

How you feel makes you what you are:
Partisan reactions to political incivility online

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ABSTRACT

This study brings together two debates: fears about an increasingly polarized electorate and the effects of uncivil political discourse, especially in the blogosphere. We explore the effects of an uncivil, attacking message on group identification and polarization. We find that uncivil messages provoke negative emotional responses among partisans, which can mediate changes in partisan identification, but this process depends on whether the respondents identified with the attacking or the attacked group.

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Debates about “red” and “blue” divides in American politics—as the diverging perspectives of Republicans and Democrats have been colorfully characterized—are widespread both in academic literature (e.g., Hunter 1991; Fiorina, 1996) and in the news media. Can a Democrat ever win a red state? Is Hillary Clinton “too divisive” as a candidate? Does the political process breed polarization (Klein, 2007)? These debates are accompanied by research that demonstrates on the one hand connections among partisanship, intolerance, and biased processing, and on the other, partisanship as a driver of participation and political engagement (Mutz, 2006).

The debate concerning the value or harm of partisanship has carried on in parallel with a debate concerning the tone of media discourse in the Internet era. The past decade has seen a rise in the accessibility of partisan media, enabled by the ease of publishing online. Newer forms of media, such as partisan political blogs, have raised specters of a populace self-selecting to read, hear, and watch only agreeable political opinions. What’s more, many new media political outlets can be seen to encourage a somewhat coarser political conversation, supporting existing fears about uncivil discourse in television talking head programming (Mutz & Reeves, 2005), and other media coverage of politics (Patterson, 2002). These studies are themselves balanced by others suggesting that negativity can have positive effects and incivility can promote engagement (Brooks & Geer, 2007).

This study draws together strands of both these debates by examining the micro-level role played by uncivil, partisan media in the process of group identification and differentiation. Following previous research, we conceptualize partisanship as an important (for some) social

identity (Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002; Greene, 2002; Huddy, 2001). Our aim is to investigate the links between exposure to uncivil, partisan media content and partisan social group differentiation. We draw on social identity approaches and intergroup emotion theory to construct a process model that links exposure to uncivil partisan media to various group identification processes through a series of discrete negative emotions. That is, we propose that group-based emotions mediate the effects of incivility on partisan identification. We also have an additional objective, to explore whether our model performs differently depending on the position of the reader as member of an ingroup that is either being attacked or on the attack within a message. We test our model using an experimental design.

Literature Review

The social identity approach

Human beings are surrounded by and embedded in social networks and groups with which we identify, and that can provide us with a sense of belonging. Further, the boundaries of these groups have important consequences for our attitudes and behaviors. Perceptions of threats from outgroups sit at the root of violent conflicts, and can spur acts of prejudice. These group identities, however, do not emerge fully formed out of thin air, nor are individuals solely implicated in their maintenance. Group identities are mutually constituted by the individual and by his or her environmental context. That is, identities are maintained and kept relevant over time through exposure to friends, family, and, of course, media messages (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000). Social identity and self-categorization theories—comprising the social identity approach (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002)—provide a framework through which to

understand the interactions between group identities and the social contexts that variously make group identities salient and thus accessible to influence attitudes and behavior.

An important part of an individual's self-concept is provided by membership in social groups (Johnston & White, 2003). Individuals tend to categorize themselves by accentuating differences between their in- and outgroups, and, under most circumstances, enhance the self by favoring the ingroup over the outgroup (and ingroup members over outgroup members). Group identities "are cognitively represented as group prototypes that describe and prescribe beliefs, attitudes, feelings and behaviors that optimize a balance between minimization of ingroup differences and maximization of intergroup differences" (Terry et al., 1999, p. 228).

Recent work on identity theory suggests that in- and outgroup distinctions are not the exclusive basis of individual identity. Identity also involves particular roles as a group member (Stets & Burke, 2000). While group-based identity emphasizes membership, role-based identity emphasizes performance of one's role as a group member. Stets and Burke illustrate role-based identity using the example of a teacher. A teacher is a member of a social group, "teachers," with its own set of relevant outgroups (e.g., "students"), and "teacher" is also a role that is defined within the organization of a school. Roles bring with them sets of expectations that are tied to the performance of those roles: for the teacher, a certain form of address with students is required, as is an organized lesson plan. Failure to fulfill a role will have negative identity consequences for the individual, and can result in negative evaluation of that individual by other ingroup members. Although these two bases of identity—group- and role-based—have different emphases, they co-exist, and both are relevant to understanding the links between media messages and identification.

