The Emotional Consequences of Psychological Conflict Orientation and Political Incivility

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Keywords: incivility, emotion, affect, conflict orientation, political communication

Research into media effects has long established that political news has the power to shape people’s emotional and cognitive engagement with politics. However, less has been done to understand how psychological differences lead to variation in individuals’ reactions to the tone of media coverage. I argue that individuals’ predispositions towards conflict—their conflict orientation—change how they react to mediated incivility, making the conflict avoidant more disgusted with politics and less likely to engage upon watching the uncivil presentation of information. To examine this question, I conducted a survey experiment in which participants were asked to complete a questionnaire about their conflict orientation and were then randomly assigned to one of four conditions containing video clips that convey political information in a civil or uncivil way. After being exposed to this treatment, participants were asked about their affective responses to, and perceptions of, political media. I find that the conflict avoidant—those who are uncomfortable with argument and confrontation—report more anger and disgust with the clip than their conflict approaching peers. These findings suggest that we should pay more attention to individual differences when considering media effects and complicate our understanding of the impact of incivility on political behavior.

I thank the Woodrow Wilson Department of Politics at the University of Virginia for their funding of the survey used for this project. I would especially like to recognize Paul Freedman, Nicholas J.G. Winter, Lynn Sanders, Emily Pears, and Nicole Pankiewicz for their feedback and suggestions.

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In 2010, Lanny Davis, former White House Counsel to President Clinton and founder of the Civility Project, commented that the level of political vitriol was the worst he’d seen in his forty years ("Uncivil War," 2010). The presence of incivility has been documented across a range of media (Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, & Ladwig, 2013; Berry & Sobeiraj, 2014; Papacharissi, 2004; Sobeiraj & Berry, 2011) and has been shown to affect a range of political attitudes and behaviors, including perceptions of legitimacy, trust in government, and participation (Brooks & Geer, 2007; J. Geer & Lau, 2006; Kahn & Kenney, 1999; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). Implicit across this research is the expectation that incivility has the same effect across all individuals, regardless of their personal predispositions and attributes.

In contrast, recent research on exposure to disagreement—a cousin to (or requirement for) incivility—demonstrates that personal characteristics shape both positive and negative consequences of exposure (Testa, Hibbing, & Ritchie, 2014). Specifically, one’s tendency to seek out or avoid conflict interacts with exposure to interpersonal disagreement to affect political participation. However, research also suggests that individuals are exposed to disagreement most frequently through the media (Mutz & Martin, 2001). Given this tendency, it is through communication via the media, not interpersonal political conversations, where we should observe scenarios in which individuals actually experience the effects of incivility.

In both interpersonal and mediated communication, disagreement can take many forms. Hearing someone say, “I disagree, and here is why,” is a very different experience than “You idiot! I can’t believe you think something so stupid.” While most people will react more negatively to the second comment, their reactions will also depend on how
comfortable they are with conflict generally. Some individuals are generally conflict-avoidant and are uncomfortable with uncivil ways of disagreeing. Others are conflict-approaching and may be drawn into a debate because they find conflict and confrontation exciting. Little has been done to understand how the effects of incivility differ based on an individual’s predisposition towards conflict.

I argue that what I call “mediated incivility” – that is, incivility experienced through the consumption of news media – elicits different emotional effects on individuals because of their conflict orientation. Conflict-avoidant individuals—those who don’t feel comfortable in argumentative situations—will react more negatively to uncivil presentation of political news, exhibiting more disgust and anxiety and less interest, entertainment or amusement than when watching a civil news clip. To test this argument, I run a survey experiment on a sample of 600 participants recruited by Survey Sampling International in which participants are asked to complete a questionnaire about their conflict orientation and are then randomly assigned to one of four conditions containing video clips that convey political information in a civil or uncivil way. After being exposed to this treatment, participants were asked about their affective responses to, and perceptions of, political media.

