Explaining Voters’ Campaign Tone Perceptions: The Role of Incivility

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Abstract

In this study, we explore how much voters’ campaign tone perceptions depend on the type of attack, whether issue-based or uncivil. We then ask whether different types of individuals are more sensitive to uncivil attacks. Using a vignette study, in which we present a random sample of American citizens with different campaign scenarios that describe different types of campaign attacks, we find that uncivil attacks drive perceptions of tone far more than issue-based attacks, and we find that certain types of individuals, including women, younger people, those with moderate levels of political knowledge, the better educated and the more conscientious, are more sensitive to those uncivil attacks.
Explaining Voters’ Campaign Tone Perceptions: The Role of Incivility

People exposed to the same campaign message often evaluate its tone differently, with some finding its negative and some finding it positive (Mattes and Redlawsk 2015). Moreover, people’s perceptions of the tone of a campaign do not necessarily correspond to the “actual” tone of the campaign as measured by social scientists (Sigelman and Kugler 2003; Ridout and Franz 2008; Ridout and Fowler 2010). Yet understanding this variation in people’s perceptions of the tone of a campaign, in general, or a campaign message, in particular, is important. First, perceptions of tone are arguably much closer to people’s attitudes and political behaviors than are scholarly assessments of the tone of the messages to which people are exposed (Sides, Lipsitz and Grossman 2010) and thus may exert more of an influence on those attitudes and behaviors than the blunt coding of scholars. Second, studies have demonstrated that perceptions of campaign negativity may have a negative impact on voters’ attitudes towards the political system, resulting in lower efficacy, lower trust in government, more negative candidate evaluations and a lower likelihood to vote (Craig and Kane 2000; Leshner and Thorson 2000; Thorson et al. 2000; Crigler et al. 2002; Walter and Van der Eijk 2015). Yet only a small number of studies have paid attention to the antecedents of campaign tone perceptions (e.g. Sigelman and Kugler 2003; Sides et al. 2010; Ridout and Franz 2008; Ridout and Fowler 2010; Fridkin and Kenney 2011).

In this study, we first ask how much voters’ campaign tone perceptions depend on the type of attack, whether issue-based, trait-based or uncivil. Given the recent rise in incivility in politics in the United States, we pay special attention to the role of uncivility in shaping perceptions of campaign tone. We ask whether different types of individuals are more sensitive to uncivil attacks. Using a vignette study, in which we present a random sample of American voters with different campaign scenarios that describe different types of campaign attacks, we find that uncivil attacks drive perceptions of tone far more than trait and issue-based attacks, and we find that women, liberals, the less educated and older voters are more sensitive to those uncivil attacks.

Our research is innovative in that it allows for a comparison of the relative impact of various types of attacks (competence, integrity, ideology and uncivil) on perceptions of campaign tone, something previous studies have ignored. Second, having found a strong effect of an uncivil attack, we proceed with the assumption that different types of individuals are more and less affected by incivility. Thus, our research examines not just the individual-specific characteristics that influence perceptions of tone—something that has been done previously—but the individual-specific characteristics that make some more sensitive to uncivil attacks. Finally, our research is the one first pieces to examine the antecedents of campaign tone perceptions experimentally, which allows us to make strong claims about causality than most observational research that has come prior.

Negative Campaigning and Perceptions of Tone

One choice that all election campaigns must make is whether to use negative campaign, positive campaigning or a mix of both. With positive campaigning, candidates or parties choose to emphasize their own abilities, accomplishments and policy stands. With negative campaigning, candidates or parties concentrate on attacking their opponent(s) on these grounds (Lau and Pomper 2004; Geer 2006).

How citizens perceive the tone of these messages, however, has been the focus of only limited research. This research has focused on four factors shaping perceptions of

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1 One notable exception is experimental work on campaign tone perceptions by Mattes and Redlawsk (2014).
campaign tone: message traits, the individual attributes of the receiver, the receiver’s exposure to the campaign, and the characteristics of the campaign. First, the content of the campaign message matters. Not surprisingly, whether candidates attack opponents or not matters for perceptions of negativity, with increased exposure to negative and contrast ads resulting in greater perceptions of negativity (Ridout and Fowler 2012). In addition, Mattes and Redlawsk (2014) find that attacks that are issue- and qualification-oriented are not seen to be as negative as those focused on the target’s family or religion. Fridkin and Kenney (2011) focus on two additional factors that influence perceptions of campaign negativity: the relevance of the message and its civility. They find that the more civil the message, the more likely it is to be perceived as positive. But the more relevant the message, which is defined as discussions about “issues, personal traits, or other topics that people consider pertinent for an electoral campaign” (p. 308), the more likely it is to be perceived as negative.

