

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Race, Gender, and the Politics of Incivility: How Identity Moderates Perceptions of Uncivil Discourse

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## Abstract

Many worry that uncivil discourse can undermine democratic processes. Yet, what exactly does it mean for discourse to be uncivil? I argue that there is systematic variation in perceptions of incivility based on the identity of those targeted by uncivil speech. Specifically, I show—via a conjoint survey experiment—that White Americans are less likely to view statements directed at Black Americans as uncivil but more likely to perceive incivility when the target is a woman or a co-partisan. These results suggest an identity-laden aspect of incivility such that it is acceptable to treat Black Americans with less civility but less acceptable to do so for women and co-partisans. The results have implications for how we assess discourse and how that discourse affects the public.

**Keywords:** Political Incivility; Identity; Racial Attitudes; Stereotypes

Many Americans agree that incivility in politics is a problem and has been one for a long time (Herbst 2010). Many speak of incivility as a singular concept; that is, a set of words and phrases that apparently “everyone” knows have no place in good democratic governance. Recent work has found systematic variation in what people perceive as uncivil. I argue that these variations stem not only from partisan reasoning but perhaps more importantly from stereotypes about race and gender, indicating that incivility itself is an identity-laden construct for most Americans. If perceptions of incivility depend on the identities not only the person observing the uncivil speech but also on the identities of those involved with the communication—the speaker and target—then these perceptions are perhaps susceptible to manipulation by political elites to either use uncivil speech in their own politicking or disparage political opponents who can be framed as uncivil. But these downstream consequences are dependent on understanding the extent to which incivility perceptions are context and identity dependent.

Most existing work on incivility perceptions focuses on partisanship or specific types of rhetoric (e.g., insults or threats) (e.g., Druckman et al. 2019;

Muddiman 2017; Mutz 2015). Some recent work has also studied how the gender of the person exposed to uncivil speech can moderate those perceptions (Kenski, Coe, and Rains 2020), and how the identity of those speaking uncivilly can result in varied perceptions of incivility (Muddiman, Flores, and Boyce 2021; Sydnor 2019a). This study extends the existing body of research by systematically testing a whole host of potential identities at once, instead of opting for more traditional experimental designs that vary one or two features of uncivil speech at once. Further, this study furthers our understanding of how *race* intersects with perceptions of what constitutes uncivil speech. This is important because incivility is a historically racialized concept surrounding minority political actions, and racialized perceptions of incivility could affect the political fortunes of efforts to secure racial equality (Kirkpatrick 2008; Lozano-Reich and Cloud 2009; Rood 2013).

To address these gaps, I employ a conjoint experiment embedded in a nationally representative survey of 450 White, non-Hispanic/Latino Americans to test how the identities of a speaker, target, and observer of uncivil speech induces variations in perceptions of incivility. I find that the identity of those involved in uncivil discussions—their partisanship, race, and gender—moderates perceptions. Specifically, White Americans are *more* likely to perceive incivility when a speaker directs it at their co-partisans, more likely to perceive incivility when the speaker or target are women, and *less* likely to perceive incivility a speaker directs it at a Black American. These latter perceptions are moderated by prejudiced attitudes such that those with strong prejudiced attitudes least strongly perceive incivility directed at Black Americans. The implication of these findings is that White Americans are not perceiving norm violations equally in all cases, and especially in terms of identity. They seem to hold women to a higher standard in their expectations of civility and, among those with less prejudiced attitudes, are more sensitive to incivility targeting Black Americans. Moreover, I argue that incivility, due to these variations in perceptions, can act as a tool for bolstering the status quo.

### **Defining political incivility**

I define political incivility as *perceived, norm-violating political communication* (Mutz 2015, 6). Political incivility occurs when an individual (i.e., an audience member) perceives a statement from a speaker to a target as norm-violating; this entails a reaction to a dyadic combination of speaker and target. In political settings, a common definition of norm violations involves “violations of politeness that include slurs, threats of harm, and disrespect” (Druckman et al. 2019; also see Stryker, Conway, and Danielson 2016). But if people perceive uncivil speech differently depending on who says it and who it targets, then the consequences of perceived incivility are unevenly distributed and consequences of such speech on democracy are not as easily studied.

While much of the existing research on political incivility focuses on clear cases of norm violations—that is, experimental treatments designed to be as uncivil as possible—there are also instances where perceptions of norm violations depend on the political context. After all, what a person construes as a “threat of harm” or “disrespect” is largely a subjective assessment, and it will likely vary depending

on the context. Further, I argue that we should better understand how and why perceptions of incivility vary so that we can then better understand any effects of incivility. These effects include efficacy (Sydnor 2019a), trust in government (Mutz 2015), and negative affect toward partisans (Druckman et al. 2019), all of which can have notable consequences on American democracy. This study aims to elucidate the antecedents to these effects.

