

CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS “IN-YOUR-FACE” POLITICS?

It was March 2003 and my mother-in-law was visiting from Berkeley. I was watching George W. Bush speak to the nation about the impending war with Iraq. As she walked into the room, she turned her head away from the television in disgust. “Aach!” she exclaimed, “I can’t *bear* to have that man in my face. It makes me sick to my stomach!” Of course, the president was not actually in her face, he was speaking to us from Washington, D.C. But as I watched, the images to a significant extent bore out her impression. For the next twenty minutes, I viewed George Bush from a far more intimate, close-up visual perspective than I had viewed my own family across the dinner table. His face often filled the entire television frame, so much so that the top of his head was cut off. To obtain the same visual perspective in person, my mother-in-law would need to be either his lover or his dentist. Given her politics, the mere thought of being that close probably did make her sick to her stomach. While I initially had considered her statement a display of political histrionics, when viewed from this perspective it seemed far more plausible that she might have such a visceral reaction.

Television gives us a unique visual perspective on other human beings, one that is far more intimate than we are accustomed to having with strangers in everyday life. But I had not previously thought about the consequences this might have for how we react to politicians and politics. As a film student in college, I learned to use the close-up camera shot to create a sense of emotional intensity in films: but do we really want that kind of intimacy with our politicians? In face-to-face social contexts, there are strong social norms guiding

the distance we put between ourselves and other people, particularly people with whom we disagree. Do televised interactions follow these same rules? Apparently not. Instead, televised political interactions often violate face-to-face social norms for social distance by producing the appearance of being close to viewers. Television simulates a lack of physical distance between us and them and thus violates some deeply ingrained social norms involving spatial distance.

The fact that viewers' visual perspective on politicians is now commonly "in your face," in the sense of the spatial closeness that television conveys to viewers, is only part of the story. Television is also "in your face" in a second respect. Political discourse on television regularly violates norms for polite conversation. Complaints about uncivil political discourse on television are by now so widespread that incivility goes almost unquestioned. It is obvious to most Americans that televised expressions of differences of political opinion do not follow the usual face-to-face social norms of American culture. As young viewer Caitie Casey of Alma, Michigan, wrote in a letter to *The O'Reilly Factor*, "Mr. O'Reilly, I am 13 and have noticed that some people are very mean to you. You laugh it off, but my feelings would be hurt if that happened to me."

Ms. Casey is correct that much of what transpires on political talk shows these days would be highly unlikely to happen in the face-to-face "real" world. And most of us would, indeed, have hurt feelings if someone talked to us how Bill O'Reilly does to his guests and vice versa. To be sure, there will always be a few people who jump up and down and get screaming mad when talking about politics with others. But when it comes to expressing political views in face-to-face settings, most people are polite most of the time. If they don't agree, they either keep this information to themselves, or they downplay their differences of opinion by shifting the conversation toward commonalities. With political television, in contrast, there is considerable (if not incessant) political disagreement, and the opinion holders that we see and hear are often chosen specifically as exemplars of extremely divergent, highly polarized positions.

By "in-your-face politics," I refer to these two characteristics of political television both individually and in combination. It is well established that violating norms for interpersonal distance or norms

for polite conversation can have important consequences in real life. This book addresses whether these same norm violations have consequences when they occur via television. Overwhelmingly, Americans experience politics and politicians through television. In this chapter I begin by providing background on what I mean by incivility in political discourse and what is known about the importance of spatial distance in how people react to one another. In the remainder of the book I provide a series of original studies exploring the consequences of in-your-faceness for American politics.

UNCIVIL POLITICAL DISCOURSE

In a keynote address in 1996, Judith Rodin argued that “across America and increasingly around the world, from campuses to the halls of Congress, to talk radio and network TV, social and political life seem dominated today by incivility, . . . an unwillingness to compromise and an intolerance for opposition. . . . No one seems to question the premise that political debate has become too extreme, too confrontational, too coarse.” Likewise, law professor Stephen Carter argued in his 1999 volume titled *Civility*, “Sadly, we are losing the skill for respectful debate—if, indeed, we ever truly had it.” Academics were far from the first to recognize incivility in political discourse as prevalent in America. Indeed, many historians date this problem to the country’s birth, noting that harsh invective has always been part and parcel of American politics.¹

Whether this is a new or age-old problem, calls for greater civility in political discourse are now commonplace.² To suggest that political discourse in America is uncivil is by now a banal observation. Although there are certainly those who would dispute whether it is more uncivil now than at some point in the past, I know of no one who views this designation as inappropriate today. It is simply widely accepted that incivility pervades political discourse, and television is the major means by which citizens are exposed to that incivility, although the Internet may be fast on its heels.

