Civil Engagement and Civic Engagement:
The 2020 Presidential Election and Beyond

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Abstract

The 2020 elections in the United States saw levels of voter turnout that were unusually high, an anomaly in the trend of declining civic engagement in the United States, even as new technologies have expanded access to political information and to opportunities for political interaction. Why do we see such variation in political participation? The primary aim of this research is to answer this question by examining the relationship between Americans' perceptions of incivility in public life and their civic engagement, specifically looking at political participation beyond just voting. This research further seeks to reveal the relative impact of perceptions of incivility, partisan attachment, and perceptions of polarization on civic engagement, while controlling for traditional variables. Using survey data gathered on a nationally representative sample of 1,001 American adults in early 2021, OLS regression analysis reveals that perceptions of incivility in the political arena do indeed positively influence a citizen's level of political participation. The findings further demonstrate that while traditional variables such as income and educational attainment have the expected effect, strength of party affiliation and perception of political polarization also positively influence civic engagement and that among all the study's variables, the intensity of one's party identification appears to have the greatest impact on civic engagement.

Introduction

The 2020 elections in the United States saw levels of voter turnout that were unusually high with 66.8% of eligible voters casting a ballot, the largest turnout since the early 1990s and five points higher than the previous presidential election. This spike in turnout occurred across both Democratic-leaning and Republican-leaning citizens and was driven primarily by large increases in voting among Asian American, Latino, and non-college-educated white populations (US Census Bureau 2021). The bump in voter turnout in 2020 was good news to the many scholars and policymakers who have been increasingly concerned about declining civic engagement and the weakness of civil society in the United States, a trend that began decades ago even as new technologies have expanded access to political information and to opportunities for political interaction with others (Abramson and Aldrich 1982; Putnam 1995; Skocpol and Fiorina 1999; Winthrop 2020).

What is driving this renewed engagement with the political system? While some believe that higher turnout in 2020 was a result of the particular vagaries of President Trump's outsized populist rhetoric and personality, many scholars consider systemic factors as both more likely and more capable of providing a full understanding of variations in citizens' civic engagement. Specifically, some have argued that extreme incivility in American public discourse has angered citizens and motivated them to engage (Gervais 2015, 2019; Weber 2012), while others have pointed to the high levels of polarization and partisanship that characterize the current political environment as a cause (Abramowitz 2012; Hetherington 2008; Miller and Conover 2015; Wolfe, Strachan, and Shea 2012). This research seeks to uncover and document the relative importance of these and other traditionally accepted factors in explaining a citizen's level of political participation. The primary focus of this research will be to examine the relationship between Americans' perceptions of incivility in public life and their civic engagement, specifically looking at the potential impact of perceived incivility on a wide range of civic activities beyond simple voting, including participation in civic organizations, interest in and attention to politics, and even willingness to engage in political conversation and debate. A secondary focus of the project is to disentangle and clarify the complicated relationships among incivility, political polarization, and civic engagement, with the goal of isolating the particular role of civility with respect to engagement.

Literature Review

Civility

Civility is a social norm that defines the kinds of behavior we can expect from others (Fehr and Fischbacher 2004; Sinopoli 1995), and because our norms about appropriate behavior are so context-specific (Benson 2011; Ferree et al. 2002), some scholars claim that it is virtually impossible to settle on one clear definition (Boyd 2004; Carter 1998; Jamieson et al. 2017; Massaro and Stryker 2012). Others argue that a growing literature in the area is helping to develop a clear and explicit definition of incivility, with care taken to distinguish incivility in

political discourse from social impoliteness, negative messaging, and emotional appeals (Brooks and Geer 2007; Massaro and Stryker 2012; Papacharissi 2004; Sifianou 2019; Stryker, Conway, and Danielson 2016). Jamieson et al. (2017) argue that most definitions share a few common components: 1) civility is not about use of specific words but about the mode of interaction; 2) civil discourse does not silence or derogate alternative views; and 3) the behavior of participants in civil discourse demonstrates respect for those who hold alternative views and/or for "collective traditions of democracy;" Massaro and Stryker (2012) more clearly specify the elements of incivility as including "verbal intimidation, ad hominem attacks, personal vitriol, purposive or careless deception, and exaggerated claims" (407). A more recent confirmatory factor analysis of 23 different indicators conducted on a representative sample of undergraduate students by Stryker, Conway, and Danielson (2016) establishes that perceived political incivility is a multi-dimensional concept; specifically, the authors find that issue-attacks are not generally considered incivil while personal attacks with three different components are perceived as incivil: insulting utterances, deception, and behaviors "tending to shut down inclusive ongoing discussion" (535). Zurn (2013) also clearly addresses what civility is NOT: it is not seeking compromise or consensus, ideological impurity, non-partisanship, crossing party lines, or favoring the 'common good' over private or sectarian good (349-350).

Some claim that a lack of consensus on what constitutes incivility is very problematic; Sigelman and Kugler (2003) argue, for example, that many studies are inconclusive because citizens do not agree with scholars' categorization of what is civil and what is not civil, and Brooks (2000) reports that some citizens do not even consider personal attacks as negative or unfair. On the other hand, Fridkin and Kenney (2008) find the association between respondents' and researchers' perceptions of civility is strong and statistically significant and also have made the case that civility and incivility are better understood as a continuum – a matter of degree – rather than a sharp qualitative distinction (Fridkin and Kenney 2008).