I find, as expected, that conflict-avoidant individuals recoil from expressions of incivility in the media while conflict-approaching individuals relish it. While the conflict-avoidant report greater feelings of disgust and anxiety after watching uncivil media, the conflict-approaching report overall less disgust and anxiety at roughly equivalent levels for both civil and uncivil video clips. Conversely, the most conflict-approaching participants reported significantly higher feelings of amusement and
entertainment when assigned to watch the uncivil treatment. The conflict-avoidant, however, were no more entertained by incivility than civil presentations of information. These results demonstrate that the interaction of incivility and conflict orientation leads to very different emotional responses across individuals.

These divergent outcomes complicate our understanding of the role of incivility in politics. On the one hand, incivility elicits emotions that draw people into the political arena, potentially increasing participation and citizen engagement. On the other hand, it systematically discourages involvement by the conflict-avoidant; people who are more likely to articulate positions in non-confrontational ways. Furthermore, these findings suggest that incivility breeds incivility: nasty online comments and hateful outbursts at political rallies are the result of the conflict-approaching individual’s enthusiasm for argument and confrontation.

Mediated Incivility and Political Behavior

Incivility has been documented at differing levels across media platforms. Sobeiraj and Berry (Berry & Sobeiraj, 2014; Sobeiraj & Berry, 2011) report that almost 90 percent of the blogs, cable television and talk radio segments they sampled contain at least some form of “outrage,”2 with television ranking as the worst offender. One hundred percent of the cable television programs in their sample and 98.8 percent of talk radio programs contained some form of outrage. Sobeiraj and Berry find that blogs feature outrage less frequently than cable and talk radio, but not “radically less” (Berry &

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2 Outrage, according to Sobeiraj and Berry (2013) “differs conceptually from its more frequently examined compatriot, incivility, because the discourteous gestures implied by incivility…are considerably less dramatic and demeaning than the remarks and behaviors we define as outrageous.” However, I interpret outrage as operating on the same continuum as incivility and treat it as equivalent to highly uncivil communication.
Sobeiraj, 2014). Several studies suggest that incivility has been steadily increasing since the 1980s with the rise of cable television, the internet, and negative campaigning (J. G. Geer, 2012; Shea & Sproveri, 2012). Papacharissi (Papacharissi, 2004) investigates incivility in the new media environment of online forums, and finds that around half of forum messages contain either impolite or uncivil commentary.

Increased incivility has mixed implications for political behavior. Some studies find that exposure to negative, rude or uncivil media leads to decreased perceptions of government legitimacy and lower trust in government (Kahn & Kenney, 1999; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). Others find that incivility increases engagement and participation in campaigns (Brooks & Geer, 2007; J. Geer & Lau, 2006). While these findings demonstrate substantial implications of incivility for political behavior, they say little about the mechanisms by which the presence of incivility in the media leads to changed behavioral outcomes in citizens.

Emotions are influenced by mediated communication and have also been shown to influence behavioral outcomes. For example, emotions play a role in reasoning and affect political decision-making (Brader, 2006; Cassino & Lodge, 2007; Huddy, Feldman, & Cassese, 2007; MacKuen, Marcus, Neuman, & Keele, 2007; Parsons, 2010). Brader (Brader, 2006) shows that positive campaign ads can cue enthusiasm that motivates participation and activates pre-existing loyalties. Brader also manipulates ads, finding that negative music and images evoke fear, which facilitates persuasion. While Brader focuses on non-verbal communication, others have studied responses to the language used in uncivil communication (Mutz, 2015). Sociologists, interested in Australians’ responses to situations of “everyday incivility,” find that individuals’
emotional responses to uncivil experiences are dependent on whether the person was a witness or participant in the event. In focus-group recollections of these experiences, individuals who had participated were more likely to report feelings of anger than witnesses, while observers reported more feelings of fear, unease, and disgust (Phillips & Smith, 2004).

