Stage 2 Registered Report:
Incivility Does Not Exist: An Experimental Assessment on the Drivers of Incivility Perceptions and their Effects on Candidate Evaluations

Abstract

Elite political discourse seems to have gotten too *"uncivil."* But do we really all agree about this? Building upon the definition of incivility as norm-violating conduct, we argue that incivility does not exist per se as an objective reality, but only as a subjective and context-dependent perception. Specifically, this Stage 2 Registered Report postulates that what is deemed polite or impolite, as well as appropriate or inappropriate in political discourse – in essence, incivility perceptions – is contingent on the prevalent norms within a given social context, and within each individual. Based on this, we investigate how a range of contextual factors (i.e., the who, what and when of the communication act) and individual dispositions (i.e., political attitudes, social experiences, personality traits) shape incivility perceptions. We leverage data from a conjoint survey experiment run on a sample of 1884 American respondents, manipulating the characteristics of an "uncivil" attack – notably, who went uncivil, in which way, and in which circumstances. Largely contradicting what we hypothesized, our main results reveal that attacks are perceived as more uncivil in two sets of circumstances: (i) when they are uttered by candidates described as more aggressive, and (ii) when the electoral context in which the attack took place is depicted as being characterized by widespread incivility. Additional exploratory analyses show that political attacks were less likely to be seen as uncivil by individuals with authoritarian tendencies, higher populist beliefs, stronger feelings of social marginalization, and a "darker" personality profile. Finally, we demonstrate that the extent to which candidates are punished for "going uncivil" partially depends on how incivility is perceived within the context in which it occurs.

Contemporary politics has witnessed a noticeable shift in the tone of elite political discourse, with politicians often resorting to name-calling, ridicule, and other forms of insulting or derogatory language against their opponents (Frimer et al., 2022a; Herbst, 2010). This has sparked a vibrant public debate on the current state of elite public discourse, which is broadly regarded as too "uncivil" (Bonn, 2020; Weber Shandwick, 2019). *But do we really all agree about this?* Building upon the intuition that incivility does not exist as an objective, intrinsic characteristic of specific types of speech or behavior – but only as a subjective and context-dependent perception – this article addresses this question by investigating what shapes incivility perceptions and with what consequences. Our aim is to provide a foundational understanding of incivility as a perception-driven aspect of political discourse and to encourage further research on the web of influences of incivility perceptions and their effects.

Pushing the available constructionist literature to its extremes (Muddiman et al., 2021), we posit that conduct commonly identified as uncivil in the campaign literature (namely the use of insulting language and ridicule; e.g., Kenski et al., 2020; Muddiman, 2017; Stryker et al., 2016) is differently perceived in different situations. These variations in incivility perceptions stem from the fact that what is deemed polite or impolite, as well as appropriate or inappropriate, is contingent on the prevalent norms within a given social context, and within each individual (Maisel, 2012). Based on this, this article experimentally assesses the role of contextual factors to shape such norm-related perceptions of political incivility. Additionally, we explore the downstream consequences of such perceptions for subsequent candidate evaluations.

We leverage results from a conjoint experimental design, with evidence gathered from a sample of US respondents (N = 1884) in February 2024. After answering questions about socio-demographics and attitudes, respondents are shown the profiles of two (fictive) candidates, each of them attacking an opponent using language commonly identified as uncivil (insults, ridicule). These baseline profiles are manipulated on several attributes (i.e., who goes uncivil, how, and under what

circumstances), corresponding to the postulated contextual drivers of incivility perceptions. Respondents are then asked to rate the incivility of each attack (i.e., their impoliteness, as well as inappropriateness) and to evaluate each candidate. By doing so, we assess how perceptions of potentially uncivil conduct vary as a function of contextual factors. We then test the mediating effect of these perceptions on candidate evaluations. We also explore the intervening role of individual dispositions (political beliefs, social experience, personality traits).

Beyond the empirical evidence gathered, this paper makes a threefold contribution. First, from a conceptual standpoint, it fosters the nascent research agenda conceiving political incivility as a perceptual construct (Liang & Zhang, 2021) – and lays the foundations for a systematic empirical investigation on the contextual drivers of differences in such perceptions. As such, our article advocates for a conceptual overhauling of research on political incivility, suggesting that this latter might not exist, per se, as an immutable phenomenon.

Second, from a theoretical standpoint, we expand on the existing research investigating the dynamics of rhetoric aggressiveness – of which incivility is a major cornerstone – by advocating for the need to consider individual perceptions of political messages. Individual perceptions play a major role when it comes to the effectiveness of negative and uncivil rhetoric (e.g., Otto et al., 2020). Additionally, limited but growing evidence shows that the effect of elite aggressiveness on important political attitudes, such as affective polarization, does not unfold directly but is mediated by how such aggressiveness is perceived (e.g., Nai & Maier, 2023). All in all, the analytical framework investigating the effectiveness of rhetorical aggressiveness seems increasingly to suggest that individual perceptive experiences are a necessary condition to account for. Our article builds on this intuition and develops a systematic framework to investigate how such perceptions unfold.

Third, substantively, our article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the potential electoral consequences of political incivility, by investigating the role of perceptive experiences for the

evaluation of political candidates. Modern election campaigns are candidate-centered businesses (Wattenberg, 1991), a phenomenon which unfolded considerably in the age of super-personalized (Barberá et al., 2017) and latently negative (e.g., Maurer & Diehl, 2020) social media. In this respect, studying the effect of *perceived* incivility on candidate evaluation adds to our understanding of mass electoral behavior and changing patterns of political competition, expanding both the theoretical palette of factors shaping candidate evaluations and the conceptual mechanisms linking candidates' communication and candidate support.

Theoretical Framework

Incivility as an Inappropriate Violation of Politeness Norms

As political incivility lacks a universally agreed-upon definition, it is imperative to establish a clear understanding of what it is in the context of this study. Building on previous accounts, we view incivility as a *socially inappropriate violation of politeness norms*. Two aspects of this definition are worth highlighting, as they carry significant implications for our investigation. First, our definition confines the realm of incivility to communicative acts that breach politeness norms (Mutz, 2015). These norms, which derive from the way in which regular citizens behave when interacting with one another (Brown & Levinson, 1987), mandate that politicians refrain from engaging in impolite conduct. This approach positions our research within the field of campaign studies, where the concept of political incivility was originally introduced to distinguish particularly "harsh" forms of negative campaigns (Brooks & Geer, 2007). Since then, contemporary scholarship moved beyond this broad characterization to more specific types of impolite, rude, disrespectful conduct (e.g., Gervais, 2018; Mutz, 2015; Sydnor, 2019a). Some examples are ad-hominem attacks, name-calling, and other forms of derogatory language, as well as ridicule, shouting, interrupting (Muddiman, 2017; Mutz, 2015).