Priming identities: salience and identification

In general, group identification is conceptualized as a relatively enduring state. However, as individuals, people are not just “soccer fans” or “Republicans”—they may in fact be both, and claim membership in many other important social reference groups as well. Identity salience in any given context is enabled through accessibility and situational fitness (Christensen et al., 2004; Hogg & Reid, 2006). In order for social categorization to influence group-related attitudes and emotions, a particular group prototype must be a) readily accessible (that is, chronically accessible in memory) and b) perceptually salient in a given context (situationally accessible). That is, a Republican is more likely to respond “like a Republican” when environmental cues signal the relevance of partisan social identity to the current context. Hong et al. (2000) demonstrated that identity salience could be primed using iconic imagery representing a particular culture. Other studies have primed identity salience by emphasizing conflict between the ingroup and a relevant outgroup (Richardson, 2005; Christensen et al., 2004).

Media messages frequently contain cues that prime constructs linked to social identities (Anastasio, Rose, & Chapman, 2005; Mastro, Tamborini, & Hullett, 2005). For example, a college-age, female fan of the San Francisco Giants may find her fan identity more salient when reading the sports pages, feel her gender more intensely when watching a documentary about rape, and experience her college-ness while browsing Ratemyprofessors.com (Anastasio et al., 2005). Media messages may also play a role in identity formation over the long term. Hong et al. (2000) proposed that institutions, texts and interpersonal relationships act as repetition primes, rendering group prototypes chronically accessible through frequency of use. Identity is thus constituted and reinforced both by individuals and their environment. Slater (2007) has suggested that media exposure may, over time, serve to reinforce group identity and lead to

increasing polarization between groups, especially for those who self-select to inhabit a media environment dominated by a particular set of values or opinions.

Persuasion researchers have applied the social identity approach to theory about group norms to aid in the design of persuasive health messages (e.g., Rimal & Real, 2003; 2005). Fewer studies have examined links between group cues in media messages and identification processes. The effects of group cues in news media messages have mainly been explored in the context of race and political judgments. Domke (2001) found that racial cues in news media crime coverage activated racial considerations in subsequent political judgments and led individuals to become ideologically distinct in their attitudes. Similarly, Valentino, Hutchings, and White (2002) found that implicit racial cues in campaign communication increased the cognitive accessibility of racial attitudes and thus their importance in determining candidate preference. In a study of the relationship between diversity-framed news stories and attitudes toward affirmative action, Richardson (2005) found evidence that frame manipulations emphasizing conflict between an in- and outgroup can activate distinct social identities.

Anastasio et al. (2005) extended this line of research to examine the impact of identity-relevant news coverage on issue opinions. As they note, news stories frequently portray public opinion as divided along lines that map to important group identifications. For example, imagine a news story with Republicans and Democrats facing off on either side of a social policy. Anastasio et al.'s studies on the effects of this "divisive coverage" showed that a news story in which members of a group are aligned on one side of an issue can lead reader opinions to split along the same lines. In contrast, non-divisive coverage has no such effect. The authors proposed (but did not test) that "perhaps exposure to divisive coverage facilitates identification with one's own group, in turn promoting the tendency to side with that group" (p. 188).

Social identity, intergroup emotions and identification

Common to the studies reviewed above is a strict focus on the cognitive aspects of group identification. Yet, group membership and intergroup processes are not entirely cognitive. Affect unquestionably plays a role in the dynamics of social groups. Some outgroups are feared; a collision of social groups can result in anger, leading to aggression. Theorists of intergroup emotion explain that because group membership is part of one's self, events that harm or favor an ingroup are in some sense equivalent to events that harm or favor one's self. Therefore, group members may experience emotions on behalf of an ingroup, just as they would feel fear, anger or disgust on their own behalf (Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000).

Intergroup emotion studies draw on appraisal theories of emotion. Appraisal approaches suggest that emotional reactions are responses to cognitive evaluations of events, including the potential of a given event to help or hurt individual goals (Smith, 1993; Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000). When social identity is activated, appraisal of situations and events (e.g., media messages) related to social identity focus on the social rather than personal concerns (Smith, 1993). Because the group membership is part of one's self, a group member will experience emotions because his or her ingroup is helped or hurt by the events. Different events can trigger specific emotions among ingroup members (Smith, 1993). For example, when an ingroup member is treated unfairly and suffers from the behaviors of an outgroup member, other ingroup members are more likely to feel angry (Gordijn et al., 2006). Dumont et al. (2003) showed that when Dutch and Belgian participants saw themselves as belonging to the same group as American victims in the 9-11 attacks, they experienced more fear than those that identified themselves as outgroups in the tragedy. Doosje et al. (1998) found that Dutch participants felt guilt for the

historic conduct of group-members after exposure to a strongly negative and unambiguous historical message, even when they had not been personally involved in bad acts.