Research on media and emotion establishes a starting point from which to investigate the link between incivility, emotion, and political behavior. Much of this research assumes that everyone generally has the same emotional response to negative or positive music and images. But, like Phillips & Smith, I argue that citizens’ responses to political incivility are more nuanced. Incivility does not elicit the same emotions across all individuals. Instead, affective responses are shaped by individuals’ conflict orientation: their desire to approach or avoid argumentative or confrontational situations.

Conflict Orientation

Psychologists argue that conflict orientation is trait-based—a set of relatively stable personality attributes rather than responses that change in the face of various environmental stimuli (Bresnahan, Donohue, Shearman, & Guan, 2009; Goldstein, 1999). Conflict orientation determines how people experience and react to conflict, including whether they are excited by arguments, uncomfortable when others fight in public, or happy to handle a disagreement face-to-face (Bresnahan et al., 2009; Goldstein, 1999; Testa et al., 2014). At one extreme, an individual can be highly conflict-avoidant, finding disagreement and argument uncomfortable. Conflict-avoidant individuals dislike confrontation and face-to-face resolution of conflict and will find ways in their personal and political lives to minimize their exposure to potential conflict situations. At the other
extreme are conflict-approaching individuals, who have no problem expressing disagreement, are excited by the prospect of a debate, and are happy to air their arguments face-to-face in any environment. Conflict-approaching individuals are not disturbed by the presence of conflict around them, and can even thrive in a high-conflict environment.

Political scientists have applied the concept of conflict orientation to their own outcomes of interest, specifically the relationships between conflict orientation, interpersonal disagreement, trust in government and political participation (Mutz, 2006; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Testa et al., 2014; Ulbig & Funk, 1999). It is easy to see how exposure to incivility while watching political news could lead to different reactions across orientations towards conflict. Those who dislike arguing with others will have a more negative reaction to the yelling, ad hominem attacks and belittling that characterize uncivil communication than those who are excited by the same experience.

Expectations

Conflict orientation and incivility interact to produce different emotional reactions in citizens. More conflict-avoidant individuals will be more likely to react negatively to incivility while conflict-approaching individuals will have positive responses to the same tone. I focus on three negative emotions—anxiety, disgust and anger—and two positive emotions—amusement and entertainment.

I expect that when conflict-avoidant individuals are faced with political information that is expressed in a highly argumentative or uncivil manner, they will have a negative reaction, regardless of whether they agree with the information being conveyed or the people presenting that information. The conflict-approaching, on the
other hand, will more likely react with enthusiasm to the expression of incivility in political media.

More specifically, I expect conflict-avoidant individuals to report greater feelings of anxiety and disgust than their conflict-approaching counterparts. The tendency for individuals to seek congruence between their personal disposition and situational characteristics (Deutsch, 1985), coupled with theories of cognitive dissonance, suggest that individuals experience some level of anxiety when faced with contradictory information or an environment that is at odds with their personalities. Furthermore, it seems plausible that Phillips and Smith’s (Phillips & Smith, 2004) finding that incivility provokes disgust, fear and unease would apply most strongly to those who are the most uncomfortable with conflict.

H₁: More conflict-avoidant individuals than conflict-approaching individuals will report feeling disgusted by incivility.

H₂: The more conflict-avoidant the individual, the more anxiety he or she will report feeling when exposed to incivility.

Because anger is a negative emotion that frequently follows a different set of patterns than other negative emotions, provoking an approach motivation where other negative emotions would elicit avoidance, I do not believe that conflict-avoidant individuals will necessarily respond with more anger than their conflict-approaching counterparts. Instead, the hypothesis here is mixed. On the one hand, we could imagine that exposure to incivility could prompt greater anger among the conflict-avoidant—towards the media for sanctioning this type of language, towards political elites for using it, or towards politics generally. On the other hand, given that anger is an approach-
oriented emotion, it seems to contradict the conflict-avoidant individuals’ desire to avoid confrontation. Furthermore, it seems unlikely that the conflict-approaching would experience anger in the face of incivility. While it is easy to identify possible targets of conflict-avoidant individuals’ anger, it is unclear who or what would be the target. Given the lack of a clear directional hypothesis given our understandings of how conflict orientation should produce emotion, I have no *a priori* expectation for the relationship between conflict orientation and anger.

