Dimensions of Elite Partisan Polarization

Comparing the Effects of Incivility and Issue Polarization on Mass Attitudes

Rasmus Skytte, raks@ps.au.dk
Aarhus University
Early draft, please do not cite or circulate.
April 20, 2017

Abstract
The rising level of elite partisan polarization in the US has received massive attention from scholars of public opinion, and different researchers have focused on different aspects of this development. Some have studied the effects of the growing ideological distance between the parties, often termed issue polarization, while others have looked at the effects of harsh and disrespectful language, often termed incivility. However, due to empirical confounding, it remains unanswered whether and how the effects of these two aspects of elite conflict differ. In this paper, I address this issue using two experiments embedded in a large, representative survey of the US population. By manipulating each aspect of elite conflict independently of the other, I am able to show that incivility and issue polarization have very distinct effects. Political trust is lowered by incivility, but not by issue polarization. Conversely, issue polarization creates attitude polarization among partisans, but incivility does not. Both aspects of elite conflict can create affective polarization, but their effects remain quite distinct as they depend on the policy issue that is being debated.
Introduction

If you go to Google Images and type in the words “Democrat” and “Republican”, you will get several cartoons depicting fistfights between blue donkeys and red elephants. Of course, real scuffles are still rare events outside the world of political satire, but there is no doubt that elite partisan polarization has risen to a very high level in the United States (Hetherington 2009; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006).

This development has received massive attention from scholars of public opinion, but different researchers have focused on different aspects of it. Some have studied the effects of the growing ideological distance between the parties, often termed issue polarization, while others have looked at the effects of harsh and disrespectful language, often termed incivility. Among the most notable findings is that issue polarization can lead to attitudinal and affective polarization among partisans (Levendusky 2009, 2010; Carsey and Layman 2002; Rogowski and Sutherland 2016), while incivility can lower political trust (Mutz and Reeves 2005; Forgette and Morris 2006).

However, an important but unanswered question is whether and how the effects of these two aspects of elite conflict actually differ. In many prior studies, incivility and issue polarization have been confounded empirically, which makes it difficult to know exactly what is causing the observed effects (Mutz 2015: 28). This is especially true for experimental studies in which the treatment material often consists of information that can be interpreted as describing both the tone of the debate and the ideological distance between the parties (e.g., Gervais 2014; Borah 2014; Mullinix 2016; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013).

Furthermore, though the emphasis in the literature on incivility and in the literature on issue polarization has to some extent been on different outcomes, both aspects of elite conflict have been claimed to affect many of the same attitudes. For instance, the negative effects on political trust have mainly been studied within the literature on incivility, yet there are also scholars who argue that trust can be adversely affected by issue polarization (Uslaner 2015; King 1997; Brady, Ferejohn, and Harbridge 2008). We thus know that elite conflict can have a variety of potentially harmful consequences, but we cannot be sure which of the two aspects citizens are responding to.

To disentangle the effects of issue polarization and incivility, I present the results of two survey experiments in which each aspect of elite conflict is manipulated independently of
the other. Using such a design allows me to compare their effects on a variety of different outcomes. To date, this has not been possible in any other study.

The results clearly show that the two aspects of elite conflict have distinct effects. Trust in politicians is lowered by incivility, but issue polarization has no effect on this outcome. Conversely, issue polarization creates attitude polarization among partisans, but incivility does not. Both aspects can create affective polarization in the form of an increased dislike for the other party, but their relative effects depend on the issue being debated.

The fact that incivility and issue polarization have different effects indicates that they provide citizens with informational cues that structure their political attitudes in different ways. Therefore, it makes good sense to treat them as distinct dimensions of elite partisan conflict. However, it also means that scholars of public opinion should be more careful to avoid confounding them. In an experimental setting, this entails a closer attention to the specific information that participants are given and the inclusion of post-treatment items to establish that each dimension is manipulated independently of the other.

Two dimensions of elite partisan polarization

Issue polarization is typically defined as the ideological distance between the parties and the homogeneity of each party (e.g., Levendusky 2010; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013). In other words, if polarization is high on some policy issue, the members of each party agree internally and have ideal policy points that are far from the ideal policy points of the members of the other party. This dimension of conflict is thus solely related to the policy positions of the politicians.