Second, the characteristics of the person exposed to the campaign messages affects perception of tone. Among the most important factors is partisanship (Pattie et al. 2011; Sigelman and Kugler 2003; Walter and Van der Eijk 2016; Ridout and Fowler 2012). Voters who do not identify with a party tend to perceive campaigns as more negative (Sigelman and Kugler 2003). People tend to recall campaigns run by the party they support more positively than campaigns run by the opponent. In addition, those with more political information tend to perceive more negativity (Sigelman and Kugler 2003; Ridout and Fowler 2012). There is some suggestion that women perceive campaigns as less negative than men, but this difference was found in only one of four models (Ridout and Fowler 2012), and may contradict the finding that women have less support for negative campaigning than men (Lipsitz, et al. 2005).

Third, the extent to which people are exposed to the campaign also affects their tone perceptions (Pattie et al. 2011; Ridout and Fowler 2010; Cheng and Riffe 2008), though the effects may differ depending on the campaign. Respondents who reported exposure to the actual campaign were more likely to evaluate parties’ campaigns as positive in the context of the 2007 Parliament Election in Scotland (Pattie et al. 2011). However, Cheng and Riffe (2008) find that people with more exposure to the 2004 U.S. presidential campaign were more likely to perceive it as negative. The differences across these studies may have to do with how the news media covered these campaigns, as we know that people’s exposure to the media, in general, and their exposure to strategic mentions of political advertising in the local media, in particular, also influences perceptions of tone (Pattie et al. 2011; Cheng and Riffe 2008; Ridout and Fowler 2010).

Finally, the characteristics of the campaign influence perceptions of tone. People perceive the campaign to be more negative towards the end of the campaign and in more competitive races (Sigelman and Kugler 2003; Ridout and Fowler 2010). This finding suggests that variation in perceptions of tone is reflective of true variation in message tone over time, as candidates are more likely to go negative towards the end of the campaign and in competitive races (Damore 2002; Lau and Pomper 2004).

Civil in Politics
Commentators have noticed a recent rise in political incivility in the United States. Moreover, as current communication technologies make incivility immediately visible to society as a whole, any effects of political incivility are amplified (Mutz 2015). Traditional and social media not only amplify political incivility by dissemination, but seem to stimulate political incivility (Mutz 2015; Sobieraj and Berry 2011; Clayman 2011).

Political incivility can be defined as norm-defying behavior that occurs in a political context (Gervais 2016). That is, uncivil behavior is that which violates the unspoken rules about how people, whether citizens or politicians on the campaign trail, are supposed to
behave. One long-standing norm is respect for one’s political opponents, even when one disagrees. Brooks and Geer (2007) argue that what makes political talk uncivil, rather than just negative, is that uncivil talk includes superfluous words and actions that actively demonstrate lack of respect and often involves hyperbole. Despite recent high-profile examples, most politicians in the U.S. would still hesitate to call a political opponent a derogatory name on the campaign trail. Importantly, because norms may vary by time and culture, political incivility is a relative concept (Herbst 2010). Still, it takes time for norms to change.

**Theorizing Perceptions of Tone**

Overall, the literature that attempts to explain perceptions of campaign tone is limited and has yet to examine how the type of the attack interacts with the characteristics of the individual.² Our contention is simple but undoubtedly true: different types of people will react differently to different types of negative messages. We are particularly interested in differences in how people react to incivility in attacks made on the campaign trail.

Based on existing literature on campaign tone perceptions, we argue that people exposed to a campaign message that contains an attack will evaluate its tone as more negative than will voters that are exposed to a campaign message without an attack. Quite simply, we believe that exposure to a campaign attack will increase perceptions of negativity:

**Attack Hypothesis:** Respondents who are exposed to an (competence/integrity/ ideology or uncivil oriented) attack will evaluate the campaign message as more negative than respondents who are not exposed to an attack.

However, the size of the impact is likely to differ across types of attacks. In particular, we expect that uncivil attacks will have more of an impact on perception of negativity than will attacks on candidates’ competence, integrity or political ideology. This expectation comes from the fact that attacks on candidate competence, integrity and political ideology are standard in American political rhetoric. Indeed, almost 80 percent of political ads that aired in the 2016 presidential general election contained an attack, and about 90 percent of ads from the Clinton campaign and its allies contained an attack on her opponent (Fowler, Franz and Ridout 2017). Moreover, such attacks are nothing new. Geer (2006) found that though negativity has increased over time, even 50 years ago there was considerable negativity, both policy- and character-based, in presidential campaigns. In other words, a campaign is not defying a political norm when it attacks on competence, integrity or ideology. But uncivil attacks, by definition, defy the norms of campaign behavior, and thus uncivil attacks are likely to drive perception of negativity much more than other types of attacks. We therefore propose:

**Incivility Hypothesis:** Uncivil attacks will influence perceptions of negativity more than attacks made on competence, integrity or ideology.