Individuals who are more conflict-approaching will have more positive reactions to incivility. This hypothesis comes directly out of research by Mutz and Reeves (Mutz & Reeves, 2005), who find that individuals who are excited by conflict also report that incivility has greater entertainment value. I look to replicate that finding here.

$H_3$: The more conflict-approaching the individual, the more he or she will report being entertained by incivility.

$H_4$: The more conflict-approaching the individual, the more he or she will report being amused by incivility.

[Table 1 here]

**Sample**

Much of the data for this study was collected as part of a larger survey experiment conducted on a nationally representative sample of 600 participants by Survey Sampling International (SSI). The survey was run through the open-source survey platform Limesurvey and hosted by [redacted for peer review]. In order to meet sampling quotas, participants first filled out demographic questions about their age, race, education, gender and partisanship. If they met eligibility requirements, they completed three other
Researchers’ brief surveys and a series of two screening questions to ensure that they were reading and paying attention to the survey. The questions and treatments for this experiment were the third set out of four.

While online samples raise external validity concerns similar to those expressed about student samples, our institution of a quota system ensures a more diverse set of respondents than is the case in most online convenience samples. As Table 2 shows, the quotas were relatively successful in capturing a sample that was reflective of gender, age and race/ethnicity in the United States. As is the case with many online samples, the participants tended to be more educated than the average American but with a lower median household income; however, we still had substantial variation across both of these categories.

[Table 2 here]

While the alignment between the sample and census demographics suggest that the results of the experiment are likely to hold across a diverse set of citizens, other research allays concerns about the external validity of online samples. Research comparing crowd-sourcing sites like MTurk to more nationally representative online samples also demonstrates that while these samples display demographic differences, the experimental findings from both samples remain very similar (Weinberg, Freese, & McElhatten, 2014). This research provides evidence of the external validity of samples like the one used in

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3 This researcher’s questions came near (3rd out of four) the end of the series of four sets of questions. However, each of the projects was on a distinct topic that was unrelated to the research questions at play here. Furthermore, any randomization of participants for experiments taking place earlier in the survey was done separate from randomization for this survey. Taking both of these factors into consideration, I do not believe there are strong reasons to be concerned about order effects or priming of particular effects through participation in the three quarters of the survey. For the full questionnaire, including treatments and questions asked by other researchers, see the supplementary appendix.
this paper, reducing my concerns about the effects of demographic differences or other individual-level characteristics of the sample affecting experimental results.

Measuring Conflict Orientation

Across studies of conflict orientation and political behavior, conflict orientation is measured using different scales or survey questions. While Testa and his colleagues (2014) assume that conflict orientation consists of two distinct dimensions—both approaching and avoidant orientations—I build on Mutz’s (2005) work by drawing my measures of conflict orientation from the same psychological measure—the Conflict Communication Scale (Goldstein, 1999). Although Mutz uses only a single question from the CCS, I extend my measure to include five questions that I combine into an additive scale. The scale can range from -10 (the most conflict-avoidant) to 10 (the most conflict-approaching). As Figure 1 shows, many individuals exhibit both conflict-approaching and conflict-avoidant behaviors, placing them somewhere in the middle of the scale. Even using a different scale, my results align with Testa’s (2014) finding that most people are “conflict ambivalent.”

[Figure 1 here]

Looking at the specific questions asked within the CCS, it is clear that the scale was designed to measure reactions to conflict in interpersonal settings. And indeed, much of the political science literature focuses on the relationship between conflict orientation and actions that require interpersonal communication (specifically the potential for disagreement) — protesting, knocking on doors for a campaign, or having political conversations. I expect conflict orientation to have the same impact on individuals’ reactions to disagreement in the media. Reeves and Nass (Reeves & Nass,
1996) find that individuals relate to computers or television programs in much the same way that they relate to other human beings, suggesting that they will process an argument fought on television similarly to one witnessed in a restaurant. This study presents a further test of their claim by examining emotional responses to mediated incivility.