Defining incivility is somewhat harder than defining issue polarization, as there is no agreed upon standard (Jamieson et al. 2015). However, the majority of scholars agree that incivility concerns the amount of respect that politicians show their opponents (e.g., Brooks and Geer 2007; Coe, Kenski, and Rains 2014; Borah 2013). It is thus a feature of their interaction with other politicians, not a feature of their beliefs or the extremity of their attitudes. In line with this, I define incivility as acts or statements by a politician that, in the eyes of most observers, are disrespectful towards his or her opponents.\(^1\) For instance,

\[^1\]By stating that the acts or statements have to be disrespectful “in the eyes of most observers”, I am deliberately focusing on what might be termed perceived incivility. I thus avoid having to define objective criteria for incivility. This parallels the study of, for instance, frame strength, in which researchers focus on the perceived strength instead of
incivility includes interrupting and shouting at another politician during a debate, and it also includes name-calling and the use of pejoratives.\footnote{It is important to note that incivility is not the same negative campaigning or negativity (Mutz 2015, 7). Negative ads (i.e., ads that make claims about political opponents) can be both civil and uncivil, depending on the content (Fridkin and Kenney 2008, 2011). Furthermore, incivility is a broader term that can be used to describe the tone of messages not only in ads, but also in interviews or debates.}

The level of incivility and the level of issue polarization can be thought of as conceptually different dimensions of conflict. It is possible to highly disagree without being disrespectful, and it is also possible to be disrespectful without actually disagreeing much. Of course, the two dimensions might be empirically correlated to some extent, but this does not change the fact that there is no logical connection between the two phenomena. Each aspect of elite conflict has its own literature, and I am not the first to note that they should be thought of as conceptually distinct (see Mutz 2015, 28; Brooks and Geer 2005: 4; Schraufnagel 2005). Nevertheless, many researchers have not clearly distinguished between them.

To illustrate this lack of a clear distinction, consider the example that Hetherington (2009) puts forward in the opening of his careful and thorough review of the issue polarization literature: Following a dispute over procedure in a committee meeting in 2003, Rep. Scott McInnis (R-Col.) told Rep. Pete Stark (D-Calif.) to "shut up", and Stark then called McInnis "a little fruitcake." Hetherington states that this example "illustrates the intense polarization" of American politics, but there is nothing to indicate that the issue positions of the two politicians were particularly far apart. Instead, it is a good example of incivility as the two politicians were clearly being disrespectful towards each other.

Of course, if this were just a matter of choosing more accurate examples, the lack of clarity would be of minor importance. Unfortunately, the two dimensions are not clearly separated at the empirical level either. For instance, in experimental studies of incivility, the stimulus often includes statements that can also be interpreted as describing the level of issue polarization. A good example of this is the uncivil message given to participants by Gervais (2014). Here, the college policies of Obama are described as "socialist", which can surely be considered disrespectful in an American context. However, given the ideological content of the word, it might also signal something about the policy positions of President Obama and those of the messenger. Another example is the uncivil message used by Thorson, Vrage, and Ekdale (2010) and Borah (2014) in which the purpose of the Kyoto Protocol is described as "misguided." Here, the problem is not that the word creating objective criteria (e.g., see Chong and Druckman 2007).
has ideological connotations, but that it is used to describe the aims of a policy, thereby signaling something about the messenger’s substantive position.

Furthermore, we have no way of knowing whether the two dimensions are confounded as none of these studies include post-treatment measures tapping perceived issue polarization. As Mutz (2015, 28) recently noted, this is actually a problem for most experiments dealing with incivility:

[M]ost of the studies that have examined the impact of incivility thus far have not included measures to establish that incivility was manipulated independent of other factors such as the partisan extremity of the communication source. This makes it difficult to know how much of any identified effect is style, and how much is perceived political substance.