Role-based identity theory (Stets & Burke, 2000) suggests that the meanings and expectations associated with group roles and their performance are also incorporated into the self. Emotions serve as performance indicators for how well a particular role identity is played out (Stets, 2005). Stryker (1987, as cited in Stets, 2005) argued that inadequate role performance generates negative emotions whereas adequate role performance leads to positive emotions. Stets (2005) found that positive emotions was generated when meeting identity expectations, in turn, enhanced the role identity.

Media messages and emotion

Although previous studies have examined how group cues in media messages can influence attitudes by influencing identification processes (e.g., Anastasio, et al. 2005) this line of research has not yet been linked with work on intergroup emotion. Increasingly, media effects researchers have taken notice of the role of emotions in a variety of processes (Nabi, 1999, 2002a, 2002b, 2003a; Edwards & Smith, 1996, Hiese & Thomas, 1989; Costarelli, 2007). Media studies from a variety of different traditions, including news and advertising, have suggested that messages can provoke emotional responses (Nabi, 2003b; Cho et al., 2003; Chadhur & Buck, 1995; Nabi, 2002; Holbrook & Batra, 1987). Once elicited, these emotions can affect processing of the message, attitude change, and persuasion (Nabi, 2002, 2003b). These studies suggest that emotions can play a key mediating role in a variety of media-related processes.

Linking incivility, emotions, and group identity

One feature of political media content in particular that has received a lot of recent attention is the civility level of discourse. While mainstream news stories traditionally maintain

an air of detached objectivity, opinionated content produced by television talking heads or political bloggers often embraces incivility as useful mode of opinion expression. The combination of incivility and opinionated commentary has been shown to effect trust in and credibility of information sources. In a study of incivility in television talking head exchanges, Mutz and Reeves (2005) found that although uncivil political discussion increased interest in the debate, it also reduced levels of political trust. Furthermore, uncivil commentary, either in political candidate statements or in online exchanges, has led respondents to rate the statements as less fair, informative, and credible (Brooks & Geer, 2007; Ng & Detenber, 2003).

While these studies have not explored the impact of exposure to uncivil, attacking discourse on emotional responses of readers or viewers, previous research suggests that such messages should provoke strong, negative emotions. The emotional experience should be enhanced for adherents of political parties because uncivil dialogue that emphasizes partisanship will make partisan political identity salient. In particular, we expect that uncivil messages should provoke two distinct sets of emotions: anger and irritation, and disgust and repulsion. Anger and disgust are among the most studied forms of discrete emotions (Nabi, 1998, 1999, 2003a). Anger has been characterized as an approach emotion, while disgust emphasizes avoidance (Nabi, 1999). Approach and avoidance, while traditionally used in terms of processing and engagement, may also suggest that in a group conflict situation, these emotions could promote or hinder identification with both in- and outgroups.

H1: Exposure to uncivil commentary by a blogger will lead to more anger than exposure to civil political blog commentary.

H2: Exposure to uncivil commentary by a blogger will lead to more irritation than exposure to civil political blog commentary.

H3: Exposure to uncivil commentary by a blogger will lead to more disgust than exposure to civil political blog commentary.

H4: Exposure to uncivil commentary by a blogger will lead to more repulsion than exposure to civil political blog commentary.

The relationship between emotions and group identification is a complex one. In the real world of social interaction, and the world of political punditry in particular, rarely are opposing groups engaged in civil turn-taking in argumentation. Instead, one group is often under attack by another. A Democratic political operative may attack the opposing party's position on a particular issue, and, not infrequently, such an attack will involve some level of incivility. Therefore, we also wish to investigate whether and how the link between message tone, experienced emotions, and group identification might depend on the position of the reader's ingroup as either under attack or playing the role of attacker. Ellemers et al. (2002) have argued that different social contexts systematically bring with them distinct identity concerns, suggesting a taxonomy of situations at the various intersections of identity commitment with context features. Their taxonomy identifies group-directed threat as a particular context feature that can systematically influence emotions and identification.

