Preregistration analysis plan

Politicians' Use of Uncivil and Simplified Communication: Decreasing Political Trust, Increasing Persuasive Power?
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Brief introduction

This project aims to compare the effects of the simplified, uncivil communication style politicians often seem to use today, to a more deliberative ideal of well-justified, civil communication. In particular, an experimental design is developed to investigate the causal impact of these different communication styles and compare how they affect the extent to which politicians can convince voters of their arguments and gather support as well as how these different speeches affect citizens' evaluation of the political system more generally. We expect to find *tensions* as communication styles that are effective for politicians to persuade voters might not be beneficial to the evaluation of trustworthiness of the politician and political system. Moreover, we expect that not all people will react in a similar way to uncivil and simplified political messages. We expect some people to react more strongly to these messages than others (see below).

Description of the sample

Online survey experiment with Dynata (https://www.dynata.com/) on Belgian population (region: Flanders).
Targeted number of participants:
- Pilot study: *N*=100
- Survey experiment: *N*=1100

Research design

A between-subjects online survey experiment with four conditions – 2 (civil vs. uncivil communication) x 2 (simplified vs. well-justified communication) – is designed in which participants are asked to listen to an audio fragment of a fictional political debate (+/- 4-5 minutes). They are randomly assigned to one out of the four conditions. In each political debate two politicians take opposite stances on a statement about safety, i.e. whether politics should invest more in giving more competences and tasks to security services (e.g. police, intelligence service, department of justice). First, the moderator presents the statement to both politicians. Afterwards, both politicians reply back and forth. Politician A (fictional name: Wim Denouw) argues against giving more competences to the security services. Politician B (fictional name: Erik Verlaken) argues for more power to security services. It is politician B's communication style that is manipulated across each condition. While politician A expresses the same arguments in the same, neutral way across each condition, politician B's communication style is manipulated. This means that the content of the positions of both politicians remains the same across each condition, but the **communication style of politician B** is **manipulated**. In particular, in the **first condition** he replies and makes his argument in a civil and well-justified way. In the **second condition**, he replies with the same argument but in an uncivil way. In a **third condition**, the politician is civil but does not give a well-elaborated justification for his position. Instead a simplified argument is used. In the **fourth condition**, the politician replies in a simplified and uncivil way.

The present design builds further on a similar online survey experiment that has been conducted in January 2018. In that first survey experiment, we asked participants to *read* a short transcript of a fragment from a fictional political debate. The hypotheses and research questions were the same as for the present survey experiment. The difference, however, is the design where participants listen to – instead of read – a political debate. Citizens are generally not exposed to written political debates, but rather watch (and thus hear) or listen to it on television, internet or radio. Therefore, this second audio-based experiment is developed to make the findings of the study more ecologically valid and to gain further insights into the effects we are interested in.

Main variables
Stimulus material
1) **Political Incivility**:
In the **civil condition**, politician B listens carefully to politician A and lets him finish his political arguments. He only starts talking after politician A finishes speaking and waits his turn to answer. When he replies he makes clear that he does not agree with politician A, but he does that in a respectful way. Politician B can thus criticize politician A and his policies, but when he criticizes, he does that respectfully without personally attacking him or expressing unnecessary impolite language. In the **uncivil condition** on the other hand, politician B disagrees with politician A in a disrespectful way by interrupting him, ridiculing him and his policy views, and personally attacking him. He does that by stating, for example, that politician A's policy proposals are ridiculous and that he lacks any capacity to govern.

2) **Simplification:**
We distinguish between two types of arguments: a well-justified and a simplified one. Building on insights from deliberative democratic theory, a politician uses a **well-justified argument** when he reasonably justifies his policy positions. This means that the politician provides extensive reasoning for the claims he makes: the conclusion is backed up by arguments, and a linkage is also made between claims and arguments (e.g. "because" or "since"). Politician B's policy position is thus clearly explained to the audience by providing well-elaborated reasoning to substantiate the policy stance he takes. In the **simplified argument** condition, politician B does not extensively justify his positions and rather presents his arguments in a simplistic format and reduces them to one-liners, slogans or soundbites, or he does not give any arguments at all for his standpoints.

Dependent variables
The two main dependent variables are **political trust** and **persuasive power** to test our main hypotheses, i.e.:
H1a: Politicians' use of uncivil language leads to lower levels of trust in politics than civil language.
H1b: Politicians' use of uncivil language is more effective to persuade citizens than civil language.
H2a: Politicians' use of simplified arguments leads to lower levels of trust in politics than well-justified arguments.
H2b: Politicians' use of simplified arguments is more effective to persuade citizens than well-justified arguments.

The tension we expect to observe might be stronger when both elements are present in one political speech. In other words, we do not only compare uncivil versus civil communication, and simplified versus well-justified communication. We also compare political communication that is both uncivil and simplified to communication that is both civil and well-justified. The reason is that we expect effects to be stronger when politicians use a debating style that is *both* uncivil and simplified, because this means that politicians violate social norms twice:

H3a: Politicians' combined use of uncivil language and simplified arguments leads to lower levels of trust in politics than civil language and well-justified arguments.