Second, while the mere breach of the norms of politeness is a necessary condition for the definition of incivility, it is not a sufficient one. Critics of the politeness approach have argued that

this view on political incivility is overly simplistic (Bardon et al., 2023). By reducing incivility to mere breaches of politeness, this approach neglects the normative component of incivility – the essential values and societal norms that shape our understanding of civil behavior (Papacharissi, 2004). With this in mind, a second necessary condition intervenes: for a speech or behavior to be classified as uncivil, it also needs to be *socially inappropriate*. This dual criterion emphasizes that incivility is not only about the nature of the communication act itself (i.e., its impoliteness) but also about the way in which it is evaluated (i.e., its inappropriateness).

Incivility Does Not Exist: A Perception-Based Approach

Defining incivility as (i) a violation of politeness norms that (ii) is evaluated as socially inappropriate carries significant empirical challenges. Notably, politeness norms are not static and universally applicable, but differ across cultures – and even within the same culture, they can vary between different situations and among different individuals (Bardon et al., 2023; Jamieson et al., 2017). Consequently, behavior deemed impolite in one cultural or situational context, or by certain individuals, might be considered entirely polite in another context, or by someone else (Flores et al., 2021). Furthermore, even if there was a consensus on behaviors that are universally impolite, the evaluation of such conduct also involves a complex interplay of cultural, situational, and individual factors (Flores et al., 2021). For instance, cultures that value directness and assertiveness may be more tolerant, or even appreciative of impoliteness, while cultures that place a high value on harmony may be less tolerant of it. At the same time, it is possible that in certain situation impoliteness may be deemed acceptable or even necessary. On an individual level, personal values, past experiences, or personality traits can significantly color the evaluation of norm-violating conduct (Kahneman & Miller, 1986), potentially leading some people to view impolite behaviors in a more positive light.

The consequence of defining incivility as a socially inappropriate violation of politeness norms is, logically, that incivility is not a fixed, absolute quality inherent to certain types of speech or behavior.

What constitutes incivility is largely influenced by the norms and values that prevail in a given context, and within each individual. These ultimately determine what is considered polite or impolite, as well as appropriate or inappropriate in a specific context and for specific individuals. Consequently, we posit that incivility does not exist per se as an objective reality but only as a context-dependent and subjective perception. This means that, to fully grasp the essence of political incivility, we must approach this phenomenon as a perception-driven aspect of political discourse (Liang & Zhang, 2021).

Against this backdrop, we build on the emerging "constructionist" literature to investigate variations in incivility perceptions (Muddiman et al., 2021). Most of this research has focused on the role played by individual characteristics such as gender (Kenski et al., 2020), conflict orientation (Sydnor, 2019a), personality traits (Kenski et al., 2020), and political ideology (Bentivegna et al., 2022; Kenski et al., 2020). Although there are a few notable exceptions (Gubitz, 2022; Muddiman et al., 2021), little is known about the role played by contextual features. More importantly, this research is still limited and fragmented, emphasizing the need for a unified framework capable of comprehensively explaining variations in what is considered polite or impolite, as well as appropriate or inappropriate – i.e., variations in incivility perceptions. To bridge this gap, our research delves into the primary drivers of incivility perceptions, drawing on theories of normative behavior, with the aim of building a foundational understanding of this phenomenon. In the next sections, we elaborate on these theoretical insights.

Shifting Social Norms: Contextual Drivers of Incivility Perceptions

Social norms, i.e. the unwritten rules that guide behavior in a society, dictate how speech and behaviors are interpreted and judged in different social settings (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). They are dynamic constructs that evolve through the process of socialization (van Kleef et al., 2019). As such, they are deeply interwoven with the unique characteristics of the social context in which they operate, leading to substantial variations across societies, groups, and situations (Kahneman & Miller, 1986).

Thus, to fully comprehend the variations in what is deemed polite or impolite, appropriate or inappropriate – i.e., incivility perceptions – it is essential to grasp the diverse and changing nature of social norms within their respective contexts.

Two fundamental theories help us understand how social norms vary, and how people differently respond to their violations depending on contextual characteristics. First, the Focus Theory of Normative Conduct identifies two primary sources of norm formation (Kallgren et al., 2000). On the one hand, injunctive norms form from the observation of what people commonly approve in society; on the other, descriptive norms result from the observation of what people commonly do in society. This distinction is important as it suggests that norms about how one *ought to behave* can be overruled by norms that are constructed based on the observation of how relevant others *do behave*.

Second, the Expectancy Violation Theory posits that people's interpretations and evaluations of norm violations can vary based on their contextual expectations (Burgoon & Jones, 1976). A behavior that deviates from expectation leads to increased attention, interpretation, and evaluation of the transgressor's behavior; Conversely, behavior consistent with people's expectations is less likely to be perceived negatively. This theory suggests a dynamic framework whereby people's interpretation and evaluation of norm-violating conduct is contingent upon this conduct being anticipated in a given social context.

Building upon these theories, we contend that incivility perceptions will depend on what is considered common or expected in a given context. To investigate this dynamic, we focus on two communication acts categorized as uncivil in previous research: insulting language and ridicule (Muddiman, 2017; Stryker et al., 2016). We propose that the degree to which these acts are perceived as uncivil (i.e., impolite, as well as inappropriate) depends on a tryptic of factors reflecting the *who*, *what* and *when* of the communication act. Specifically, we claim that incivility perceptions in insulting language and ridicule are less likely when (i) these speech acts are used by men, candidates with more

aggressive personalities, or outsiders; (ii) they are used as retaliatory measures or are connected to specific issues like moral ones; and (iii) they take place in environments where such conduct is prevalent. In these scenarios, such behaviors tend to align more closely with what is common or expected, reducing their perceptions as uncivil. We detail these expectations below.

