

Uncivil yet persuasive? Testing the persuasiveness of political incivility and the moderating role of populist attitudes and personality traits

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Abstract

Political incivility—that is, treating political opponents with disrespect—and its consequences are increasingly investigated. This article examines the effect of incivility on message persuasiveness and the moderating role of populist attitudes and personality traits. We test these relationships via original experimental data collected in Switzerland (Study 1, $N=1340$) and the United States (Study 2, $N=1820$, preregistered). In both studies, participants were asked their opinion about a controversial political issue, presented with persuasive information framed either civilly or uncivilly, and asked again their opinion about the issue to assess whether they changed their mind. Results of a between-subject design show that incivility does not necessarily undermine the message's persuasiveness, contrary to what we expected. Notably, uncivil messages resonated more with those respondents exhibiting higher levels of populist attitudes (Study 2) and darker personality traits (both studies). Our results further suggest a connection between incivility, message congruence, and particularly cultural context, which warrants further investigations.

KEYWORDS

dark triad, experiment, incivility, personality, persuasion, populist attitudes

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INTRODUCTION

Populist leaders, who have gained increasing electoral support in recent years, are known for a campaigning style characterized by coarse, rude, and disrespectful language (Moffitt & Tormey, 2013). Donald Trump's inflammatory rhetoric is perhaps the best example of this political jargon. His numerous invectives—for example, “Crooked Hillary,” “Lyn’ Ted,” “Sleepy Joe”—earned him the nickname of “insulter in chief” and set the tone of the last U.S. presidential campaigns. However, Trump is not the only populist politician who has gained electoral support with an uncivil campaign. In 2016, Rodrigo Duterte, who infamously called Barack Obama a “son of a whore,” became the Philippines' 16th president (Holmes, 2016). Similarly, in Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro won the 2019 presidential election, leading a campaign filled with offensive remarks about women, race, the environment, and more (Lehman, 2018).

This typically populist vernacular falls under the label of political incivility. Defined as a violation of norms requiring politicians to treat each other with respect (Jamieson et al., 2017; Maisel, 2012), political incivility has gathered growing academic attention. Within this literature, some scholars regard incivility as a rhetorical device and examine if and under which circumstances it might be an effective communication strategy (Gervais, 2021; Herbst, 2010; Maier, 2021; Mutz, 2015). While evidence shows that people generally dislike incivility (e.g., Frimer & Skitka, 2018), the rise of politicians with a distinctly uncivil tone raises the question of who is persuaded by incivility. In this article, we address this paradox. Building upon the assumption that political incivility is a characteristic feature of populist discourse, we argue that it may be an effective communication strategy to sway populist voters.

The idea that political incivility may have differential effects on populist supporters is in line with recent findings demonstrating that the reactions to incivility depend on who people are (e.g., Goovaerts & Marien, 2020; Kenski et al., 2020; Sydnor, 2019). This is because incivility is essentially a norm violation; as such, its perceptions and effects are contingent on the enforced norms within cultures, circumstances, groups, and individuals (Flores et al., 2021). Hence, we argue that while political incivility should, on average, decrease message persuasiveness, this may not be the case for populist supporters. By doing so, we expand incivility research not only by focusing on an outcome that has received relatively little attention (i.e., message persuasiveness) but also on an individual predisposition that, to the best of our knowledge, has not been investigated yet (i.e., populist attitudes).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The persuasiveness of incivility

Even though political incivility is hard to define (Jamieson et al., 2017), most scholars agree that it is essentially a norm-defying behavior (Muddiman et al., 2021). The nature of this norm violation depends on the theoretical tradition, with scholars distinguishing between violations of deliberative norms and violations of politeness norms (Muddiman, 2017; Papacharissi, 2004). We focus on the latter and equate incivility to behaviors defying norms of interpersonal conversation, which require participants in a political discussion to treat each other with respect (Mutz, 2015). In this sense, incivility manifests itself through expressions of disrespect, such as name-calling, insulting language, or vulgarity (Mutz, 2015; Skytte, 2019).

While only a few studies have linked political incivility to persuasive outcomes (e.g., Goovaerts & Marien, 2020; Vargiu & Nai, 2022), there are good reasons to believe that incivility reduces message persuasiveness. First, we have evidence that uncivil messages might have detrimental effects on their sponsors as incivility lowers the source credibility and perceived message quality (Ng & Detenber, 2005). People also have more negative attitudes toward the

sponsor of uncivil messages (Gervais, 2015; Maier, 2021; Mutz, 2015) and are less likely to vote for candidates who are disrespectful (Mölders et al., 2017; Mutz, 2015). While a few studies show that incivility can also have positive consequences for the sender—it can draw attention (Brooks & Geer, 2007; Mutz, 2015) and mobilize supporters (Chen, 2017)—most of the research concludes that politicians are punished for being uncivil. Second, incivility seems to decrease people's tolerance for opposing ideas. Studies show, for example, that exposure to incivility in political discussions can foster antideliberative attitudes (Gervais, 2018). It increases expressions of disagreement with discussion partners (Hwang et al., 2016), reduces open-mindedness (Borah, 2014), and dampens support for bipartisan compromise (Gervais, 2018). Last, incivility generates feelings of anger, disgust, and contempt (Gervais, 2018, 2021; Hwang et al., 2016)—all critical factors in decreasing message persuasiveness (Chakravarti et al., 1993).

Based on these findings, we hypothesize:

H1: Incivility (vs. civility) decreases message persuasiveness.

The role of individual differences

While we expect political incivility, on average, to decrease message persuasiveness, we question whether this assumption holds for all respondents. It is widely established that people differ in their personalities, motives, and abilities and that these factors explain how the same persuasive message can lead to different outcomes for different people (Briñol & Petty, 2005; Briñol et al., 2004). This should be especially the case in connection to political incivility. As the violation of a norm, incivility and its effects are conditional on what is considered acceptable behavior. Norms are context dependent, and what is deemed uncivil will vary among political cultures (Flores et al., 2021) and among individuals within the same culture (Kallgren et al., 2000). As such, incivility is “in the eye of the beholder” (Herbst, 2010, p. 3): Kenski et al. (2020) show, for example, that being female and more agreeable predicts higher incivility ratings on a series of presumably uncivil statements. Sydnor (2019) finds that while conflict-avoidant individuals report more disgust after exposure to incivility, conflict-approaching individuals are more likely to feel amused. Similarly, people who are less tolerant of disagreement report lower intention to participate in political discourse after being exposed to uncivil messages, while those who are more tolerant are not impacted by incivility (Otto et al., 2020). As regards persuasive outcomes, Goovaerts and Marien (2020) demonstrate that politically cynical individuals are slightly more persuaded by uncivil (and simplistic) messages. Overall, this literature concludes that incivility may be “a matter of taste” (Nai & Maier, 2020). Expanding upon this literature, we focus on one individual predisposition that has not been investigated yet: individuals' populist attitudes.