Experimental Manipulation of Incivility

After participants responded to the Conflict Communication Scale, they were told that they would watch a short clip from a recent political newscast and then be asked a series of questions based on the video. Participants were assigned to one of four treatments that varied in their level of civility. The clips were either civil or uncivil⁴ and came from either MSNBC’s *Morning Joe* or *The Dylan Ratigan Show*.⁵ Because a pilot test of the treatments suggested that the clips from the two shows were viewed similarly across key measures, the analyses in this paper focus only on the difference between the civil and uncivil treatments and not on distinctions between those participants who saw *Morning Joe* and those who saw *Dylan Ratigan*. The use of both civil and uncivil treatments allows me to compare reactions to the two treatments at the same value of conflict orientation, as well as responses to the same treatment across different levels of conflict orientation. To encourage realism, the clips are excerpts from live cable news

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⁴In a pretest, 300 MTurk participants were randomly assigned to watch one of six videos—a civil or uncivil clip from *Morning Joe*, *The Dylan Ratigan Show*, or *Hannity*. They were then asked, “To what extent was the clip you just watched uncivil?” They could respond on a scale from one to five, with one indicating “not at all uncivil” and five representing “extremely uncivil.” *Morning Joe* and *The Dylan Ratigan Show* were found to be statistically indistinguishable in both the civil and uncivil conditions. The uncivil clips used to build the treatments in this paper were evaluated as follows: \( M_{\text{Morning Joe}} = 2.89, M_{\text{Ratigan}} = 2.98, p<0.69 \). Both the civil and uncivil clips from *Hannity* were seen as more uncivil than their MSNBC counterparts and were therefore excluded from the treatment set.

⁵*Morning Joe* has been on MSNBC since 2007. It currently airs from 6 to 9 am EST. *The Dylan Ratigan Show* aired weekdays on MSNBC from 4 pm to 5 pm EST from January 2010 to June 2012. The show focused on debate and discussion related politics, economy and business. I selected Dylan Ratigan over more well-known MSNBC shows because of his focus on the economy and in a desire to minimize partisan bias in responding to the news clip.
broadcasts, with the same two to three minute segment shortened to highlight either the civil or uncivil components of one conversation among the same set of commentators. The segments from both *The Dylan Ratigan Show* and *Morning Joe* dealt with major economic debates from 2009 and 2011: the AIG bonus scandal and the budget deficit. As with any experimental treatment, the videos represent a balance between the desire for ecological validity and a realistic experience on the part of participants against the need to control as much of the content as possible to ensure that the treatments differ only on the construct of interest (Druckman, Green, Kuklinski, & Lupia, 2011).

As Figure 2 shows, participants in the survey interpreted the uncivil treatment as approximately one-half point less civil than the civil treatment, a statistically significant but perhaps not substantively significant difference. The most conflict-avoidant and the most conflict-approaching participants perceived the civil treatment as similarly civil and the uncivil treatment as similarly uncivil. These treatments present a hard test of my theory—if only a slight difference in incivility can produce different emotional effects, it is likely that a more extreme case would produce larger variation. Furthermore, because perceptions of incivility don’t vary with conflict orientation, we can be more confident that conflict orientation is directly shaping emotional reactions, rather than orientation affecting perceptions which then influence one’s affective response.

[Figure 2 here]

Incivility Sparks Emotional Responses

Before getting into the differences across conflict orientations, I looked for a general relationship between exposure to incivility and reported emotional responses.
Drawing on Mutz and Reeves (2005) and Brader (2006), I expected the uncivil treatment to increase individuals’ reported experience of all emotions, positive or negative.