In Mutz’s own experiments on the effects of televised incivility, she first makes participants watch a mock debate between two political candidates, and then measures the perceived levels of both dimensions of conflict to avoid this pitfall. However, the results she presents do not actually rule out the possibility that the level of issue polarization varies across her treatment conditions. In her manipulation check, all results are averages across the two candidates (see Mutz and Reeves 2005, 5; Mutz 2015, 55), and we thus have no information regarding whether the two politicians are seen as disagreeing more in one condition than in the other.3

The potential for empirical confounding is also present in studies focusing on the effects of issue polarization. For instance, Mullinix (2016) tells experimental participants that the "political atmosphere" is "incredibly competitive and highly polarized", and Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus (2013) tells participants that "the partisan divide is stark as the parties are far apart". While researchers who are used to working with ideological continua might read these as nothing more than descriptions of issue positions, it is unsure whether the same can be said for laypeople. Furthermore, none of these studies include post-treatment measures tapping the degree of perceived incivility, so we have no way of knowing whether the two dimensions are actually confounded. The potential for confounding is also present in observational studies as researchers generally do not control for the level of

3Furthermore, Mutz does not actually measure the perceived issue positions of the two candidates. Instead, she measures how liberal/conservative and Republican/Democratic they are seen. This is a small, but very important, difference since the issues discussed in the mock debate are neither ideological nor partisan in nature (e.g., they discuss whether NASA should receive additional funding for space exploration). It is therefore unlikely that these measures are very good at tapping the perceived distance in terms of issue positions.
incivility when examining the effects of issue polarization (see, e.g., Brewer 2005; Garner and Palmer 2011; Thornton 2013; Rogowski 2014)

The fact that scholars of public opinion often fail to distinguish clearly between incivility and issue polarization is not surprising given that the two aspects of elite conflict are often mentioned in close connection to each other in the media (Levendusky and Malhotra 2016). However, they have actually been distinguished by researchers outside the field of public opinion. For instance, Schraufnagel (2005) has argued that this distinction should be made when analyzing the functioning of legislatures.

To be sure, there are a few studies in which the risk of confounding is not that big. For instance, in the experiments conducted by Levendusky (2010), the degree of issue polarization is not varied using words. Instead, he presents people with diagrams that depict the issue positions of the members of each party. It is probably unlikely (though not impossible) that these diagrams can be used to infer anything about the tone of the debate, and this makes the risk of confounding seem small even if he does not measure the level of perceived incivility. However, as long as only one of the two dimensions of conflict is varied, it is still impossible to compare them. To discern whether their effects differ, we need a single study in which both dimensions are manipulated, but no such study has to date been conducted.

**The effects of incivility and issue polarization**

Extant research shows that incivility and issue polarization can have a variety of effects on citizens. The outcomes upon which I will be focusing are: trust in politicians, attitudinal polarization, and affective polarization. From a democratic perspective, all three are important; lack of trust is symptomatic of political alienation, and polarization erodes cohesion and makes compromising harder. Furthermore, each of the three variables has, to a varying degree, been linked to both elite incivility and issue polarization, but the possible confounding and lack of comparison in previous studies means that we do not know whether and how the effects of incivility and issue polarization differ on these outcomes.

In what follows, I use the theoretical arguments offered in the existing literature to put forward three sets of hypotheses regarding the effect of these two types of conflict on each of the three outcomes. As mentioned, it is not certain that the effects of incivility and issue polarization differ, and the different hypotheses should therefore not be seen as competing.
Trust in politicians

Trust in politicians is a type of specific trust directed at either elected officials or at bodies of elected officials such as Congress. Several researchers argue that this type of trust can be adversely affected by incivility (Mutz and Reeves 2005; Forgets and Morris 2006; Borah 2013). The theoretical rationale typically offered is that trust in politicians is, at least partly, dependent on whether people think that politicians will "observe the rules of the game" (Citrin and Muste 1999). Displays of incivility can provide seemingly informative cues about whether our elected officials are likely to do so. More specifically, when politicians shout or turn to name-calling, they breach the social norms of good conduct that are only rarely disregarded in everyday life (Funk 2001: 197). In such instances, it is therefore reasonable for people to doubt whether politicians actually care about the common rules at all.

However, other researchers argue that it is not (only) the style of political discussions that lowers trust, as issue polarization might also have an effect (King 1997; Uslaner 2015; Brady, Ferejohn, and Harbridge 2008). For instance, some claim that the ideological positions of elected officials in the United States have become significantly more polarized than the positions of the general public, and that this greater discrepancy creates distrust. Hetherington (2005, 23) summarizes this argument in the following way: "[T]hose in the political center—the majority of Americans—are now less likely to trust the government because they see the parties as too far apart from ordinary people and too close to the ideological poles."