The moderating effect of populist attitudes

There are several reasons to support the notion that there is an “elective affinity” between populist attitudes and a heightened acceptance and even appreciation of political incivility.

First, political incivility can serve as a means to reinforce the populist view of the world as divided into two antagonistic camps (Mudde, 2004). Populist thinking embraces a Manichean perspective, framing the political conflict as a moral struggle between good and evil (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2018). It constructs the social identity of the “pure people” and portrays “the elites” as the embodiment of corruption and privilege. By doing so, populism fosters polarization and intergroup conflict (Ginsburgh et al., 2021; Martínez et al., 2022). In this process, political incivility can become a strategic asset as it effectively separates opponents from allies (Jamieson et al., 2017) and demonizes political adversaries.

Second, within a context of perceived social marginalization, populist supporters may regard political incivility as a means to make their voices heard. Populist actors seek to speak for the “silent majority” (Canovan, 1999, p. 5), that is, those who feel neglected by the political establishment which is “said to be devoted to cosmopolitan values and global initiatives at the expense of ordinary people” (Gidron & Hall, 2019, p. 2). In doing so, populism feeds on feelings of social marginalization (Gidron & Hall, 2019; Norris & Inglehart, 2018). In this context, incivility can become a means of expressing frustration and demanding attention to people's concerns. At the same time, by resorting to “civility policing,” that is, invoking civility norms against minority views to delegitimize their claims, the political establishment may exacerbate this sense of marginalization (Gubitz, 2021). This creates a situation where those who seek political change but feel powerless to achieve it within the boundaries of civil political discourse may view incivility as a positive force.

Finally, from a communication standpoint, populism thrives on disrupting established sociopolitical norms. It is characterized by deliberate provocations and a disregard for conventional expectations and practices (Arditi, 2007; Heinisch, 2003; Moffit, 2016). This includes intentionally challenging accepted manners of behavior, such as respecting political opponents. In this sense, political incivility may serve as a visible manifestation of the disruptive approach embraced by populist actors. In this regard, Kefford et al. (2021) found that people's attitudes toward populist communication, including concerns about political offense, are distinct but correlated with attitudes associated with the ideational approach to populism. Hence, it is reasonable to posit an association between populist attitudes and political incivility, considering their alignment in terms of how they manifest through discursive and performative acts.

For all these reasons, we argue that populist supporters may not only be more tolerant of uncivil messages but may even like them and, thus, be persuaded by them—which would contribute to explaining their support of leaders employing harsher forms of communication. Hence, we hypothesize:

H2: Incivility (vs. civility) increases message persuasiveness for respondents high in populist attitudes.

Before turning to the empirical test of our expectations, we'd like to stress that the fundamental role of message (in)congruency in shaping persuasive outcomes should not be disregarded. According to motivated reasoning, people process information in a way that supports their prior beliefs or attitudes (Kunda, 1990; Redlawsk, 2002; Taber & Lodge, 2006); when people encounter new information, their desire to maintain consistent beliefs and protect their own identity leads them to adopt biased information strategies (Kunda, 1990; see Tappin et al., 2021 for a more critical take). For instance, they invest more cognitive effort in scrutinizing information that runs counter to their beliefs (Edwards & Smith, 1996; Taber & Lodge, 2006). Conversely, they actively seek out information that confirms their preexisting beliefs (Taber & Lodge, 2006) and tend to find this type of information more convincing (Redlawsk, 2002; Taber & Lodge, 2006). While these mechanisms are generally well established, it is less clear whether similar dynamics hold when political incivility is introduced. While some have hypothesized that people might be more forgiving of incivility when it comes from their own party (proattitudinal incivility) compared to when it originates from the opposing party (counterattitudinal incivility) (e.g., Druckman et al., 2019; Gervais, 2018, 2022; Mutz, 2015), available evidence doesn't consistently support this expectation. Most studies actually suggest that in-party incivility is penalized just as much as out-party incivility (Druckman et al., 2019; Frimer & Skitka, 2018), and sometimes even more so (Gervais, 2021). In light of these contradictory findings, we will examine, in an exploratory fashion, whether the tested effects apply consistently to both congruent and incongruent messages, or if there are any variations between the two.

STUDY 1—SWITZERLAND

Sample

Our hypotheses were first tested on a Swiss-German sample recruited by the ISO-certified German panel provider Gapfish between August and October 2022 (Study 1 or S1). Straight-liners ($n=83$)¹ and those who did not pass the attention check ($n=1394$) were removed from the final sample. Although the failure rate of 48% is comparatively high, it resembles that of studies that used similar IMCs in terms of length (Morren & Paas, 2020; Rubio Juan & Revilla, 2021). At the end of the survey, we further asked participants to self-evaluate the quality of their answers and indicate whether their data should be used. The final sample includes $N=1340$ participants.²

In comparison to the Swiss population, our sample is more female (62.1%, compared to 50.4% in the Swiss population; Bundesamt für Statistik, 2022) and slightly less educated (34.3% obtained a tertiary education, compared to 45% in the Swiss population; Bundesamt für Statistik, 2021). Of the sample, 34.1% are aged between 18 and 29 (compared to 15% in the Swiss population; Bundesamt für Statistik, 2021), and only 6% are above 60 years of age (compared to 31% in the Swiss population; Bundesamt für Statistik, 2021). The sample is relatively well distributed in terms of interest in politics, with 25.2% of participants reporting low to very low interest and 25.6% indicating high to very high interest. Turning to political ideology, we find that the participants were relatively moderate when looking at the self-reported 0–10 left–right scale ($M=4.8$; $SD=2.3$).