The findings as to whether incivility is on the rise (Altschuler and Blumin 2000) or is falling (Carter 1998) in the United States is driven by how one defines and measures it (Jamieson et al. 2017). Herbst (2010) argues that incivil behavior and discourse have strategic uses that make them common in American politics over time, echoing multiple case studies that suggest that the political arena in the United States has always been rather rough-and-tumble (Scher 1997). An interesting study of third party descriptions of politics as nasty, mean, hurtful, and bitter by Shea and Sproveri (2012) suggests that the degree of incivility in American politics is not consistent through time but rather surges to extreme levels at certain periods and becomes more cordial in others (in a cycle of about 20-30 years); the findings thus indicate that it is not appropriate to assume that American politics have always been incivil but that political discourse and behavior become more incivil during periods of partisan realignment and, especially, at the times of "critical elections" (late 1820's, mid-1860's, 1896, 1932, etc.). They therefore embrace Herbst's theory that incivility is a strategic tool and go further to claim that political actors employ this tool in times when the stakes are very high and involve deep-seated beliefs and – perhaps – ideological and partisan polarization. The authors conclude that, while certainly not novel, incivility has been on the rise in America since the 1980's (419). Indeed, there appears to be general agreement that incivil tendencies in American culture are both more apparent and more abundant in recent years, especially in the online environment (Hill, Capella and Cho 2015; Popan et al. 2019; Smith and Bressler 2013; Sobieraj and Berry 2011).

The proposed causes of incivility are wide and varied, although many scholars point to the pervasiveness, diversity, and ideological/partisan nature of media and media sources as a major contributing factor (Jamieson et al. 2017; Jamieson and Hardy 2012; Maisel 2012; Massaro and Stryker 2012). Research demonstrates, for example, that people overwhelmingly select media sources that are like-minded; even the most knowledgeable individuals seek cognitive simplicity when selecting information sources because exposure to information that contradicts their current beliefs is difficult to process and takes more time and energy to consider (McCombs & Stroud 2014). Similarly, people often find conversation with those holding opposing views as threatening or uncomfortable (Witschge 2004), with the result that they avoid exposure to those with views contrary to their own. Existing differences are thus deepened and reinforced, and the evidence suggests that this political "silo-ing" may be especially problematic in the online environment (Jamieson and Hardy 2008; Suhay et al. 2014). Growing differences and isolation may then exacerbate political polarization – another factor that is often blamed for incivility in politics. There is some evidence that opinion extremity and incivility are correlated (Suhay et al. 2014), although the complexity of the problem and a dearth of research in this area does not allow us to clearly disentangle whether polarization causes incivility, incivility produces polarization, or if each is reinforcing the other (see Massaro and Stryker 2012).

Researchers agree that incivility is "emotionally arousing" in all contexts (Mutz 2007). The effects of being a *target* of incivil remarks include a strong emotional response, reduced effective cognitive processing, reduced productivity, and reduced creativity (Porath and Erez 2007; Rafaeli et al. 2012; Vasquez et al. 2013). In addition, one is likely to reciprocate an incivil attack with more incivility (Andersson and Pearson 1999). It is less clear what the effects are of *witnessing* incivility. Some research suggests that incivility has a negative impact on political trust, especially when politicians are the ones engaging in incivil behavior (Borah 2013; Graf, Erba, and Harn 2017; Molders and Van Quaquebeke 2017; Mutz and Reeves 2005; Wu and Thorson 2017), and incivility has been shown to polarize witnesses or lead them to perceive more polarization in the public, especially in the online environment (Anderson et al. 2014; Hwang, Kim, and Huh 2014: Mutz 2006; Popan et al. 2019). Those exposed to incivil discussions are also much more likely to then demonstrate an incivil mode of discourse in their own comments, particularly when they are exposed to like-minded incivility (Gervais 2014; Han and Brazeal 2015). Politicians who are civil enjoy higher public approval ratings, while those who are incivil experience a decrease in their approval scores across almost all groups in the electorate (except for their very strongest supporters); indeed, incivil participants of all kinds are universally viewed less favorably and, specifically, as less trustworthy (Fridkin and Kenney 2008, 2011; Frimer and Skitka 2018; Graf, Erba, and Harn 2017; Molders and Van Quaquebeke 2017).

In addition, incivil messages themselves are viewed as being less fair, less informative, and less important (Brooks and Greer 2007). However, there are mixed results in terms of the impact on the perceived credibility of information that is presented in an incivil context; some find that credibility actually increases (Borah 2013; Thorson, Vraga, and Ekdale 2010), but most other studies show that incivil actors, comments, and arguments are viewed as much less legitimate, rational, trustworthy, and/or credible (Graf, Erba, and Harn 2017; Mutz 2007; Ng and Detenber 2017; Popan et al. 2019; Wu and Thorson 2017). It is important to note that

these studies differ in terms of who or what is viewed as less credible: it may be the information or argument itself, the media source or platform, or the incivil presenter of the information. In addition, several studies indicate that this effect is only found or is exacerbated when the incivility is attached to an *opposing* point of view.

        With specific regard to the impact on civic engagement, there is a substantial literature exploring the impact of negative campaigning and negative messages on political engagement, but negativity is not necessarily the same as incivility. Indeed, many scholars have bemoaned the lack of empirical tests that would begin to confirm or disconfirm widespread concerns about the specific effects of *incivility* on the electorate (Brooks and Geer 2007; Mutz and Reeves 2005). That gap is slowly being filled, but the results of many studies are contradictory and much remains unknown. Some studies suggest that exposure to incivility may increase political engagement; Brooks and Geer (2007), for example, find that being exposed to incivility has small but positive consequences for self-reported likelihood to vote and interest in politics. Similarly, Mutz and Reeves (2005) demonstrate that incivility in television ads increases viewer interest in politics, and there is also evidence that incivil messages heighten people's attention and will therefore be more likely to be remembered (Coe, Kenski, and Rains 2014; Lau 1982; Mutz and Reeves 2005). Gervais (2015) shows that exposure to incivil political talk induces feelings of anger and aversion; this finding is important since Ryan's field experiments demonstrate that evoking anger substantially increases web users' likelihood of clicking through to a political website (2012), Weber (2012) finds that evoking the emotion of anger is mobilizing by increasing intentions to participate, and Gervais (2019) shows that anger provokes an "active and combative" form of partisan citizenship.