### Politics and incivility perceptions

Existing research has also looked at how partisanship may moderate people's perceptions of incivility. A number of researchers find that people are less sensitive to incivility that comes from their co-partisans (Gervais 2019; Muddiman 2017; Mutz 2015). This makes clear that there is some sort of in-group bias at play when partisans perceive incivility (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2004; Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015). For an audience member perceiving a speaker/target dyad, this means that she will likely have a bias in favor of a co-partisan. As such, if the speaker says something potentially uncivil, an audience member sharing the speaker's partisanship may be inclined to diminish the severity of the uncivil communication.

**Hypothesis 1a:** Audience members will less strongly perceive incivility when the speaker is a co-partisan, relative to when the speaker is not, all else constant.

As for how perceptions vary due to the partisanship of the target, I predict that audience members will be *more likely* to perceive incivility when a speaker directs it at a co-partisan. The logic here follows work in social psychology that finds people are more sensitive to threats that target their in-group (Voci 2006; Wann and Grieve 2005). This should extend to perceptions of incivility insofar that uncivil statements are norm violations and thus threatening in nature to one's in-group. Further, Gervais (2017) finds that incivility that targets in-party members triggers stronger emotional reactions. Because of this sensitivity to in-group members being treated poorly, audience members will be more likely to detect incivility when a speaker directs it at a co-partisan. While existing work has explored the question of uncivil speakers thoroughly, this question of those targeted by incivility remains unaddressed.

**Hypothesis 1b:** Audience members will more strongly perceive incivility when the target is a co-partisan, relative to when the target is not, all else constant.

### Gender and gender stereotypes

Gender identity is subject to a set of norms about what is and is not appropriate for women to say or for others to say to women (Mendelberg and Karpowitz 2016). Moreover, gendered stereotypes and gender roles likely play a prominent role in many Americans' perceptions of what is means to be uncivil. After all, gender is one of the primary means by which people forms perceptions about others; that is, it is one of the go-to heuristics people rely on, even when gender has nothing

to do with the issue at hand (Ito and Umland 2003). Further, even when people are primed to think about gender stereotypes, they often dominate discourse (Mendelberg and Karpowitz 2016).

While there are numerous stereotypes about women, most fall into one of two major stereotype categories that women are (1) warmer and (2) less competent than men (see Ellemers 2018 for a thorough review). Many people, either implicitly or explicitly, understand women through these two stereotypes regarding warmth and competence: that is, women care more about others, are better at expressing concern, are more sensitive than men, and are physically weaker than men. Moreover, these stereotypes become prescriptive insofar that many believe women *should* act in a manner consistent with their stereotype (Prentice and Carranza 2002).

Incivility, as discussed earlier, is a harsh sort of rhetoric, the sort that is often frowned upon by others because it violates certain social norms (Mutz 2015). This becomes a gendered issue when we consider that many believe women should be warmer and nicer than men. Women who engage in uncivil speech challenge the dominant stereotype about how they should behave. And women who challenge these sorts of stereotypes are judged more harshly than women who conform to them. For example, Phelan, Moss-Racusin, and Rudman (2008) find that supervisors punish women who express higher levels of competence in mock hiring processes by giving them less favorable evaluations, shifting attention to their perceived deficiencies in other areas; this pattern was not observed with male applicants. Further, Boussalis et al. (2021) find women in politics express less anger than men do, arguing that these prescriptive stereotypes of how women behave have real consequences in politicking. Thus, I contend that people will perceive incivility more strongly when the speaker is a woman, due to the woman breaking not only norms of politeness applied to everyone but also breaking specific stereotypes about how women should act.

**Hypothesis 2a:** Audience members will more strongly perceive incivility when the speaker is a woman, relative to when the speaker is a man, all else constant.

One consequence of the stereotype that women are weaker and more sensitive than men is that women are often perceived as needing protection from harm (Glick and Fiske 1996). This stereotype, and subsequent bias, is often internalized during childhood when gender norms are typically instilled in children, even from parents who consciously try to raise their children in counter-stereotypical ways (Bos et al. 2021; Endendijk et al. 2014, 2017). In fact, even adult women can express these sort of sexist attitudes in response to perceived hostility toward women (Fischer 2006). Thus, I expect Americans will be more sensitive to incivility when a speaker targets a woman compared to that speaker targeting a man.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Further, women in the United States have not been prominent in politics and have lower political efficacy as a result (Lawless and Fox 2005). Thus, many in the United States may be seen as less able to deal with uncivil political rhetoric.

**Hypothesis 2b:** Audience members will more strongly perceive incivility when the target is a woman, relative to when the target is a man, all else constant.

### Race and prejudice

As stated earlier, incivility as a concept has been historically racialized by those in the majority to silence racial minorities' speech (Lozano-Reich and Cloud 2009; Rood 2013). It stands to reason, then, that the race of the speaker or target can affect someone's perceptions of incivility. Specifically, I argue that the key to understanding this dynamic lie with some White Americans' prejudiced attitudes.