Another explanation for why issue polarization might create distrust is that people generally fail to recognize how much other people disagree with them on many issues. If people believe that the common good is fairly self-evident on most issues, it is easy to reach the conclusion that "political conflicts are unnecessary trumped-up affairs traceable to the influence and narrow interests of powerful groups" (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002, 142).

Hypothesis 1A: Elite incivility lowers trust in politicians.

Hypothesis 1B: Elite issue polarization lowers trust in politicians.

Attitude polarization

There is, and has long been, significant disagreement about whether the American population is polarized in terms of attitudes (see, e.g., Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Fiorina,
Abrams, and Pope 2005, 2008). However, much of the disagreement stems from a lack of consensus about how to define this sort of mass polarization (Hetherington 2009; Lelkes 2016: 394). In this study, I focus on what might be termed partisan attitude polarization, which is the degree to which Republicans and Democrats hold different attitudes on policy issues. Using this definition, it seems clear that the American population has grown more polarized (Hetherington 2009; Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006; Fiorina and Abrams 2008).

The majority of scholars seem to think that the cause is the growing issue polarization among politicians, but there are also a few who claim that elite incivility might have an effect as well. For instance, relying on affective intelligence theory, Gervais (2014) argues that this type of conflict can produce feelings of anger, and that anger makes people rely more heavily on party cues and preexisting viewpoints. Ultimately, incivility therefore reduces the willingness to compromise. Similarly, Andersson et al. (2013) find that online incivility can polarize opinions on nanotechnology.

Several arguments have been offered for elite issue polarization and mass attitude polarization should be causally connected. For instance, Levendusky (2009, 2010) argues that when the elites are polarized on an issue, the party cues become clearer, and it is easier for people to know where the parties stand. Therefore, issue polarization also makes it easier for people to adopt the positions of their preferred party, and an increasing partisan gap is created. A different, but related, argument is offered by Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus (2013). They believe that polarization decreases ambivalence and increases motivated reasoning. In a polarized environment, people will therefore pay less attention to the arguments offered and instead rely solely on party cues.

Hypothesis 2A: Elite incivility increases attitude polarization.

Hypothesis 2B: Elite issue polarization increases attitude polarization.

Affective polarization

Affective polarization is the degree to which partisans feel negatively towards the opposing party and its supporters. In recent years, several researchers have begun mapping this phenomenon, and the results have been very clear; affective polarization is on the rise in the U.S., and partisans increasingly dislike or even hate the other side (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012; Mason 2015). The majority of scholars seem to think that the rise in affective
polarization is driven by elites in some way, but there are different explanations on the market regarding the exact cause.

In one camp, there are researchers arguing that elite incivility—or phenomena closely related to incivility—is the main cause. For instance, Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012, 23) propose that exposure to "loud and negative political campaigns" is creating the increasingly negative feelings. These campaigns do so because they "reinforce voters’ sense of partisan identity and confirm stereotypical beliefs about supporters and opponents."

Similarly, Mutz argues that the thermometer ratings of politicians can be polarized by incivility. Relying on experiments, she finds that if a televised debate featuring close-ups becomes incivil, there is a tendency for people to decrease their ratings of their least liked candidate. Mutz argues that this affective polarization occurs because incivility creates arousal, and arousal can, in turn, "intensify the negative affect viewers have for disliked people and political positions" (Mutz 2007: 624).

In another camp, there are researchers arguing that affective polarization is produced by issue polarizations among the elites. For instance, Rogowski and Sutherland (2016) find that increased ideological differences between political figures produce increasingly polarized thermometer rankings (for similar findings, see Abramowitz and Webster n.d., Hetherington 2001). They offer two arguments in respect to why issue polarization might lead to affective polarization. First, as the candidates become more ideologically diverse, the stakes associated with the choice between them become bigger. Second, polarization may lead to more motivated reasoning in which citizens form attitudes more confidently and with less reflection, and this can in turn heighten in-group favoritism.

Hypothesis 3A: Elite incivility increases affective polarization.

Hypothesis 3B: Elite issue polarization increases affective polarization.

Study design

In order to be able to distinguish the effects of the two dimensions of conflict, each has to be manipulated separately. I therefore need great control over the information that people receive. To achieve this, I chose to conduct vignette-based survey experiments.