        On the other hand, Valentino et al. (2008) find that evoking anger can lead people to claim that they will pay attention to a political campaign, but in reality that anger actually depresses total political information seeking; this finding contradicts those of Kahn and Kenney (1999), who find that campaign "mudslinging" causes people to self-report a lower level of turnout and less political interest but also is associated with greater political knowledge. And while Ng and Detenber (2017) find that incivility has no significant impact on people's intentions to participate, Fridkin and Kenney's 2004 study of negative campaign messages suggests that "extreme incivility" influences voters to disengage from political participation. More recent research also indicates that exposure to incivility reduces a person's expectation that engaging in public discussion of issues is productive (Hwang, Kim, and Huh 2014) and directly reduces their self-reported willingness to participate in political discussions (Han and Brazeal 2015).

Polarization and Partisanship
        There is general agreement in the literature that current US party politics are polarized (Mason 2018; Massaro and Stryker 2012). Even though elite party polarization has been typical across time in the United States (Layman et al. 2006), current elite polarization – such as among members of Congress – is much greater than several decades ago and is generalized across a wide variety of issues (Heatherington 2009; Massaro and Stryker 2012). There is more debate regarding the degree of polarization in the electorate, although researchers seem to agree that polarization in party identification has increased since the 1970s (Fiorina and Levendusky 2006;

Wolfe, Strachan, and Shea 2012). Indeed, Lilliana Mason's more recent work (2018) clearly indicates that American partisans have been growing increasingly ideologically distinct since at least 1972 (27) and that this trend has been exacerbated by mounting "social sorting." Wolf, Strachan, and Shea (2012) have also argued that a second layer of party polarization has developed in the electorate that goes beyond simple issue or ideological differences; rather, they find a growing unwillingness among voters for politicians to compromise with the other side, as well as a growing determination to blame the opposing party alone for political incivility; this stance is most common among the substantial percentage of the electorate that strongly identifies with one party or the other (432).

As mentioned above, much work remains to be done to disentangle the complicated relationship between incivility and polarization, and the web of relationships becomes even more complicated in the attempt to isolate the influence of incivility versus polarization in shaping civic engagement. Research has shown, for example, that high levels of ideological conflict between Senate candidates reduces voter turnout (Rogowski 2014), and an earlier study by Hayes, Scheufele, and Huge (2006) demonstrates that in a polarized opinion climate, some people will refrain from publicly observable political activities because they fear scrutiny and criticism. However, Miller and Conover (2015) find that strong partisan identifiers (the most polarized) hold the most hostile and the most incivil attitudes *and* are more likely to participate in elections; this finding confirms Wolfe, Strachan, and Shea's 2012 results, which demonstrate that each party's strong and intense partisan "base" are the most likely to say that they do not want their elected officials to compromise, are the most mobilized and the most reliable participants in elections, and are the most likely to blame the opposing side for incivility (432-433). According to the authors, when those voters who prefer politicians who are willing to compromise are also those most likely to be *demobilized* by negative and incivil tactics, it is difficult to imagine how the "downward spiral" of political incivility in American politics will ever be disrupted and repaired.

There is substantial evidence that elite party polarization has increased citizen political engagement in terms of voter turnout, following public affairs, interest in elections, political knowledge, and political activity beyond voting (Abramowitz 2010; Hetherington 2008). Indeed, different scholars variously argue that polarization gives citizens clearer choices, promotes stronger attachment to parties, provides citizens with greater confidence in their vote choice, and makes it easier for citizens to hold parties accountable for poor performance (Lupu 2015; Strachan and Wolf 2012). It is also important to note that it has long been established in the literature that political diversity and disagreement in different contexts can have a notably positive impact on citizen engagement in a multiplicity of forms (Blais 2000; Campbell 2006; Franklin 2004; Pacheco 2008; Scheufele et al. 2004), although political discord and diversity are not necessarily the same thing as polarization.

Civic Engagement

Civic engagement, political engagement, or political participation: whatever label is used, this area of concern has been a major focus of research in political science since the

discipline was first founded, and scholars of democracy and democratic theory have worked long and hard to establish the factors that influence citizens' engagement in the political process. Political participation has been defined as "those actions of private citizens by which they seek to influence or to support government and politics" (Milbrath 1981, 198), and so electoral participation (intention to vote in future, past voting behavior, and/or registration to vote) is an obvious and widely used measure (see Campbell et al. 1960). However, the scholarship also makes clear that only focusing on voting really fails to capture the many domains of political participation. Beyond simple voting, civic engagement is viewed as including political knowledge; news consumption; campaign and political party activism; membership in civic and religious groups (although participation in civic life – known as "social capital" – is also seen as a *cause* of political participation); corresponding with elected officials; donating money to political parties, candidates, or causes; demonstrating; consumer participation (such as boycotts); and online activism (Almond and Verba 1963; Brady, Schlozman, and Verba 1999; Copeland and Feezle 2017; Dalton 2008; Verba and Nie 1972; Wray-Lake, Metzger, and Syvertsen 2017). As this research is particularly focused on political discourse, it is also appropriate to consider the impact of perceived incivility on a citizen's willingness to engage in political conversation with others, which some scholars view as a central aspect of engagement (Davidson and Cotter 1989).

Finally, a person's age is universally recognized as an important control variable in understanding political and civic engagement since variation over the lifecycle is well-established in the literature (Brady, Schlozman, and Verba 1999; Levy and Akiva 2019; Wray-Lake, Metzger, and Syvertsen 2017). Research has also clearly demonstrated that race, socio-economic status (income and education level), marital status, and gender are also important demographic factors that may play a role and should be controlled in any research on civic engagement (Brady, Schlozman, and Verba 1999; Condon 2015; Copeland and Feezell 2017; Hansen 1997; Hayes and Been 1993; Levy and Akiva 2019; Putnam 1996; Wilkins 2000).