These relationships are borne out in the data, although the results are more pronounced for negative emotions than positive ones. The graph on the left-hand side of Figure 3 shows that incivility only weakly increases individuals’ positive feelings. Participants in the incivility treatment only report a significant increase in their feelings of amusement when compared to those who watched the civil clip ($M_{\text{civil}}=1.89$, $M_{\text{uncivil}}=2.08$, $p<0.041$). This difference is relatively small—the participants in the uncivil condition reported their amusement as, on average, two-tenths of a point higher on a five-point scale than did those participants in the civil condition. There was no significant difference in their reported entertainment.

The treatment has a greater effect on participants reported experience of negative emotions—anger, disgust and anxiety. Participants reported statistically significantly greater feelings of each negative emotion in the uncivil condition than in the civil condition. The effects are still relatively small for anger and anxiety, an increase of between two- and three-tenths of a point, but they report much greater feelings of disgust. On average, participants report feeling a little disgusted after watching the civil treatment ($M=1.90$), but this average jumps half a point on the scale to 2.37, or somewhere between “a little” and “somewhat” disgusted for participants in the uncivil condition ($p<0.01$).

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6 Statistical significance calculated from a two-sample, two-tailed t-test.

7 Entertainment: $M_{\text{civil}}=2.13$, $M_{\text{uncivil}}=2.23$, $p<0.30$, two-tailed two-sample t-test.

8 Anger: $M_{\text{civil}}=1.80$, $M_{\text{uncivil}}=1.98$, $p<0.02$, two-tailed, two-sample t-test; Anxiety: $M_{\text{civil}}=1.74$, $M_{\text{uncivil}}=2.05$, $p<0.001$, two-tailed, two-sample t-test
Effects as Moderated by Conflict Orientation

Overall, these findings demonstrate that incivility elicits a range of emotional responses from citizens, both positive and negative. But the main effects of incivility on emotional response also suggest an interesting tension: incivility increases reported negative feelings like anger, disgust and anxiety, but it also increases positive feelings of amusement. Breaking the results down across the range of conflict orientations reveals why incivility seems to produce both positive and negative emotional reactions in individuals. In comparison to civil coverage of the same issue, incivility is more likely to elicit positive emotions in more conflict-approaching individuals, while it is more likely to induce negative emotions in the conflict-avoidant.

Looking first at the negative emotions—anxiety, anger and disgust—I expected that exposure to incivility would increase feelings of anxiety and disgust among the conflict-avoidant; I was neutral in my expectations for the effects of incivility on anger across conflict orientations. When I compare the findings from the civil and uncivil treatments across the range of conflict orientations, it is clear that individuals who are more conflict-avoidant do experience greater negative emotional reactions to incivility than they do to the civil discussion of the same issue. As Figure 4 shows, a similar pattern emerges in individuals’ self-reported feelings of anxiety, disgust, and anger in response to civility and incivility. Individuals who are more conflict-avoidant report greater negative emotional reactions to the uncivil clip than they do to the civil clip. However, this difference disappears when we look at individuals that are more conflict-approaching. Feelings of disgust among the conflict-avoidant are most influenced by the presence of incivility, with the highly conflict-avoidant (those that score a -10 on the Conflict Communication Scale) reporting average feelings of disgust at around 2.6 on the 5-point
scale when shown the uncivil video clip. This translates to feeling somewhere between “slightly” or “moderately” disgusted. Those conflict-avoidant individuals who viewed the civil clip reported feelings of disgust that averaged around 1.6, a full point lower than those who viewed incivility, and somewhere between “not at all” disgusted and “slightly.” The gap between those who viewed the uncivil treatment and those in the civil condition declines as conflict orientation moves towards greater conflict-approaching tendencies, becoming statistically indistinguishable around the conflict-ambivalent zero point.