Candidate Characteristics

Expectations regarding the behavior of politicians likely vary based on their characteristics (i.e., the "*who*"). We focus on candidate's gender, their agency/communion attributes, and their insider/outsider status. First, the stereotype content model predicts that women are commonly associated with communal traits, such as kindness and compassion, while men are associated with agentic traits, such as dominance and assertiveness (Fiske et al., 2002). Given this association, insulting language and ridicule by female candidate likely contradicts the prevailing expectations of women being communal, resulting in an increase in incivility perceptions; Conversely, people may expect male candidates to project agentic traits through the use of such acts, leading to a decrease in incivility perceptions (Muddiman et al., 2021). Second, evidence indicates that judgments of agency and communion go beyond merely shaping gender stereotypes; they play a crucial role in how voters form their mental images of politicians (e.g., Funk, 1996, 1999). Based on this, we expect that insulting language and ridicule are less likely to be perceived as uncivil when employed by more aggressive and less compassionate candidates (i.e., those who present themselves as high on the agency but low on the communion dimensions), as this conduct aligns with their character (Mölders et al., 2017). Third, some politicians openly reject "civility" as the standard of doing politics (Edyvane, 2017). These leaders (populist politicians for example) distance themselves from the political establishment by showcasing a transgressive campaigning style (Moffit, 2016). For these "political outsider" the use of insulting language and ridicule is consistent with their established political persona (Nai et al., 2022). Hence, incivility perceptions should decrease. Overall, we expect that *(H1) people perceive less incivility in*

the use of insulting language and ridicule when this conduct is employed by (a) male (vs. female) candidates, (b) candidates framed as high in agency and low in communion (vs. low in agency and high in communion), and (c) political outsiders (vs. political insider).

Attack Characteristics

The nature of the attack (the "*what*") is also likely to influence expectations regarding politicians' conduct, thus incivility perceptions. We consider two characteristics that have already been identified as influential in the context of negativity and incivility: (i) the type of attacks, differentiating between retaliatory and non-retaliatory, and (ii) the specific issue it targets, whether it is moral or non-moral. First, research on negative campaigning suggests that candidates often engage in a "logic of retaliation" (Nai, 2020; Song et al., 2017). Notably, as politicians face the risk of appearing weak when they do not "punch back," they are expected to respond to attacks in kind (Dolezal et al., 2016). Second, moral issues are more likely to lead to more aggressive rhetoric than non-moral ones. Research on televised election debates (Goovaerts & Turkenburg, 2022) and responses to news articles on Facebook (Ziegele et al., 2020) observed higher levels of derogatory rhetoric when discussions centered on moral topics. These findings align with the idea that moral debates, which are rooted in deep convictions about right and wrong, justify the use of extreme tactics (van Kleef et al., 2015). In both cases (the attack is retaliatory or on a moral issue), the use of insulting language or ridicule is more likely to match people's expectations for politicians' behavior. Thus, we hypothesize that *(H2) people perceive less incivility in the use of insulting language and ridicule when this conduct is embedded (a) in a retaliatory attack (vs. non-retaliatory attacks) or (b) in an attack that targets a moral (vs. non-moral) issue.*

Setting Characteristics

Finally, we consider the political climate whereby the use of insulting language or ridicule takes place (the "*when*"). As previously mentioned, one way through which norms arise is through the observations of the behavior of relevant others. In the realm of political communication, this means

that norms regulating politicians' conduct in a given social context depends on how politicians have been communicating in that context (Muddiman et al., 2021; Vargiu, 2022). Thus, if insulting language and ridicule by political candidates are commonplace, then this speech is likely to be perceived as less uncivil. More formally, we expect that *(H3) people perceive less incivility in the use of insulting language and ridicule in settings wherein this conduct is common (vs. uncommon).*

Shifting Personal Norms: Individual Dispositions and Incivility Perceptions

So far, our discussion has primarily centered on the role of contextual factors in shaping perceptions of incivility. Nevertheless, insights from constructionist literature underscore the significance of individual dispositions in molding these perceptions (Bentivegna et al., 2022; Kenski et al., 2020; Sydnor, 2019a). Therefore, although our experimental design precludes drawing any causal conclusions with regards to the role of individual-level factors, our investigation includes an exploration of individual dispositions shaping perceptions of political incivility. Our aim is to foster a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence perceptions of incivility, based on how these latter are shaped not only by prevalent social norms of behavior, but also by individuals' personal norms of conduct. Extensive research demonstrates that personal norms, i.e., individuals' internalized standards of conduct, independently predict attitudes and behavior in a variety of settings (e.g., Bašić & Verrina, 2023; Catola et al., 2021). Thus, we posit that they will contribute, in conjunction with social norms, to shape people's interpretation and evaluations of speech or behavior in the realm of political discourse. While social norms are influenced by social context and negotiated within a social group, personal norms are shaped by individuals' personal values, experiences, as well as their personality traits (Schwartz, 1977). Based on this, we focus on three critical aspects of an individual's profile that are likely to significantly influence individuals' personal norms vis-à-vis political incivility: (i) their *political attitudes*, namely populism and authoritarianism; (ii) their *social experiences*, emphasizing the individuals' sense of social marginalization; and (iii) their *personality traits*, with a focus on the role

of a "darker" personality profile. In the upcoming section, we discuss expected trends for each of these characteristics. Given the limitations of our design, we keep this investigation purely exploratory, and do not formulate any formal hypothesis.

Political Attitudes: Populism and Authoritarianism

Personal norms are influenced by people's perception of the society they inhabit, with political attitudes being a key element of this perception (Désilets et al., 2020). In examining incivility, populist attitudes and authoritarianism appear especially pertinent. First, by demonizing political adversaries (Jamieson et al., 2017), the use of insulting language or ridicule may fit with the populists' Manichean view of the world as a moral struggle between good and evil (Mudde, 2004), thus likely making this communication more in line with their personal norms of conduct. At the same time, such communication is the visible expression of the disruptive approach favored by populists, who thrive on challenging the accepted standards regulating political discourse (Moffit, 2016). Second, authoritarians, especially in their aggressive form, believe that causing harm to others is justified when the aggression is approved by or preserves an authority (Dunwoody & Funke, 2016). This makes them more likely to positively perceive the use of insulting language or ridicule from authoritative figures, such as candidates.

Social Experiences: Perceived Social Marginalization

It is clear that people's social experiences also play a pivotal role in the formation of their personal norms of behavior (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). In the context of incivility, the experience of social marginalization seems particularly significant. "Civility" typically operates as the favored language of the political elites, who often resort to "civility policing" to stigmatize minority viewpoints as deviant (Edyvane, 2017; Gubitz, 2021). This is a way to maintain the status quo and suppress dissenting voices by labeling them as "uncivil". For marginalized groups, the limitations imposed by politeness in political discourse may feel oppressive and impoliteness may represent a means to draw

attention to their issues or demands, thus aligning with their personal norms of behavior (Gubitz, 2021). As a result, incivility perceptions should decrease.