Hypotheses, Data, and Measurement

There is an obvious lack of consensus in the literature about the impact of incivility on civic engagement, the principle focus of this research. In addition, much work remains to be done in terms of disentangling the effects of competing but related variables such as partisanship and polarization. Using a cross-sectional research design at the individual level and OLS regression analysis, this research therefore seeks to reveal the relative impact of perceptions of incivility, strength and direction of partisan attachment, and perceptions of polarization on civic engagement, while also controlling for traditional variables such as age, race, education, and income. In addition, a secondary hypothesis focuses on understanding the impact of these competing variables specifically on willingness to participate in political discussion since previous research suggests a possible negative relationship with exposure to

incivility (Han and Brazeal 2015; Hwang, Kim, and Huh 2014) and because some scholars view it as a central component of engagement (Davidson and Cotter 1989).

The data for this analysis were collected from a random sample of 1,001 adults, ages 18+, in all 48 states of the continental US and the District of Columbia (see Appendix A for a copy of the survey instrument). Telephone interviews conducted by live interviewers were employed from March 2-10, 2021, with a quota of 50% cell phone respondents and 50% landline respondents. Demographic targets for age, gender, and party identification were used to correct for non-response, and the sample was weighted for age by gender and for educational attainment in a multi-step process to further adjust for non-response.[1] Results based on this national sample of adults are estimated to have a margin of sampling error of +/- 3.1 percentage points with 95% confidence. The survey was sponsored by and funded by the Stubblefield Institute for Civil Political Communications at Shepherd University.

Measurement of the dependent variable, civic engagement, is operationalized for this study well beyond simple electoral participation, which fails to capture all the domains of true engagement (Almond and Verba 1963; Brady, Schlozman, and Verba 1999; Copeland and Feezle 2017; Dalton 2008; Levy and Akiva 2019; Verba and Nie 1972; Wray-Lake, Metzger, and Syvertsen 2017). For example, Brooks and Geer (2007) measured engagement as self-reported likelihood of voting in the upcoming election, interest in politics and elections, political trust, political efficacy, and political learning; Wilkins (2000) employed an original scale with moderate reliability (Cochran's Chi Square = .75) composed of belonging to a political party (39%), being registered to vote (83%), voting in the recent national election (79%), and voting in an earlier local election (76%). Following Flavin and Keane (2011), I measure civic engagement on a simple additive index (ranging 0-13) that includes the following elements: being registered to vote; voting; donating money to a political candidate, party, or cause; participating in a protest or demonstration; expressing an interest in politics and elections; contacting an elected official about an issue; being willing to talk with others about politics; participating in a civic or religious organization; reading a newspaper regularly; seeking out information about a candidate or issue; volunteering or working for a political campaign or party; attending a meeting or rally for a political candidate; and displaying a button, yard sign, or bumper sticker for a political candidate (see Appendix A).

There is far less agreement with respect to the measurement of the main independent variable, incivility, even though scholars such as Stryker, Conway, and Danielson (2016) argue strongly for standardized measures of political incivility. Since Sigelman and Kugler (2003) find that many studies are inconclusive because citizens may not agree with scholars' categorization of what is civil and what is not civil, it is extremely important to measure citizens' *perceptions* of incivility rather than to impose the researcher's own definition. Furthermore, Fridkin and Kenney (2011) make a compelling case that there is a continuum of civility and incivility, so this

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[1] Population estimates for age by gender came from the U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, June 2020. Population estimates for educational attainment were drawn from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 Current Population Survey.

variable is measured by the question, "Thinking about politicians, the media, and your fellow citizens in America: How would you characterize the level of civility in politics over the last five years?", with five possible responses that range from "Extremely Civil" to "Extremely Uncivil."

Similarly, the polarization variable must be measured on a continuum and should tap into a respondent's perceptions about the degree of division in the political environment. This variable has therefore been measured with the question, "On a scale of 0 to 100, where 0 is no political division and 100 is division on the edge of a civil war, where would you rank the level of political division in the country today?" Strength of party identification, another competing explanation that may be confounded with both polarization and perception of incivility, is operationalized in this study on a typical seven-point scale ranging from "Strong Democrat" to "Strong Republican." Controls for gender, age, race, education, income, and employment and marital status are also essential to include in any test of civic engagement (Brady, Schlozman, and Verba 1999; Condon 2015; Copeland and Feezell 2017; Hansen 1997; Hayes and Been 1993; Levy and Akiva 2019; Putnam 1996; Wilkins 2000) and are similarly measured with a traditional format (see Appendix A, questions 3-5 and 11-15).

Findings

Univariate analysis reveals an interesting profile for the study's sample (see Appendix B for full results). A large majority of respondents to the survey indicated that they believe that politics in the country have been uncivil, with 81% reporting that they view politics in the US as either fairly or extremely uncivil during the last five years. Over 90% agreed that the lack of civil discussion in the American political system is a serious problem, and 32% said that they expect political conversation to become even less civil over the next year. The partisan breakdown of the sample closely matches that of the overall population; nearly 30% of the sample identify respectively as Democrat, Republican, or Independent with 53% of identifiers reporting a strong level of attachment to one of the major political parties and 23% categorized as partisan leaners. In addition, almost two thirds of the sample characterized the level of political division in the country as high (greater than a score of 66 on a scale of 0-100), with over 11% of respondents scoring the level of political division in the country at the highest possible level – believing that the country is "on the edge of civil war."

In terms of civic engagement, more than two thirds of the sample reported that they read a newspaper regularly, that they sought out information about a candidate or issue in the last year, and that they are very interested in politics and elections. In addition, almost 70% indicated that they are willing to talk politics with others, with more than half of those saying that they are very willing to engage in these kinds of conversations. More than 80% said that they voted in the 2020 presidential election, and 88% said that they had participated in four or more civic engagement activities in the last year. Indeed, 18% of those surveyed reported a

high level of civic engagement in the last year – participating in anywhere from nine to thirteen different activities.

