely to show only interpersonal-level conflict frames (27% of texts) than opinionated news (3% of texts).
4. Most troubling, political figures in the news were likely to discuss incivility in strategically. Specifically, partisans labeled their own side as civil or their opponents as uncivil more often than the other way around. Only 7 percent of the news texts included political figures who only described their own side as being uncivil and/or the other side as being civil.

Citizens' Perceptions of Conflict: Method and Results

After examining media content, I turned to *citizens'* perceptions of incivility by conducting two online experiments. In the first, I pulled from the content analysis to create a series of statements describing behaviors by political and media elites that ranged from extremely civil (ex., Rachel Maddow had a polite conversation with her conservative guest) to extremely uncivil (ex., Sean Hannity compared Democrats to Hitler). The statements also varied based on whether participants read statements describing behaviors enacted by people from the political party they *supported*, the political party they *opposed*, or by political figures whose partisanship was not mentioned. The 279 participants recruited from MTurk.com reported whether they thought the behaviors they read about were civil/uncivil and acceptable/unacceptable. In the second experiment, 293 participants recruited from MTurk.com read a news story that either supported or opposed the 2012 Supreme Court ruling on the Affordable Care Act. The article also included politicians behaving civilly or engaging in either interpersonal-level conflict, public-level conflict, or both. Participants then reported whether they perceived incivility in the news articles, and whether they would like to read a news article from the same source in the future.

Three findings from these experiments are particularly important:

1. Citizens perceived different types of political incivility in the behaviors. Specifically, public-level conflict (e.g., politicians standing their ground) was perceived as more acceptable than interpersonal-level conflict (e.g., politicians calling each other Nazis).
2. Like in the content analysis, partisanship mattered. Likeminded partisans were perceived as more civil and acceptable than opposing partisans, even when the same behaviors were involved.
3. Once the behaviors were included in news articles, interpersonal-level conflict and simply reading a counter-attitudinal article prompted the most thoughts of incivility and made people less likely to want to read news from the same source in the future.

Effects of News Frames: Method and Results

Finally, I brought the first two sections of this research together by testing whether media portrayals of political incivility influenced citizens' perceptions of incivility in politics. To do so, I conducted a final online experiment with 566 participants recruited through MTurk.com. Individuals read a news article about immigration reform in Congress that included different media portrayals of incivility. The articles portrayed the immigration reform debate using either an interpersonal-level conflict frame (ex., rudeness, yelling), a public-level conflict frame (ex., refusal to compromise, spreading misinformation), a mix of both conflict frames, or neither conflict frames.^{xiii} Participants then answered questions measuring their favorability toward political figures in the article, emotional responses to the article, and perception that the arguments in the article were legitimate.

From this final study, the effects of mediated conflict frames are not encouraging:^{xiv}

1. Inclusion of conflict frames in the news, particularly public-level conflict and a mix of both interpersonal-level and public-level conflict, decreased citizens' favorability of Congress.

2. Inclusion of conflict frames, particularly public-level conflict and a mix of both interpersonal-level and public-level conflict, increased feelings of anger and aversion compared to news that presented civil conflict about the same topic.
3. Inclusions of conflict frames, particularly public-level conflict and a mix of both interpersonal-level and public-level conflict, prompted people to think that counter-attitudinal arguments were weak.

Necessity of Research

My research shows that (a) media elites cover intense conflict in ways that emphasize incivility, (b) people perceive incivility in those behaviors but find public-level conflict more acceptable than interpersonal-level conflict, and (c) news coverage using conflict frames has troubling effects on citizens. Further, incivility is *partisan*. Political and media figures often label the opposition as uncivil and their own side as civil, rather than the other way around. And citizens perceive likeminded partisans as behaving more acceptably than people with whom they disagree, even if the behaviors are the same.

The proposed research has a host of benefits for researchers, journalists, and the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life. For researchers, the results from the three studies show that the concept of incivility is a two-dimensional construct involving both interpersonal-level and public-level conflict. For journalists, not every news outlet covered the conflicts in the same way, showing that covering politics using conflict frames is a choice. Media figures need to understand the influence of that choice on citizens when they discuss political conflict in the news.