Radio talk shows were the first to attract public attention for impolite discourse, though television was not far behind.³ According

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to radio and television critic Lawrence Laurent, who wrote for the *Washington Post* in the early days of broadcasting,⁴ television journalists of the earlier era had etiquette guides from the networks that instructed them how to treat their guests politely, what to ask and not, and how to maintain a friendly rapport. By contrast, today's no-holds-barred interview style throws Emily Post and Miss Manners out the window; there is typically no effort to maintain etiquette-book levels of politeness. Instead, both interviewers and their political guests commonly adopt highly confrontational interview styles, particularly on television talk shows.

Examples of incivility in political discourse are by now too numerous to recount. For those who nonetheless desire additional examples, I include links to videos of a few of my personal favorites.⁵ To describe just a few illustrative examples, in a 2005 incident television contributor Robert Novak stormed off the set of CNN's *Inside Politics* midprogram after growing frustrated in a conversation with liberal political analyst James Carville. In a 2004 interview during coverage of the 2004 Republican Convention, *Hardball* host Chris Matthews ripped into Democratic Senator Zell Miller, creating such a fiery exchange that Miller ended up yelling back at Matthews, "I wish I could challenge you to a duel!" In so doing, Miller incidentally made an excellent point: it is worth remembering that many of our most admired Founding Fathers sometimes resolved their differences of political opinion through the use of force. More commonly today, participants in television talk shows simply yell over one another, interrupt frequently, and even derogate the legitimacy of their opponents' views.

Other highly publicized incidents of uncivil discourse have occurred beyond the context of political talk shows, further contributing to public awareness of uncivil political discourse. For example, Congressman Joe Wilson breached decorum by yelling "You lie!" at President Barack Obama during a 2009 presidential address to a joint session of Congress outlining Obama's proposal for reforming health care. Still more recently, it was noted in a headline in the *Huffington Post* that "John Boehner's F-Bomb at Harry Reid Plunges D.C. Civility to New Low."⁶

Journalists and academics regularly decry incivility in political discourse, and public opinion polls suggest that average Americans share a similar disdain. In a recent national poll, over 95 percent of Americans concurred that civility in politics was important.⁷ Foundations and civic groups likewise fund initiatives to call attention to this problem and publicly admonish both media and politicians, while clamoring for change in the civility of discourse. Even politicians themselves express concerns about uncivil discourse and its potential consequences. Nonetheless, this nearly universal condemnation does not appear to have affected the prevalence of political incivility.

As I discuss extensively later in the book, I am not convinced that the political advocates of today are necessarily any more uncivil than politicians of previous centuries. It is certainly possible, but I have yet to see convincing evidence to this effect over a substantial historical period. Nonetheless, I am convinced that the way the American public experiences these uncivil exchanges has changed in important ways. When Aaron Burr famously dueled with Alexander Hamilton, there was no audience. Not a single firsthand observer could recount precisely what happened during the duel itself, although Hamilton died from his wounds the following day. People learned of the event via newspapers or word of mouth.

If an event involving dueling politicians were held today, we would surely have “on the scene” video. If no video of the event itself were available, we would still have tearful interviews with family members or with eyewitnesses, perhaps video of the body being taken away, and probably televised reenactments of the event as well. When politicians rip into each other today, we see them do so because they are in front of a camera rather than behind closed doors. As we shall see in Chapter 7, it is one thing to read about an act of incivility in a newspaper, and quite another to witness it “firsthand” via television.