Simple bivariate analysis begins to shed some light on the complicated relationships among the key study variables. Crosstabulation analysis demonstrates that perception of civility has a highly significant but weak relationship with party affiliation (X^2=29.13, p≤0.004, Cramer's V=0.10); those who identify as Democrats and Independents were more likely than those who identify as Republicans to view American politics as incivil – with 84% of Democrats, 82% of Independents, and only 76% of Republicans saying that politics over the last five years have been fairly or extremely uncivil. In addition, self-identified Democrats (68%) and Independents (64%) were more likely to view recent politics as "extremely uncivil" as compared to Republicans (56%). A similar relationship is revealed between perception of polarization and party affiliation (X^2=23.83, p≤0.001, Cramer's V=0.112), but in this case the association is reversed, with Republicans (71%) being more likely to view the nation as very divided as compared to Independents (62%) and Democrats (55%). On the other hand, the results show a similarly significant but weak connection between perception of polarization and strength of party affiliation (X^2=14.71, p≤0.023, Tau-c=0.04; the stronger the affiliation, the greater the perception of polarization) but no relationship at all between perception of civility and strength of partisanship (X^2=16.62, p≤0.164). Finally, the belief that American political life is polarized appears to be closely related to attitudes about civility (X^2=68.53, p≤0.000, Tau-c=0.18); those who perceive high levels of polarization in the country are about one and half times more likely than those who think political division is low to view politics as "extremely uncivil."

Initial bivariate testing of the primary hypothesis suggests that a positive relationship may exist between perceptions of incivility and civic engagement. Although crosstabulation tables show no relationship between perception of incivility and willingness to engage in political discussions (X^2=6.38, p≤0.173), they do reveal that those who believe that recent politics have been incivil are more likely to vote (X^2=13.56, p≤0.009, Cramer's V=0.119). In addition, the analysis demonstrates that the more an American views recent politics as uncivil, the more civically engaged they are likely to be (X^2=30.71, p≤0.000, Tau-c=0.105). Those who believe that the American political environment is incivil, for example, are almost twice as likely to be highly engaged in public life (participating in nine are more different activities) than those who view it as civil.

More sophisticated analysis, in the form of OLS regression, provides a much clearer picture of the relative impact of each of the central study variables on citizens' level of civic engagement. The results displayed in Table 1 confirm the bivariate findings that the more a person perceives recent politics as having been incivil, the higher their level of political participation is likely to be (B=0.196, p≤0.006) – regardless of the direction and strength of their party identification, their perception of polarization, and their age, income, education, marital status, gender, or race. Interestingly, the same positive and significant relationship is revealed between strength of party affiliation and civic engagement (B=0.639, p≤0.001), demonstrating that the more partisan a person is, the more politically active they are. In addition, the same positive relationship is found between polarization and civic engagement (B=0.015, p≤0.000),

all while holding traditional explanatory factors such as age and income constant. The one key study variable for which this connection does not hold true is for the direction of party affiliation: the level of political activism is the same regardless of whether one is a Republican, a Democrat, or an Independent/Third Party identifier, all other things being equal.

[Table 1 about here]

Thus, scholars' differing claims that political incivility, strength of partisan attachment, or polarization are important factors in explaining variations in the level of civic engagement are, in fact, all confirmed by this study. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that all three variables have a positive impact on political engagement and also shed some light on the question of the relative influence of each. With the caveat in mind that each independent variable is measured with a different range of variation, the results nonetheless suggest that the strength of attachment to party has the strongest influence on the level of political activism; partisan intensity has a much larger impact on a person's level of civic engagement than does the perception of incivility, which in turn has a greater impact on civic engagement than does the perception of polarization. Indeed, the strength of a person's attachment to their political party appears to have a greater influence on the level of political participation than any other variable in the study, including traditional explanatory factors like income, education, and gender.

In terms of the secondary goal of evaluating the influence of incivility specifically upon a person's willingness to engage in political discussion, the results of a second OLS regression confirm the bivariate findings mentioned above: there is no statistically significant relationship between the two variables once all variables are controlled (see Table 1). In fact, the findings demonstrate that of the key study variables, only the strength of party affiliation has any impact on the willingness to participate in political conversation (B=0.332, p≤0.009); the more partisan a person reports themselves to be – regardless of their party affiliation or perceptions of incivility and political division – the higher their level of civic engagement, even when controlling for traditional explanatory factors.

Discussion and Conclusion

While the 2020 election saw voter turnout rise to a level that was in distinct contrast to the pattern established in previous decades, the factors driving recent increased electoral participation have been less clear. Indeed, as scholars and policymakers have become more and more concerned about what they see as insipid civic engagement and weakness in American civil society, the search for explanations for the variation in Americans' political participation has often been too narrowly focused and unsatisfactory. In terms of the role of systemic (rather than individualistic) variables, some have argued that high levels of incivility in the American political arena today best explain increasing civic engagement (Gervais 2015,

2019; Weber 2012), while others believe the causes are more likely to be the high degree of polarization in the political environment (Abramowitz 2010; Hetherington 2008) or the feeding of group identification motivations brought on by intense partisanship (Miller and Conover 2015; Wolfe, Strachan, and Shea 2012). The results of this research demonstrate that, in fact, all three of these variables play a role in increasing civic engagement, measured broadly to include participation in the political system beyond simple electoral turnout. In addition, while all three study variables and more traditional explanations such as income, educational attainment, marital status, and gender all have an impact on political participation levels, the strength of party identification appears to have the greatest relative influence on civic engagement. And, of the three key study variables, only party affiliation strength influences respondents' specific willingness to talk politics with others.

It might therefore be tempting to conclude that we should focus on the intensity of party affiliation as the driving force behind civic engagement, but such a focus would be misplaced. The results reported here show clearly that all three variables – perceptions of polarization and civility in addition to the strength of party identification – have an independent and positive impact on a citizen's political participation, even when controlling for traditional factors. In addition, the results of the bivariate analyses demonstrate that the perception of polarization has only weak relationships with strength of party identification and perceptions of civility and that there is no statistically significant relationship at all between party identification strength and perception of civility. In other words, the three key variables in this study are not strongly connected with one another, so no one factor should be considered central in our focus and in our effort to understand civic engagement in America.