H3b: Politicians' combined use of uncivil language and simplified arguments is more effective to persuade citizens than civil language and well-justified arguments.

The dependent variables are operationalized as follows:
1) **Political Trust**: 3 measures
- Trust in the political candidate:
  - In the survey question participants are asked to rate politician B on the following statement: 'Erik Verlaken is a politician I can trust'
  - The scale ranges from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree)

- Trust in government to implement good security policy:
  - Survey question: 'To what degree do you trust government to implement a good security policy? 0 means that you do not have any trust at all in government to implement a good safety policy, and 10 means that you have complete trust'
  - The scale ranges from 0 (not at all) to 10 (completely)

- Trust in the political system:
  - 2 items: trust in the federal parliament and trust in politicians in general is measured
  - Survey question: 'Could you indicate on a scale ranging from 0 to 10 how much trust you personally have in the following institutions in general? 0 means that you do not have any trust at all in an institution, and 10 means that you have complete trust'
  - Participants are asked to rate both the federal parliament and politicians in general on a scale that ranges from 0 (not at all) to 10 (completely)
  - If both items correlate well, a sum index will be created for the evaluation of trust in the political system by adding the scores on both scales and dividing them by two. The scale will run from 1 (low trust evaluation) to 11 (high trust evaluation)

2) **Persuasive Power**: 2 measures
- Effectiveness to convince citizens of one's policy position:
  - 3 items:
    - 'To what degree do you agree with the argument that politician Erik Verlaken made in the debate?'

- ▪ 'To what degree would you defend the policy position of Erik Verlaken in a discussion with friends?'
- ▪ 'To what degree are you convinced by the argument of Erik Verlaken?'.
  - o 5-point Likert scales: participants indicate whether they totally agree (5) or not (1), whether they would certainly defend the policy position in a discussion with friends (5) or not (1), and whether they are certainly convinced by Erik Verlaken's argument (5) or not (1)
  - o If the three items correlate well with each other and load on one principal component (Eigenvalue > 1), a sum index will be created for the evaluation of effectiveness by adding the scores on the three scales and dividing them by three. This way, the effectiveness scale will run from 1 (not effective) to 5 (effective)

- • Effectiveness of political candidate
  - o Survey question : 'In the media people often talk about politicians as winners or losers of a political debate. To what extent do you think that one of the two politicians won this debate?'
  - o Scale ranges from 'Wim Denouw was absolutely the winner of the debate' (1) to 'Erik Verlaken was absolutely the winner of the debate' (5)

Moderating variables

We expect that not all people will react in a similar way to uncivil and simplified political messages. We expect **political cynicism, perspective inclusiveness, political sophistication, populist attitudes, education level, opinion sharing, and conflict avoidance** to moderate these effects. The first two moderators are of central importance to our study and will be included in a paper resulting from this survey experiment. The other 5 moderators will be analyzed to gather insights for the broader project on how the relationship between incivility/simplification and political trust/persuasive power works. These 5 moderators are not the central focus of the paper that will result from this experiment, and will - if included - only be included as an additional check in appendix. They might however become part of an additional paper focusing more extensively on the moderating impact of these variables in the relationship between incivility/simplification and political trust/persuasive power.

The hypotheses regarding the moderators, and the operationalization of the moderators, are as follows:

Political cynicism

H4a: The effect of incivility and simplification on political trust is weaker for the more politically cynical.
H4b: The effect of incivility and simplification on persuasive power is stronger for the more politically cynical.

- • Respondents are asked to rate three items that tap into their level of political cynicism:
  - o 'Politicians do not understand what matters to citizens and society'
  - o 'Politicians primarily act in a self-interested way'
  - o 'Politicians consciously promise more than what they can deliver'

- The scale ranges from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree)
- If the three items correlate well with each other and load on one principal component (Eigenvalue > 1), a sum index will be created by adding the scores on the three scales and dividing them by three

Perspective Inclusiveness

= *level of importance citizens attach to the inclusion and discussion of different perspectives in political debate*

H5a: The effect of incivility and simplification on political trust is stronger for citizens who highly value perspective inclusiveness.

H5b: The effect of incivility and simplification on persuasive power is weaker for citizens who highly value perspective inclusiveness.

- Respondents are asked to rate three items:
    - 'I believe it is important that each politicians' opinion is included and thoroughly discussed in political debate'
    - 'I believe that including and discussing the perspectives of minority groups in political debate is equally important as including and discussing those of majority groups'
    - 'I believe politicians have the obligation to take into account all different perspectives when debating with each other'
- The scale ranges from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree)
- If the three items correlate well with each other and load on one principal component (Eigenvalue > 1), a sum index will be created by adding the scores on the three scales and dividing them by three

Education Level

H6a: The effect of incivility and simplification on political trust is weaker for citizens with low education levels.

H6b: The effect of incivility and simplification on persuasive power is stronger for citizens with low education levels.