Personality Traits: "Dark" Personality

Personality traits are another key factor influencing the formation and expression of personal norms of behavior (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). In the context of incivility, we argue that individuals showcasing a darker personality profile – specifically, individuals high in psychopathy (coldness, proclivity for antisocial behaviors), narcissism (ego-reinforcing attitudes, bombastic self-promotion), and Machiavellianism (proclivity for cunning and scheming behaviors), the so-called "dark Triad" of personality (Furnham et al., 2013) – should be more tolerant, or even appreciative, of impoliteness. Central to dark personality is callousness (Marcus et al., 2018), broadly reflecting insensitivity and cruel disregard for others. It is thus not a surprise that dark personality has frequently been associated with more aggressive behaviors such as bullying (Fernández-del-Río et al., 2021) and anti-social tendencies (Pailing et al., 2014). Importantly, good reasons exist to believe that a dark personality should be conducive to preferences for a more muscular approach to politics. For instance, high dark traits, and in particular psychopathy have been associated with greater effectiveness of political attacks, in particular harsher ones (Nai & Maier, 2020), and with a marked preference for aggressive humor (Veselka et al., 2010). A similar case can be made for trait aggressiveness, that is, the individual tendency to be argumentative, engage in bellicose behaviors, react when provoked, and experience "an increased motivation to hurt others" (Wilkowski & Robinson, 2007, p. 4). Individuals high in trait aggressiveness should be expected to react more positively to aggressively charged information. Indeed, they "tend to be more susceptible to violent cues because they maintain a larger store of aggression-related schemata in memory ready to be activated" (Kalmoe, 2014, p. 548). All in all, a more antagonistic personality profile should be associated with higher tolerance for potentially uncivil conduct.

The Role of Incivility Perceptions for Candidate Evaluations

Having explored the factors influencing perceptions of incivility, we now turn our attention to the downstream consequences of these perceptions on one of the crucial drivers of electoral choice in elections worldwide: candidate evaluations (Garzia, 2014). After all, it seems quite unlikely that incivility is used a rhetorical device without candidates accounting for its possible electoral consequences. Does it pay to go uncivil – and in which case? Previous effect studies on incivility have established a negative relationship between incivility and various metrics of sponsor evaluations (e.g., Druckman et al., 2019; Gervais, 2021; Mutz, 2007; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). Yet, these negative relationships are often mitigated by contextual factors. For instance, evidence shows that people tend to penalize "uncivil" language from black men less than from white men (Sydnor, 2019b); people who are more tolerant of disagreement are less likely to be demobilized when exposed to "uncivil" conflict (Otto et al., 2020); in-elite "incivility" has a depolarizing effect on stronger partisans and in competitive elections (Gervais, 2022). Against this backdrop, some scholars have emphasized the need to focus on individual perceptive experiences, as differing effects may be attributed to variations in incivility perceptions (Liang & Zhang, 2021; Nai & Maier, 2023). We expand on this knowledge by exploring how the relationship between the contextual factors discussed above and candidate evaluation can be refined via the mediating role of respondents' perceptions of incivility.

Methods

Sample

We tested our hypotheses on a sample of American respondents, surveyed via the online platform CloudResearch (February 2024) and paid $ 1.50 for their participation. The results of an a-priori power analysis revealed that a sample size of N = 1658 is enough (power > 90%) to detect a

small effect of 0.04 (AMCE; alpha = 0.008[1]) for a paired conjoint design with 3 tasks and maximum of 2 levels per attribute (Schuessler & Freitag, 2020). With this in mind, and also to account for dropped observations in the data cleaning stage, we recruited 2122 participants. After exclusion of inattentive respondents[2], the final sample includes n = 1884 respondents. Full sample description is included in Appendix F.

Experimental Design and Procedure

The survey included a paired-profile conjoint experiment[3], whereby respondents simultaneously saw and rated the profiles of two fictive politicians. Conjoint designs involve creating hypothetical *profiles* by varying the *levels* (e.g., candidate gender: male and female) of different *attributes* (e.g., candidate gender) and then asking people to evaluate these profiles in a comparative fashion. In our case (see Figure 1) participants were told that a political consulting company working for multiple candidates in upcoming Congressional elections wanted to test various versions of the same tweets, and that they would be asked to provide judgments about those.[4] Each profile (two per task) introduced the candidate (i.e., name and AI-generated picture), and the election they are competing in (each candidate competes in a different election). Then, respondents were presented with a collection of the candidates' tweets and retweets[5], containing the attributes' manipulations (i.e., each corresponding to the postulated contextual drivers of incivility perceptions), with the last tweet always featuring insulting language or ridicule. After reviewing these tweets, respondents were asked to rate

[1] Following a Bonferroni correction, the threshold for statistical significance was set at p = .008; because we will perform up to six comparisons within a single model, the usual threshold of p = .05 was reduced by a factor of six.
[2] Respondents who failed an attention check (n = 27), whose responses on a battery with reverse coded items had a standard deviation of zero (n = 66), and whose completion time was below half of the median of the sample (n = 156).
[3] This design has the advantage of implicitly encouraging respondents to compare the two profiles, increasing survey engagement; it performs the best against behavioral benchmarks compared to other designs (Hainmueller et al., 2015).
[4] Framing the task in this way, respondents are less likely to be deterred by presenting only slightly different versions of the same material, as they understand the need to test the various campaign strategies in different contexts.
[5] Employing tweets as the carrier of our manipulations allows us to present them in a manner that resembles a classic conjoint table, with profiles' attributes – embedded in each tweet – presented side by side. At the same time, tweets increase the study's external validity. Twitter (now known as X) is known as the quintessential platform for political discussions, and it is increasingly used by politicians to speak with their audience and directly at their political opponents (Conway et al., 2015). Additionally, it is particularly conducive to incivility (Frimer et al., 2022b).

the final tweet on the extent to which they perceived it as uncivil and to express their feelings toward each candidate.