Finally, finding that the current political environment – one characterized by historically high levels of partisanship, polarization, and incivility – produces greater engagement in the political system rather than less is encouraging news. The widespread claim (and fear) that the average American will be "turned-off" by the rancor and aggressive, win-at-all costs political environment is clearly not merited. What is less clear, however, is the connection between a hostile political arena and the quality and speed with which our governmental institutions address the pressing problems – and even crises – that face the nation. Our focus thus needs to shift to understanding how to leverage increased political engagement by the electorate into productive policy outcomes.

Table 1: OLS Regression, Impact on Civic Engagement and Willingness to Talk Politics[+]

	Civic Engagement Level	Willingness to Talk Politics
Constant	0.607 (0.563)	2.404*** (0.375)
Level of Civility	0.196** (0.070)	-0.035 (0.047)
Party ID Strength	0.639*** (0.190)	0.332** (0.127)
Democrat (Democrat = 1)	0.163 (0.464)	-0.232 (0.309)
Republican (Republican = 1)	-0.419 (0.456)	0.014 (0.304)
Polarization	0.015*** (0.003)	0.004 (0.002)
Age	-0.002 (0.074)	-0.130** (0.049)
Income (Above $75,000 = 1)	0.478** (0.181)	0.205 (0.121)
Education	0.377*** (0.054)	0.107** (0.036)
Marital Status (Married = 1)	0.511** (0.176)	-0.035 (0.118)
Gender (Male = 1)	0.354* (0.160)	0.309** (0.107)
Race (White = 1)	0.249 (0.199)	0.056 (0.133)
Adjusted R^2	0.231***	0.078***

*p ≤ 0.05   **p ≤ 0.01   ***p ≤ 0.001 (2-tailed)

+ Unstandardized Coefficients with Standard Errors

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Appendix A

Civility and Engagement Questionnaire

Hello, my name is _____ and I am calling on behalf of the Stubblefield Institute at Shepherd University. We are not affiliated with any political party or candidate but are an academic institution that is conducting research on civility in public life. I was hoping to talk to the youngest (male/female) over the age of 18 in the household for a survey on this important issue. Do you have about eight minutes to talk?

1) In politics today, do you consider yourself a Democrat, Republican, Independent, or Third Party?

Democrat **(Continue)**	1
Republican **(Continue)**	2
Independent **(Skip to Q1B)**	3
Third Party **(Skip to Q2)**	4
Depends/Depends on issue **(Do not read)(Skip to Q1B)**	5
None of the above **(Do not read) (Skip to Q1B)**	6
Unsure **(Do not read) (Skip to Q1B)**	7

1A) Would you say you are a strong or a weak (Democrat/Republican)?

Strong Democrat **(Skip to Q2)**	1
Weak Democrat **(Skip to Q2)**	2
Strong Republican **(Skip to Q2)**	4
Weak Republican **(Skip to Q2)**	3
Unsure **(Do not read) (Skip to Q2)**	5

1B) If you had to choose, would you say you lean more toward the Republican or Democratic party?

Republican **(Continue)**	1
Democratic **(Continue)**	2
Neither **(Do not read) (Continue)**	3
Unsure **(Do not read) (Continue)**	4
Depends/depends on issue **(Do not read) (Continue)**	5
Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue**)	999

2) Are you registered to vote?

No **(Continue)**	0

| Yes **(Continue)** | 1 |
| Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)** | 999 |

3) In what age group are you? Would you say 18-24, 25-40, 41-56, 57-75, or 76 and over?

18-24 **(Continue)**	1
25-40 **(Continue)**	2
41-56 **(Continue)**	3
57-75 **(Continue)**	4
76 and over **(Continue)**	5
Refused to answer **(Continue**)	999
Under 18 **(Terminate)**	

4) Sex **(Do not read) (By observation)**

Male **(Continue)**	1
Female **(Continue)**	2
Unsure **(Continue)**	3

5) What is the highest level of education you have completed? **(Do not read, just record)**

Some grade or high school (1-11 years) **(Continue)**	1
Graduated high school (12 years) **(Continue)**	2
Technical/Vocational (12 years) **(Continue)**	2
Some college (13-15 years) **(Continue)**	3
Associate's Degree (13-15 years) **(Continue)**	4
Bachelor's/Graduated college (16 years) **(Continue)**	5
Graduate/Professional (16 or more years) **(Continue)**	6
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**	999

6) Thinking about politicians, the media, and your fellow citizens in America: How would you characterize the level of civility in politics over the last five years? Has it been extremely civil, fairly civil, neither particularly civil nor incivil, fairly incivil, or extremely incivil?

Extremely civil **(Continue)**	1
Fairly civil **(Continue)**	2
Neither civil nor incivil **(Continue)**	3
Fairly incivil **(Continue)**	4

Extremely incivil **(Continue)**   5
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue**)   999

7) I would like to read you a list of statements people have said about American politics today. Please listen carefully as I read each statement and tell me if you would strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with that particular statement.

"The lack of civil discussion in our political system is a serious problem." Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree?

Strongly agree **(Continue)**	5
Somewhat agree **(Continue)**	4
Somewhat disagree **(Continue)**	2
Strongly disagree **(Continue)**	1
Neither/Neutral **(Do not read) (Continue)**	3
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue**)	999

7A) "I am interested in politics and elections." Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree?

Strongly agree **(Continue)**	5
Somewhat agree **(Continue)**	4
Somewhat disagree **(Continue)**	2
Strongly disagree **(Continue)**	1
Neither/Neutral **(Do not read) (Continue)**	3
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue**)	999

7B) "I am willing to talk politics with others." Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree?

Strongly agree **(Continue)**	5
Somewhat agree **(Continue)**	4
Somewhat disagree **(Continue)**	2
Strongly disagree **(Continue)**	1
Neither/Neutral **(Do not read) (Continue)**	3
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue**)	999

8) Now, I am going to read you a list of activities that some people do in public life. Please tell me whether you did or did not participate in each of the following activities <u>during the last year</u>:

Did you vote in the 2020 elections?