I have conducted a total of two experiments embedded in the same survey. In each, participants were presented with information concerning a political issue on which some
members of Congress are supposedly working. The information consisted of a few lines describing the level of issue polarization and a few lines describing the degree of incivility among politicians working on this issue. Thus, both experiments have a 2x2 design, where the level of issue polarization and the level of incivility were varied. For purposes of benchmarking, I also included a control group that did not receive information concerning the level of conflict along the two dimensions.

The two experiments are very similar, but they concern political issues with different levels of salience. In experiment 1, the issue is whether drilling should be allowed off the Atlantic Coast and in the Arctic, and in experiment 2, it is whether private firms should be in charge of air traffic controllers. Furthermore, these topics have previously been used by Levendusky (2009, 2010) and Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus (2013).

As it might harm the experimental realism and psychological engagement, I found it important not to present participants with information in one experiment that could be seen as contradicting the information in the other. Therefore, the treatment group to which people were assigned in the first experiment was aligned with the treatment group to which they were assigned in the second experiment. For example, if a participant was placed in the incivility/high issue polarization condition in the first experiment, he or she would also be in this condition in the second. Of course, this opens the door to potential spillover effects from one experiment to the other. I therefore randomized the order of the experiments in order to be able to check if the results from each of them vary according to whether participants have first completed the other experiment (this does not appear to be the case, see appendix A).

**Manipulating the two dimensions of conflict**

To manipulate the degree of issue polarization in my experiments, participants were given information regarding the homogeneity of the two parties and distance between them in terms of policy positions. This corresponds to the definition of issue polarization offered earlier, and similar procedures have become standard for manipulating this type of conflict (e.g., Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus 2013; Mullinix 2016). In the polarized versions of my two experiments, people were told that the differences of opinion are large, and that most members of each party are on the same side of the issue as the rest of their party. In the unpolarized versions, people were told that differences of opinion are small, and that members of each party can be found in large numbers on both sides of the issue. To avoid
confounding the two aspects of elite conflict, I made sure not to use words that could also be interpreted as describing the tone of the debate.

To manipulate the level of civility, participants were told that the tone of the debate between the politicians working on the issue had been either "very harsh" or "quite respectful". They were also given two short quotes that were supposedly from a leading Democrat and a leading Republican. In the uncivil versions of my experiments, the two quotes were rude and insulting to the politicians’ opponents (e.g., saying that the opponents have “rotten intentions”), and in the civil versions, the quotes were polite and complimentary (e.g., saying that the opponents have "good intentions"). Again, I made sure not to use words that could also be interpreted as describing the issue positions of the parties.

I did not wish to use the same quotes in both experiments, as it would probably seem very peculiar to participants if the discussions on both issues were identical. I therefore created a total of four pairs of quotes (two civil and two incivil). All quotes were inspired by comments from real politicians (see appendix B), and a prior study on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (N=100) confirmed that all pairs are balanced, meaning that each quote is approximately as rude/polite as the other quote in the pair (see appendix C).

Half of the quote pairs (one civil and one incivil) relate to the intentions of the politicians’ opponents. The other half (one civil pair and one incivil) relate to the capabilities of the politicians’ opponents (for more on this distinction, see Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick 2007). Prior studies have implicitly assumed that all types of insults/compliments produce the same effects, but it has never been tested empirically. I varied the content of the quotes systematically in this manner in order to make sure that statements pertaining to different dimensions of social perception do not produce markedly different effects (they do not seem to do so, see appendix D).

It was randomized whether it was the Republican or the Democratic politician who was the author of each of the statements within each pair. Furthermore, it was also randomized which quote pair went with which experiment. For example, if a participant was assigned to a civil condition, it was decided by chance whether the civil quotes regarding intentions would appear in experiment 1 or experiment 2.