To be clear, what I refer to in this book as “incivility” refers to the style rather than the substance of political discourse. Indeed, as subsequent chapters will make clear, I am interested in the impact of incivility *independent of* political substance, and thus go to great lengths methodologically to separate the two. In part because complaints

about incivility are so widespread, the term has been applied to the substance of discourse purely because it is partisan, inaccurate, negative, or polarized in the issue positions that are held by discussants. I do not consider these characteristics either necessary or sufficient.⁸ Thus uncivil discourse should not be confused with polarized issue positions or with negative political appeals. Instead, I am referring to violations of norms for interpersonal interaction, the type of behavior that would be considered impolite in face-to-face contexts. Differences of opinion both small and large can be expressed civilly or in an uncivil fashion.⁹ Because political discourse on television typically involves human interaction, it would be surprising if the style of disagreement were inconsequential given that it has well-documented consequences in the real world.

It is likewise important to distinguish incivility from the extent of conflict or extremity of opinion in the political environment. Although conflict is an essential part of the democratic process, Americans tend not to react favorably to conflict.¹⁰ Serious concerns have been voiced about elite polarization and the role of partisan media, but the extent of substantive political differences is conceptually separable from the style of discourse used to discuss those conflicts.

For my research purposes, I define “uncivil discourse” as communication that violates the norms of politeness for a given culture. A wealth of empirical studies substantiates the importance of adhering to social norms of politeness in the course of everyday interactions. Although uncivil discourse has been deemed difficult to define by many who have examined political discourse,¹¹ fortunately the field of linguistics has done an admirable job of defining “politeness.”¹² According to this definition, politeness is the expression of a speaker’s intention to mitigate face threats carried by acts toward another.¹³ In other words, consistent with linguistic definitions of politeness that Grice and Lakoff provided, civil interaction allows both participants to save face.¹⁴

An expression of politeness/impoliteness can take both verbal and nonverbal forms. It can be a matter of tone and inflection rather than the actual words spoken. In what I define as a polite or civil interaction, participants cooperate to maintain each other’s positive public self-images. In an uncivil interaction, they do not. There may

be varying degrees of civility/incivility, but it is a characteristic of the style of interaction rather than of any given individual’s opinions per se. For example, ignoring another person can be highly impolite and uncivil, even though it requires no words.

It is noteworthy that, according to this definition, incivility is not the same thing as negativity, though the two are often conflated in everyday discourse about politics. It is possible to make positive statements that are impolite (such as excessive bragging about one’s accomplishments in order to cause another to lose face), just as it is possible to make negative statements in a civil fashion.¹⁵ Contrary to some previous examinations of incivility, I make no distinctions between positive and negative claims, whether statements are made about issues or personal traits, and so forth. Instead, civility is defined strictly in terms of whether participants adhere to cultural norms for polite face-to-face conversation. A claim that is positive in the sense typically meant by those who study political advertising tone could be expressed in either a civil or uncivil fashion; likewise, a negative claim need not be uncivil.¹⁶

Civil discourse by this definition requires politeness in social interaction, and politeness is widely established to have important consequences. Brown and Levinson’s theory of politeness argues that it “makes possible communication between potentially aggressive parties,” and promotes the “maintenance of social equilibrium” by promoting comity.¹⁷ In the political world, as well as in social interaction more generally, politeness and civility are not arbitrary norms of etiquette akin to using the correct fork; they are rules that allow people of diverse views to smooth over differences and promote social harmony. Following the rules of civility/politeness is thus a means of demonstrating mutual respect.¹⁸

In the book I document several consequences of *televised* political incivility and find that they closely parallel claims about the role of politeness in face-to-face interaction. My findings suggest that civility is particularly important for purposes of facilitating respect for oppositional political viewpoints. Furthermore, civility influences citizens’ levels of trust in politicians and the political process more generally.

Incivility also has indirect consequences that flow from the fact that it is physiologically arousing. Arousal in this case means simply

that a person becomes psychologically and physiologically prepared to respond to stimuli of some kind. The mind and body are on alert, preparing to respond if necessary. Arousal goes hand in hand with the experience of emotions, but it is nonspecific with respect to the kind of emotion that is being experienced. Both positive and negative emotions can occur with high or low levels of arousal.

My purpose in this book is not to advance a particular theoretical perspective on emotion so much as to apply what we already know about emotional arousal to explain in-your-face politics. For these purposes, it matters little which specific emotions people are experiencing, so appraisal-based theories, which ask people to self-identify emotions, are unnecessary.¹⁹ My focus on arousal does not negate the utility of studying more nuanced emotions for other purposes, but these distinctions are unnecessary for purposes of understanding in-your-face politics. Simpler, more parsimonious explanations are preferable in this particular case.