No **(Continue)**	0
Yes **(Continue)**	1
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**	999

8A) Did you donate money to a political candidate, party, or cause?

No **(Continue)**	0
Yes **(Continue)**	1
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**	999

8B) Did you participate in a protest or demonstration?

No **(Continue)**	0
Yes **(Continue)**	1
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**	999

8C) Did you contact an elected official about an issue?

No **(Continue)**	0
Yes **(Continue)**	1
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**	999

8D) Did you participate in a civic or religious organization?

No **(Continue)**	0
Yes **(Continue)**	1
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**	999

8E) Did you seek out information about a candidate or issue?

No **(Continue)**	0
Yes **(Continue)**	1
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**	999

8F) Did you read a newspaper regularly, either online or in print?

No **(Continue)**	0
Yes **(Continue)**	1
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**	999

8G) Did you volunteer or work for a political campaign or party?

    No **(Continue)**   0
    Yes **(Continue)**   1
    Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**   999

8H) Did you attend a meeting or rally for a political candidate?

    No **(Continue)**   0
    Yes **(Continue)**   1
    Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**   999

8I) Did you display a button, yard sign, or bumper sticker for a political candidate?

    No **(Continue)**   0
    Yes **(Continue)**   1
    Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**   999

9) Thinking ahead to the next year, do you expect political conversation in America to become less civil, become more civil, or not really change much?

    Become less civil **(Continue)**   1
    Become more civil **(Continue)**   3
    Not really change much **(Continue)**   2
    Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue**)   999

10) And, thinking about the issue of political divisions in general…on a scale of 0 to 100, where 0 is no political division and 100 is division on the edge of a civil war, where would you rank the level of political division in the country today?[2]

    Enter number given **(Continue)**   0-100
    Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**   999

Now, just a few final questions for statistical purposes only…

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[2] Question wording adopted from the Georgetown University Institute of Politics and Public Service Battleground Poll 65.

11) What do you consider to be your race? Are you white, African-American, Hispanic or Latino, Asian, Native American, or other?

White **(Continue)**	1
Black/African-American **(Continue)**	2
Hispanic/Latino **(Continue)**	3
Asian/Pacific American **(Continue)**	4
Native American **(Continue)**	5
Other **(Continue)**	6
More than one above **(Do not read) (Continue)**	7
Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**	999

12) Would you say your household income is above or below 75,000 a year?

Above **(Continue)**	1
Below **(Continue)**	0
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**	999

13) Now, thinking about your employment situation…are you white collar, blue collar, service sector, a student, retired, or unemployed?

White Collar **(Continue)**	1
Blue Collar **(Continue)**	2
Service Sector **(Continue)**	3
Student **(Continue)**	4
Retired **(Continue)**	5
Unemployed **(Continue)**	6
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**	999

14) How would you describe the community in which you live? Is it rural, small town, suburban, city, or large city?

Rural **(Continue)**	1
Small town **(Continue)**	2
Suburban **(Continue)**	3
City **(Continue)**	4
Large city **(Continue)**	5
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**	999

15) What is your current marital status – are you single and never married, married, separated, divorced, or widowed?

Single **(Continue)**	1
Married **(Continue)**	2
Separated **(Continue)**	3
Divorced **(Continue)**	4
Widowed **(Continue)**	5
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**	999

Thank you very much for your time this (morning/evening). Your responses are very valuable for our research.

Appendix B

Univariate Results

In politics today, do you consider yourself a Democrat, Republican, Independent, or Third Party?

Democrat **(Continue)**	**29.5%**	
Republican **(Continue)**	**30.6%**	
Independent **(Skip to Q1B)**		**26.7%**
Third Party **(Skip to Q2)**		**4.5%**
Depends on issue **(Do not read)(Skip to Q1B)**		**0.6%**
None of the above **(Do not read) (Skip to Q1B)**	**6.1%**	
Unsure **(Do not read) (Skip to Q1B)**		**2.0%**

Would you say you are a strong or a weak (Democrat/Republican)?

Strong Democrat **(Skip to Q2)**	**27.9%**	
Weak Democrat **(Skip to Q2)**	**3.7%**	
Strong Republican **(Skip to Q2)**	**22.9%**	
Weak Republican **(Skip to Q2)**	**3.4%**	
Unsure **(Do not read) (Skip to Q2)**		**42.2%**

If you had to choose, would you say you lean more toward the Republican or Democratic party?

Republican **(Continue)**	**32.6%**
Democratic **(Continue)**	**29.4%**
Neither **(Do not read) (Continue)**	**20.8%**
Unsure **(Do not read) (Continue)**	**7.1%**
Depends/depends on issue **(Do not read) (Continue)**	**4.3%**
Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue**)	**5.9%**

Are you registered to vote?

No **(Continue)**	**7.7%**
Yes **(Continue)**	**92.0%**
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**	**0.3%**

In what age group are you? Would you say 18-24, 25-40, 41-56, 57-75, or 76 and over?

18-24 **(Continue)**	**4.9%**
25-40 **(Continue)**	**17.6%**
41-56 **(Continue)**	**22.5%**
57-75 **(Continue)**	**36.7%**
76 and over **(Continue)**	**18.0%**
Refused to answer **(Continue**)	**0.4%**
Under 18 **(Terminate)**	

Sex **(Do not read) (By observation)**
  Male **(Continue)**   **54.1%**
  Female **(Continue)**   **45.8%**
  Unsure **(Continue)**   **0.1%**

What is the highest level of education you have completed? **(Do not read, just record)**
  Some grade or high school (1-11 years) **(Continue)**   **6.0%**
  Graduated high school/Vocational (12 years) **(Cont)**   **32.6%**
  Some college (13-15 years) **(Continue)**   **19.5%**
  Associate's Degree (13-15 years) **(Continue)**   **9.3%**
  Bachelor's/Graduated college (16 years) **(Continue)**   **19.4%**
  Graduate/Professional (16 or more years) **(Continue)**   **13.3%**
  Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**   **0%**

Thinking about politicians, the media, and your fellow citizens in America: How would you characterize the level of civility in politics over the last five years? Has it been extremely civil, fairly civil, neither particularly civil nor incivil, fairly incivil, or extremely incivil?
  Extremely civil **(Continue)**   **3.7%**
  Fairly civil **(Continue)**   **9.5%**
  Neither civil nor incivil **(Continue)**   **5.4%**
  Fairly incivil **(Continue)**   **18.0%**
  Extremely incivil **(Continue)**   **59.9%**
  Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue**)   **3.5%**

I would like to read you a list of statements people have said about American politics today. Please listen carefully as I read each statement and tell me if you would strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with that particular statement.