To give a sense of the wording of the different conditions, an example is included below (see appendix E for all conditions).
Example of treatment content (Experiment 1: High issue polarization/Incivility)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drilling off the Atlantic Coast and in the Arctic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Some members of Congress have recently been discussing whether to allow drilling for oil and gas off the Atlantic Coast and in the Arctic.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strong disagreement between the parties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On average, Democrats in Congress tend to be strongly opposed to drilling, while Republicans tend to be strongly in favor of it, and the differences of opinion are generally large. Opinions are clearly split along partisan lines as most members of each party are on the same side as the rest of their party.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Harsh tone of debate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At the same time, the debate on this issue has been very harsh. For instance, a leading Republican member of Congress who supports drilling has said that the opponents “have rotten intentions.” Likewise, a leading Democratic member of Congress who opposes drilling has said that the supporters “are bad people who can’t stop lying.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Measures

Before completing the two experiments, participants were asked a number of background questions. These included a question measuring their partisanship on a seven-point fully labeled scale ranging from "strong Democrat" to "strong Republican." This question is needed to test the hypotheses concerning attitude polarization and affective polarization. I deliberately chose not to use the more traditional two-step ANES question or more elaborate measures (see Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe, 2013) as I feared that these might prime partisanship too heavily and thereby interfere with my experiments.

Following each of the experiments, respondents were given a number of questions tapping the three dependent variables. To measure trust in politicians, respondents were asked two questions. The first was: "How much trust do you have in the members of Congress who work on this issue?" Answers ranged from "a great deal of trust" to "hardly any trust" on a four-point scale. The second was: "To what extent do you perceive the members of Congress who work on this issue to be trustworthy?" Answers ranged from “to a very high extent” to “to no extent” on a nine-point scale. Similar measures have previously been used by, for instance, Bøggild (2016). The two measures were combined into a single scale ($\alpha=0.86$) ranging from 0 (no trust in politicians) to 1 (maximum trust in politicians).

To measure attitude polarization, I included questions asking participants about their policy attitudes on the two political issues. Following experiment 1, participants were given
the question: "Given this information, to what extent do you oppose or support drilling for oil and gas off the Atlantic Coast and in the Arctic?" In addition, following experiment 2, they were given this question: "Given this information, to what extent do you oppose or support allowing private firms to be in charge of air traffic controllers?" In both cases, the scale had seven points going from "strongly support" to "strongly oppose". Items with almost identical wordings have previously been used to study attitude polarization by Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus (2013). Attitude polarization was calculated as the difference in attitudes between Republicans and Democrats (including leaners) and recoded to range from -1 to 1. However, it should be noted that negative values are mostly a hypothetical possibility as they require that partisans in general support the views of the opposing party. In practical terms, it therefore makes more sense to think of the scale as ranging from 0 (no attitude polarization) to 1 (maximum attitude polarization).

To measure affective polarization, I relied on two different measures reflecting standard approaches in the literature (Lelkes 2016: 401-402). First, I included a feeling thermometer asking participants to indicate how warm or cold they felt towards both the Democrats and the Republicans who are working on the issue. Second, I also asked participants to indicate on five-point scales how well the words “intelligent”, "mean", and "selfish" (the two last were reverse-coded) describe the two groups. In both cases, affective polarization was calculated for partisans (including leaners) as the difference between in- and out-party ratings. These two measures were then combined into single index ($\alpha=0.85$) that ranges from -1 to 1. As before, negative values are mostly a hypothetical possibility, and it therefore makes more sense to think of the scale as ranging from 0 (no affective polarization) to 1 (maximum affective polarization).

I wanted to avoid asking respondents a great deal of similar sounding questions. Therefore, only the questions about policy attitudes were included after both experiments. In contrast, respondents only had to answer questions about affective polarization and trust once when completing the survey. For half the participants, the trust questions followed experiment 1, and the affective polarization questions followed experiment 2. For the other half of the participants, the reverse was true. Of course, not asking these questions following both experiments reduces the power of the statistical tests concerning hypotheses 1 and 3, and I therefore also present pooled results in the following section.
Sample and manipulation check

A nationally representative survey was administered by YouGov in early March 2017. The original sample consisted of 1,616 individuals, but the analyses in the following section are only reliant on those who did not fail an embedded attention check on final pages of the survey. This brings the total number of respondents down to 1,279 (all main findings can be replicated using the full sample, see appendix F).

To ensure that my experimental stimulus material did, in fact, manipulate the two dimensions of conflict separately, I included items measuring the perceived level of issue polarization and the perceived level of incivility on both issues. To measure the former, participants were asked to indicate on a four-point scale how much the Democrats and Republicans, on average, agree or disagree on the two issues. To measure the latter, participants were asked to indicate on a seven-point scale how rude or polite the debate concerning the two issues was. In both cases, the answers have been recoded to range from 0 to 1. I only present the average ratings across the two issues as the results from each experiment look very similar.