An a priori power analysis conducted with G*Power 3.1 revealed that such a sample size is close enough to detect small effect sizes. A sample size of $N=788$ is required to detect small effect sizes ($d=.2$) in independent sample t -tests with .05 probability of error I, 80% power, and an equal allocation of respondents in two groups; for four groups (as we have a 2×2 factorial experiment, see below), the required sample size is thus $N=(788/2)*4=1576$. Furthermore, a sample size of $N=1634$ is required to detect small effect sizes ($f=.1$) in ANOVAs with interaction terms with 0.05 probability of error I, 80% power, 10 numerator degrees of freedom, and two groups compared.

Experimental design and procedure

After giving informed consent, participants were first asked to provide some sociodemographic information.³ The next block consisted of a range of political questions, including participants' political interest and ideology, as well as their political attitudes and tolerance toward uncivil behavior of politicians. Respondents were then randomly assigned to a block of questions regarding *one* of the three political issues that served as the basis for the experiment (see Figure A1 in the online supporting information for survey flow). Namely, they were asked to indicate their initial opinion, perceived knowledge, and importance of either using the preferred pronoun for transgender people; using pornography in sex education in secondary

¹Straight-liners were identified by calculating standard deviations for two batteries of questions with reversed statements. Participants whose responses had a standard deviation of zero (unless they selected the middle category) were labeled as straight-liners.

²All data, codes, and materials are openly available for replication at the following anonymous OSF repository: <https://osf.io/e28xh/>.

³This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of University of Bern (24.03.2022./No. 042022).

school; or reversing the burden of proof on the accused of sexual crimes, respectively. These issues were chosen for several reasons: First, we aimed to keep the general topic relatively constant across conditions (i.e., gender/sex). Second, by using topics that are relatively new and not yet “owned” by any established parties in Switzerland, they should minimize potential source effects. Third, although the issues may not be the current focus of today's political debate, they do bear some relevance to a contemporaneous matter discussed in Switzerland, which concerns the tightening of the rape law (“only yes means yes”). As such, they are relatively topical. The initial opinion on these political issues served as baseline to compute the dependent variable—that is, opinion change—and was measured on a 0 (*absolutely disagree*) to 10 (*absolutely agree*) scale. To distract the voters from the central issues outlined above, they also answered similar questions regarding unrelated topics, including the economy, health care, and immigration.

Before moving on to the experimental part of the survey, individuals answered a set of questions that captured their personality profile. They were then exposed to the experimental treatments that came in the form of an online discussion between politicians and citizens on the respective political topic. The discussion forum was introduced as part of a new online magazine that “aims to cover as many political views and standpoints as possible” and encourages “citizens and politicians from the region [to] exchange views on various topics” (directly extracted from the questionnaire).

The manipulation follows a 2 × 2 between-subjects factorial experiment. Respondents were randomly exposed to either a civil or an uncivil discussion (factor 1), which presented to them either attitude-congruent or attitude-incongruent arguments on the respective topic (factor 2). After exposure to the treatments, participants answered poststimuli questions, including the manipulation check. The last question in this block asked participants again to indicate their opinion on the issue of the treatment they were assigned to. The participants were then debriefed and rewarded with 4.60 Euros for completing the survey.

Independent variable: Incivility

As already discussed, the experimental stimuli came in the form of an online discussion forum, where politicians and citizens exchanged their opinions on the respective political matter (e.g., sex education) in a civil and uncivil manner, respectively.⁴ To manipulate the main independent variable, namely (in)civility, we varied the two introductory sentences of the persuasive arguments. In the uncivil conditions, the introductory sentences expressed disrespect toward opposing views (i.e., “(...) this is insane!!!” and “[this] is complete bullshit!!!”). Conversely, in the civil condition, the introductory sentences expressed respect toward opposing views (i.e., “I understand that people might have different views, but I cannot agree” and “I can understand the arguments of the opponents, but they do not convince me completely”). These introductory sentences were followed with a persuasive argument that was kept constant across conditions (see Tables A1–A3 and Figure A2 in the online supporting information for the stimuli material).

Statistical checks show successful manipulations. To check if the participants perceived the discussion as (un)civil, they were asked to indicate on a 0–10 semantic differential scale how polite/impolite and positive/negative they found the conversation. Compared to respondents exposed to a civil condition, respondents exposed to an uncivil condition were significantly less likely to perceive the discussion as polite, $t(1338) = 15.22$, $p < .001$, $d = .83$, and

⁴We decided to use an explicitly civil version of the stimuli (vs. a neutral) because a pretest revealed that there was no significant difference between the civil and neutral and the uncivil and neutral condition in terms of perceived respect and politeness. The only significant difference was found for the civil versus uncivil condition.

significantly more likely to perceive it as negative, $t(1338) = -9.26, p < .001, d = .51$. Compared to respondents exposed to an incongruent condition, respondents exposed to a congruent one were significantly more likely to evaluate the discussion as being aligned with their position, $t(1287) = 19.23, p < .001, d = 1.07$.

Dependent variable: Message persuasiveness

The dependent variable is message persuasiveness, which we operationalize as opinion change in the direction of the persuasive information. To measure opinion change, we asked respondents to indicate their level of support for a controversial political issue before and after exposure to persuasive information about that issue (0 = *absolutely disagree* to 10 = *absolutely agree*). Comparing the two opinions provides a measure of opinion change and is used to evaluate if the message was persuasive. In simple terms, we operationalize message persuasiveness as a change in respondent's opinion in the direction of the message they were exposed to. As illustrated in Figure 1, this is for instance the case for a respondent who is initially in favor of a proposition and is much more positive after exposure to a message in favor of such a proposition. Inversely, when opinions move against the direction of the persuasive information received, such information “backfired.”

Given that both opinion scales range between 0 and 10, comparing initial with final opinions creates a scale that ranges between -10 (maximum backfire—e.g., a respondent who is initially completely in favor of a position but is completely against it after being exposed to a message advocating *for* the position) and 10 (maximum persuasion—e.g., a respondent who is initially completely in favor of a position and is completely against it after being exposed to a message advocating *against* the position).

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of respondents on the message persuasiveness scale. Of all respondents, 32.0% showcased a stable opinion (zero persuasion), 41.4% were persuaded and changed their opinion in the direction of the message, and 26.3% changed their opinion against the direction of the persuasive information.

Interestingly, incongruent messages are significantly and substantively more persuasive than congruent ones, $t(1287) = -11.02, p < .001, d = .66$, challenging the assumption that political information can only reinforce preexisting dispositions.