Incivility also has a greater effect on individuals’ reported feelings of anxiety if they are highly conflict-avoidant. The gap between average reported anxiety for the highly conflict-avoidant in civil and uncivil treatments is about half a point on the five-point scale, such that those who watched the uncivil video clip reported more anxiety than those in the civil treatment. The difference between the treatments at the highest levels of conflict avoidance is not statistically significant, but this is likely due to the relatively small set of participants who score the highest and lowest values of the CCS. The difference is clear for those participants who are slightly conflict-avoidant (those who scored between -7 and zero), and the gap between reported feelings of anxiety for these individuals is between a quarter and a third of a point. Like with reported feelings of disgust, the difference between the civil and uncivil treatments disappears for those participants who are conflict-approaching. The responses for reported feelings of anger also follow this pattern, although these differences are not statistically significant. The conflict-approaching do not experience any greater feelings of anger, anxiety or disgust when viewing an uncivil video clip than when viewing a civil clip. However, the
conflict-avoidant report feeling more anxious and disgusted when they watch uncivil coverage of politics than when they watch a civil discussion of the same issue.

[Figure 4 here]

The pattern for the experience of positive emotions mirrors that for negative emotions. Looking at Figure 5, we see that the conflict-approaching are more likely to report feeling amused or entertained when watching an uncivil clip than when exposed to the civil treatment. However, more conflict-avoidant individuals report feeling no more positive when watching the uncivil video than when watching the civil one. The effects for both amusement and entertainment are relatively similar, with highly conflict-approaching participants in the uncivil condition reporting levels of both reactions that are about three-quarters of a point higher than those in the civil condition. In other words, the most conflict-approaching people found the uncivil clip to be moderately amusing or entertaining, while they found the civil clip to be only slightly amusing or entertaining. Those who identified as more conflict-avoidant reported no difference in their feelings of amusement and entertainment when watching the uncivil or civil video clips.

[Figure 5 here]

While these analyses allow me to compare the effects of the treatment at various levels of conflict orientation, they do not account for the impact that other characteristics might have on emotional responses to the video clips, nor do they allow us to distinguish the effect of conflict orientation within a treatment. For example, those who know more about or are more interested in politics may have stronger emotional reactions. Gender and partisanship may also affect emotional responses to media; we know, for example,
that anxiety and enthusiasm interact with partisanship to influence candidate preferences (Marcus & Mackuen, 1993). And while the treatments demonstrate that conflict orientation shapes emotional reactions to incivility in comparison to civility, they do not allow us to compare the reaction of the conflict-approaching and conflict-avoidant to incivility or civility. To investigate each of these effects and test the robustness of these findings in the context of social or demographic factors, it is necessary to use basic regression techniques.

Table 3 displays the results of five OLS regression models that investigate the relationship between each emotional response, conflict orientation, the treatment condition, and a variety of demographic and political characteristics. I hypothesized that political interest would influence emotional reactions to political news. Our survey used political knowledge is used as a proxy for interest, with the assumption that knowledge increases as one becomes more politically interested. Knowledge is measured through a set of five political knowledge questions that were excerpted from Delli Carpini and Keeter’s (1995) scale. Gender, partisan identification and partisan strength were also included as possible characteristics that could affect the emotions experienced in watching these video clips.

[Table 3 here]

Once I factor in other key variables, the relationship between incivility, conflict orientation and emotion is weaker, but still plays a role in understanding who has greater emotional reactions, particularly of disgust and entertainment. For these two reactions, the main effect of the uncivil treatment and the interaction between the treatment and conflict orientation remain statistically significant in the expected directions. Feelings of
disgust decrease in reaction to the uncivil treatment as we move from the conflict-avoidant to the conflict-approaching. The opposite occurs with entertainment; the interaction is positive, indicating that the conflict-approaching in the uncivil treatment are more likely to feel entertained than the conflict-avoidant, even taking into consideration the role of partisanship, political knowledge and gender.