As can be seen from figure 1, my stimulus material generally succeeded in manipulating each type of conflict separately. The only only substantial differences in perceived incivility are between civility conditions, and the only substantial differences in perceived issue polarization are between polarization conditions. This also serves to illustrate that it is indeed possible for people to distinguish between the tone of the debate and the actual level of disagreement.

Figure 1: Manipulation check

(a) Perceived incivility

(b) Perceived issue polarization

The labels on the y-axis correspond to the labels used in the survey question.
Results

There were no significant interaction effects between the two dimensions of conflict on any of the outcomes (see appendix G). In the following, I therefore focus mainly on the average effects of the two. I present the results for each of the three outcomes in turn, starting with trust in politicians. I finish by summarizing the findings for all of them in table 1.

If we look at the pooled results in figure 2, it primarily seems to be incivility that has an effect on trust. The average difference in trust levels between the civil and the uncivil conditions is -0.05 scale points (p=0.002).\(^4\) In contrast, the average effect of issue polarization is -0.01 scale points (p=0.28).

Figure 2: Trust in politicians

(a) Pooled results

(b) Experiment 1: Drilling for oil and gas

(c) Experiment 2: Air traffic controllers

Note: C's indicate level of trust in the control groups.

Analyzing each of the two experiments separately supports this conclusion, though the \(^4\)Two-sample t-test. All t-tests are one-sided as all hypotheses are directional.
The effect of issue polarization approaches statistical significance in the second. In experiment 1, the effect of incivility is -0.05 scale points ($p=0.012$), and the effect of issue polarization is 0.01 ($p=0.73$). In experiment 2, the effect of incivility is also -0.05 scale points ($p=0.027$), and the effect of issue polarization is -0.03 ($p=0.073$).

There is thus support for hypothesis 1A, but no support for hypothesis 1B. The substantial effect sizes are not large. However, this is partly due to the nature of the dependent variable; only few participants are willing to say that they trust politicians in Congress, and my trust measures are therefore somewhat skewed. For instance, in the pooled results, around 70 percent of the observations are in the bottom half of the scale.

![Figure 3: Attitude polarization](image)

In figure 3, the results regarding attitude polarization are presented. Looking at the average results across the two experiments, it clearly seems to be the level issue polarization that matters for this variable. The average difference between the low and the high issue
polarization conditions is 0.16 scale points (p<0.001). In contrast, the level of incivility is not important with an average effect of -0.01 scale points (p=0.57).

When the two experiments are analyzed separately, the same pattern emerges. In both cases, the level of issue polarization has a significant effect on attitudes, but the level of incivility does not. Furthermore, the effect sizes are roughly the same in both experiments. There is thus a lot of support for hypothesis 2B, but no support for 2A.

Figure 4: Affective polarization

(a) Pooled results

(b) Experiment 1: Drilling for oil and gas

(c) Experiment 2: Air traffic controllers

Note: C’s indicate level of aff. pol. in the control groups.

In figure 4, the results regarding affective polarization are presented. With respect to trust in politicians and attitude polarization, the results from experiment 1 and experiment 2 look largely similar. As can be seen in figure 4 below, this is not the case for affective polarization. Here, the results from the two experiments differ quite substantially, and the pooled results are therefore less informative. In experiment 1, the average effect of
incivility is 0.02 scale points (p=0.27), and the average effect of issue polarization is 0.11 (p=0.007). Similarly, the average effect of incivility in experiment 2 is 0.11 scale points (p=0.001), and the average effect of issue polarization is 0.04 (p=0.13).

It thus seems that both types of conflict can increase the degree of affective polarization, but their effects nevertheless remain fairly distinct as they depend on the policy issue. When politicians are debating drilling, the level of issue polarization is important, lending support to hypothesis 3B. However, when they are debating air traffic controllers, it is the level of incivility that matters, lending support to 3A. It is hard to say precisely why the effects differ across the two experiments. However, one possible (post-hoc) explanation is that policy positions take priority over the tone of the debate when partisans perceive the issue to be important.