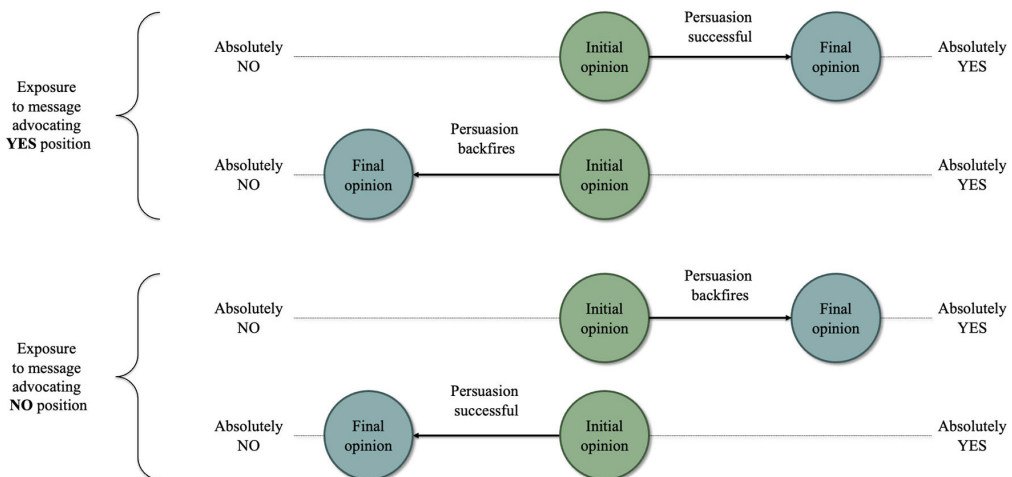
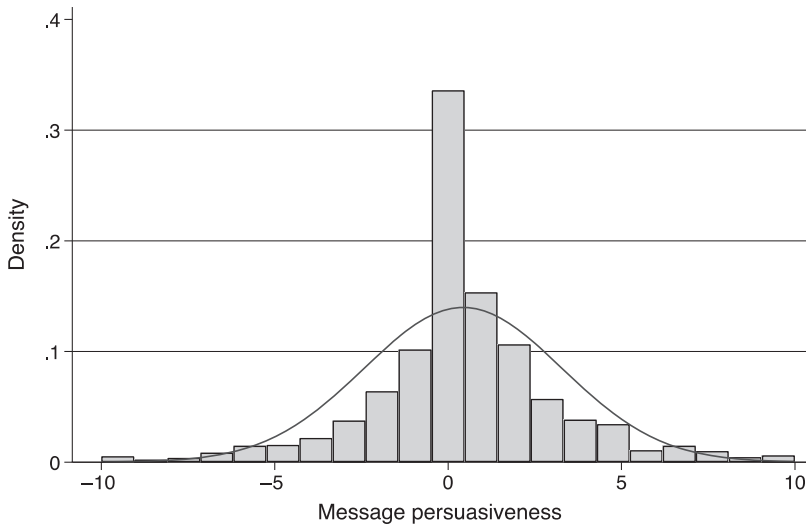


FIGURE 1 Conceptual flowchart.



$N = 1,340$.

FIGURE 2 Study 1 (Switzerland). Message persuasiveness. $N = 1340$.

Moderator: Populist attitudes

Populist attitudes were measured using the battery of the CSES Module 5 (Hobolt et al., 2016) and adapted to the Swiss context using the German translation of the SELECTS 19 study (FORS, 2019). The battery contained seven statements (e.g., “Most politicians do not care about the people”) that were captured on a 7-point Likert scale ($M = 4.04$, $SD = .93$, $\alpha = .74$).

Results

Figure 3 illustrates the average scores for message persuasiveness across the civil and uncivil conditions, first in general (left-hand panel) and then separately for the incongruent and congruent messages (respectively, center and right-hand panels). Against what we hypothesized (H1), there are no significant differences between uncivil and civil messages when looking at all the messages jointly. Yet, we find a significant difference in the persuasiveness of civil versus uncivil *congruent* messages. As shown in the right-hand panel in Figure 3, exposure to congruent incivility reduces persuasiveness compared to congruent civility. To be sure, while significant at $p < .05$, the magnitude of the effect should not be overestimated (Cohen's $d = .12$).⁵

Our second expectation was related to the moderating effect of populist attitudes. The model control for respondents' age, gender, education level (obligatory, secondary, tertiary), self-assessed issue importance (0–10), issue knowledge (self-reported, 1–5), initial opinion on the issue (binary variable: pro, contra), and opinion extremity (based on initial opinions: 0–5). Contrary to our expectations, populist attitudes do not moderate the effect of political

⁵Figure A3 in the online supporting information replicates this analysis separately for each of the three issues respondents might have been exposed to. While we argue for caution in interpreting the results, due to smaller sample size, similar trends seem to exist for the first (pronouns for transgender people) and third (sexual assault) topics, even if not statistically significant at the conventional level.

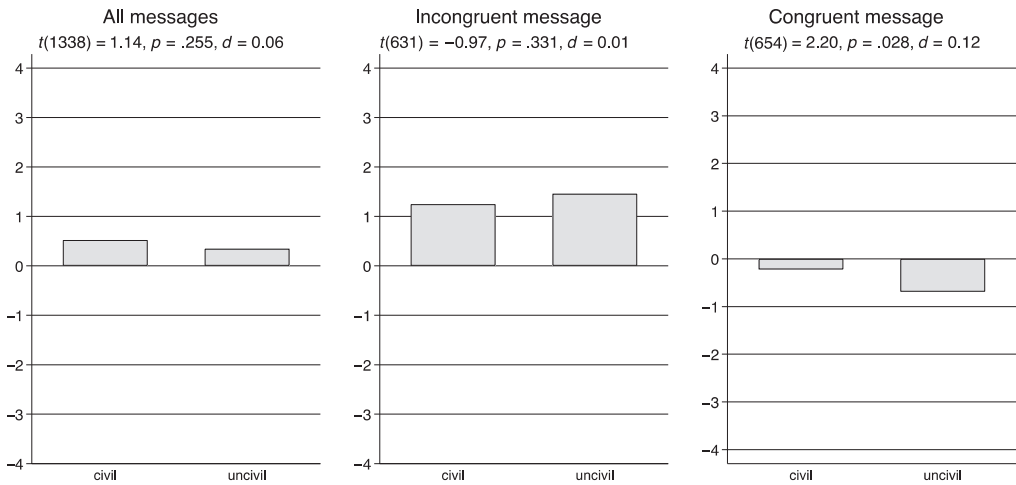


FIGURE 3 Study 1 (Switzerland). Message persuasiveness by incivility. Please note the reduced range of the y-axis (original variable varies between -10 and 10).

incivility on message persuasiveness; the interaction term is rather weak and not statistically significant ($b = -.22$, $t(1253) = -1.26$, $p = .208$).