Combinations of attacks might also strengthen one another. In particular, campaign messages that not only contain an attack focused on the voters’ ideology, competence or integrity, but also an uncivil attack are likely to be evaluated more negatively. Thus, we propose:

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² Fridkin and Kenney (2011) examine how people differ in their tolerance for uncivil and irrelevant message, not how they differ in perception of tone when exposed to incivility and irrelevance. Mattes and Redlawsk (2015) examine the impact of attacks with different topics, but they do not report heterogeneity in the effects.
Uncivil Attack Hypothesis: The presence of an uncivil attack has a moderating effect on the relationship between exposure to an (competence/integrity or ideology-oriented) attack and evaluation of the tone of the campaign message, with larger effects for voters that are exposed to an uncivil attack and another attack.

Explaining Heterogeneity

We also expect that different types of people should react differently to exposure to an uncivil attack. Our definition of incivility depends on the action or behavior defying the norms of politics or typical campaign behavior, and so theoretically, we are looking for characteristics that make it more likely that individuals would accept norm-defying behavior.

First, we expect to find differences between men and women in how they respond to incivility in political campaigns. Brooks (2010) is one of the few to address this topic directly, finding in an experiment that uncivil attacks increase intention to participate among men but lower it among women. Although Brooks does not offer a strong theory for these differences, she does point to a variety of research showing that women are more averse to conflict than are men: studies showing that men are more physically aggressive, are less likely to use cooperative language and are more likely to choose violent media programming. Thus, based on this research, we hypothesize that women will be more responsive to incivility than will men.

In terms of age, we expect that older individuals are more likely to have learned the norms of politics due to a longer socialization process, and thus they would be more sensitive to violations of these norms. We also expect that political knowledge might moderate the impact of exposure to incivility on perceptions of campaign tone. One possibility is that people with more political knowledge are more likely to have been socialized into the norms of politics, and thus they might be more sensitive to violations of these norms. On the other hand, people with more political knowledge might be more aware that civility as a norm of political conduct in the United States appears to have eroded over the past couple of decades, as evidenced by the shouting on cable news programs and declining decorum in the U.S. Congress, and thus those with more political knowledge might be less sensitive to political incivility.

Education may also condition the impact of exposure to incivility. We expect that the better educated have been better socialized into the norm of political civility, and thus they should be more sensitive to violations of that norm than those who are less educated. Yet one could also make the opposite argument: if the better educated are exposed to more diverse ways of life they may be more accepting of violations of political norms. A person’s ideology is also likely to matter, as conservatives generally are concerned with rules and norms more than liberals, who are more open to change and new experiences (Carney, et al. 2008). Thus, we expect conservatives to respond more to uncivil attacks than liberals.

Finally, there is one personality trait that should moderate exposure to incivility: conscientiousness. Mondak (2010) shows that fundamental psychological differences contribute to variation in political behavior, both directly and through one’s interaction with environmental influences. Thus, dispositional traits have the potential to improve our understanding of fundamental individual-level differences in how people evaluate and respond to their political environment (Gerber et al. 2011), including their perceptions of campaign tone. Conscientiousness describes socially prescribed impulse control that facilitates task and goal-directed behavior, such as thinking before acting, delaying gratification, following norms and rules, and planning, organizing, and prioritizing tasks
(John and Srivastava 1999:121). Because people higher in conscientiousness hesitate to break norms, we expect them to be more sensitive to violations of norms.

**Experimental Design**

To examine the impact of different kinds of attacks on perceptions of campaign negativity, we conducted a between-subjects experiment (2x2x3x2) embedded in a survey. The experiment took the form of a vignette study. Using random assignment, we presented each participant with one of 24 short vignettes describing a fictional but realistic-sounding campaign. We manipulated four characteristics of the campaign messages independent of one another. We manipulated whether the campaign message had a competence attack (present/absent), an integrity attack (present/absent), an ideology attack (liberal/conservative/absent) and a civility attack (civil/uncivil). The vignettes had a fixed order of sentences. All vignettes shared the same introductory text about two fictional candidates, Tom Marshall and his opponent Peter Cook, who were running for the U.S. Senate. The remainder of the text differs across the vignettes depending on the condition.

The competence attack states that “the state agency led by Marshall has repeatedly overspent its budget.” The integrity attack states that “Marshall misled federal investigators who were looking into allegations that he had improperly used campaign funds.” The liberal/conservative attack states that “Marshall’s voting record is way too liberal/conservative for the people in the state he represents.” The civil treatment includes the statement that “Cook states that although he respects Marshall’s service, it is time for a change,” while the uncivil treatment includes the statement that “Cook states that Marshall has repeatedly embarrassed himself and embarrassed the state.” (See Appendix 2 for an overview of the 24 conditions). This treatment was designed to follow the definition of incivility provided by Brooks and Geer (2007), which includes disrespect for an opponent and the use hyperbolic language (i.e., “embarrassed the state”).