America's racial hierarchy is useful for understanding White Americans' potential attitudes toward a speaker or target involved in uncivil speech. White Americans are, by and large, the most socially powerful group in America (Omi and Winant 2014). White Americans dominate the country's history books as heroic figures and figureheads of democratic citizenship (Allison and Goethals 2011). And because most White Americans live in segregated communities, much of their exposure to Black Americans is through media, which often portray them as dangerous criminals (Jackson 2019).

The theory of social dominance orientation (SDO) provides a partial explanation for why this racial hierarchy may matter for some White Americans assessing the uncivil nature of some political speech. This theory posits that dominant groups in society have such a strong preference for the status quo that they outright desire a hierarchical society that places them at the top at others' expense (Sidanius and Pratto 2001). That is, those with these attitudes express an outright desire in many cases to dominate racial minorities in the United States.

It follows that perceptions of incivility could be subject to these prejudiced attitudes as incivility is generally considered a negative behavior in America (Bybee 2016).<sup>2</sup> Those with strong prejudiced attitudes are motivated to see Black Americans or other racial minorities as uncivil because incivility is often threatening; these people *want* to see these groups as uncivil because it confirms what they already believe: that these groups are threats.<sup>3</sup>

**Hypothesis 3a:** Audience members with strong prejudiced attitudes will more strongly perceive incivility if the speaker is Black, relative to an audience member with weaker prejudiced attitudes (i.e., a moderation effect), all else constant.

Extending this logic from speakers to targets, those with strong prejudiced attitudes are likely to express outright hostility toward Black Americans and other minorities;

<sup>2</sup>"Prejudiced attitudes" refer to SDO from this point forward, or racial resentment, which is a separate measure also employed by this study (Kinder and Sanders 1996).

<sup>3</sup>In one of the only studies on the subject of race and incivility perceptions, Sydnor (2019a) uses an experiment that varies the race of two people engaged in an uncivil discussion on Twitter. She finds that an interaction between two White men is perceived as more uncivil than an interaction between a Black man and a White man. However, she does not measure prejudiced attitudes and cannot find moderation effects, which I anticipate are crucial to detecting the effects that race and differences in soft power more generally have on perceptions of incivility. These findings are significant at  $p < 0.10$  (see her online appendix).

they want to hate these groups. As an extension of that, I posit that those with prejudiced attitudes *want* to see others expressing hostility toward Black Americans and other racial minorities. That said, while they may enjoy the uncivil statements themselves, they will be unlikely to admit that they perceive the statements as uncivil.

**Hypothesis 3b:** Audience members with strong prejudiced attitudes will less strongly perceive incivility if the target is Black, relative to a target with weaker prejudiced attitudes, all else constant.<sup>4</sup>

## Method

My framework to study incivility involves a dyad consisting of a speaker and a target of the incivility, and an audience that is exposed to that communication. I predict that the audience's reaction to any dyad depends on both ascriptive and descriptive features as well as the type of incivility. I study the impact of the hypothesized features via a conjoint experiment. This approach allows one to vary several features of stimuli and assess the causal effects of each feature independent of the others (Bansak et al. 2021). The advantage of this approach, as compared to a factorial vignette experiment, is that it allows me to study that large menu of dimensions about which I hypothesized. Specifically, respondents are randomly exposed to a set of features, multiple times. As Bansak et al. (2021) explain, multiple exposures in conjoint experiments do not appear to lead to satisficing.

I test the effects of 10 features of an uncivil communication: (1) the *speaker's* partisanship; (2) gender; (3) race, and (4) elite status (e.g., elected official or not); (5) the *target's* partisanship; (6) gender; (7) race, and (8) elite status; (9) the type of incivility; and (10) the presence of civility policing (i.e., an explicit pointing out of an uncivil statement). Each of these 10 features has two or more possible values that are always varied with each iteration of the conjoint experiment.<sup>5</sup> I will detail the specific connection of each attribute to their respective hypothesis below. I preregistered the hypotheses at AsPredicted.org.<sup>6</sup>

Note that I included three features that I did not discuss above: elite status, civility policing, and the type of incivility. I include the former to make the experimental design more externally valid, as job titles are frequently attributed to those mentioned in news articles. And I include civility policing also to enhance ecological validity as headlines often vary in whether it explicitly calls out incivility. Moreover, civility policing itself is worth further exploration in future work on the subject, but it is not the subject of interest in this particular study (see Braunstein 2018 for an introduction to this concept).

I omit the type of incivility as a formal hypothesis because the existing literature is clear on expectations. Namely, that due to exceedingly strong violations of social

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<sup>4</sup>While these hypotheses concerning race stipulate an interaction between prejudiced attitudes and perceptions of incivility based on race, the tests for these hypotheses emphasize the marginal effects we can observe from an interaction between these features of uncivil speech and personal attitudes.

<sup>5</sup>With that many features to randomly assign across so many possible values, I would need 4,608 unique stimuli to assess the effects of a feature if I were to use a traditional factorial design.