Exploratory analysis: Incivility and dark personality

Given the lack of effects for populist attitudes, we venture beyond our initial hypotheses and explore the moderating role of respondents' underlying personality traits. Recent evidence suggests that personality intervenes in the processing of persuasive information (Nai et al., 2023). Different persuasive strategies work on different personalities, and persuasive appeals that are tailored to one's personality are more effective (Hirsh et al., 2012; see also Oyibo et al., 2017). Considering these findings, there are reasons to believe that the persuasiveness of uncivil political messages is a function of respondents' underlying personality profile, particularly the dark traits (i.e., psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism): Voters with dark personality profiles show a preference for more aggressive behaviors, including aggressive rhetoric from elites. The dark traits, and in particular psychopathy and Machiavellianism, have been associated with an appreciation for aggressive humor (Veselka et al., 2010) and verbal sadism (Plouffe et al., 2017) and a tendency to engage in bullying (Goodboy & Martin, 2015). Furthermore, recent experimental evidence with American voters shows that character attacks are particularly effective for respondents high in psychopathy, whereas political incivility is more effective among respondents low in agreeableness (Nai & Maier, 2020). It comes as little surprise then that the dark traits are also associated with populism (Hofstetter, 2024 but see Galais & Rico, 2021; Pruyssers, 2021). At the level of political elites, populist politicians across the world tend to score substantially higher on all dark traits (and lower on agreeableness; Nai & Martinez i Coma, 2019). In voters, low agreeableness is associated with a preference for populist parties (Bakker et al., 2016), and, inversely, populist voters prefer candidates who showcase a “darker” personality profile (most notably, high psychopathy; Nai, 2022). Similarly, in a series of three studies in the United Kingdom and Germany, Thielmann and Hilbig (2023) demonstrate that populist attitudes and conspiracy mentalities have a “common core,” which is closely linked to dark personality traits. As such, a case could be made that it is not populism per se that drives attitudinal preferences for incivility but the underlying “aggressive” personality traits that are often associated with populism.

Measures

We measure respondents' personality traits via two independent batteries. For the Big Five traits, we rely on the BFI-S-2 inventory (Rammstedt et al., 2020), which includes six statements for each trait that respondents must evaluate. For instance, for agreeableness, respondents were asked to what extent they see themselves as a person who “is compassionate, has a soft heart” and “assumes the best about people,” among other statements (all statements evaluated between 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*). The average score of all groups of six statements yields a separate measure for each of the Big Five, which we have forced onto a 0–1 scale for comparability with the dark traits (Openness: $M = .60$, $SD = .16$, $\alpha = .62$; Conscientiousness: $M = .69$, $SD = .16$, $\alpha = .74$; Extraversion: $M = .53$, $SD = .16$, $\alpha = .63$; Agreeableness: $M = .70$, $SD = .14$, $\alpha = .65$; Neuroticism: $M = .40$, $SD = .17$, $\alpha = .74$).

The dark traits were measured via the Dirty Dozen inventory (Jonason & Webster, 2010), which includes four statements for each trait (all statements evaluated between 1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*). For instance, for psychopathy, respondents were asked to what extent they agree with statements such as “I tend to lack remorse” and “I tend to not be too concerned with morality or the morality of my actions.” The average score of all groups of four statements yields a separate measure for each of the dark traits, also forced onto a 0–1 scale (Narcissism: $M = .36$, $SD = .21$, $\alpha = .82$; Psychopathy: $M = .25$, $SD = .18$, $\alpha = .80$; Machiavellianism: $M = .22$, $SD = .19$, $\alpha = .88$).

Results

Figure 4 presents coefficient plots that summarize a series of models in which the persuasiveness of the message was regressed on the interaction between exposure to incivility and each of the eight personality traits (Big Five, dark traits), in separate models. As in the previous

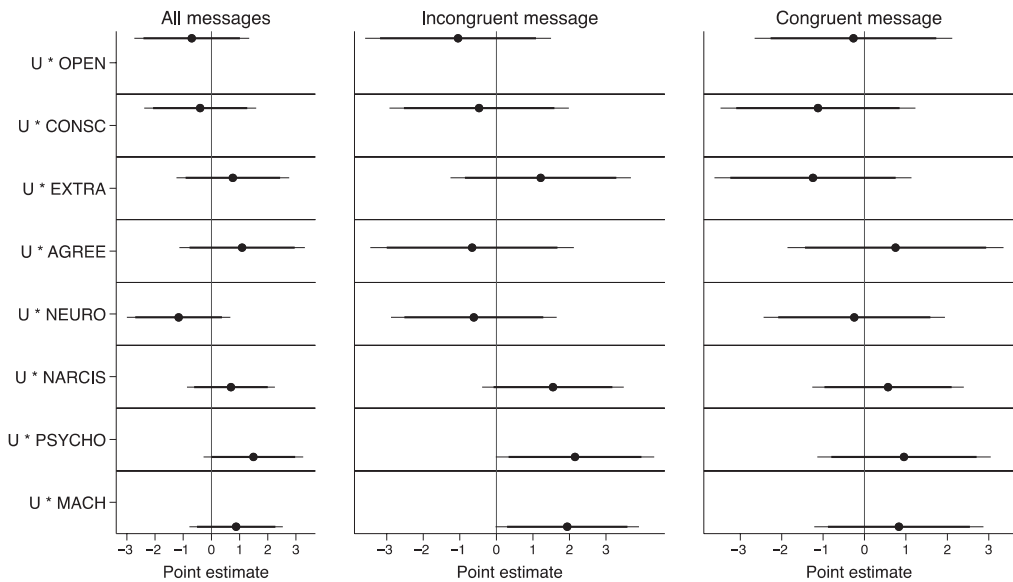


FIGURE 4 Study 1 (Switzerland). Message persuasiveness by incivility and personality. Coefficient plots with 95% (thin line) and 90% (bold line) confidence intervals. One separate model for interaction, only interaction terms displayed. All individual variables vary between 0 and 1. Full results are in Appendix A, Tables A5–A10, in the online supporting information.

analyses, the left-hand panel estimates effects regardless of message congruity; the central panel estimates effects only for respondents exposed to an incongruent message, and the right-hand panel for respondents exposed to a congruent message. Full results are in Appendix A, Tables A5–A10, in the online supporting information.