When the message threatens the ingroup

As described above, people experience emotions on behalf of members of their ingroup. In situations where ingroup members are being unfairly treated by an outgroup member, group identity is made salient, and observers are more likely to focus on the similarities between themselves and the victim, perceiving themselves and the victim as members of the same group. Observers are more likely to experience negative emotions (e.g. anger) toward the outgroup. These group-based emotions serve to highlight the similarities of the ingroup and the differences of the outgroup. As a result, the ingroup identity of the observers is more likely to be

strengthened, and ingroup members will move to differentiate themselves from the outgroup, leading to polarization (Gordjin, et al., 2001; 2006).

An ingroup member on the attack

The same message cues that made group identity salient for the victimized ingroup—the contrast between two opposing groups—should also make identity salient for readers who share group membership with the attacker. When an observer sees an ingroup member engaging in harmful behaviors (e.g. insults) to an outgroup member, we would expect that the observer would feel negative emotions because the performance of that ingroup perpetrator fails to fulfill the identity expectation as an ingroup member, according to identity theory (which emphasizes the role of component of group identity (Stets, 2005). This individual exemplar’s harmful behaviors violate the role expectations of being an ingroup member. The negative emotions experienced by ingroup observers may then lead them to differentiate from the deviant individual member of the group because this ingroup perpetrator’s behaviors may harmful to the ingroup as a whole (Marques & Paez, 1994). Marques and Paez refer to this as the “black sheep” hypothesis. Their studies confirm that individuals will move to differentiate themselves from a badly behaving group member, but it is difficult to predict whether the black sheep phenomenon will extend to differentiation between *groups*.

In the particular case of political discourse, incivility (and the throwing about of insults) generally violates expected norms derived from preferred forms of interpersonal interaction. Mutz & Reeves (2005) note “there are strong social norms likely to be observed for purposes of these interactions. Face-to-face exchanges are relatively polite” (p. 3). We therefore expect that an attacking message will violate role expectations for a “good” group member, provoking

negative emotions that might encourage other group members to distance themselves from this particular representation of identity.

For both groups—attacker and attacked—it is expected that the effect of uncivil messages will be channeled through the experience of negative emotions. A message that provides group cues should make partisan identity salient. Incivility should spark negative emotions on behalf of the group. These experienced emotions should then serve as feedback for an evaluation of group identification strength. However, based on the above line of argumentation, a key objective for this paper is to explore whether the indirect processes whereby message incivility is expected to affect group polarization differ depending on the position of the reader as member of attacked or attacking group. For group members whose group is under attack, polarization seems a likely outcome of negative emotions provoked by a media message—the threat to the ingroup should drive differentiation (Ellemers et al., 2002). For members of the attacking group, however, it seems possible that the message could have the opposite effect, reducing differentiation between groups, an extension of the “black sheep effect” (Marques et al., 1994). Therefore, we propose the following research question:

RQ1: Do the indirect processes linking incivility to group identification differ based on the based on whether a reader’s ingroup is attacked in the message or is the attacker?

Method

Our hypotheses were tested in an experiment embedded in a web survey in which participants viewed a fictitious news story about global climate change policy accompanied by commentary from a fictitious political blogger. Participants were a purposive sample of blog readers of the nation’s top political blogs. These readers were identified after on a solicitation of 154 top political blogs, using Technorati’s (<http://www.technorati.com/pop/blogs/>) ratings of

“biggest blogs” and Blogstreet’s (<http://www.blogstreet.com>) Blog Influence Quotient (BIQ). Of those solicited, 40 bloggers posted a survey for their readers to take. Readers who took this survey in the winter of 2007 were asked if they were willing to participate in further research. Those who provided their email addresses were re-contacted a few months later and asked to participate in the experiment.

This experimental sample was selected to provide participants who were familiar with the format of and content found in blogs, and also to test our hypotheses among a group of highly politically interested media consumers. The study’s sample was slightly more male (62.7 percent), middle aged ($M = 46.74$), highly educated ($M =$ some graduate school), with a high annual income ($M =$ \$60,000-80,000) and an overall strong political identification (76 percent of the sample reported “strong” identification with a political party). The sample was comprised of 210 Democrats and 74 Republicans. Tests of our hypotheses among this unique sample will enable future comparisons with responses among other populations, particularly those for whom partisanship is a less accessible identity.

