

Professor studies impact of political incivility on partisanship

October 11 2018

From Twitter to daily interactions on the street, the constant impoliteness in today's politics is under examination in UTSA Department of Political Science and Geography.

In his recent article, "Rousing the Partisan Combatant: Elite Incivility, Anger, and Anti-Deliberative Attitudes" published in *Political Psychology*, Bryan Gervais explores the connection between the lack of civility among political leaders and partisanship. In the study, Gervais, looks at whether incivility provokes anger, rather than enthusiasm and anxiety, and whether the reactions induced by incivility yields changes in attitudes.

"Individuals who feel anger towards the "other side" are likely to quarrel with and attack members of the out-group," said Gervais. "Anger can decrease open-mindedness and increase a heavy reliance on partisan cues and biased information processing in support of your pre-existing views."

Gervais conducted two online experiments that involve the manipulation of incivility in messages of political and media professionals from press releases and tweets.

"There is good reason to expect individuals to feel anger rather than anxiety or enthusiasm when their partisan in-group is the target of incivility," said Gervais.

The results provide insight into the dynamics of discourse in the digital age, when polarization is the norm and professionals commonly use uncivil rhetoric. In the first experiment—which was embedded in the 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES)—subjects were randomly assigned to read one of four short, fake paragraphs that were said to be actual statements made by party leaders.

The paragraphs addressed the national debt and what the "other side" needs to do to help debt reduction negotiations move forward. Out of the four paragraphs, two were negative but civil (one by a Republican leader and one by a Democratic leader) and two were uncivil, negative statements (again, one by a Republican and one by a Democrat).

Based on their partisanship and the paragraph they were assigned to read, subjects fell into one of four conditions: pro-attitudinal (P-A) civility, counter-attitudinal (C-A) civility, pro-attitudinal (P-A) incivility, and counter-attitudinal (C-A) incivility. After reading the paragraph, respondents were asked how angry the debate over the national debt made them feel.

The second experiment drew from a national sample of more than 800 people fielded by a professional survey firm in March 2015. Subjects were presented with a "trending tweet they may have missed" that appeared to be issued by the Twitter account of a well-known media source.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of five groups: a control group, a conservative slant group, a liberal slant group, an uncivil conservative group, and an uncivil liberal group. In each group, subjects viewed a tweet describing a transportation plan under consideration.

Those in the control group saw a tweet from the "CNN Breaking News" handle, intended to be neutral in terms of the source and the content and

not tied to a specific party or ideology.

Meanwhile, participants in the conservative slant and liberal slant groups saw similar messages, but with the addition of partisan bias and questions raised about the policy's effectiveness.

The conservative slant message appears to come from the official Twitter handle of Bill O'Reilly, who, at the time of the experiment, hosted a show on Fox News, and the liberal slant message appears to come from the official Twitter handle of Chris Matthews, host of MSNBC's Hardball with Chris Matthews. The only difference between the conservative and liberal versions is the party referenced in the tweet, with O'Reilly focusing on the Democratic plan and Matthews on the Republican plan.

Those in the conservative and liberal uncivil groups were also exposed to partisan messages from the Twitter handles of O'Reilly and Matthews, but with the inclusion of uncivil elements.

For example, to make slanted tweets uncivil, negative adjectives ("dangerous" and "radical"), and hyperbole ("imposed" and "even the experts are scared") were included. The word "alert" was placed in the message with multiple exclamation points, and words strategically presented in all caps were included in the tweets.

Gervais said both studies provide evidence that counter-attitudinal incivility (publicly communicating a belief which runs counter to a belief that the individual holds) induces anger and the second experiment makes it clear that counter-attitudinal incivility does not increase feelings of anxiety or enthusiasm. These feelings of anger, in turn, led subjects to express more partisan attitudes in responses to open-ended questions. That is, we are more combative and tribalistic when our partisan in-group is targeted by incivility.

In addition to this research, Gervais has been working with Walter Wilson, associate professor of [political science](#) at UTSA, to examine the representation of Latinos in congressional Twitter feeds. Wilson and Gervais found that Latino representatives were far more likely than their colleagues to reach out to Latinos in Spanish or by referencing Latino-oriented hashtags.

As the coordinator of the UTSA Digital Politics Studio, Gervais works with undergraduate and graduate students using machine-learning programs to code large data sets they collect while conducting research about social media and digital communications.

Gervais has published articles about political communication and political psychology in top journals such as *Political Communication*, *PS: Political Science & Politics*, *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, *Social Science Quarterly*, and more. He has taught in the UTSA Department of Political Science and Geography since 2013.

More information: Bryan T. Gervais, Rousing the Partisan Combatant: Elite Incivility, Anger, and Antideliberative Attitudes, *Political Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1111/pops.12532](https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12532)

Provided by University of Texas at San Antonio

Citation: Professor studies impact of political incivility on partisanship (2018, October 11) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-10-professor-impact-political-incivility-partisanship.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.