The left-hand panel, which estimates the effects of exposure to any type of message regardless of their congruity, shows that exposure to uncivil messages is more persuasive for respondents scoring higher on psychopathy, albeit only significant at $p < .1$ ($b = 1.49$, $t(1253) = 1.65$, $p = .098$). While the magnitude of the effect should not be overestimated—it roughly corresponds to an increase in 0.6 persuasiveness points when comparing respondents with high versus low psychopathy—it nonetheless is in line with the idea that dark traits could lead to an increased receptivity to uncivil persuasive messages. This situation appears more clearly when focusing on incongruent messages (central panel). Uncivil incongruent messages are significantly more persuasive for respondents high in Machiavellianism ($b = 1.94$, $t(611) = 1.94$, $p = .053$) and, again, psychopathy ($b = 2.15$, $t(611) = 1.95$, $p = .052$). This time, the models predict an increase in 1.3 persuasiveness points when comparing respondents with high versus low psychopathy. No significant interactions exist for exposure to (uncivil) congruent messages. All in all, this exploratory analysis suggests that voters with a darker personality profile could be more attuned to uncivil persuasion, in particular when coming from ideologically incongruent messages.

STUDY 2—United States

Study 1 was run in Switzerland, a country known for its consensual, pluralist, and discourse-oriented nature (Esser et al., 2017), which begs the question as to whether the trends found there would hold in more confrontational environments. With this in mind, Study 2 replicates the general idea of Study 1 on a sample of American respondents. We have preregistered our protocol and expectations for the replication on the American sample. In particular, we have preregistered the two hypotheses in Study 1, according to which incivility should be less persuasive overall (H1), but more persuasive for respondents high in populist attitudes (H2). Furthermore, in light of the results of Study 1, we also have preregistered the expectation that:

H3: Incivility should be more persuasive among voters with darker personality traits.

The preregistration can be accessed here: https://aspredicted.org/V94_F99.

Sample

In September 2023, we collected survey data from a sample of American respondents ($N = 2007$ initial) via the online platform CloudResearch, who participated against a small compensation (\$0.8). CloudResearch builds on Amazon's MTurk panel by prevetting their panelists to increase their quality and has indeed been shown to provide higher quality samples than MTurk (e.g., Douglas et al., 2023). After dropping respondents who failed an attention check ($n = 49$), engaged in straight-lining (respondents with $SD = 0$ on selected batteries with reversed items, $n = 116$), and refused to share the data ($n = 4$), the final sample includes $N = 1845$ respondents. The average respondent is 46.2 years old ($SD = 14.0$); 59.9% of respondents are female, and 60.8% have a university degree. On average, respondents score rather in the middle of 0–10 scales for left–right ($M = 4.6$, $SD = 3.2$) and liberalism–conservatism ($M = 4.5$, $SD = 3.2$). Of the respondents, 44.2% identify as Democrats, 27.7% as Republicans, and 23.5% as an Independent. Just below 5% of the participants identify with “other” parties or have no preference.

Experimental design

Following the logic of Study 1, respondents were first asked their position on a controversial issue, then exposed to persuasive information, and then asked their opinion again.⁶ Respondents were exposed to a series of three tweets (“thread”) from a fictive candidate (John Bauer, “an Independent candidate running for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives for Minnesota’s 9th Congressional district”; directly extracted from the questionnaire) about the issue of parental consent for gender transitions in teens. By choosing this issue, we aimed to tap into a similar topic as the ones presented in the previous study. Mirroring Study 1, the study followed a 2 × 2 between-subject factorial design, where respondents were randomly exposed to one out of four possible Twitter threads: In the threads, Bauer argued either in favor or against parental consent (factor 1), and either in a civil (i.e., “I know some might disagree (...)” and “I can respect that some people may think differently (...)”) or uncivil manner (i.e., “I don’t care what other people think (...)”, “it’s f***ing obvious (...)” and “(...) every other opinion is just bullshit”) (factor 2). Treatments are shown in [Table B1](#) and [Figure B1](#) in the online supporting information.

Statistical checks show successful manipulations. Compared to respondents exposed to a civil condition, respondents exposed to an uncivil condition were significantly more likely to perceive the materials as disrespectful, $t(1843) = -28.46$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.33$, uncivil, $t(1843) = -32.18$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.50$, and negative, $t(1843) = -18.92$, $p < .001$, $d = .88$. Compared to respondents exposed to materials advocating in favor of parental consent, respondents exposed to materials advocating against consent were overwhelmingly more likely to say that the materials espoused this position, $t(1843) = -76.31$, $p < .001$, $d = -3.55$.

Dependent variable: Message persuasiveness

Mirroring Study 1, message persuasiveness is measured as the magnitude of opinion change in the direction of the position advocated in the message (see [Figure 1](#)) and varies between -10 (maximum backfire) and 10 (maximum persuasion). Compared to Study 1, many more respondents showcased stable opinions (74.2%). Of respondents, 15.7% changed their opinion in the direction of the message, and 10.1% changed their opinion *against* the direction of the persuasive information. As in Study 1, incongruent messages are significantly and substantively more persuasive than congruent ones, $t(1723) = -8.88$, $p < .001$, $d = .43$.

Moderators: Populist attitudes and personality traits

Populist attitudes are measured using the battery of the CSES Module 5 (Hobolt et al., 2016; $M = 4.63$, $SD = 1.00$, $\alpha = .72$). The Big Five traits are measured via the BFI-S-2 inventory (Rammstedt et al., 2020), which yields five separate variables: Openness ($M = 5.20$, $SD = 1.21$, $\alpha = .82$), Conscientiousness ($M = 5.21$, $SD = 1.18$, $\alpha = .84$), Extraversion ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 1.20$, $\alpha = .76$), Agreeableness ($M = 5.16$, $SD = 1.08$, $\alpha = .79$), and Neuroticism ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.40$, $\alpha = .87$). The three dark traits are measured via the Dirty Dozen inventory (Jonason & Webster, 2010), which yield three separate variables: Narcissism ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.41$, $\alpha = .85$), psychopathy ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 1.27$, $\alpha = .80$), and Machiavellianism ($M = 2.47$, $SD = 1.40$, $\alpha = .88$).