We can also see in Table 3 that political knowledge plays an important role in emotional responses to the clips. Specifically, greater knowledge reduces the emotional impact of the treatment on individuals in all instances but disgust. In other words, people with greater political interest are less anxious, angry, amused or entertained by either news clip. There is no interactive effect of political knowledge and treatment, which suggests that incivility is no more or less appealing to those who are more interested in or knowledgeable of politics.

To summarize, my experimental survey results suggest that conflict orientation and incivility interact to produce different emotional responses in the conflict-avoidant and conflict-approaching. Participants who are more conflict-avoidant are more likely to report negative emotions such as disgust and anxiety when shown an uncivil news clip than when shown a civil portrayal of the same information. Conversely, more conflict-approaching individuals report greater amusement and entertainment when watching an uncivil clip than a civil one. These findings hold even when controlling for other facets of individual’s political lives, including their partisanship, political interest and knowledge, and demographic characteristics like gender. While these demographic and social characteristics do have an impact on individuals’ emotional responses above and
beyond the treatments, incivility and conflict orientation continue to play a significant role in emotional response, particularly in evoking disgust and entertainment.

Discussion

Current research on incivility emphasizes its dual nature: on one hand, it decreases trust in government and perceptions of legitimacy while on the other it increases participation. This article offers one reason for these contrasting outcomes: incivility affects people differently because people respond to conflict in different ways.

The fact that conflict orientation and incivility interact to provoke different emotional responses has implications for a range of political behaviors and decisions. Much of the evidence suggests that emotion has a positive effect on political participation (Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000). Research by Brader suggests that anxiety propels people to seek more information while enthusiasm stimulates the desire to vote (Brader, 2006). This increased engagement in the political sphere is typically seen as normatively positive, but it raises concerns about the quality of citizens’ engagement. Conflict-approaching individuals are being drawn into politics, but not in a way that facilitates reasoned, respectful conversations about the issues. A Facebook post by a Toledo, Ohio news station about steps to resettle Syrian refugees prompted a stream of uncivil comments, from “Gas them, dig a big hole” to “Sad to say but I think it’s time of a new day and aged [sic] Hitler” (Voss, 2015). Previous research (Anderson et al., 2013; Stroud, Scacco, Muddiman, & Curry, 2014) suggests that preventing anonymous postings and moderating comment forums can reduce uncivil comments, but this does not explain why individuals are driven to make uncivil comments in the first place, nor does it explain why they are willing to use their Facebook accounts to do so. My research
suggests that the presence of incivility in the media, coupled with greater engagement by people who are comfortable with conflict in the first place, increases the likelihood that discourse will become uncivil.

Future research concerning the impact of incivility on emotional responses should push this connection further, identifying emotional response as the mechanism by which incivility and conflict orientation shape political participation and engagement. If incivility makes the conflict-avoidant anxious, are they looking for more information about politics, and if so, how and where are they doing so? If not, given that they seem to have stronger disgust reactions than anxiety reactions, are most of the conflict-avoidant deciding to simply avoid political information instead? If positive emotions encourage engagement, it is important to identify what kinds of political activities the conflict-approaching more likely to engage in. Experimental work that builds political activities onto the end of the surveys used here would go far towards exploring these effects.

Finally, this research fits within a growing body of literature that acknowledges individual variation in reactions to and engagement with the media. Where traditional media effects research assumed that news clips and advertisements had similar effects across individuals, these findings demonstrate that such effects are conditioned by an individual’s predispositions—both political and nonpolitical.
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Figure 1

Distribution of Participants on the Conflict Communication Scale

Conflict Orientation

Highly Avoidant

Highly Approaching
Figure 2

To what extent was the clip you just watched civil?

Conflict Orientation

- Avoid
- Approach

Reported level of civility

- More uncivil
- Less uncivil

Uncivil Treatment
Civil Treatment
Figure 3

Average Participant Report of...

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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>Amusement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Reported Experience of Emotion (Average)</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Runnin HEAD: Conflict Orientation, Incivility and Emotions