<sup>6</sup>You can find an anonymized document here: <https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=8z96ms>

norms, different types of incivility evoke stronger reactions (Muddiman 2017; Stryker, Conway, and Danielson 2016). For the purposes of this study, I follow Muddiman's (2017) work by studying personal-level and public-level incivility; specifically, I study insults and threats as forms of personal-level incivility, and slurs as a category of incivility that falls somewhere between the two major categories. First, insults deride political opponents. Second, threats often aim to increase make a target concerned for their own safety. Finally, slurs are derogatory, taboo words or phrases that a given culture perceives as incredibly offensive to a certain group of people (Henderson 2003). I am not the first to draw these distinctions, which Muddiman's (2017) research validates. As such, we should expect slurs to elicit the strongest perception of incivility, followed by threats, and then insults.

### *Conjoint design*

After a pretreatment survey, respondents are told that they are going to read excerpts from recent articles about politics. They then receive six different excerpts, each of which is randomly generated from the 10 different attributes mentioned above.<sup>7</sup> Table 1 shows each attribute and respective possible levels, as well as the relevant hypotheses. For occupation, I included numerous "ordinary" jobs, such as teacher, accountant, and nurse so that respondents did not consistently receive a description of the same nonelite job in each scenario. Also, I varied incivility type in a similar manner, with many different operationalizations all falling under the three main categories: insults, threats, and slurs. I discuss the variations in name/race/gender below.

A couple of examples of this short vignette are displayed in Figure 1.

After reading each vignette, the survey asked respondents to assess how uncivil they thought the scenario was. This process was repeated another five times for six total excerpts.<sup>8</sup>

### *Names and race*

To vary race and gender in the scenarios, I followed the audit study literature, using names (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004; Butler and Homola 2017). Specifically, this study relies on findings from Gaddis (2017) to select 64 first names to use in the study (16 for each gender/race combination), along with 15 last names that reliably denote a White or Black identity. I chose names from his results that control for class with six exceptions (see Appendix I for those six names), and I also account for the class confound by adding last names that are distinctly Black or White. The 64 names are all perceived to be the intended race at least 90 percent of the time, according to the Gaddis findings. I adopted the last names straight from Gaddis' study as well. Names were randomly generated according to what race and gender

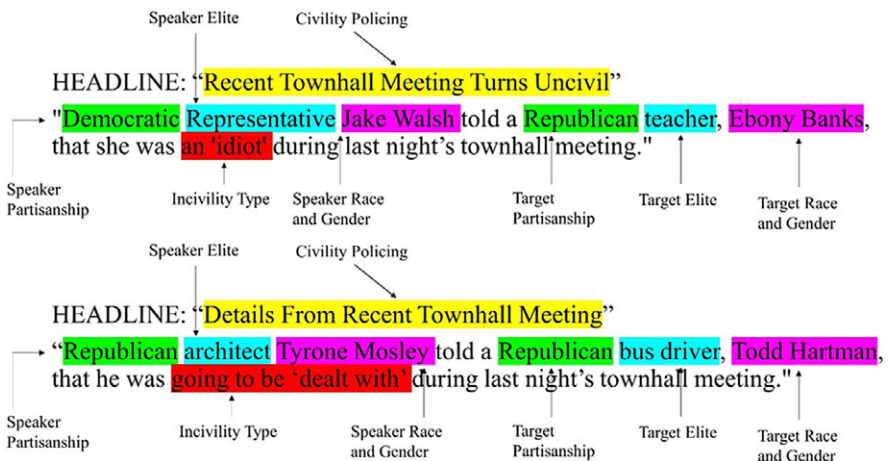
<sup>7</sup>A pilot test of this study, conducted with 130 undergraduate students, revealed that six tasks were the optimal number of tasks to ask respondents to complete for this design.

<sup>8</sup>I designed the excerpts to be brief, as fatigue could have been an issue with longer vignettes. Further, readers could lose attributes in longer texts, which encourage skimming. Six profiles is a low number of tasks to complete, as recent work finds that as many as 30 profiles does not significantly increase satisfying behaviors among respondents (Bansak et al. 2021).



**Table 1.** Attributes and levels in conjoint experiment

Attribute	Level	Hypothesis tested
Speaker Partisanship	1. Democrat 2. Republican	Hypothesis 1a
Speaker Gender	1. Female 2. Male (accomplished through name)	Hypothesis 2a
Speaker Race	1. Black 2. White (accomplished through name)	Hypothesis 3a
Target Partisanship	1. Democrat 2. Republican	Hypothesis 1b
Target Gender	1. Female 2. Male (accomplished through name)	Hypothesis 2b
Target Race	1. Black 2. White (accomplished through name)	Hypothesis 3b
Incivility Type	1. Insults (idiot, moron, lunatic, asshole, shit head, bitch, bastard) 2. Threats (“get punched,” “get roughed up by the crowd,” “get hurt by someone,” “be dealt with”) 3. Racial and gendered slurs (N-word, cracker, cunt, prick)	No associated prediction
Civility policing	1. “Recent Townhall Meeting Turns Uncivil” 2. “Details From Recent Townhall Meeting”	No associated prediction
Speaker Occupation	1. Elite 2. Nonelite (accomplished through multiple possible job titles)	No associated prediction
Target Occupation	1. Elite 2. Nonelite	No associated prediction



**Figure 1.** Examples of treatment variation.



were randomly assigned to the participant for any given task. First name and last name were randomly assigned separately to increase variation while still ensuring that the race of the first and last name was kept constant such that no one could receive a treatment where a speaker had a distinctly Black first name and a distinctly White last name, for example. I detail all first and last names chosen for this experiment in Appendix I.