Design and procedure

The study used a between-subjects design, manipulating the civility of tone (civil vs. uncivil)¹ in a blogger’s commentary on a news story. Respondents read a news story about global climate change policy, which was written to emulate journalistic practice by providing a balanced summary of two positions on climate change policy. The article described both a liberal policy position for addressing climate change, endorsing mandatory caps on emissions, as well as a contrasting conservative position, supporting voluntary emissions reductions and

¹ Note: This 2x2 design was extracted from a larger experimental design. The full design included a third manipulation related to the structure of the blog post. This variable did not interact with the civility or congruence manipulation and is therefore included in the analysis only as a statistical control where relevant.

technological innovation by industry. The news story was attributed to the Associated Press. The content of the news story remained consistent across both experimental conditions.

The policy news story was embedded in a post on a fictitious web blog authored by a blogger named “Curt.” The blog commentary was written to critique the liberal policy positions as represented in the news story, and Democrats more specifically. Thus, participants who reported Democratic party identification were exposed to a policy attack against their group, while Republican participants witnessed an attacking blogger who shared their group identification. Participants who reported either “Independent” affiliation or affiliation with a third party ($N=96$) were excluded from this analysis, as we would have no expectation that a mainstream political party would serve as a relevant identity for this population.

To create the civility manipulation, we shifted whether the blogger’s commentary made civil or uncivil references to the opposing side of the debate (Brooks & Geer, 2007). In the civil condition, the critique of the news story maintained a respectful tone (i.e., “Democrats often criticize Bush for renouncing the Kyoto Protocol, but they fail to recognize that most of the signing nations have failed to live up to the promises of the accord.”). In the uncivil condition, while the terms of the argument remained the same, the blogger used derogatory terms and insulting language when referring to opponents of the blogger’s position (i.e., “Democrat whiners often criticize Bush for renouncing the Kyoto Protocol, but they can’t seem to get it through their thick skulls that most of the signing nations have failed to live up to the misguided promises of the accord.”).

Measures

Emotions. Emotional responses—anger, irritation, disgust, and repulsion—to the message were measured via a series of questions that asked respondents to rate how strongly “the

blogger's commentary made you feel" particular emotions on an eleven point scale, from "not at all" to "a great deal."

Democratic social identification. This measure serves as the measure of ingroup identification for the group that was attacked by the blogger's commentary. Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with three statements (adapted from Greene, 1999) on an eleven point scale, from strongly disagree to strongly agree: "When I talk about Democrats, I usually say 'we' rather than 'they;'" "When someone criticizes Democrats, it feels like a personal insult;" and "I don't have much in common with Democrats" (reverse coded). These items were averaged together to form an index ($\alpha=.82$, $M=4.26$, $SD=2.76$).

Republican social identification. This measure serves as the measure of ingroup identification for the group that was represented by the blogger's commentary. The items were identical to those above, with "Republican" replacing "Democrat." These items were averaged together ($\alpha=.80$, $M=2.43$, $SD=2.57$). The social identification batteries were rotated to offset possible question order effects.

Identification gap. This variable was created to present an additional look at polarization between groups. Scores on this variable represent the distance between each person's ingroup and outgroup identification. It was created by subtracting Republican identification from Democratic identification and taking the absolute value of each score.

Results

The data analysis was conducted in two parts. The first set of hypotheses (H1-H4), examining the effects of the manipulation on emotional responses, were tested using independent-samples t-tests. This analysis serves as a manipulation check, and also lays the groundwork for the second part of the analysis, an examination of the indirect effects of the

manipulation on identification outcomes. Although the overall indirect effects model was expected to be a good fit for both groups—members of the attacking vs. “victimized” groups—we expected that the links between constructs (that is, the path coefficients) might differ between groups. To examine our research question, we estimated a series of nested path models using Mplus software.

Message effects on emotional responses

Hypotheses 1-4 received strong support (Table 1). The uncivil message provoked more anger, irritation, disgust, and repulsion than did the message written in a civil tone. These findings set the stage for the second part of our analysis, an investigation of how message-provoked emotions provide feedback to the evaluation of “belongingness” to in- and outgroups.

Insert Table 1 about here

Attacker vs. attacked differences in identification outcomes

A path diagram of the baseline model is shown in Figure 1. Separate models were estimated for each of the four emotions². The exogenous variable, manipulated message incivility, was expected to be positively related to each negative emotion, which, in turn was expected to be related to in- and outgroup identification, and to the identification gap.