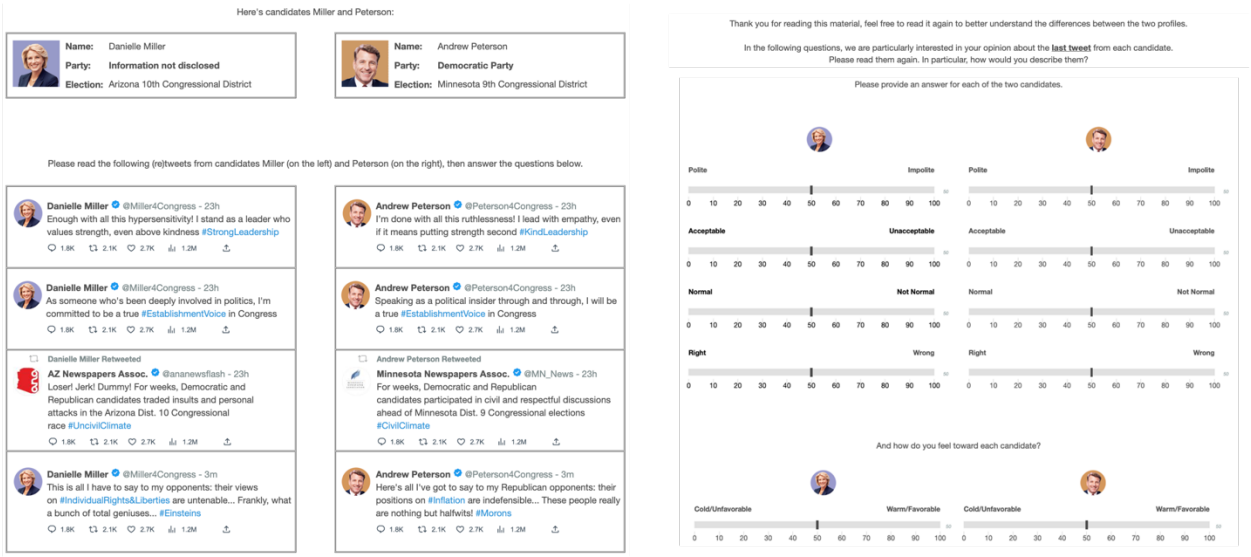

Figure 1. Example of conjoint task

Stimuli

Each profile featured four tweets: two tweets with the candidate profile manipulation (H1); a tweet where the candidate launches an attack against the opposing party, incorporating the attack manipulation (H2); a retweet from a news agency introducing the setting manipulation (H3). The order of the tweets was randomized between tasks and respondents to limit potential ordering effects but consistent between profiles to ease comparison. However, the tweet containing the attack always came last, as this was the one that respondents were asked to evaluate. In this tweet, the candidate uses either insulting language, characterized by name-calling or derogatory remarks used to express contempt for one's opponents, or ridicule, which involves mocking or making fun of ones' political opponents. These specific communication acts were selected for two reasons. First, they are prevalent in US political discourse. Sobieraj and Berry's (2011) analysis of 10 weeks of political blogs, talk radio, and cable news programs revealed that mockery and insulting language are among the most common forms of incivility in these channels. Secondly, incorporating instances of insulting language and

ridicule, enable us to check whether our results apply to both stronger (insulting language) and milder (ridicule) forms of potentially uncivil conduct. Based on this, we drafted a set of eight attacks. Half of them featured insulting language (e.g., "Idiots, the lot of them! #Morons"), while the remaining half included forms of ridicule (e.g., "Great times ahead with those superior thinkers… #Einstein"). Considering the result of a pretest conduct on a sample of N = 1845 American respondents (CloudResearch, September 2023), we retained six out of the eight attacks (for a comprehensive account of the pre-test methods and results please refer to Appendix B). Therefore, respondents were randomly exposed to one of six uncivil attacks, consisting of three insults and three ridicules. This allowed us to reduce redundancy between tasks and profiles, while not compromising the comparability of the uncivil communicative acts.

Incivility Perceptions. As per our definition, a speech or behavior qualifies as uncivil when two necessary conditions are met: (i) the conduct is a violation of politeness norms, and (ii) the conduct is socially inappropriate. Based on this, we measure impoliteness by asking respondents the extent to which each attack is polite or impolite (0-100 scale; *impoliteness*: M = 60.01, SD = 26.34). Social inappropriateness is measured by asking respondents the extent to which each attack is acceptable or unacceptable, normal or not normal, right or wrong (0-100 scales; *unacceptable*: M = 53.65, SD = 27.56; *not normal*: M = 46.10, SD = 26.23; *wrong*: M = 56.46, SD = 26.00). These statements are averaged to build a scale for "inappropriateness." We then compute our measure of incivility perceptions by averaging the "impoliteness" and "inappropriateness" scores (M = 56.04, SD = 22.92). This ensures that each aspect – impoliteness and inappropriateness – contributes equally to our overall assessment of incivility perceptions.

Candidate Evaluations. Candidate evaluations were measured via feeling thermometers. Concretely, respondents are asked to express their feelings toward each candidate on a 0 to 100 scale,

where 0 means they feel cold/unfavorable toward the candidate and 100 means they feel warm/favorable (M = 42.54, SD = 26.43).

Attributes' Manipulation

Each tweet contains one of three sets of manipulations corresponding to candidate, attack, and setting's attributes. The full text of each attribute's level is included in Appendix A[6].

Candidate attributes. Candidates' names and profile pictures are randomized between males and females (H1a). Leadership traits are manipulated by candidates presenting themselves as "*a leader who values [strength/empathy], sometimes even above [kindness/strength]*" (H1b). To manipulate insider and outsider status, candidates say that they are *"someone who's [never been part of the political elite/been deeply involved in politics]"* (H1c). We also control for party affiliation by presenting the candidate as either a Democrat or Republican. We also include a non-partisan condition by using the label "information not disclosed" where party affiliation would be.

Attack attributes. Each candidate's attack can be either on a moral or non-moral issue (H2b). To ensure variation across profiles and issues, the specific issue being targeted by each attack is randomly selected from a pool of three moral issues (abortion, gun ownership, and individual rights and liberties), and three non-moral issues (the economy, tax reform, inflation). Furthermore, respondents are randomly exposed to either a retaliatory or non-retaliatory uncivil attack (H2a). In the retaliatory attack condition, the candidate's uncivil attack is preceded by the candidates themselves mentioning previous attacks launched by the opposition (e.g., *"This is all I have to say in response to the attacks launched today by my opponents:"*). In the non-retaliatory attack condition, this mention is absent (*"This is all I have to say to my opponents:"*).

[6] While the attributes' texts are the same between tasks, the two profiles in each task present slightly different versions of the same text to increase respondents' engagement with each profile. Additionally, to ensure that respondents pay attention to all the manipulations, each of them is connected to a hashtag – highlighted in blue, hence immediately visible, and easily digestible.