Although not all political conflict rises to the level of making our hearts race, uncivil discourse is particularly likely to increase levels of emotional arousal in television viewers because it openly violates social norms. Even if a viewer is not particularly interested in the issues at stake in the discussion, she knows when someone is out of line with respect to norms for social interaction. This heightened tension is symptomatic of arousal.

Interestingly, even when we ourselves are not personally involved in a disagreement, and are mere third-party observers of others' conflict, it is still tense and uncomfortable to watch. Anyone who has been at a dinner party where a couple is quarreling has experienced the discomfort of merely watching others engage in disagreement. Conflict affects observers as well as participants; we can't help but notice it. This discomfort generally manifests itself in heightened physiological arousal among both participants and observers. Evolutionary psychology suggests that people become aroused, alert, and ready to respond to conflicts in their environment because these responses are important to their survival.²⁰ We pay attention and prepare to take action if necessary.

But what about conflict on television? When watching television, there is obviously no need to react in any immediate sense to a con-

flict that is presented. To ignore what is happening on a television screen—even when it is quite violent—does not put a person at risk. So do people react similarly to televised conflicts of political opinion when they violate norms for politeness? This is one of two central questions addressed by this book.

PERCEIVED SPATIAL DISTANCE

A second key question addressed by this book is whether the mere *appearance* of physical closeness produced by television matters. In addition to less civil exchanges of opinion, the television world provides a uniquely intimate perspective on politicians, one that regularly violates people’s perceptions of appropriate social distance. The study of proxemics, that is, how physical space affects communication, suggests that different cultures maintain different standards for how much personal space is appropriate to an interaction with a family member, acquaintance, or stranger.²¹ However, violating someone’s personal space has similar consequences across cultures. Interestingly, the distance deemed appropriate for face-to-face interactions with public figures in American culture is beyond twelve feet.²² Yet most citizens’ exposure to politicians via television has the appearance of being far closer—sometimes just a few inches.

As discussed further in Chapter 3, there is something particularly unnatural and disturbing about being in close proximity to someone we dislike a great deal, at least in real life. In the face-to-face world, people tend to automatically back away from others they dislike, putting greater physical distance between themselves and those with whom they disagree. This reaction occurs without conscious thought or deliberation. At a cocktail party, for example, if two people discover a political difference of opinion, they will normally back away from one another, even if the conversation continues. To lean in or come closer during a disagreement could seem aggressive, so we naturally allow one another some space, both literally and figuratively, in order to preserve social harmony.

It is easy to underestimate the importance of spatial distance precisely because it is so primitive. Spatial relations are among the earliest

concepts acquired by infants,²³ perhaps because all of the relevant information is easily available to the senses. Moreover, physical distance cues have evolutionary significance because they are tied to the notion of safety from threat,²⁴ so it makes sense that proximity plays an important role in how humans process information. Cognitive neuroscience demonstrates that the human brain is designed to be sensitive to information about physical distance.²⁵ Furthermore, Williams and Bargh argue that humans' early primitive understanding of physical distance serves as the basis for later understanding of psychological distance.²⁶ To the extent that we "conceptualize the mental world by analogy to the physical world,"²⁷ spatial distance and affective reactions to others are closely linked.²⁸

Extending this same logic to the appearance of physical distance as conveyed by television, one important thing television has changed about the way citizens experience political discourse is the proximity of their perspective on political advocates. Filmmakers have long recognized the potential for facial close-ups to intensify emotional reactions. As Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein described it, "A cockroach filmed in close-up seems on the screen a hundred times more terrible than a hundred elephants captured in long shot."²⁹ The close-up creates a sense of spatial intimacy that violates individuals' boundaries for personal space, particularly when close contact with the target on the screen is undesirable, as with cockroaches or disliked politicians.

When people do not agree, the tendency is to allow more even more space between them.³⁰ In contrast, as televised political conflicts intensify, the camera generally does not back away, and may even dolly or zoom in for tighter and tighter perspectives on the people involved. This norm violation may create a highly unnatural experience for viewers, one in which they view confrontation—something they would normally back away from—from an extremely intimate perspective, one that would be highly unlikely to occur in the real world, where we seek distance from things we dislike.