To test whether identification processes differed depending on whether participants’ ingroup was attacked or was attacking, a series of multiple group path models were estimated in Mplus using maximum likelihood. First, for each emotion, a constrained model was estimated, requiring path coefficients for both groups to be equal. The resulting constrained models were

² The baseline model proposes a fully mediated relationship between the experimental manipulation and the outcome variables. This model was compared with the saturated model (including estimation of direct paths from incivility to the identification outcomes). The chi-square test of difference was not significant, therefore the more parsimonious fully mediated model was used.

then compared to their unconstrained counterparts, where the path coefficients for each group were freely estimated. In order to argue that the two groups differ, the constrained models needed to produce a significant decline in model fitness over the unconstrained models. Chi-square difference tests revealed that this was the case for only two of the emotions: irritation and repulsion. Goodness of fit statistics for the constrained models, as well as chi-square difference tests, are reported in Table 2. The unconstrained models for all four emotions resulted in a good fit of the data (see Table 3).

In two cases, irritation and repulsion, it appears that participants' social group identification may have led to differences in the way emotions were experienced, and how those emotions were linked to identification. Tables 4-7 present the path coefficients and R^2 for all four emotion models. All four models suggest somewhat similar processes at work for the attacked group. Regardless of the negative emotion experienced, the more members of the attacked group (Democrats) felt the emotion, the more they identified with their own ingroup, and pushed away from the outgroup (Republicans). In all cases, the experience of negative emotions positively predicted an increased identification gap between for the attacked Democrats, a polarization effect.

Results for participants who share group membership with the attacking blogger are somewhat more complex. The civility manipulation did not produce more anger among the attacking group. When anger was experienced, it was positively related to identification with the *outgroup*. That is, angry participants placed less emphasis on the "we're not like them" aspects of group identification. Incivility did lead to more irritation among this group, but experiencing irritation was not linked to group identification processes.

For the attacking group (Republicans), incivility predicted both avoidance emotions, disgust and repulsion. These emotions produced no significant effects on ingroup identification, although both coefficients are signed negative. Disgust and repulsion *positively* predicted outgroup identification. Repulsion in particular was quite strongly related to increased levels of outgroup identification. The repulsion model as a whole explained 22.6% of the variance in reaction to the outgroup, providing evidence for some sort of “black sheep” effect. Likely because of a lack of effect on ingroup identification, the avoidance emotion models for the attacking group did not predict a greater gap between in- and outgroup identification.

Discussion

This study took as its starting point strands of two debates: one concerning fears about an increasingly polarized electorate, the other dealing with worries about the effects of uncivil political discourse. Both these debates are interwoven with conversations as to whether the improved ease of access to partisan media online will encourage audiences to consume media espousing only agreeable viewpoints (Sunstein, 2001). We contribute to these debates by providing an initial exploration of the effects of an uncivil, attacking message on group identification and polarization. The findings demonstrate that uncivil messages provoke a host of negative emotional responses among partisans. People exposed to the uncivil blogger’s commentary reported feeling more angry, irritated, disgusted, and repelled. While this comes as no surprise, we cannot find a previous test of this effect. Studies examining uncivil media messages have found decreases in political trust and message credibility (Brooks & Geer, 2007; Reeves & Mutz, 2005). It seems likely that these effects too may be related to the emotional responses aroused by incivility.

Intergroup emotion theories have opened a useful pathway for those curious about the links between media messages, emotional responses, and identification processes. Media texts carry with them cues that serve to make various group identities salient. These group cues, and the related constructs they make salient, help to maintain and reinforce group identities over time (Hong et al., 2000). A message that highlights conflict between Republicans and Democrats may make partisan group identity salient for Republican and Democrat readers alike (Thorson, 2006). Our findings demonstrate that the tone of the message matters not only because incivility can provoke an emotional response, but also, and more importantly, because these emotions are used as feedback when evaluating subsequent levels of identification with the ingroup and the outgroup. What our study begins to show, therefore, is one way that media cues, and the way those cues are presented, can also help to reinforce (or break down) boundaries between partisan groups.

The impact of message-provoked negative emotions on identification outcomes seems to depend on readers' perception of their ingroup's performance in the message, at least for some emotions. Our participants were presented with a blog post not unlike what a visitor to a real-world political blog might see: a partisan blogger attacking the position of the opposing party. For all participants, the message should have served as a contextual cue to prime partisan identity. For the Democrats among the group, their party and its positions were under attack. For Republicans, a member of their ingroup was on the attack, and was, in one condition, engaging in a quite uncivil attack. We expected that these two reader positions would produce different effects on identification, mediated by different emotional experiences. An inspection of the four emotion models suggests this was indeed the case. Members of the attacked group were consistently polarized as a result of emotional responses to the uncivil message. Experiencing

any of the negative emotions we examined led the Democrats to heighten their identification with their ingroup, and report a lower ability to identify with the Republican outgroup.