### Procedure

The survey started (prior to the scenarios) with respondents answering a set of pretreatment questions including partisanship (seven-point scale), gender, and the SDO<sub>7</sub> scale ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ,  $\mu = 0.264$ ,  $sD = 0.192$ ) (Ho et al. 2015). This latter scale is used to test Hypotheses 3a and 3b. I also asked for respondents' basic demographic information, their partisanship, and their political ideology pretreatment (full question wording can be found in Appendix D). Participants then received the experimental treatments. After each scenario, participants answered the main posttreatment item, a five-point perceived incivility scale ( $\mu = 3.611$ ,  $sD = 1.336$ ), which is fairly standard in the existing literature (e.g., Muddiman 2017; Stryker, Conway, and Danielson 2016; Sydner 2019a).<sup>9</sup>

### Participants

The sample is 450 White, non-Hispanic/Latino American adults. The nationally representative sample was collected by Bovitz, Inc. between October 21 and 25, 2019. I collected an all-White sample because my predictions concerning prejudiced attitudes (H3a and H3b) are predicated on White Americans' attitudes; I wanted to maximize my ability to detect the predicted moderation effects. I determined the sample size based on recommendations provided by Orme (2010), who advises that conjoint analyses looking at subgroups use about 200 respondents per subgroup (65). Since I am analyzing the data using interactions to test two of the hypotheses, it is prudent to think of the analyses as having two main "subgroups," one group with "low" levels of out-group hostility, and one group with "high" levels.<sup>10</sup> Full demographics for the sample can be found in Appendix A.

<sup>9</sup>Some may worry that answering the first outcome question will subsequently affect the measurement of that same outcome after additional profile tasks are completed. However, research finds that this is not the case and that this particular concern can be addressed in analyses. Specifically, one can assess this by examining of the outcomes from later tasks differ from those results from the first task (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014, 8). I do this and find my results do not significantly differ when using only the first scenario's data (see Appendix F), except in the case of the interactions, which lose most of their statistical power by dropping 5/6 of the sample size.

<sup>10</sup>Since each participant responded to six tasks each, the data was first transformed from "wide" to "long," such that each task became its own row, complete with the corresponding respondent ID and characteristics (e.g., race, gender, etc.). Open-source code used for this transformation are publicly available. This creates a dataset of 2,700 rows or "respondents."

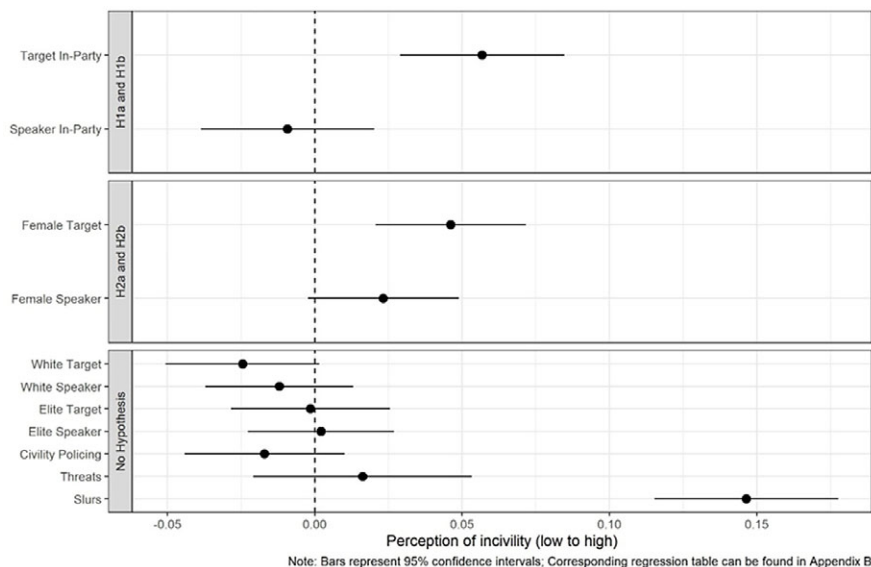


Figure 2. Perceptions of incivility and how they vary.