Setting attribute. We manipulated the prevalence of civility or incivility in the electoral context via a candidate's retweet from a news agency describing the political climate of the election as civil (e.g., *"For weeks, Democratic and Republican candidates in the AZ Dist. 10 Congressional race engaged in civil and respectful conversations"*) or uncivil (e.g., *"Loser! Jerk! Dummy! For weeks, Democratic and Republican candidates traded insults and personal attacks in the AZ Dist. 10 Congressional race"*).

Measured Independent Variables

We measure *populist attitudes* with the battery of the CSES Module 5 (Hobolt et al., 2016) (7-point scale; $M = 4.63$, $SD = 0.99$), and *authoritarian aggression* with the battery developed by Dunwoody and Funke (2016) (7-point scale; $M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.30$). Second, we measure respondent's experience of social marginalization with two items from Peterson et al. (2021). These reflect two key components of marginalization perceptions, which can reflect either a *perception of status loss* (11-point scale; $M = 2.81$, $SD = 2.77$) or the *perception of inability to gain status* (11-point scale; $M = 3.13$, $SD = 2.81$) (Petersen et al., 2021). Third, we measure respondents' "dark" traits via the Dirty Dozen inventory (Jonason & Webster, 2010), which includes four statements for each trait that respondents evaluate – all evaluated on a 7-point scale (*psychopathy*: $M = 2.39$, $SD = 1.25$; Machiavellianism; $M = 2.44$, $SD = 1.39$; Narcissism: $M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.43$). Additionally, we measure trait aggressiveness via the Short-Form Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire (Diamond & Magaletta, 2016) (7-point scale; $M = 2.68$, $SD = 1.18$).

Analysis Plan and Modelling Strategy

We begin our investigation with the test of our hypothesis on the effect of contextual factors on incivility perceptions. This is done by estimating Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs) for each the attribute of the conjoint, which indicate how much the rating of a profile (in our case, incivility perceptions) changes when a given attribute is compared to a chosen baseline (Hainmueller et al., 2014). Then, we conduct a first exploratory analysis on the relationship between individual-level

differences and incivility perceptions. Because exogenous to the conjoint experimental design, the effect of these individual factors cannot be established causally; thus, it is tested in a correlational fashion. We regress incivility perceptions on each of the individual disposition discussed above. Finally, we perform a second exploratory analysis to investigate the mediating path from contextual factors to candidate evaluation via incivility perceptions.

All models are calculated on a stacked dataset, whereby each profile is treated as the unit of analysis. As a robustness checks, all main analyses are replicated per type of potentially uncivil conduct (i.e., insulting language and ridicule) and using the "impoliteness" and "appropriateness" scales as dependent variables. The AMCEs models are also replicated by running an OLS regression model, controlling for respondents' gender, political interest, partisan identification, and issue importance. Results from the robustness checks are presented in the main text only when they differ from the results of the main analysis. The complete numerical results for each model used in our analysis are included in Appendix E, together with detailed model specifications.

Results

Hypothesis Testing: The Contextual Drivers of Incivility Perceptions

Figure 1 presents ACMEs (left panel) for each of the postulated contextual drivers of incivility perceptions – as well as Marginal Means (on the right panel) for descriptive purposes. Overall, none of our hypotheses finds support in our data. As regards candidate characteristics (H1), there are no significant effects of gender and insider/outsider status on incivility perceptions. Instead, we find a significant effect of leadership traits; however, its direction was reversed compared to the postulated one. Specifically, attacks from more "agentic" candidates were perceived as more uncivil than attacks from more "communal" candidates ($ACME$ = 4.24, se = 0.47, $p < .001$). Turning to the attack characteristics (H2), neither the type of the attack nor the issue it discussed had a significant effect on incivility perceptions. Finally, while the amount of incivility in the electoral context (H3) significantly

affected perceptions of incivility, it increased them rather than lowered them (*ACME* = 3.56, *se* = 0.47, $p < .001$). Beyond our preregistered hypotheses, we found a significant negative effect of partisan congruency on incivility perceptions. Compared to attacks coming from an unknown party source, inparty attacks were perceived as less uncivil (*ACME* = -2.68, *se* = 0.63, $p < .001$), while outparty attacks were perceived as more uncivil (*ACME* = 3.93, *se* = 0.58, $p < .001$). These results are confirmed by all robustness checks (see Appendix E).

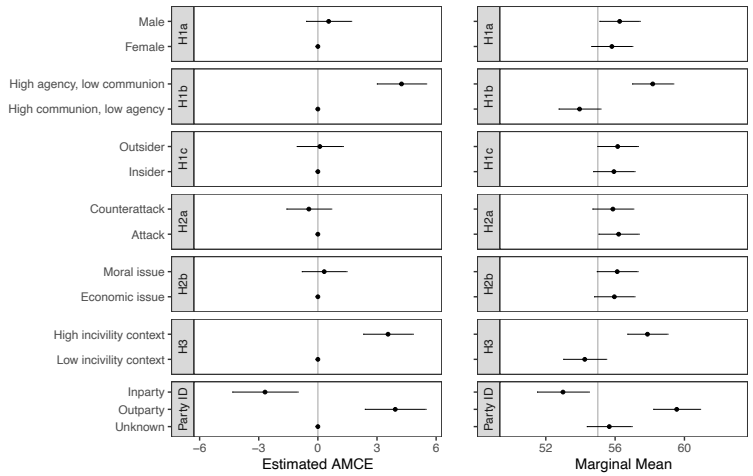

Figure 2. ACMEs (on the left) and Marginal Means (on the right) predicting incivility perceptions (estimated using the R package "cregg" developed by Leeper, 2020). Results from Model A1.

Exploratory Analysis 1: Individual Differences in Incivility Perceptions

In contrast to the unexpected outcomes concerning how contextual factors influenced perceptions of incivility, the exploratory analysis on the role of individual-level differences mostly aligns with the discussed trends. Figure 2 displays the regression coefficients for the proposed individual correlates of incivility perceptions. Each coefficient is extracted from an OLS regression model (nine models in total, Model B1.1 – Model B1.9), with incivility perceptions as the dependent variable and the individual correlate as the independent variable, while controlling for various demographic factors such as age, gender, educational level, political interest, partisan identification, issue importance, and partisan congruence (see Appendix E, Table E2 for full numerical results).

As anticipated, populist attitudes (b = - 0.72, se = 0.23, p < .01), authoritarian aggression (b = - 1.86, se = 0.19, p < .001), and perceived social marginalization (b = - 0.45, se = 0.08, p < .001) are all negatively associated with a decrease in incivility perceptions. As regards the role of personality traits, there was a significant negative association with trait aggressiveness (b = - 0.63, se = 0.19, p < .01), Machiavellianism (b = - 0.58, se = 0.16, p < .001), and narcissism (b = - 1.07, se = 0.16, p < .001); however, this was not the case for trait psychopathy (b = - 0.19, se = 0.18, p > .05).