Finally, the results of the studies will help the Strauss Institute address its mission to fight the lack of civility in U.S. political life. Going forward, rather than simply calling for a return to civility in politics, the Strauss Institute and others who are interested in decreasing incivility in the U.S. can recognize that incivility, at least in part, is a perception that needs to be changed. Thus, encouraging journalists and political figures to mention moments of respect and compromise and teaching citizens how to take themselves out of a partisan mindset when thinking about political conflict would be strong steps in addressing political incivility in the future.

ⁱ Shea, D. M., & Steadman, B. (2010). *Nastiness, Name-Calling & Negativity*. Allegheny, NY: Allegheny College.

ⁱⁱ Is 2012 race the most uncivil in campaign history? (2012, August 23). Fox News. Retrieved from <http://video.foxnews.com/v/180111284001/is-2012-race-the-most-uncivil-in-campaign-history/>; ReasonTV. (2010, October 28). Attack ads, circa 1800. *YouTube*. Retrieved from

http://www.youtube.com/#watch?v=Y_zTN4BXvYI&desktop_uri=%2Fwatch%3Fv%3DY_zTN4BXvYI

ⁱⁱⁱ ReasonTV (2010).

^{iv} Shea & Steadman (2010), p. 5.

^v Jamieson, K. H., & Hardy, B. W. (2012). What is civil engaged argument and why does aspiring to it matter? *Political Science & Politics*, 45(3), 412–415.

^{vi} Brooks, D. J., & Geer, J. G. (2007). Beyond negativity: The effects of incivility on the electorate. *American Journal of Political Science*, 51(1), 1–16. doi:10.1111/j.1540-5907.2007.00233.x; Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language use*.

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^{vii} Darr, C. R. (2011). Adam Ferguson's civil society and the rhetorical functions of (in)civility in United States Senate debate.

Communication Quarterly, 59(5), 603–624. doi:10.1080/01463373.2011.614208; Entman, R. M. (2011). Incivility and asymmetrical partisan warfare. *In the name of democracy: Political communication research and practice in a polarized media environment*.

Retrieved from www.lsu.edu/reillycenter; Uslander, E. M. (1996). *The decline of comity in Congress*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.

^{viii} Shea & Steadman (2010).

^{ix} Edelman, M. (1988). *Constructing the political spectacle*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.; Jarvis, S. E. (2005). *The talk of the party: Political labels, symbolic capital, and American life*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.; Lippmann, W. (1922/2010). *Public opinion*. Blacksburg, VA: Wilder Publications Inc.

^x Ladd, J. (2010). The neglected power of elite opinion leadership to produce antipathy toward the news media: Evidence from a survey experiment. *Political Behavior*, 32(1), 29–50. doi:10.1007/s11109-009-9097-x; Ladd, J. M. (2012). *Why Americans hate the media and how it matters*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.; Watts, M. D., Domke, D., Shah, D. V., & Fan, D. P. (1999). Elite cues and media bias in presidential campaigns. *Communication Research*, 26(2), 144–175. doi:10.1177/009365099026002003

^{xi} I would like to thank Kayla Rhidenour for helping me code the news texts and Robert McDonald for helping me code the news images in this project.

^{xii} Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51–58.

doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x; Lawrence, R. (2010). Researching political news framing: Established ground and new

horizons. In P. D'Angelo & J. A. Kuypers (Eds.), *Doing news framing analysis: Empirical and theoretical perspectives* (pp. 266–285). New York: Routledge.; Reese, S. D. (2010). Finding frames in a web of culture: The case of the war on terror. In P. D'Angelo & J. A. Kuypers (Eds.), *Doing news framing analysis: Empirical and theoretical perspectives* (pp. 17–42). New York: Routledge.

^{xiii} The article also varied on whether they included small cues suggesting that the behaviors were either civil (ex., civil, good citizens) or uncivil (ex., uncivil, rude). However, these small cues had minimal effects.

^{xiv} The outcomes listed here are the direct effects of the news stimuli. There were a number of indirect effects as well. The conflict frames increased perceptions of incivility which then led to decreased favorability toward Congress, increased anxiety and aversion, decreased enthusiasm, and increased perceptions of legitimacy for likeminded arguments.