## Results

I analyze the data using ordinary least squares with all variables recoded from 0 to 1; all standard errors are cluster robust on the respondent (to account for the fact that each respondent produced six different rows of data).<sup>11</sup> I first present a model that tests Hypotheses 1 and 2, or the hypotheses that do not require moderation analyses to test. The reported significance tests are two-tailed in order to present a more stringent test of the hypotheses. The model shown in Figure 2 tests whether respondent’s perceptions of incivility (i.e., five-point scale from “not at all uncivil” to “very uncivil”) is affected by the following: the partisanship of the speaker (H1a) and the target (H1b); the gender of the speaker (H2a) and the target (H2b); the type of incivility used (no hypothesis) the race of the speaker (no hypothesis) and the target (no hypothesis); the presence of “civility policing” (no hypothesis); and the elite status of the speaker and target (no hypothesis). I include variables for which there are no associated hypotheses, including two race variables, because although unrelated to my central hypotheses (some of which are contingent on prejudiced attitudes), it is still important to account for them in this model since I am trying to isolate the effects of particular features of the vignette. This “base” model is later used again, with the relevant interactions added to it, to test Hypotheses 3a and 3b while accounting for the variation in the vignettes.

<sup>11</sup>AMCEs are perhaps the better-known method for analyzing conjoint designs. I omit them here because multivariate OLS is not only the same analysis when used with cluster-robust standard errors, but also because OLS regressions with interactions produce results that are easier to interpret. Regardless, I replicated the main analysis (sans interactions) with an AMCE model and the results did not significantly differ from the OLS; these results can be found in Appendix G.

Figure 2 shows the results of the base model, broken down by hypothesis. First and foremost, I find that sharing partisanship with the speaker has no effect on perceptions of incivility.<sup>12</sup> This indicates that people perceive in-party members and out-party members similarly when it comes to making uncivil statements, replicating some prior work on the subject (e.g., Druckman et al. 2019). However, in contrast, other work that finds people are less sensitive to incivility from their co-partisans, relative to their out-party (Gervais 2019; Muddiman 2017). This may be due to the variation in the other aspects of the conjoint. My approach presents a wider variety of possible intervening variables to people's perceptions of incivility, while the work that finds people less sensitive to co-partisan incivility has to date focused only on the intersection of partisanship and incivility type.

However, I do find strong support for H1b that predicts that those who share partisanship with the target will be more likely to perceive incivility, relative to audience members who do not share partisanship with the target. I find strong effects in the predicted direction for partisanship ( $p < 0.01$ ). This indicates that people are more likely to perceive incivility when a speaker targets a co-partisan with uncivil speech, relative to situations wherein the audience member does not share partisanship with the target.

Next, I turn to the hypotheses concerning gender, namely that people would more strongly perceive incivility when it was spoken by or targeted at a woman, both of which are supported.<sup>13</sup> As Figure 2 shows, there are positive effects of the speaker ( $p < 0.10$ ) or target being a woman ( $p < 0.01$ ). Both of these findings reflect the effects that gendered stereotypes in American society can have on people's perceptions of uncivil speech from and toward a woman. White Americans judge women who act uncivilly more harshly than men, likely due to stereotypes about how women are supposed to be "nicer" than men. And White Americans are sensitive to women being targeted by incivility, likely due to paternalistic notions about protecting women, who they believe are inherently sensitive.

I next move on to the question of whether prejudiced attitudes affect these perceptions. As one can see in Figure 2, the results show that White Americans more strongly perceive incivility when the target is Black. But these results do not test the actual hypotheses as those require an investigation of moderation effects. Recall that H3a predicts that those with strong prejudiced attitudes will more strongly perceive incivility if the speaker is Black, relative to an audience member with weaker prejudiced attitudes. This implies an interactive model between the presence of Black speaker and prejudiced attitudes. Specifically, I operationalize this as social dominance orientation. I present the interaction graphically in Figure 3, with the details appearing in Appendix B. As one can see in the figure, I find no evidence in favor of H3a.<sup>14</sup> This indicates that people with strong prejudiced attitudes do not perceive incivility more strongly from Black speakers.

<sup>12</sup>Do note that any analyses testing partisanship excluded "true" independents from the analysis (a 4 on the seven-point scale).

<sup>13</sup>For those interested in seeing the results of a speaker or target sharing the same gender as the audience member, see Appendix J.

<sup>14</sup>This holds true with models substituting racial resentment; the hypothesis is still unsupported.

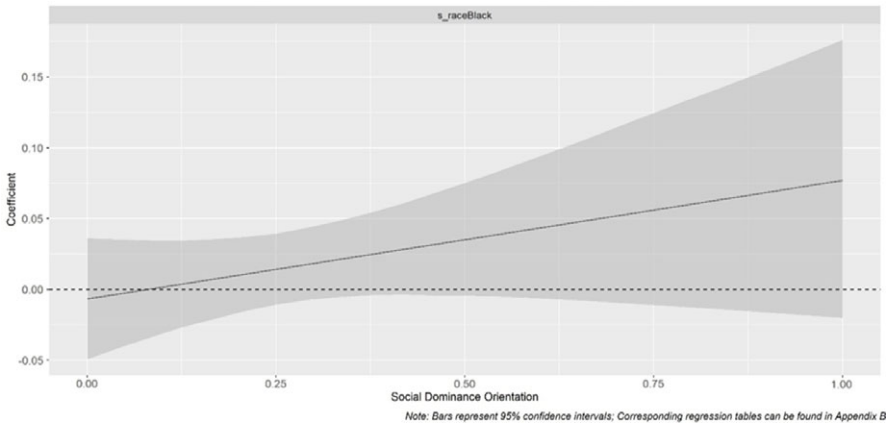


Figure 3. OLS interaction model for racism toward speaker.