  "The lack of civil discussion in our political system is a serious problem." Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree?
  Strongly agree **(Continue)**   **72.4%**
  Somewhat agree **(Continue)**   **17.0%**
  Somewhat disagree **(Continue)**   **4.2%**
  Strongly disagree **(Continue)**   **4.2%**
  Neither/Neutral **(Do not read) (Continue)**   **0.6%**
  Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue**)   **1.5%**

  "I am interested in politics and elections." Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree?
  Strongly agree **(Continue)**   **62.6%**
  Somewhat agree **(Continue)**   **21.1%**
  Somewhat disagree **(Continue)**   **5.4%**
  Strongly disagree **(Continue)**   **8.2%**

Neither/Neutral **(Do not read) (Continue)**	**2.0%**
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue**)	**0.7%**

"I am willing to talk politics with others." Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree?

Strongly agree **(Continue)**	**41.6%**
Somewhat agree **(Continue)**	**26.7%**
Somewhat disagree **(Continue)**	**10.0%**
Strongly disagree **(Continue)**	**18.6%**
Neither/Neutral **(Do not read) (Continue)**	**2.6%**
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue**)	**0.7%**

Now, I am going to read you a list of activities that some people do in public life. Please tell me whether you did or did not participate in each of the following activities <u>during the last year</u>:

Did you vote in the 2020 elections?

No **(Continue)**	**10.8%**
Yes **(Continue)**	**88.9%**
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**	**0.3%**

Did you donate money to a political candidate, party, or cause?

No **(Continue)**	**69.3%**
Yes **(Continue)**	**30.4%**
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**	**0.3%**

Did you participate in a protest or demonstration?

No **(Continue)**	**90.7%**
Yes **(Continue)**	**8.6%**
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**	**0.7%**

Did you contact an elected official about an issue?

No **(Continue)**	**64.8%**
Yes **(Continue)**	**34.9%**
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**	**0.3%**

Did you participate in a civic or religious organization?

No **(Continue)**	**60.6%**
Yes **(Continue)**	**37.9%**
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**	**1.5%**

Did you seek out information about a candidate or issue?

No **(Continue)**	**30.1%**
Yes **(Continue)**	**69.8%**
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**	**0.2%**

Did you read a newspaper regularly, either online or in print?

No **(Continue)**	**32.7%**
Yes **(Continue)**	**66.7%**
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**	**0.7%**

Did you volunteer or work for a political campaign or party?

No **(Continue)**	**92.6%**
Yes **(Continue)**	**7.3%**
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**	**0.1%**

Did you attend a meeting or rally for a political candidate?

No **(Continue)**	**87.0%**
Yes **(Continue)**	**12.7%**
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**	**0.3%**

Did you display a button, yard sign, or bumper sticker for a political candidate?

No **(Continue)**	**69.8%**
Yes **(Continue)**	**29.9%**
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**	**0.4%**

Thinking ahead to the next year, do you expect political conversation in America to become less civil, become more civil, or not really change much?

Become less civil **(Continue)**	**30.2%**
Become more civil **(Continue)**	**22.0%**
Not really change much **(Continue)**	**43.5%**
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue**)	**4.3%**

And, thinking about the issue of political divisions in general…on a scale of 0 to 100, where 0 is no political division and 100 is division on the edge of a civil war, where would you rank the level of political division in the country today?

Enter number given **(Continue)**	0-100
Low (0-33)	**8.4%**
Medium (34-66)	**27.5%**
High (67-100)	**60.0%**
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**	**4.2%**

What do you consider to be your race? Are you white, African-American, Hispanic or Latino, Asian, Native American, or other?

White **(Continue)**	**73.9%**
Black/African-American **(Continue)**	**8.3%**
Hispanic/Latino **(Continue)**	**5.2%**
Asian/Pacific American **(Continue)**	**1.4%**

Native American **(Continue)**	1.0%
Other **(Continue)**	5.4%
More than one above **(Do not read) (Continue)**	1.3%
Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**	3.5%

Would you say your household income is above or below 75,000 a year?

Above **(Continue)**	40.1%
Below **(Continue)**	53.4%
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**	6.5%

Now, thinking about your employment situation…are you white collar, blue collar, service sector, a student, retired, or unemployed?

White Collar **(Continue)**	19.5%
Blue Collar **(Continue)**	16.5%
Service Sector **(Continue)**	8.5%
Student **(Continue)**	3.1%
Retired **(Continue)**	40.8%
Unemployed **(Continue)**	8.2%
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**	3.4%

How would you describe the community in which you live? Is it rural, small town, suburban, city, or large city?

Rural **(Continue)**	22.3%
Small town **(Continue)**	24.1%
Suburban **(Continue)**	26.8%
City **(Continue)**	17.6%
Large city **(Continue)**	8.6%
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**	0.7%

What is your current marital status – are you single and never married, married, separated, divorced, or widowed?

Single **(Continue)**	21.3%
Married **(Continue)**	55.4%
Separated **(Continue)**	1.3%
Divorced **(Continue)**	8.9%
Widowed **(Continue)**	11.6%
Unsure/Refuse **(Do not read) (Continue)**	1.5%