The survey was conducted online using Qualtrics software. A sample of 1499 respondents living in the United States was provided by Survey Sampling International (SSI), a market research firm. The sample was chosen to closely match the adult population of the United States on age, gender, race/ethnicity and region of residence. (See Appendix 4 for sample characteristics).

We presented each respondent with a single vignette and obtained comparability by using statistical controls of subject characteristics to obtain unit homogeneity (King, Keohane and Verba 1994). This allows for an analytical separation of the effect of each of the factors that define the vignettes on the evaluative responses of the respondent. By presenting respondents with a single vignette, we also eliminate response effects of earlier presented stimuli. After respondents were exposed to one of the vignettes, we asked them to indicate the tone of the campaign message. See Appendix 3 for the questionnaire.

**Analysis Strategy**

Although all 1499 respondents were exposed to a vignette, we did not force respondents to answer all questions, and thus we have some missing values. For our analyses, we excluded those respondents that had a missing value on the dependent variables measuring campaign tone or the socio-demographic variables included in our analyses. The number of observations that we use in our analyses is thus 1400. Randomization checks confirm that conditions were balanced on pre-treatment covariates (see Appendix 4 for randomization checks).

Because our dependent variable, perceptions of campaign tone, is ordinal, we used ordered probit regression models. The large number of observations in our sample allows us
to test for main effects and some interaction effects, but not for all higher-order effects as power would be too limited to make non-rejection of a null-hypothesis informative.

**Operationalization of Variables**

We measured respondents’ perceptions of the tone of the campaign by asking, “How would you describe this campaign?” Respondents were shown a 1-7 scale, with one labelled “not at all negative” and 7 labeled “extremely negative.”

We control in our models for various socio-demographic characteristics, including sex, age, race, education, political ideology and political knowledge. Sex is measured as a dichotomous variable (1=Male; 0=Female). Age is measured two ways. In our general models, age is expressed in years, but when interacted with civility in the models attempting to find heterogeneity, we dichotomize age at the median value, so that ages 18 to 40 are one category and ages 41 and older are another category. We dichotomize because, theoretically, we expect older and younger people to react to incivility differently, but we don’t believe that the relationship should change linearly.

Three dummy variables measure race/ethnicity, namely, White (1=Yes; 0=No), Black (1=Yes; 0=No) and Hispanic (1=Yes; 0=No). Those indicating another race/ethnicity serve as the base category. We gauge level of education with a variable ranging from 1 to 9. A score of 1 means the individual has completed grade 8 or lower, while a score of 9 means the person has completed a doctoral degree. Liberalism is measured on a 5-point scale, where 1 is very conservative and 5 is very liberal. As the candidates portrayed in the vignettes are hypothetical and do not have a partisan identity, we do not control for partisan affiliation. Political knowledge is measured on a 0 to 4 scale indicating how many of four knowledge questions that the respondent answered correctly (Cronbach’s alpha is 0.6). For our model that interacts civility with political knowledge, we divide political knowledge into three categories (low, medium and high) to account for potential curvilinear relationships (Zaller 1992). Answering no or one knowledge question correctly places one into the low category, answering two correctly places one in the medium knowledge category, and answering three or all four questions correctly places one in the high knowledge category.

Our survey also included the TIPI questionnaire (Gosling et al. 2003), which is designed to measure the “Big Five” personality traits, including conscientiousness. The TIPI asks respondents to report the extent to which they see themselves characterized by a series of ten trait pairs using a seven-point scale ranging from “disagree strongly” to “agree strongly.”

Two trait pairs speak to the larger construct of conscientiousness. We averaged across those two trait pairs to create a measure of conscientiousness that ranges from 1 to 7.

**Results**

Figure 1 provides a sense of the impact of each of our treatments on perceptions of negativity. Plotted is the difference in the mean score on the negativity measure between those participants who received each treatment and those who did not. Clearly, each attack helped to increase perceptions of negativity, though the size of the impact varied considerably. The civility attack had a considerable impact, boosting perceptions of negativity by .78, while the integrity attack boosted perceptions of negativity by .28. The ideology attacks had a slightly smaller impact, .21 for the “too conservative” attack and .18

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3 Although longer instruments tend to have better psychometric properties than shorter instruments, those who have used the TIPI questionnaire report acceptable levels of validity and reliability (Gosling et al. 2003)

4 In the case of the liberal and conservative attacks, we find the difference in the scores of those who received each attack and those who received no attack.
for the “too liberal” attack. The attack on competence had the smallest effect, increasing scores on the 7-point negativity scale by .12.