⁶This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of the University of Amsterdam (18.08.2023/Ref. FMG-4517).

Results

In line with Study 1, message persuasiveness is not a direct function of incivility—neither overall, $t(1843)=0.93, p=.355, d=.04$, nor for incongruent messages, $t(878)=1.00, p=.316, d=.07$. While the results broadly mirror the findings of Study 1, it must be noted that the trend that was picked up in Study 1—that is, that incivility might backfire for congruent messages—could not be replicated in the United States, $t(843)=.48, p=.632, d=.03$. We, thus, reject Hypothesis 1.

Against the findings in Study 1, but in support of our original Hypothesis 2, we find evidence that uncivil messages are more persuasive among voters high in populist attitudes. As shown in Figure 5 (first row), respondents scoring high in populist attitudes are significantly more likely to be persuaded by uncivil messages both in general ($b=1.21, t(1692)=2.41, p=.016$) and for incongruent messages ($b=1.55, t(821)=1.90, p=.057$), even if this latter is only significant at $p<0.1$. Full results for the moderating role of populism are in Appendix B, Table B2, in the online supporting information.

We also find evidence in support of Hypothesis 3, according to which incivility is more persuasive among voters with a darker personality profile. Our models pick up a positive interaction effect between exposure to uncivil messages and respondents' psychopathy when the message is incongruent. While the effect is only significant at $p<.1$ ($b=1.06, t(821)=1.67, p=.096$), it is nonetheless in line with trends discussed in Study 1. Going in a similar direction, we also find evidence that respondents low in agreeableness are significantly more likely to be persuaded by incivility, both in general ($b=-.99, t(1692)=-2.16, p=.031$) and in particular for incongruent messages ($b=-1.85, t(821)=-2.48, p=.013$). Full results are in Appendix B, Tables B3–B8, in the online supporting information.

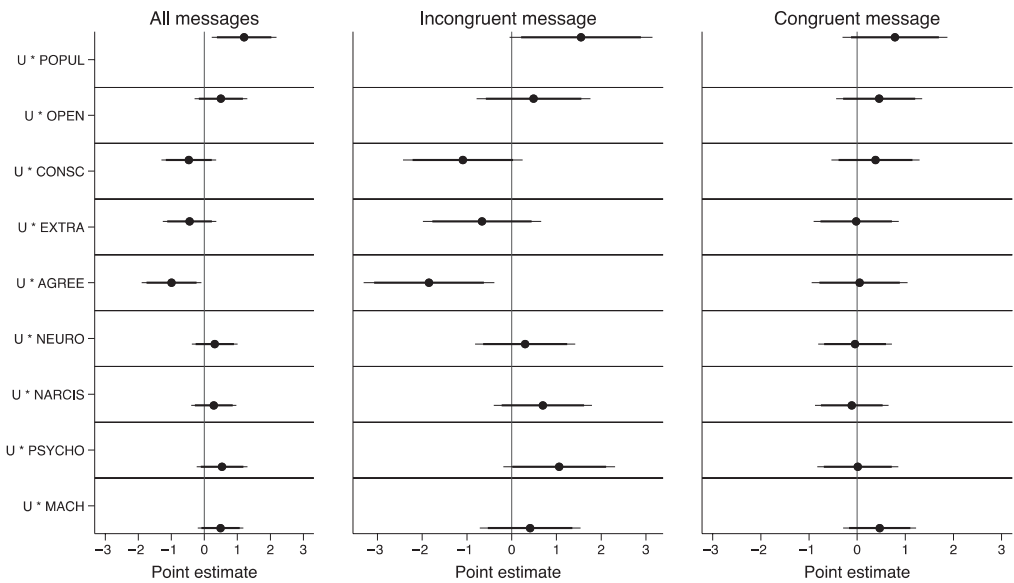


FIGURE 5 Study 2 (United States). Message persuasiveness by incivility, populism, and personality. Coefficient plots with 95% (thin line) and 90% (bold line) confidence intervals. One separate model for interaction, only interaction terms displayed. All individual variables vary between 0 and 1. Full results are in Appendix B, Tables B2–B8, in the online supporting information.

DISCUSSION

As political incivility seems to be gaining momentum, much research has been devoted to understanding its consequences. Following Herbst (2010), we defined incivility as a rhetorical device that can be strategically used for political gains and tested its effects on the persuasiveness of political messages. Considering the literature indicating that individuals respond negatively to incivility, we hypothesized that uncivil messages would generally be rejected. At the same time, we expected that this is not the case for everyone, and that incivility might be persuasive for populist supporters and respondents showcasing a “darker” personality profile.

Our first hypothesis posited that uncivil political messages are less persuasive than civil ones. Broadly speaking, we found no significant variation in the persuasiveness of civil versus uncivil political messages. This null effect, although surprising, finds some explanations in the incivility literature, which indicates that incivility may positively affect information processing (Fridkin & Kenney, 2008). Incivility, with its shocking and attention-grabbing nature, has been shown to boost political interest (Brooks & Geer, 2007) and even be entertaining (Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Sydnor, 2018). This could partially explain why our findings do not show a negative effect of incivility on message persuasiveness.

At the same time, this null effect could be explained by our operationalization of civility. In line with our definition of civility as explicit respect toward opposing opinions (as opposed to incivility, i.e., explicit disrespect toward opposing opinions), the civil condition acknowledged the presence of legitimate disagreement on the issue. In a context where contrasting views were presented as valid, people may have felt more comfortable with the fact that they disagree with the message content, contributing to the lower persuasive power of civil messages. This could have counterbalanced the hypothesized negative effect of incivility on message persuasiveness, thus contributing to the lack of variation in the persuasiveness of civil versus uncivil messages.