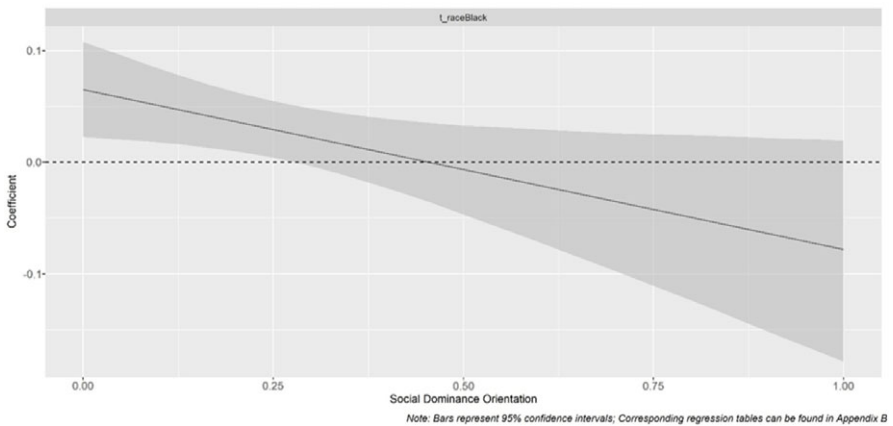


Figure 4. OLS interaction model for racism toward target.

And Hypothesis 3b predicts that those with strong prejudiced attitudes will less strongly perceive incivility if the target is Black, relative to audience members with weaker prejudiced attitudes. This, again, calls for an interactive model between SDO and the presence of a Black target. Figure 4 shows some support of this hypothesis, but from a different angle than originally predicted. This figure shows that those with the least prejudiced attitudes (i.e., low SDO) also exhibit the highest degree of sensitivity toward uncivil speech directed at a Black target ( $p < 0.10$ ).<sup>15</sup> This indicates perhaps that those with stronger prejudiced attitudes are indeed less sensitive to incivility that targets Black people, but it may not be the case that they are actively trying to ignore such incivility. These findings replicate across other models,

<sup>15</sup>A similar model with racial resentment exhibits a similar pattern; see Appendix B.

including tests of reactions to specific dyadic combinations of speaker and target (see Appendix C).

This implies that SDO attitudes predict incivility perceptions in cases where the target of uncivil speech is a Black person, regardless of the actual incivility being used. These moderation effects reveal why respondents, as shown in Figure 2, more strongly perceive incivility when a speaker directs it at a Black target. As one can see in Figure 4, those with the least prejudiced attitudes most strongly perceive incivility that targets a Black person. In the aggregate, this result becomes weaker. Overall, however, this is clear evidence in favor of the argument that White Americans with prejudiced attitudes differentially perceive incivility depending on the race of the target.

As for features for which I do not have an associated prediction, we see some clear trends. Figure 2 shows that while the presence of slurs greatly affects people's perceptions that the exchange was uncivil, threats do not. The effect of slurs on incivility perceptions is large and statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ), providing clear evidence that respondents see slurs as more uncivil than other types of uncivil discourse, replicating some prior work on the subject (Stryker, Conway, and Danielson 2016). However, respondents do not perceive threats are more uncivil than insults. Further, there is no observed effect for the remaining variables that did not have an associated hypothesis.

This might be surprising in at least one area: the null effect on the elite status of the speaker. Elites may no longer hold a vaulted place in American culture; this may reflect the rise of polarization and decline in trust in government (Public Trust in Government 2019). In Appendix E, I replicate analyses from Frimer and Skitka (2020) that test whether people perceive incivility more strongly from their in-party elites than they do in-party nonelites. These additional analyses also exhibit null effects. This difference from Frimer and Skitka is likely due to the wider menu of features this experiment tests, as opposed to a more straightforward design that the aforementioned study employs.

## Discussion and conclusion

Many Americans are greatly concerned with incivility in politics, with most of the electorate going as far as saying the phenomena have reached “crisis levels” (The State of Civility 2017). Scholars find good reason to be wary of political incivility, as it can erode trust in institutions (Mutz 2015), increase hostility (Gervais 2017), and even disincentivize certain groups of people from engaging in politics (Sydnor 2019a). Empirical strategies for identifying incivility have evolved from manual content analyses of news corpuses (e.g., Berry and Sobieraj 2014) to automated content analyses that rely on dictionaries of “uncivil” terms (Coe and Park-Ozee 2020), machine-learning programs that adapt in real-time to evolving discourse (Hosseini et al. 2017), and hybrid methods that retain human knowledge (Muddiman, McGregor, and Stroud 2019). The issue with many of these methods of inquiry is that they often fail to account for social dynamics and human bias in how we perceive incivility.