**Figure 1: Impact of Each Attack on Perceptions of Negativity**

To examine whether the effects of the various attacks are statistically significant (or could have happened by chance) and to see whether they hold up with the introduction of controls, we estimated an ordered probit model that included each of the treatments and all control variables. Results are reported in Table 1. We find in Model 1 that all five treatments explain variance in perceptions of tone. People exposed to an uncivil attack, an attack on the candidate’s integrity, competence or ideology (whether “too liberal” or “too conservative”) perceived the tone of the campaign message as more negative than people who were not exposed. The ideology attacks, however, were borderline significant at p<.10. In short, the presence of an attack, regardless of type, leads the viewer to perceive the campaign as more negative. Thus, the evidence supports the Attack Hypothesis.

**Table 1: Ordered Probit Predictors of Perceptions of Negativity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
<th>Model 5</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uncivil Ad</td>
<td>0.526***</td>
<td>0.634***</td>
<td>0.683***</td>
<td>0.513***</td>
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<td>0.120**</td>
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<td>(0.0805)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Integrity Attack</td>
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<tr>
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<td>(0.0805)</td>
<td>(0.0566)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Too Liberal Attack</td>
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<td>0.136*</td>
<td>0.145**</td>
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<td>Too Conservative Attack</td>
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<td>0.142**</td>
<td>0.152**</td>
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<td>-0.209***</td>
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<td>0.0801</td>
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</table>
Because the dependent variable is a seven-point scale and all the treatments are presented here as dichotomous variables, we can compare the coefficients of these treatment effects. The largest coefficient in the model predicting negativity is associated with the civility treatment. Its impact is more than double of that of the next more influential attack: that on the candidate’s integrity. Thus, our Incivility Hypothesis is supported.

Looking at the socio-demographic variables, again in Model 1, we see that sex, age, ideology, educational attainment, political knowledge and having a conscientious personality are all significant predictors. Men tend to perceive the campaign as less negative than women do, and the older people get the more negative they perceive the tone of the campaign. In addition, the more liberal people are, the more negative they perceive the campaign to be. Increased education reduces perceptions of negativity, but increased knowledge of politics works in the opposite direction, increasing perceptions that the campaign is negative. The personality trait of conscientiousness also drives perceptions of tone, with the more conscientious perceiving the campaign as more negative.

We now examine whether various combinations of attacks can work interactively to influence perceptions of tone. We hypothesized that the pairing of the integrity, competence or ideological attack, on the one hand, with an uncivil attack, on the other hand, would give an added boost to perceptions of negativity. We only display model estimates in Table 1 (Models 2 to 5). We find two significant interaction effects: 1) for the interaction between incivility and the integrity attack and 2) for the interaction between incivility and the incompetence attack. But instead of increasing perception of negativity, as we had hypothesized, the interactions reduced such perceptions. This suggests that the presence of an uncivil attack alongside another attack does not heighten the effect of that attack but attenuates it. Perhaps the incivility is not as impactful when it is placed alongside another attack that people may deem as less offending of standard norms of politics. We thus find no evidence for the Uncivil Attack Hypothesis.

**Who is Most Sensitive to Incivility?**
To this point, we have discovered that attacks on a candidate tend to increase perceptions that a campaign is negative, but the uncivil attack has, by far, the greatest impact on tone perceptions. Given the important role of incivility in driving perceptions of tone, we wanted to investigate whether certain types of individuals were more influenced by incivility than others. To do this, we estimated ordered probit models predicting tone perceptions, and in each one we included an interaction of the uncivil attack indicator with the characteristic of interest. Table 2 displays our model estimates. Model 1, which includes an interaction of the uncivil attack with a male respondent indicator, shows that men are less responsive to incivility than are women, a finding that is consistent with our expectations and the findings of Brooks (2010). Model 2 shows that older individuals are less responsive to incivility than are younger people, that is, young people’s campaign tone perceptions are driven more by incivility than are older peoples’ campaign tone perceptions. This finding contradicts our expectation that older people, owing to their longer socialization into the norms of appropriate political behavior, might be more sensitive to their violation.

### Table 2 Heterogeneous Effects of Uncivil Attacks on Voters’ Campaign Tone Perceptions

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
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<td>Integrity Attack</td>
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<td>Too Liberal Attack</td>
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<td>(0.0230)</td>
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<td>(0.111)</td>
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<td>Uncivil x Older</td>
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Political knowledge (Model 3) also conditions the impact of incivility on campaign tone perceptions, with those with moderate levels of knowledge more influenced by incivility than those with low levels of knowledge. This suggests that having at least some knowledge of politics attunes one to the norms of civility, making people more sensitive to their violation, but those with high levels of political knowledge may realize that incivility has long been a part of American politics.

More education makes one less responsive to uncivil attacks (Model 4), consistent with the idea that the better educated, because they have been exposed to multiple points of view, are more accepting of violations of norms. Ideology, however, does not matter (Model 5); an uncivil attack has the same impact on liberals and conservatives in shaping their perceptions of campaign tone. Finally, Model 6 demonstrates that people who are higher in conscientiousness have their campaign tone perceptions shaped more by incivility than those who are low in conscientiousness. This result supports our expectation that was derived from research on personality traits.