Furthermore, the dynamics of group identity should be considered. It may be the case that the effect of incivility on the persuasiveness of political messages is contingent upon the source of the uncivil message. By fostering ingroup and outgroup thinking, incivility may be persuasive when the message aligns with the recipient's ingroup biases, while it may have a detrimental effect when the message aligns with the recipient's outgroup biases. It is worth noting that our study effectively controls for ingroup and outgroup dynamics by randomly assigning respondents to either pro- or counterattitudinal message conditions. This allowed us to minimize the potential confounding influence of in- and outgroup biases. Nonetheless, further research should specifically focus on the complex interplay between uncivil rhetoric, source attributions, and populist attitudes to gain deeper insights into the persuasive dynamics involved.

In this regard, we found some noteworthy differences in the persuasiveness of civil versus uncivil message when accounting for the direction of the messages. Notably, uncivil messages backfired when they aligned with respondents' initial opinion—at least in Switzerland. This finding may relate to ingroup/outgroup considerations, as the positions of the message might have signaled a specific source identity to the respondents, thereby promoting intergroup thinking. Thus, the negative effect of incivility in congruent rather than incongruent messages may indicate that people are more prone to reject incivility when it originates from ingroup sources. This aligns with the “black sheep” effect, where people tend to be more critical of ingroup deviants as a means to safeguarding a positive ingroup identity (Reese et al., 2013). It must be noted, however, that this finding was not replicated in the United States, where persuasiveness was never a function of (in)civility. In this regard, it's crucial to consider that Switzerland is a consensual country with a strong emphasis on cooperation. In such a context, incivility (especially from ingroup sources, given the black sheep effect) may be met with heightened disapproval compared to the more confrontational political landscape of the United States.

Turning to our second hypothesis, we expected incivility to be persuasive for respondents exhibiting higher levels of populist attitudes. Again, we found mixed evidence: While this expectation was rejected in Switzerland, it was confirmed in the United States. Similar to the previous argument, these mixed findings may be attributed to the political and cultural differences between these two countries. We postulated an affinity between populism and incivility based on the populists' tendency to divide society into opposing camps and incivility's ability to bolster this perspective. Additionally, we contended that the prevalent antiestablishment sentiment within populism aligns with the notion of incivility being a tool specifically suited for those who share this sentiment. Based on this, it seems reasonable that uncivil message resonated more among populist supporters in the United States, where there is a more pronounced political divide and stronger antiestablishment sentiment (Droste, 2021). In Switzerland, where a consensus-based political system prevails and there are generally fewer negative sentiments toward the establishment (Droste, 2021)—and that, notably, is also ruled by the populist Swiss People's party—the impact of identity politics and antiestablishment sentiments may not be as influential.

Finally, our exploratory analysis on the role of personality traits suggested that individuals with darker personality traits, specifically those high in psychopathy, are more receptive to uncivil messages, especially when the messages are incongruent with their beliefs. Overall, these findings highlight the political relevance of individual differences rooted in personality (Blais et al., 2021).

Limitations

This study does not come without limitations. First, this study relied on specific sets of morally laden political issues (e.g., pornography as pedagogical tools, gender transitions in teens). Although we do not have any theoretical reason to believe that our results only apply to these particular issues, future studies should ideally replicate our findings on broader political issues such as climate change or immigration.

Second, both studies used an online platform to transmit persuasive arguments, either in the form of an online forum (Study 1) or social media (Study 2). Previous studies have shown that the channel's nature significantly influences how individuals perceive and respond to uncivil political messages (Sydnor, 2018). Scholars should consider the potential effects of these channel attributes more carefully, for example, by replicating our findings with visual and auditory stimuli.

Third, we operationalized incivility as the communication of disrespect toward opposing opinions through the use of vulgar language. However, it is undebated that political incivility is a multidimensional concept that ranges from making disrespectful statements to threatening political opponents (e.g., Stryker et al., 2016). Considering the evidence that suggests that different forms of incivility and negativity influence how voters respond to it (e.g., Nai & Maier, 2020), we encourage future research to investigate if our findings translate to other forms of incivility.

Finally, the empirical operationalization of message persuasiveness—measured as opinion change before and after exposure to a persuasive message—implies the potential existence of ceiling effects: Respondents who are initially quite convinced about a given issue cannot, logically, be convinced much more (they can, however, be *unconvinced* about it). While our models do account for the possible presence of such effects—most notably, by controlling for initial opinion extremity—their conceptual existence likely cannot be tackled in a fully effective way with the data at hand. Such ceiling effects imply additional dynamics associated with opinion certainty (or, inversely, ambivalence), cognitive elaboration, and their consequences for information processing and resistance to persuasion (e.g., Valli & Nai 2023), which are beyond the scope of our article.

CONCLUSION

With a few exceptions, our results first suggest that, overall, incivility does not necessarily backfire. With confirmation both in Switzerland and the United States, these findings raise intriguing possibilities for campaign strategies. They suggest that politicians may choose to employ incivility strategically to harness its attention-grabbing power (Borah, 2014; Mutz & Reeves, 2005), all the while avoiding jeopardizing the persuasiveness of their messages.

Second, we find some intriguing differences between the cultural context, particularly in respect to the moderating role of populist attitudes. More specifically, uncivil messages were more persuasive among populist voters in the United States, but not so in Switzerland. While our interpretation of these findings is speculative, our results suggest a connection between incivility and cultural context, which warrants further investigation.

Third, our results broadly support the idea that individuals with darker personality traits, particularly those high in psychopathy, are more inclined to be persuaded by incivility in political messages. Considering that the moderating effect of socially aversive personality traits was particularly evident for incongruent messages, incivility may encourage this part of the population to engage with diverse perspectives.

Finally, our findings raise interesting questions as to whether incivility overrides mechanisms of motivated reasoning in the context of political persuasion, thus contributing to the broader literature on persuasion and message congruency. While conventional wisdom might lead us to anticipate that congruent messages would be more persuasive than incongruent ones, our study revealed that this pattern does not hold when incivility comes into play. Specifically, we found evidence that uncivil messages backfired when their content was congruent rather than incongruent with respondents' prior beliefs. Additionally, individuals with darker personality traits were especially receptive to uncivil messages when these messages ran counter to, rather than aligned with, their existing beliefs. These preliminary findings, while present only in the Swiss sample (Study 1), warrant further investigation. In particular, they indicate that placing the role of message congruency at the center of inquiries into the impact of incivility on message persuasiveness is a promising avenue for future research.

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