Thus televised political dialogue is often doubly norm violating; it violates norms for polite discourse as well as for appropriate social distance between people with conflicting views. To suggest that others are "in your face" may mean they are inappropriately aggressive

and confrontational. But it can also mean that they appear to be “in your face” in the quite literal sense of the appearance of close physical proximity.

Of course, whether any of these norm violations matter depends on the extent to which research findings based on face-to-face social interaction can be extrapolated to how viewers process social interaction on television. Emerging research on human-media interaction suggests that the findings are remarkably similar. Surprisingly, people expect technology to follow many of the same social rules that people use in face-to-face interaction. For example, in an experimental study, both men and women were more influenced by praise from a male-voiced computer than from an identical female-voiced computer.³¹ Consistent with human gender stereotypes, the female-voiced computer was judged as a better teacher about love and relationships, and as a worse teacher about computers than an identical male-voiced computer.

Likewise, the appearance of movement on a television screen is responded to in the same way that motion is in real life; people orient toward motion and pay greater attention. In the real world, objects moving toward a person demand a quick response. Televised objects that appear to come toward us by virtue of growing in size on the television screen obviously do not require a response; nonetheless, our perceptual systems appear to be hardwired to respond in much the same way. People attend to increased spatial proximity automatically.

In yet another example of face-to-face rules applied to media, the social rule that leads people to be systematically more positive in their evaluations of people to their faces as opposed to behind their backs also gets unwittingly applied to technology. For example, experimental subjects are more likely to evaluate a computer positively to its “face” than they are when evaluating that same machine using another computer.³²

Many recent findings in this vein make the proposed consequences of in-your-face politics all the more plausible. To the extent that viewers unconsciously respond to televised images of other human beings as they do real ones, violations of face-to-face norms on television should matter. Uncivil political discourse should be especially

threatening when viewed from the perspective of a close-up, and the processing of information should be affected by both incivility and perceived spatial distance.

A MULTIMETHOD APPROACH

To ensure the ability to make strong causal inferences while also taking into account the broader political context, I draw on a wealth of resources to examine my research questions. They include a series of seven different laboratory experiments, some incorporating psychophysiological measures, a population-based survey experiment using a representative national sample, a representative national survey of political television viewership, a visual as well as verbal content analysis of the most popular political programs currently on television, and, finally, an over-time analysis of the verbal and visual content of television news from the advent of television news through the present. This wealth of information allows me to document change over time in political television, as well as to draw strong inferences about the effects these changes have had on the public. The end result is a more complex understanding of both why uncivil political discourse remains alive and well and the consequences thereof.

I begin with a series of experiments focused on similar research goals; they include understanding the impact of incivility in political discourse independent of political substance, and examining how these effects are exacerbated by the perception of close physical distance. I describe one experimental design at length in Chapter 2. For the sake of efficiency, in describing subsequent experiments I mention only how and why they deviate from the original design. For reference, Appendix A summarizes all of the experimental designs and provides details on when and where they were conducted. All of the laboratory experiments incorporated adults who were not college students.³³ These participants were recruited in many different ways. Some came from temporary employment agencies and were paid their regular hourly temp rate to take part. Others were recruited as part of online meet-up groups or organizations to which they belonged, and participation was used as a group fund-raiser. As

indicated in Appendix A, the experiments occurred in three different cities over a period of many years. Different recruitment methods produced different demographic profiles, and participants included people from a variety of occupations, including lawyers, a Catholic priest, the unemployed, part-timers, retirees, and stay-at-home parents.

Experiments force exposure to specific kinds of content on all subjects and therefore raise issues of generalizability. To address these issues, I incorporate into this research a representative national survey experiment and survey data from the National Annenberg Election Panel Study (NAES) from 2008. The 2008 NAES provided an extensive array of information about the viewership of specific political programs. When combined with the experimental data, these studies allowed me to examine whether those who watch various political television programs on a daily basis are also those likely to be affected by them.