The responses of the attacking group were far less predictable. Bringing together the role-based focus of identity theory with the group-based focus of social identity helps us to see the unique position our attacking group readers may have found themselves in. Cues in the message likely made partisan identity salient for our Republican readers just as for the Democrats. However, these readers were also presented with a particular group member as a focus of attention, likely making salient a set of constructs related to role expectations for a spokesperson of the “Republican group.” This representative, the blogger, may have violated strong norms against interpersonal attacks, spurring negative emotions among observing group members. The “black sheep” hypothesis suggests that group members will distance themselves from the offending group member. But will that process have ramifications for group identification? We found no significant impact on ingroup identification in any of the emotion models, although in each model the path coefficient was signed negative. Surprisingly, the impact of the manipulation on identification for this group was a positive impact on outgroup identification. This finding should not be confused with hugs and flowers. Republicans did not “identify” with Democrats. This finding is more properly described as Republicans avoiding identification with Democrats a little bit less.

One of the most interesting findings in this vein is the R^2 value for outgroup identification for attackers in the repulsion model. The model explained 22.6% of the variance in Democrat identification for Republicans. This number, vastly higher than others in the study and corresponding to a strong, positive link between the emotion and outgroup identification, suggests that the target of revulsion for the Republican group was their own ingroup member,

“Curt” the blogger. If this is the case, it serves as our strongest piece of evidence that the black sheep effect may also lead to shifts in the boundaries between groups.

The underlying assumption for this explanation is that the emotions experienced by Republicans were not solely directed at the salient outgroup. In some cases, these negative emotions were likely turned back, at least in part, toward the ingroup. Our data do not allow a test of this assumption because we did not ask participants to identify the targets of their emotions, asking instead, “how strongly has the blogger’s commentary made you feel each of the following emotions?” For example, while both groups reported feeling more “disgust” in the uncivil condition, we cannot separate whether disgust is felt at the manner of the attack, the attackers’ political position, or either of the salient social groupings. Follow-up studies should seek to clarify the target of each group-based emotion.

This study only begins to tell the story of emotional and identification responses to attacking media messages. In this early investigation of the topic, our attacking and attacked groups may be confounded with specific characteristics Republicans and Democrats. It is possible that the responses of Republicans reflected not solely their positioning as attacking group, but also the very particular intersection of conservative politics with the complex issue of global warming. However, it worth noting that our sample of Republicans was remarkably consistent in their attitudes toward global warming, with 91 percent disagreeing with the statement “global warming is a problem that requires immediate government action.” It would be useful to test our theoretical models on a variety of media issues, and draw on a fully crossed design to prevent confounding the “attacker” or “victim” categories with a single social group.

Our unique sample of bloggers is both a limitation and a strength of our study. While we set out to test our manipulations among those most likely to encounter them in the real world,

this decision means our sample is neither representative of a general population nor likely to resemble the more popular purposive sample, college undergraduates. Considering how frequently complaints about political incivility are levied at bloggers and other partisan online media sources, it is especially important to investigate the impact of uncivil messages on active political blog readers.

Conclusion

This study provides a unique, social psychological perspective on debates about partisan media and political polarization. In the end, we remain as yet agnostic on the normative impact of our findings. Polarization may be linked to mobilization, suggesting that the prompting of these partisan identities could encourage people to become more involved in the political process. On the other hand, these identification processes could suppress willingness to engage in deliberative discussions, making compromise difficult and intolerance likely. Our theoretical models are begging to be appended with attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. These models also lend themselves to examination over time via panel survey data collections. Slater (2007) has suggested that one of the more important long-term effects of media messages may be the maintenance of social identities. Some media choices, he argues, may increasingly promote boundaries between social groups, resulting in a “reinforcing spiral” of effects. The case of blog readers provides an excellent test scenario for such a hypothesis.