Clearly, all do not react to incivility in a campaign the same way; some are much more affected than others by exposure to an uncivil attack.

### Discussion and Conclusion

This study found, not surprisingly, that whether candidates attack opponents or not matters for perceptions of negativity. Attacks on the opponent’s integrity, competence and, to a lesser extent, ideology all increased perceptions that the campaign was being negative. Importantly, though, it was less the substance of the attack and more the style of attack that mattered most for tone perceptions, as we discovered that the uncivil attack had, by far, the most impact on increasing the belief that the campaign was negative. Combining an uncivil attack with another attack, however, does not heighten the perceived negativity of that attack. Rather, the effect is attenuated. That is to say, in gauging the impact of incivility, we do not add up the impact of the uncivil attack on its own with the impact of, for example, an incompetence attack on its own; the total impact is less than the sum of the two. Thus, the risk of a voter backlash associated with piling on multiple attacks may not be as great as one might expect.

Finally, we discovered that different types of people respond differently to incivility. Perceptions of campaign tone among women, younger people, those with moderate levels of political knowledge, the less educated and the more conscientious are driven more by incivility than their counterparts. Thus, demographic characteristics, attitudes (i.e., political knowledge) and personality traits moderate how people respond to incivility.
There are lessons of this research for the campaign practitioner. First, those wanting to avoid the risk of a voter backlash should keep their attacks civil, for the civil attacks—whether based on the opponent’s competence, ideology or integrity—did much less to alter people’s perception of the tone of the campaign than did launching an uncivil attack. This is consistent with the finding of Mattes and Redlawsk (2014) that attacks on a candidate’s family or religion, which are more likely to be seen as norm-violating, are more likely to draw the anger of voters than run-of-the-mill attacks. Second, what might be deemed as quite negative by one subgroup of voters may not be seen similarly by another subgroup of voters. For instance, older, more conscientious women are likely to view an attack as much more negative than young men who score low on conscientiousness. Third, the risks associated with using an uncivil attack—such as a voter backlash—are higher with some groups of voters than others, as incivility will drive perceptions of negativity much more for some individuals than for others. Campaigns, then, must carefully consider the audience before launching an attack and choosing how to attack.

Acknowledgments

The research reported in this paper is part of the research project “CSNCC: Comparative Study of Negative Campaigning and its Consequences” and was funded by a Marie Curie Intra-European Fellowship (n° 629012: FP7-PEOPLE-2013-IEF) and a Nottingham Research Fellowship.
References


Appendix 1: Stimulus Material

Introductory text on all vignettes:
Tom Marshall is running for reelection to the US Senate after having served one term. His opponent is Peter Cook, who is currently serving in the U.S. House of Representatives. Cook has made several arguments on the campaign trail.

Vignette 1 (Competence, Integrity, Liberal, Civil)
Cook states that the state agency led by Marshall has repeatedly overspent its budget. He also states that Marshall misled federal investigators who were looking into allegations that he had improperly used campaign funds. Cook states that Marshall’s voting record is way too liberal for the people in the state he represents. Finally, Cook states that although he respects Marshall’s service, it is time for a change.

Vignette 2 (NO Competence, Integrity, Liberal, Civil)
Cook states that Marshall misled federal investigators who were looking into allegations that he had improperly used campaign funds. Cook states that Marshall’s voting record is way too liberal for the people in the state he represents. Finally, Cook states that although he respects Marshall’s service, it is time for a change.

Vignette 3 (Competence, NO Integrity, Liberal, Civil)
Cook states that the state agency led by Marshall has repeatedly overspent its budget. Cook also states that Marshall’s voting record is way too liberal for the people in the state he represents. Finally, Cook states that although he respects Marshall’s service, it is time for a change.

Vignette 4 (NO Competence, NO Integrity, Liberal, Civil)
Cook states that Marshall’s voting record is way too liberal for the people in the state he represents. Cook also states that although he respects Marshall’s service, it is time for a change.

Vignette 5 (Competence, Integrity, Conservative, Civil)
Cook states that the state agency led by Marshall has repeatedly overspent its budget. He also states that Marshall misled federal investigators who were looking into allegations that he had improperly used campaign funds. Cook states that Marshall’s voting record is way too conservative for the people in the state he represents. Finally, Cook states that although he respects Marshall’s service, it is time for a change.

Vignette 6 (NO Competence, Integrity, Conservative, Civil)
Cook states that Marshall misled federal investigators who were looking into allegations that he had improperly used campaign funds. Cook states that Marshall’s voting record is way too conservative for the people in the state he represents. Finally, Cook states that although he respects Marshall’s service, it is time for a change.