- Survey question: What is your highest level of education?
- Answer options:
    - No or primary education
    - Secondary education, not fully finished (lower ASO, BSO or TSO)
    - Secondary education, fully finished (higher ASO, BSO or TSO)
    - Non-university higher education
    - University education
- Education level will be recoded in three categories (High: University and college, middle: secondary finished, Low: none and secondary education not finished)

Political Sophistication

H7a: The effect of incivility and simplification on political trust is stronger for the more politically sophisticated.

H7b: The effect of incivility and simplification on persuasive power is weaker for the politically sophisticated.

- Political sophistication is operationalized in two ways
    - Four knowledge questions to make one knowledge scale. Each question has four answer options (1 answer is correct):
        - Question 1: The [Belgian] federal parliament consists of…
        - Question 2: Who is the current chairman of the Flemish Parliament?
        - Question 3: Which political party does Marie-Christine Marghem belong to?
        - Question 4: What function does the man who is depicted on the photo hold? [picture of Jeremy Corbyn]
    - An additive index of levels of education and interest in politics (see Dalton, 2012; Dassonneville, 2014)
        - Participants' political interest is measured on a scale for 0 (not at all interested) to 4 (very interested) and will be recoded in three categories (little interest, some interest, strong interest)
        - Education level will be recoded in three categories (High: University and college, middle: secondary finished, Low: none and secondary education not finished).
        - Both items will be summed, resulting in an index of political sophistication from 0 to 4

Populist attitudes
H8a: The effect of incivility and simplification on political trust is weaker for citizens with high populist attitude levels.
H8b: The effect of incivility and simplification on persuasive power is stronger for citizens with high populist attitude levels.

- Respondents are asked to rate four items:
    - 'Politicians in parliament need to follow the will of the people'
    - 'Politicians talk too much and take too little action'
    - 'The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions'
    - 'I would rather be represented by a citizen than by a specialized politician'
- The scale ranges from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree)
- If the four items correlate well with each other and load on one principal component (Eigenvalue > 1), a sum index will be created by adding the scores on the four scales and dividing them by four

Opinion sharing
H9a: The effect of incivility and simplification on political trust is weaker for citizens who share the politician's opinion.
H9b: The effect of incivility and simplification on persuasive power is stronger for citizens who share the politician's opinion.

- Survey question: We would like to know your opinion on the following topics. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.
    - A compulsory entrance exam is needed at all universities

- o   Nuclear power stations must be closed as soon as possible
- o   **More power should be given to security services** (the one we are interested in)
- o   More investments should be made in development cooperation
- Scale ranges from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree)

Conflict Approach/Avoidance

H10a: The effect of incivility on political trust is stronger for citizens with high conflict avoidance levels.

H10b: The effect of incivility on persuasive power is weaker for citizens with high conflict avoidance levels.

- Participants are asked to rate the following items (based on Goldstein, 1999; see also Mutz & Reeves, 2005):
  - o   'I hate arguments'
  - o   'I find conflicts exciting'
  - o   'I enjoy challenging the opinions of others'
  - o   'Arguments don't bother me'
  - o   'I feel upset after an argument'
- Scale ranges from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree)
- If the five items correlate well with each other and load on one principal component (Eigenvalue > 1), a sum index will be created by adding the scores on the five scales and dividing them by five

All survey questions related to moderators, except for education level, are asked before treatment.

We measure respondents' sex (i.e. Men, women, other), age, and job status using self-reported measurement. We also ask them to place themselves on a political left – right scale (0-10).

How is randomization done?

Randomization is done by the software Qualtrics randomizer.

Manipulation checks

Pilot study: pilot study primarily set up to assess whether manipulation of the communication styles worked. Immediately after being exposed to the political debate fragment we ask participants the following two questions:

1) Civility vs. Incivility: To what degree did Erik Verlaken react in a respectful manner? (7-point Likert scale from 'very disrespectful' to 'very respectful')

2) Simplified vs. Well-justified arguments: To what degree does Erik Verlaken explain and justify his standpoint? (7-point Likert scale from 'very limited' to 'very extensively').

Survey experiment: these manipulation checks are also included in the survey experiment conducted among 1100 participants. These checks will be included after participants answered questions related to our main dependent variables, because we want to avoid priming them with the stimulus material.

Whether the manipulations worked will be checked by means of Independent Samples T Tests. Manipulation worked if the Independent Samples T Tests indicate significant results ($p<0.05$).

Analyses
All hypotheses will be tested by means of **analysis of variance**.
ANOVA for main effects: H1a, H1b, H2a, H2b, H3a and H3b
ANOVA for main + interaction effects (H4-H10): moderating variables are included in the ANOVA models to investigate moderation effects.

An Attention check/Instructional Manipulation Check is included at the end of the survey, asking participants the following question: 'Could you please indicate the number 0 on the scale below? This question is important for us because it allows us to check how attentively the questions were answered'. The scale runs from 0 to 5.
To check robustness, our survey experiment data is analyzed both with people who did and those who did not comply with the attention check.

Exclusion criteria
* All participants younger than 18 years old are screened out and will thus be excluded
* Respondents taking the survey in less than 8 minutes will be excluded from the analyses
* Respondents indicating technical issues and consequently not able to listen to the debate will be excluded from the analyses

References
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