The results regarding all three variables are summarized in table 1. They show that trust in politicians is lowered by incivility, but issue polarization has no statistically significant effect on this outcome. Conversely, issue polarization creates attitude polarization, but incivility does not. Both types of conflict can create affective polarization, yet their effects are still quite distinct as they depend on the policy issue.

Table 1: Average effects of incivility and issue polarization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Trust in politicians</th>
<th>Attitude polarization</th>
<th>Affective polarization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Incivility</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exp. 1</td>
<td>-0.05*</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.023)</td>
<td>(0.038)</td>
<td>(0.039)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exp. 2</td>
<td>-0.05*</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.11**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.024)</td>
<td>(0.042)</td>
<td>(0.036)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue polarization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exp. 1</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.16***</td>
<td>0.10**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.023)</td>
<td>(0.037)</td>
<td>(0.039)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exp. 2</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.16***</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.026)</td>
<td>(0.041)</td>
<td>(0.036)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For trust in politicians and affective polarization, the numbers are OLS-regression coefficients showing the average effect of incivility and issue polarization. For attitude polarization, the numbers are OLS-regression coefficients for the interaction between party identification and incivility and for the interaction between party identification and issue polarization. For the full model results, see appendix G.

Standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05 (one-sided tests).

Concluding remarks

From a distance, it might seem that the distinction between incivility and issue polarization is well-established within the literature on how elites can influence public opinion. Some
studies seem to be focusing on the first of these phenomena, while other studies seem to be focusing on the second. However, upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that researchers have not always distinguished carefully between the two. On the contrary, they have probably been confounded empirically in many studies and some have even mixed them up on a conceptual level.

This makes it hard to tell whether and how the effects of the two aspects of elite conflict have different effects. Perhaps incivility and issue polarization are just two sides of the same coin to most people, in which case researchers might be studying the same thing under different headings. To address this and advance our understanding of how citizens perceive conflict between parties, I have conducted two experiments in which each dimension of conflict is varied independently of the other. Doing so allows one to compare the effects of the two, which is something that has not been possible in previous studies.

The results clearly show that the two aspects of elite conflict have different effects. Trust in politicians is lowered by incivility, but issue polarization has no effect on this outcome. Conversely, issue polarization creates attitude polarization among partisans, but incivility does not. Both aspects can create affective polarization in the form of an increased dislike for the other party, but their effects remain quite distinct as they depend on the policy issue that is being debated.

It thus makes good sense to treat incivility and issue polarization as distinct dimensions of elite conflict. Not only can they be separated conceptually, they clearly provide citizens with informational cues that structure their political attitudes in different ways. However, this also means that scholars of public opinion should be more careful to avoid confounding them. In an experimental setting, this entails a closer attention to the specific information that participants are given and the inclusion of post-treatment items to establish that each dimension is manipulated independently of the other.

A likely objection to this conclusion could be that even if the two dimensions of conflict have different effects, they are still closely correlated in the real world. If politicians are primarily being uncivil when the differences of opinion are large, or if people cannot distinguish between the two dimensions of conflict when consuming real news, then we do not need to examine each separately.

However, the two dimensions are actually not as correlated as one might think—at least not in the minds of citizens. Following my main study, I conducted a minor survey (N = 200) on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk where I asked questions tapping both the perceived level
issue polarization and perceived level of incivility in Congress. The correlation between the two measures varies depending on how each of them is calculated, but Pearson’s r never exceeds 0.27 (see appendix H for details). It thus seems that people are in fact capable of distinguishing between these two dimensions of elite conflict.

Another potential objection concerns the external validity of my findings. The information that participants were given in my experiments was brief and in written format, and perhaps this feature limits the inferences I can draw. For instance, Mutz (2007, 2015) argues that televised incivility can produce effects that are different from written incivility because the former is better at creating arousal. Furthermore, the politicians in my experiments were, by design, equally rude/polite towards each other, but in the real world, it is not uncommon for one part in a debate to be ruder than the other. Perhaps my results would have looked different if had focused on such unbalanced incivility instead?

I cannot rule out either of these possibilities relying solely on my two experiments. The purpose of my study was to take a first step at separating and comparing the effects of each dimensions of conflict, which something that no study has been able to before. But more studies are, of course, needed as replication across different settings is the only way to properly ensure the external validity of any findings (McDermott 2011: 34).

References


