

# The effect of 'in your face' political television on democracy

December 12 2007

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Television can encourage awareness of political perspectives among Americans, but the incivility and close-up camera angles that characterize much of today's "in your face" televised political debate also causes audiences to react more emotionally and think of opposing views as less legitimate.

These findings come from a research project conducted by political scientist and communications scholar Diana C. Mutz (University of Pennsylvania) and published in the November issue of the *American Political Science Review*, a journal of the American Political Science Association (APSA).

Conflict is inherent in any democracy, but the legitimacy of democratic systems rests on the extent to which each side in any controversy perceives the opposition as having some reasonable foundation for its position. Mutz's research investigates two key questions. First, does televised political discourse familiarize viewers with political perspectives they disagree with" Second, if so, do viewers perceive such oppositional views as more legitimate after seeing them hashed out on television"

The research involved three distinct experiments and a laboratory setting that presented adult subjects with televised political debate including professional actors, a professional studio talk show set, a political discussion between two purported congressional candidates, and a moderator. All participants saw the exact same exchange of political

arguments, but some viewed these arguments presented in a civil and polite tone, whereas others saw an uncivil exchange that resembled so-called “shout show” political conversations. In addition, some saw the exchange of political views from a close-up camera angle, whereas others saw the same event from a more distant camera perspective. Key findings include:

- Uncivil exchanges of political views featuring tight close-up shots generated the strongest emotional reactions from viewers and the most attention
- Viewer recall of arguments was enhanced by incivility and close-up camera perspectives
- Watching the political television programs improved people’s awareness of issue arguments, regardless of whether viewers watched civil, uncivil, close-up, or medium camera perspectives
- Incivility affected audience perspectives most significantly when shown in an up-close camera perspective
- The uncivil expression of views reinforced the viewers’ tendency to delegitimize oppositional views, while the civil expression of the same views enhanced their perceived legitimacy

“Televised political discourse would seem to be in the service of a deliberative body politic,” observes Mutz, as “any exposure is better than nothing at all.” But she concludes by noting that “when uncivil discourse and close-up camera perspectives combine to produce the unique ‘in-your-face’ perspective, then the high levels of arousal and attention come at the cost of lowering regard for the other side...[discouraging] the kind of mutual respect that might sustain perceptions of a legitimate opposition.” When people experience politicians with whom they disagree from the uniquely intimate perspective of television, their dislike for them only intensifies. This makes it more difficult for the winner in any given context to acquire the respect of the opposition that is often necessary for governing.

The full article is available online at  
<http://www.apsanet.org/imgtest/APSRNov07Mutz.pdf>.

Source: American Political Science Association

Citation: The effect of 'in your face' political television on democracy (2007, December 12)  
retrieved 24 April 2024 from  
<https://phys.org/news/2007-12-effect-political-television-democracy.html>

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