I show that researchers must account for variations in incivility perceptions going forward and attend to the gendered, racial, and partisan interplay at work when it comes to incivility. There is no single, universally accepted understanding of what is and is not uncivil; even slurs, though predominantly seen as uncivil in this study,

may still be socially acceptable in some contexts (King et al. 2018). My findings show that people form their own impressions based on a combination of their attitudes and the identity of those involved in an uncivil exchange in the following ways:

1. People are sensitive to their co-partisans being targeted by uncivil speech, while conversely being more likely to look the other way when an out-partisan is being similarly targeted.
2. People are more sensitive to women speaking uncivilly and being targeted by incivility; essentially, women need to watch their speech more, according to these findings.
3. People with strong prejudiced attitudes less strongly perceive incivility targeting Black Americans, making them easy targets for incivility for those strategic enough to capitalize on America's history of White supremacy.

And while slurs may be the strongest predictor of whether someone strongly perceives something as uncivil, the findings in this study reveal a degree of partisan strategy at play in when and how people perceive incivility (Herbst 2010). Indeed, the findings make clear that partisans are overly sensitive to uncivil speech that targets a co-partisan. I posit that this is partly strategic, as outrage politics can be quite effective when one side can make the case that their party is being treated poorly (Braunstein 2018). This also indicates to some extent that partisan calls for civility may be made in bad faith as a means to demean out-partisans for their "uncivil" behavior. White Americans may be politically motivated to perceive incivility when it is most convenient to them, such as when Black Americans or other minorities challenge white supremacy.

Gendered attitudes about what is acceptable for women to say seems to affect how strongly people perceive a woman's political speech as uncivil (Ellemers 2018). And the White Americans in this sample seemed especially sensitive to incivility targeted at women, indicating a patriarchal sort of prejudice (Glick and Fiske 1996). If women and men are being judged by different standards on what constitutes incivility, then we must pay attention to the gendered biases that can accentuate attention toward some people's speech, and not others. For example, the findings here potentially indicate that female candidates for office are hamstrung to carefully watch their language in order to appease gendered stereotypes of appropriate speech for women in America.

It is important to note, however, that this study's conclusions regarding the gender of speakers and targets are only a starting point. This survey did not measure benevolent sexism, which I argue is likely underpinning the effects observed in this study. While my findings lay a foundation for future research to build off, I cannot definitively say that sexist stereotypes underly perceptions of uncivil speech coming from or directed toward women.<sup>16</sup>

Further, even after accounting for every type of incivility and the other contextual features of an uncivil speech exchange, prejudiced attitudes can moderate White Americans' perceptions of incivility. Specifically, White Americans with the lowest

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<sup>16</sup>Gendered analyses (including interactions) can be found in Appendix C; again, these cannot provide definitive proof of a relationship between sexist attitudes and perceptions of incivility.

levels of social dominance orientation—a *desire* to dominate others in society—perceive incivility *more* when the target of that uncivil speech is Black. Meanwhile, those high on the scale do not seem to be particularly sensitive or blind to incivility targeting Black Americans. So, while racially progressive White Americans may more readily detect incivility that targets Black Americans, a whole swath of the population will likely not mind at all. This allows for an explicit type of prejudice to take place in American discourse *under the guise of uncivil speech*; that is, elites have *carte blanche* to say whatever they like about Black Americans so long as they play to the right audiences.

Perhaps more interesting to some are supplemental analyses where I measure the perceived incivility of a speaker depending on who they are speaking to. These analyses, found in Appendix H, show that Black women are routinely perceived as the most uncivil speakers, especially when they are speaking to White women. This is largely unsurprising due to the litany of research that finds that Black women are held to higher standards of personal conduct than white women or even Black men (Ashley 2014; Walley-Jean 2009; Wingfield 2007). While this study lacks the sample size to draw more definitive conclusions about the intersection of race and gender in regard to perceptions of incivility, future research should turn to these questions as they present ample opportunity to further our complex understanding of these phenomena.

In sum, what I find in this study is that claims about who is and is not uncivil are fundamentally about *power*. That is, who and what White people perceive as uncivil reflects their notions of power in America—who has it and who wants it. Those without power or those with less power are perceived as being less civil than those who already have power, like White men. As such, this study demonstrates that incivility is about *identity* and that incivility can be a tool for bolstering a status quo that benefits some while harming other, more marginalized voices in society. This could matter when contentious politics, especially those concerning race or gender, are deemed uncivil by those in power. In these situations, norm violations are not being perceived equally in all cases, specifically when the target of the uncivil speech is a woman, or a co-partisan, or Black. There are a series of double standards at play. And the outrage in politics surrounding just how “uncivil” everything has become is perhaps just another strategy: faux outrage politics that censures the speech of some, but not others. Perhaps, there is no incivility crisis in America; rather it is merely politically convenient to perceive as much when it suits some people more than others.

**Supplementary material.** For supplementary material accompanying this paper visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/rep.2022.7>

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