The 2008 NAES provided three advantages for purposes of exploring the generalizability of in-your-face politics. First, despite widespread skepticism about media exposure measures in general, the method of assessing exposure used in this survey has been empirically validated to a much greater extent than any other contemporary media measures.³⁴ In addition, this approach to measurement provided information on which individual programs respondents watched regularly, not just how much political media exposure they experienced overall. Scholars studying political television in the 1970s might have cared about simply how much total television news people viewed, but today scholars are interested also in what kind of programs people watch because not all political programming is cut of the same cloth. This remains doubly true for how “in your face” these programs are. Third, program viewership measures make it possible to match program exposure measures to characteristics of individual viewers.

Because many of the results in this book are from experimental studies, findings are presented in simple graphic form whenever possible. Experimental designs are free of the need for complex statistical analyses in order to establish causation, so experimental results can be presented in terms of the raw means broken down by experimental

condition. Random assignment to experimental conditions eliminates the need for control variables to protect against potentially spurious relationships, and researcher control over the independent variable makes the direction of causation clear. To ensure the widest possible audience, observational data are also presented in graphic form whenever possible. In some cases, those interested in technical details are referred to other publications; otherwise, I include all relevant information in an appendix.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

My goal in Part I is to document the specific kinds of effects—both positive and negative—that flow from in-your-face politics. Because of the experimental method's superior ability to establish cause and effect, laboratory experiments serve as the basis for initiating an understanding of how in-your-face politics affects viewers. Chapter 2 uses highly controlled laboratory experiments to evaluate the consequences of close-ups and incivility for viewers' levels of emotional arousal and their memory of political television content. Chapter 3 uses additional experiments to investigate effects of these same independent variables on viewers' perceptions of the legitimacy of the candidates and issue positions they like least. Chapter 4 examines the consequences of perceived distance and incivility on levels of political trust.

In Part II, I address the generalizability of these effects. In Chapter 5, I do so by varying characteristics of the experimental treatments that are used to manipulate incivility, and by expanding the kinds of people used in the experiments. These studies allow me to say more about the kinds of people most likely to be affected by in-your-face politics. In Chapter 6, I use survey data to address the issue of whether those who watch in-your-face politics in the real world are also those likely to be affected by it. By combining content analyses of forty different contemporary political programs with viewership data, I gain some purchase on who watches political programs that include this kind of content as opposed to less in-your-face political programming.

Finally, in Part III I address the historical implications of in-your-face politics. In Chapter 7, I report on additional experiments designed to answer the question of whether these effects are specific to television or are reactions to incivility more generally, regardless of medium. In Chapter 8, I report on a content analysis evaluating the ways in which the visual content of television has changed since the inception of television news. By analyzing news programs that have aired continuously since the 1960s, I demonstrate that even within mainstream legacy media such as network news broadcasts, in-your-face politics is increasingly prominent. Finally, Chapter 9 outlines the problem facing contemporary political television, regardless of whether it is experienced through networks news or cable talk shows, or through a traditional television set in real time, a time-delayed recording, or as digital video over the Internet.

Ultimately, I argue that television poses unique problems as a political medium because, more so than other media, people respond to it in fundamentally social ways. In other words, watching political figures heatedly debate political issues through the audiovisual medium of television is all too much like experiencing an argument face-to-face. People do, in fact, respond to mediated representations of other people in ways that are rooted in expectations drawn from the world of face-to-face interaction. While I won't venture to say my mother-in-law was right, it turns out that we respond to having politicians in our faces in much the way we would to any other person with whom we disagree.

Although people fully understand that the world depicted on television is not a simple window on reality, they nonetheless are guided by the same set of norms that they use in everyday interactions in how they respond to it. The story I tell is about how and why that matters. As I discover, the consequences of in-your-face politics are neither uniformly beneficial, nor completely malevolent. Despite the widespread cry for more civil political discourse in the United States, there are some very good reasons that political television looks the way it does.

When I began this research agenda I had the working hypothesis that television's norms for portraying conflict would produce negative reactions from viewers because they violate the norms people are

accustomed to in the face-to-face world. As will become clear from the chapters that follow, I was correct about this in many respects. But the ways in which in-your-face politics affects viewers are more complex than I had initially assumed. Although the findings did not ultimately change my mind about the potential problems inherent to this kind of political television, they convinced me that the many calls for more civil political dialogue were overly simplistic in their understanding of the mass audience. In the final chapter, I wrestle with this dilemma by proposing potential approaches to incorporating the beneficial effects of in-your-face politics without the negative externalities that it also creates.