Vignette 7 (Competence, NO Integrity, Conservative, Civil)
Cook states that the state agency led by Marshall has repeatedly overspent its budget. Cook also states that Marshall’s voting record is way too conservative for the people in the state he represents. Finally, Cook states that although he respects Marshall’s service, it is time for a change.
Vignette 8 (NO Competence, NO Integrity, Conservative, Civil)
Cook states that Marshall’s voting record is way too conservative for the people in the state he represents. Cook also states that although he respects Marshall’s service, it is time for a change.

Vignette 9 (Competence, Integrity, NO Ideology, Civil)
Cook states that the state agency led by Marshall has repeatedly overspent its budget. He also states that Marshall misled federal investigators who were looking into allegations that he had improperly used campaign funds. Finally, Cook states that although he respects Marshall’s service, it is time for a change.

Vignette 10 (NO Competence, Integrity, NO Ideology, Civil)
Cook states that Marshall misled federal investigators who were looking into allegations that he had improperly used campaign funds. Finally, Cook states that although he respects Marshall’s service, it is time for a change.

Vignette 11 (Competence, NO Integrity, NO Ideology, Civil)
Cook states that the state agency led by Marshall has repeatedly overspent its budget. Finally, Cook states that although he respects Marshall’s service, it is time for a change.

Vignette 12 (NO Competence, NO Integrity, NO Ideology, Civil)
Cook states that although he respects Marshall’s service, it is time for a change.

Vignette 13 (Competence, Integrity, Liberal, Uncivil)
Cook states that the state agency led by Marshall has repeatedly overspent its budget. He also states that Marshall misled federal investigators who were looking into allegations that he had improperly used campaign funds. Cook states that Marshall’s voting record is way too liberal for the people in the state he represents. Finally, Cook states that Marshall has repeatedly embarrassed himself and embarrassed the state.

Vignette 14 (NO Competence, Integrity, Liberal, Uncivil)
Cook states that Marshall misled federal investigators who were looking into allegations that he had improperly used campaign funds. Cook states that Marshall’s voting record is way too liberal for the people in the state he represents. Finally, Cook states that Marshall has repeatedly embarrassed himself and embarrassed the state.

Vignette 15 (Competence, NO Integrity, Liberal, Uncivil)
Cook states that the state agency led by Marshall has repeatedly overspent its budget. Cook also states that Marshall’s voting record is way too liberal for the people in the state he represents. Finally, Cook states that Marshall has repeatedly embarrassed himself and embarrassed the state.

Vignette 16 (NO Competence, NO Integrity, Liberal, Uncivil)
Cook states that Marshall’s voting record is way too liberal for the people in the state he represents. Cook also states that Marshall has repeatedly embarrassed himself and embarrassed the state.

Vignette 17 (Competence, Integrity, Conservative, Uncivil)
Cook states that the state agency led by Marshall has repeatedly overspent its budget. He also states that Marshall misled federal investigators who were looking into allegations that he had
improperly used campaign funds. Cook states that Marshall’s voting record is way too conservative for the people in the state he represents. Finally, Cook states that Marshall has repeatedly embarrassed himself and embarrassed the state.

**Vignette 18 (NO Competence, Integrity, Conservative, Uncivil)**
Cook states that Marshall misled federal investigators who were looking into allegations that he had improperly used campaign funds. Cook states that Marshall’s voting record is way too conservative for the people in the state he represents. Finally, Cook states that Marshall has repeatedly embarrassed himself and embarrassed the state.

**Vignette 19 (Competence, NO Integrity, Conservative, Uncivil)**
Cook states that the state agency led by Marshall has repeatedly overspent its budget. Cook also states that Marshall’s voting record is way too conservative for the people in the state he represents. Finally, Cook states that Marshall has repeatedly embarrassed himself and embarrassed the state.

**Vignette 20 (NO Competence, NO Integrity, Conservative, Uncivil)**
Cook states that Marshall’s voting record is way too conservative for the people in the state he represents. Cook also states that Marshall has repeatedly embarrassed himself and embarrassed the state.

**Vignette 21 (Competence, Integrity, NO Ideology, Uncivil)**
Cook states that the state agency led by Marshall has repeatedly overspent its budget. He also states that Marshall misled federal investigators who were looking into allegations that he had improperly used campaign funds. Finally, Cook states that Marshall has repeatedly embarrassed himself and embarrassed the state.

**Vignette 22 (NO Competence, Integrity, NO Ideology, Uncivil)**
Cook states that Marshall misled federal investigators who were looking into allegations that he had improperly used campaign funds. Finally, Cook states that Marshall has repeatedly embarrassed himself and embarrassed the state.

**Vignette 23 (Competence, NO Integrity, NO Ideology, Uncivil)**
Cook states that the state agency led by Marshall has repeatedly overspent its budget. Finally, Cook states that Marshall has repeatedly embarrassed himself and embarrassed the state.

