Statement of Research Interests
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In a survey conducted before the 2016 election, over three-quarters of polled Americans expressed serious concern about the level of incivility in American political discourse. National news organizations highlighted specific uncivil comments made by the candidates, particularly focusing on Donald Trump’s Twitter feed. The assumption made by citizens and journalists alike was that this sort of language demonstrates disrespect for one another and for American institutions that degrades the quality of our democracy. My research challenges this assumption as too broad. Drawing on theories from political science, psychology and communication, I demonstrate that our perceptions of and reactions to incivility are dependent on specific characteristics of the message, medium and individuals involved. For certain people and in certain contexts, incivility can have normatively positive, democratic effects. This research contributes to a growing body of political behavior research that recognizes the importance of individual-level variables in explaining variation in media effects. It also offers practical recommendations to those looking for interventions that will improve the quality of political discourse and reduce cynicism.

Current Research

My book project, “Fighting Words and Fiery Tone: The Interaction of Political Incivility and Psychological Conflict Orientation,” investigates how incivility in mediated political discourse interacts with individual-level predispositions toward conflict to shape individuals’ media choice and affect political engagement. The project analyzes the degree of incivility across a range of television and internet news outlets, as well as social media, and explores the differential effects that incivility can have on individuals depending on their orientation towards conflict. I use data from over 3,500 participants in three online surveys to find that highly conflict-approaching and avoidant individuals do behave differently: conflict-avoidant participants report less participation in activities such as protests or commenting on blogs and report a greater preference for traditional network news or for social media as their sources of political news. The activities and media preferred by the conflict avoidant tend to be those that are also considered more civil. Thus, an interaction between civility and conflict orientation occurs as individuals attempt to match their own reactions to conflict with the amount of civility or incivility they will experience while engaging with politics.

Another major finding of this project is that conflict orientation shapes the emotional reactions individuals have to political incivility as portrayed in the media. The conflict-approaching report greater enthusiasm, amusement and entertainment when watching uncivil news than when they are shown civil political clips. The conflict-avoidant, on the other hand, are more likely to say they feel disgusted, anxious or angry in the face of incivility.

However, self-report measures of emotion can be unreliable; psychological research shows that some emotional reactions occur outside of conscious awareness. As an extension to the book project, I have received a grant from the American Political Science Association’s Centennial Center to conduct an experiment that measures affective responses using cortisol levels. Increased cortisol is a physiological response to stress. The goal of this experiment is to demonstrate that this physiological response to incivility mediates the relationship between uncivil communication and political engagement. Specifically, I expect different cortisol levels to be correlated with decreased participation in and poorer quality of political conversation.

In addition to investigating individual differences in citizens’ reactions to incivility, my current research focuses on how our understanding of incivility is
dependent on characteristics of the communication environment as well. In a paper that was recently accepted to Political Communication, I demonstrate that different combinations of media attributes, such as channel (e.g. audio versus audio-visual), organization and interactivity, influence our perceptions of incivility. In other words, it is not just that uncivil language is more likely to be found on television, the radio, or the Internet. Characteristics of these media make people more likely to think they have encountered incivility, even if the message has been the same across all media platforms. Similarly, in a chapter under consideration for an edited volume on political civility and incivility, I argue that both our perceptions of incivility and ultimately our trust in political institutions is dependent not only on the presence of uncivil language but also on who is using that language. Incivility from a political leader has a much greater effect on political trust than does incivility from an average citizen. Advocates for greater political civility, therefore, might target political elites over the general citizenry, as this top-down approach has the potential to mitigate some of the negative effects of incivility.

**Ongoing Research**

Two projects currently in the early stages further investigate interactions between the individual and environment to shape perceptions of incivility and political behavior. Both focus on individuals’ sensitivity to uncivil rhetoric in the contemporary political arena.

The first project asks whether we can teach people specific communication skills that minimize the negative effects of incivility. A field experiment using students in two types of communication classes investigates the role of education, specifically courses in debate and argumentation, on a range of personality traits. The expectation is that when individuals are instructed in the logic of argumentation, they will be more comfortable with conflict and less sensitive to uncivil language. This experiment will be supplemented with an online experiment connecting individuals’ personality traits to their information search habits in civil and uncivil media environments. We have received a seed grant from the National Institute for Civil Discourse to pilot each experiment. These results, in turn, will be used to develop a proposal for a larger grant application to the Spencer Foundation or similar organizations that fund research into civic engagement and education initiatives.

The second project grows out of a question asked in the wake of the 2016 election. How did Donald Trump get elected when he was more uncivil, racist, and sexist in his campaign than other contemporary presidential candidates? Campaign forecasters offer a range of compelling answers, but as a political communication scholar I wondered: does increased exposure to political incivility desensitizes us to its effects? Over the course of the next year, I will design and carry out an initial set of experiments to test the effects of exposure to sustained incivility. In the initial test, participants will watch a series of political news clips. In one condition these news clips will be entirely civil, in another, a mix of civil and uncivil, and the third condition will be comprised completely of uncivil discussions. I expect to find a tipping point at which we become inured to incivility. The entirely uncivil condition will not produce stronger effects than that with mixed civil and uncivil political discussion. Results from this project can help us understand recently political behavior and suggest solutions for news organizations seeking to increase civil discourse across their media platforms.

Like with the work exploring the impact of the speaker on perceptions of incivility, I see both of these projects as not only contributing to our understanding of political incivility and its effects on citizens’ behavior but also offering recommendations and interventions for those looking to achieve normatively positive democratic ends.