Figure 1
Multi-group models between attacking and victim groups, baseline

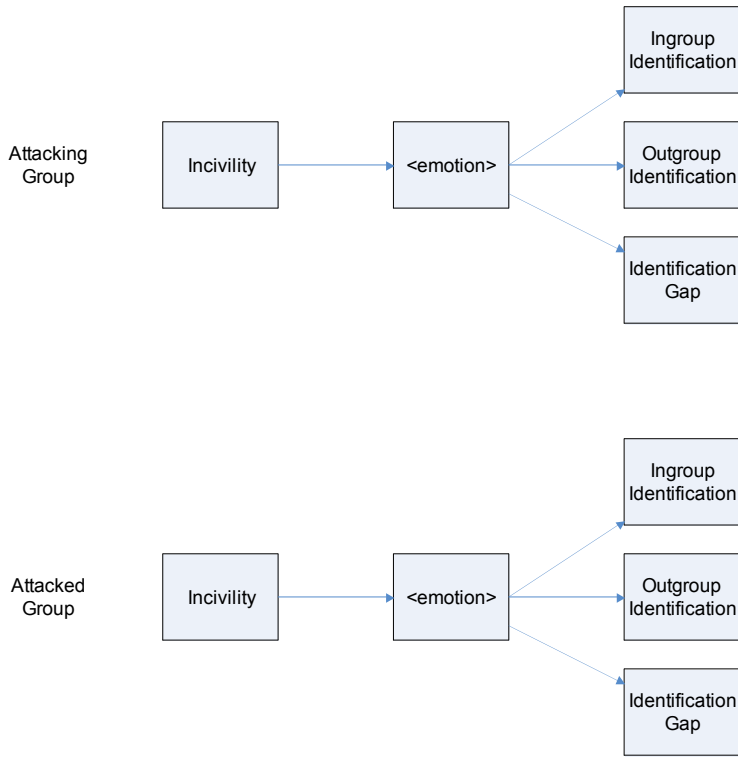


Table 1
Incivility effects on emotions, by condition

Emotion	Civility Mean	Incivility Mean	T-value
Angry	3.34	5.96	-7.77***
Disgusted	3.86	6.96	-9.11***
Repulsion	3.43	6.04	-7.22***
Irritated	5.67	7.79	-6.58***

Note. ***p >.001

Table 2

Multi-group path analysis with path coefficients constrained to equality between attacking and victim groups

	CFI	RMSEA	X2 increase, df
Anger	1.00	.00	5.13,4
Irritation	.99	.07	11.47,4*
Disgust	1.00	.03	7.79,4
Repulsion	.99	.07	12.07,4*

Table 3

Multi-group path analysis with path coefficients between attacking and victim groups, unconstrained models

	CFI	RMSEA	X2, df
Anger	1.00	.00	2.97,6
Irritation	1.00	.00	4.80,6
Disgust	1.00	.00	3.59,6
Repulsion	1.00	.00	4.65,6

Table 4

Standardized path coefficients: Anger model

	Attacking group	Attacked group
Incivility → Anger	.35	.36
Anger → Ingroup identification	-.02	.29***
Anger → Outgroup identification	.29**	-.19**
Anger → Identification gap	.09**	.32***
R ²	Ingroup=0%; outgroup=8.5%; ID gap=.8%	Ingroup=8%; outgroup=3.5%; ID gap=10%

*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Table 5

Standardized path coefficients: Irritation model

	Attacking group	Attacked group
Incivility → Irritation	.37***	.227***
Irritation → Ingroup identification	-.09	.27***
Irritation → Outgroup identification	.19	-.12
Irritation → Identification gap	-.05	.25***
R^2	Ingroup=.8%; outgroup=3.6%; ID gap=.2%	Ingroup=7.1%; outgroup=1.3%; ID gap=6.4%

*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Table 6

Standardized path coefficients: Disgust model

	Attacking group	Attacked group
Incivility → Disgust	.32**	.47***
Disgust → Ingroup identification	-.15	.24***
Disgust → Outgroup identification	.29**	-.17*
Disgust → Identification gap	-.05	.28***
R^2	Ingroup=2.4%; outgroup=8.6%; ID gap=.3%	Ingroup=6.1%; outgroup=3.0%; ID gap=7.7%

*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Table 7

Standardized path coefficients: Repulsion model

	Attacking group	Attacked group
Incivility → Repulsion	.24*	.34***
Repulsion → Ingroup identification	-.18	.19**
Repulsion → Outgroup identification	.48***	-.15*
Repulsion → Identification gap	-.10	.22**
R^2	Ingroup=3.2%; outgroup=22.6%; ID	Ingroup=3.6%; outgroup=2.2%; ID

	gap=1%	gap=4.8%
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*p< .05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

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