**Vignette 24 (NO Competence, NO Integrity, NO Ideology, Uncivil)**
Cook states that Marshall has repeatedly embarrassed himself and embarrassed the state.
## Appendix 2: Vignette Study Conditions

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<td>Civil</td>
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<td>Uncivil</td>
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</table>
Appendix 3: Questionnaire

You will now read a short description of a hypothetical race for the U.S. Senate. Please read it carefully, and we will ask you some questions about what you have read.

Tom Marshall is running for reelection to the US Senate after having served one term. His opponent is Peter Cook, who is currently serving in the U.S. House of Representatives. Cook has made several arguments on the campaign trail. [Competence Treatment] Cook states that the state agency led by Marshall has repeatedly overspent its budget. [Integrity Treatment] He also states that Marshall misled federal investigators who were looking into allegations that he had improperly used campaign funds. [Ideology Treatment] Cook states that Marshall’s voting way too [liberal/conservative] for the people in the state he represents. [Civil Treatment] Finally, Cook states that although he respects Marshall’s service, it is time for a change. [Uncivil Treatment] Finally, Cook states that Marshall has repeatedly embarrassed himself and embarrassed the state.

How would you describe this campaign? [Response options rotated randomly]

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1 (1)</th>
<th>2 (2)</th>
<th>3 (3)</th>
<th>4 (4)</th>
<th>5 (5)</th>
<th>6 (6)</th>
<th>7 (7)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not at all negative:Extremely negative (1)</td>
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<td>⬜</td>
<td>⬜</td>
<td>⬜</td>
<td>⬜</td>
<td>⬜</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critiquing the opponent:Praising own policies and character (2)</td>
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<td>⬜</td>
<td>⬜</td>
<td>⬜</td>
<td>⬜</td>
<td>⬜</td>
<td>⬜</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In general, how interested are you in politics and public affairs?

- Very interested (1)
- Somewhat interested (2)
- Slightly interested (3)
- Not at all interested (4)

In general, how would you describe your political views?

- Very conservative (1)
- Conservative (2)
- Moderate (3)
- Liberal (4)
- Very liberal (5)

Now we'd like to ask you a few questions about current events. If you don't know the answer or are unsure, please select "I'm not sure."

Who is the current U.S. Secretary of State?

- David Cameron (1)
- Hillary Clinton (2)
- John Kerry (3)
- Condoleezza Rice (4)
I'm not sure (5)

Which political party has the most members in the House of Representatives in Washington, DC?
- Democrats (1)
- Republicans (2)
- I'm not sure (3)

How long is one term of office for a U.S. Senator?
- 2 years (1)
- 4 years (2)
- 6 years (3)
- 8 years (4)
- I'm not sure (5)

A Super PAC is...
- a Political Action Committee with more than 10,000 members (1)
- an interest group that collects donations and contributes to candidates' campaigns (2)
- an interest group whose donors can only donate a limited amount of money (3)
- an interest group that spends independently of campaigns and whose donors are not limited in the amount they can contribute (4)
- I'm not sure (5)

What is the highest level of school you have completed?
- Grade 8 or lower (1)
- Some high school, no diploma (2)
- High school diploma or equivalent (3)
- Some college, no degree (4)
- Associate degree (5)
- Bachelor's degree (6)
- Master's degree (7)
- Professional degree (8)
- Doctoral degree (9)

In what year were you born?

What is your gender?
- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Other (please specify) (3) ____________________

Please indicate your ethnicity or race.
- White (1)
- Hispanic or Latino (2)
- Black or African American (3)
- Native American or American Indian (4)
- Asian / Pacific Islander (5)
- Other (please specify) (6) ____________________
Appendix 4: Sample Demographics and Randomization Checks

Table A1: Sample Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Male</td>
<td>50.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Non-Hispanic White</td>
<td>53.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Age (std. dev)</td>
<td>43.8 (16.93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Education (st. dev)</td>
<td>4.99 (1.67)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean Political Knowledge (std. dev)</td>
<td>1.77 (1.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Liberalism (std. dev)</td>
<td>2.89 (1.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>5.61 (1.15)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Appendix Table A2: Randomization Checks

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Variable</th>
<th>Chi-square (p-value)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male (0-1)</td>
<td>26.15 (p = 0.29)</td>
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<tr>
<td>White (0-1)</td>
<td>17.14 (p=0.802)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age (17-88) (ANOVA)</td>
<td>F=.58 (p=0.997)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education (1-9)</td>
<td>195.34(p=0.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Knowledge (0-4)</td>
<td>83.90 (p=0.714)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberalism (1-5)</td>
<td>100.92 (p=0.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness (1-7)</td>
<td>279.44 (p=0.431)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: To further assess balance, we estimated a multinomial logistic regression model using the variables in the table to predict treatment assignment. The chi-square from this model is 151.30 (p=0.6966) indicating that the variables do not jointly predict treatment assignment.