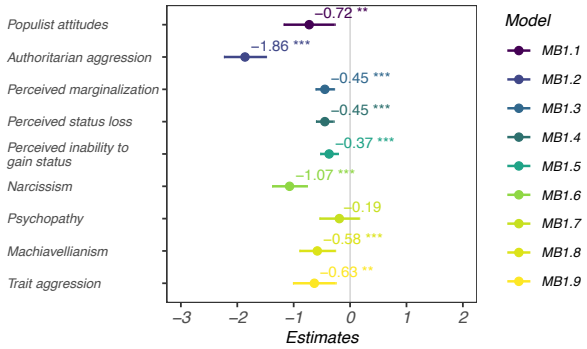

*Figure 3. Regression coefficients for individual-level correlates of perceptions of incivility. Results from OLS regression Models B1.1 – B1.9. Note: ***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05.*

Robustness checks revealed some differences. First, there are some notable differences when we disaggregate the analysis by types of incivility. As shown in Figure 3 (right panel), in the context of ridicule, only populist attitudes, authoritarian aggression, and narcissism maintain a significant negative association with incivility perceptions. Additionally, trait psychopathy (insignificant in the main model) is positively, rather than negatively, associated with incivility perceptions. In relation to insulting language (see Figure 4, center panel), populist attitudes lose their significant association with incivility perceptions, and trait psychopathy, which gains significance. Second, while results are generally consistent when using the "impoliteness" and "inappropriateness" scales as dependent variables (see Appendix E), when it comes to how "not normal" each attack was perceived, populist attitudes and authoritarian aggression are the only individual-level predictor that maintain a significantly negative association (see Figure 3, left panel).

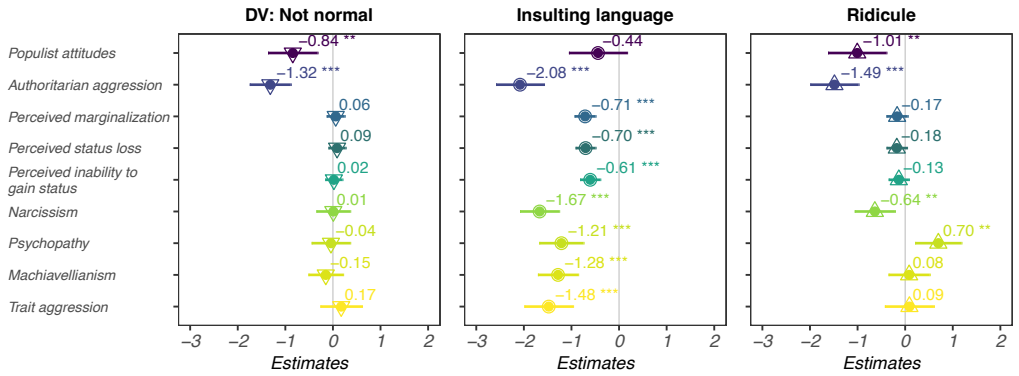

*Figure 4. Regression coefficients for individual-level correlates of perceptions of incivility, by incivility type (center and right panel) and for individual-level correlates of "not normal" perceptions (left panel). Results from OLS regression Models B2.1 – B2.9 (insulting language), B3.1-B3.9 (ridicule), B7.1-B7.9 (dv: "not normal"). Note: ***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05.*

Exploratory Analysis 2: The Downstream Effects on Candidate Evaluations

Finally, we explored the mediating path from contextual factors to candidate evaluation through incivility perceptions. Specifically, we conducted a separate mediation analysis for each of the attribute of the conjoint that significantly predicted variations in incivility perceptions, namely leadership traits and incivility setting. Figure 5 summarizes the indirect effect (i.e., the Average Causal Mediation Effect; ACME); the direct effect (i.e., the Average Direct Effect; ADE), and the total effect combined for each attribute of the conjoint. These results revealed significant negative indirect effects for both leadership traits (ACME = -2.97, $p < .001$) and incivility context (ACME = -2.56, $p < .001$), suggesting that these factors decreased candidate evaluations through increased perceptions of incivility. It shall be noted that the direct effects of leadership traits (ADE = -3.22, $p < .001$) and incivility context (ADE = -2.31, $p < .001$) on candidate evaluations are also significant and negative. This points to the existence of an additional direct pathway, independent of incivility perceptions. The total effects, combining both the indirect and direct paths, were significant and negative (leadership traits: -6.18, $p < .001$; incivility context: -4.87, $p < .001$). For both contextual factors, around 50% of this effect was mediated through incivility perceptions.

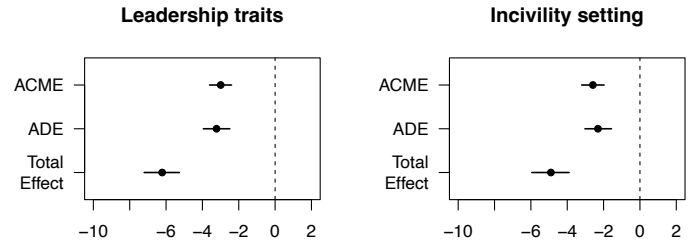

Figure 5. Summary of indirect, direct, and total effect of contextual drivers on candidate evaluation through incivility perceptions (estimated using the R package "mediation" developed by Tingley and colleagues, 2012). Results from mediation Models C1.1 and C1.2. All models control for gender, political interest, partisanship, issue importance, and partisan congruence.

Building on the role of partisan congruence in shaping incivility perceptions observed in the main analysis, we also report findings from a mediation analysis examining incivility perceptions' mediating effect on the impact of partisan congruence on candidate evaluation. It shall be note that this analysis was not initially preregistered, however it is in line with the overarching argumentation that for incivility to have the excepted detrimental effects on candidate evaluations, it must be first perceived as such. This analysis mirrors the findings related to leadership traits and incivility context, wherein incivility perceptions partially mediated the effect of partisan congruence on candidate evaluation (see Figure 6).

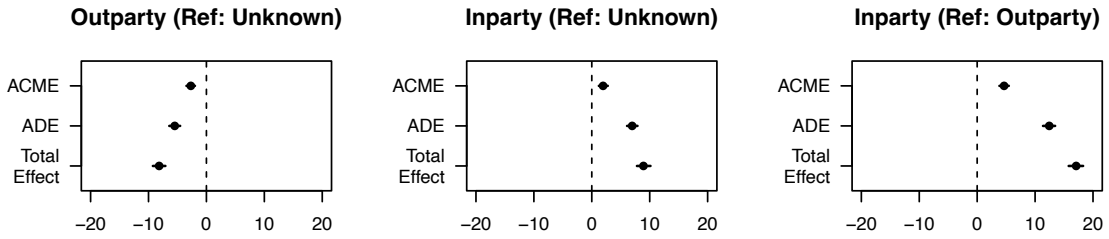

Figure 6. Summary of indirect, direct, and total effect of partisan congruence on candidate evaluation through incivility perceptions (estimated using the R package "mediation" developed by Tingley and colleagues, 2012). Results from mediation Models C1.3, C1.4, and C1.5. All models control for gender, political interest, partisanship, issue importance, and partisan congruence.

Overall, these findings, confirmed by all robustness checks (see Appendix E), suggest that while not all the influence on candidate evaluation is mediated by incivility perceptions, a significant portion is – especially in the case of leadership traits and incivility context. This underscores the critical role that perceptions, and their moderating factors, play in mediating the relationship between exposure to potentially uncivil attacks and the evaluations of political candidate evaluations.

Discussion

This paper aimed to advance our understanding of political incivility as a perception-driven aspect of political discourse, profoundly influenced by the communicative context in which it occurs. With this goal in mind, we conducted a conjoint experiment to test which characteristics of an "uncivil" attack – notably, the "who" (i.e., characteristics of the politician going uncivil), "what" (i.e., attack characteristics), and "when" (i.e., characteristics of the situation in which the attack is uttered) – influenced incivility perceptions, and how these perceptions then contributed to shape respondents' evaluations of the sponsor of such attacks. Largely contradicting what we hypothesized, the results of our analyses highlight the complexity of the phenomena under investigation.

Our main results can be summarized as follows. All things being equal, attacks are perceived as more uncivil in two sets of circumstances: (i) when they are uttered by candidates described as more aggressive (that is, their "agentic" traits are emphasized rather than their "communal" traits) and (ii) when the electoral context in which the attack took place is depicted as being characterized by widespread incivility. Leaving us bereft and reeling, *none* of the other conditions we manipulated – from candidate's gender to their outsider status, from different types of uncivil attacks to their retaliatory or moral nature – had any meaningful effect on incivility perceptions.

Given that they virtually contradict all pre-registered expectations, conducting the post-mortem of these results is no easy feat. Our intuition, generally speaking, was that in contexts where incivility is typical or expected (e.g., by aggressive candidates, or when incivility is rife in the electoral campaigns) specific instances of uncivil attack might pass more unnoticed, the public being so used to (and potentially numb towards) it – which should result in *depressed* incivility perceptions. Our results point to exactly the opposite phenomenon.

In hindsight, we can think of two possible reasons why this might be the case. On the one hand, from a theoretical standpoint, it might be that respondents overlap the explanans and the

explanandum, so to speak, and engage in a holistic assessment of the situation and the uncivil utterance at once. Specifically, these results could indicate, for instance, that incivility is automatically seen as more "in character" for more aggressive candidates – and perhaps even that candidates framed as being more aggressive (more agentic, less communal) automatically evoke a more uncivil behavior. In this sense, incivility from more aggressive candidates could be seen simply as an objective – that is, non-normative – assessment of their behavior. And finding that more uncivil contexts heighten perceptions of incivility of specific utterances (instead of depressing it) could suggest that the media may play a pivotal role framing election campaign in ways that can either amplify or mitigate perceptions of incivility (Muddiman, 2013).

On the other hand, from a methodological standpoint, it is possible that perceptions of incivility in our experiment were influenced by the nature of the experimental task itself. Specifically, by emphasizing "aggressive" leadership traits and explicitly highlighting incivility within the electoral context, these manipulations likely acted as cues that increased respondents' sensitivity to uncivil behaviors. Such "priming" may have established a mental framework for participants, predisposing them to interpret attacks from candidates characterized as more "agentic" and less "communal" and in highly uncivil electoral contexts, as more uncivil (Weingarten et al., 2016). Additionally, such cues potentially overshadowed the effects of the rest of the manipulated attributes in the study, rendering these variables less noticeable to the participants. This possibility, though speculative, highlight the challenges inherent in studying incivility perceptions in a controlled experimental setting such as ours, and indicates that more subtle and implicit methods may be required to accurately assess incivility perceptions in outside of real-world interactions.

Beyond the pre-registered expectations, our article included an exploratory investigation into the role of individual predispositions (that is, related to respondents' profile) for individual perceptions of uncivil attacks. Results for these exploratory analyses paint a rather clear picture: broadly speaking,

political attacks were less likely to be seen as being uncivil by individuals with authoritarian tendencies, higher populist beliefs, stronger feelings of social marginalization, and a "darker" personality profile. While these results should be interpreted cautiously given their correlational and exploratory nature, they expand and reinforce the available constructionist literature on incivility demonstrating that incivility in "in the eye of the beholder" (Herbst, 2010, p. 3). Additionally, they hint at the possibility that the nature of the attack, candidate going uncivil, and situation in which this happen might exert different effects for different people.

Unfortunately, our sample is not large enough to test for such interplay between conjoint attributes and individual differences in respondents in a statistically meaningful way – such analyses would be marred by largely insufficient statistical power, in particular when accounting for adjusted significance thresholds due to the expanded number of relationships tested. We advocate for further research that tests for such "cross-level" interactions within a more statistically powerful environment. In particular, the possibility that more aggressive voters (e.g., scoring high in authoritarian, populists, darker personality traits) would be particularly likely to disregard incivility when this latter is uttered by more aggressive candidates should be considered – specifically, from a normative standpoint, because this might provide relevant insights to understand why certain segments of the electorate seem particularly keen to promote candidates with a more aggressive and confrontational persona (Nai & Maier, 2024).

Finally, additional analyses showed that downstream consequences of incivility on candidate evaluation were indeed (partially) mediated by the way in which incivility was perceived. That is, the extent to which candidates are punished for "going uncivil" does partially depend on how this incivility is perceived within the context in which it occurs. This finding underscores that the effects of incivility in political discourse cannot be comprehensively assessed without accounting for the subjective perceptions of the audience, reinforcing the view on incivility as a perception. It also contributes to

explain why effect studies on the effects of incivility report mixed results (Maier, 2021) by failing to account for different perceptual experience (Liang & Zhang, 2021).

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