Article

Searching for the Dimensions of Today's Political Incivility

Sara Bentivegna[1] (iD) **and Rossella Rega[2]** (iD)

Abstract

Incivility in public discourse is a central concern for scholars and citizens alike. However, the definitions of the concept offered by scholars are dissimilar and difficult to compare. This research, which adopts an approach based on citizens' perceptions of incivility, addresses this issue by empirically testing a three-dimensional model of political incivility. The findings of a survey of 797 students to track differences in perceptions of specific types of uncivil speech show that political incivility consists of a three-dimensional concept, that is, incivility as "impoliteness," as "individual delegitimization," and as "institutional delegitimization." Future studies can use this model to corroborate these results and verify whether this composition of the concept holds up in other contexts.

Keywords

incivility, public discourse, political élite, citizens' perceptions

Introduction

In recent years, particularly following the Brexit referendum and the US presidential elections in 2016, there has been increasing commentary on the deterioration of public debate underscoring how politics has become more than ever polarized, ill-mannered, detached from reality, and "above all uncivil" (Stephens et al., 2019). As Patricia Moy noted in her presidential speech at the 2019 ICA Conference, political incivility has thus become one of the most-studied themes in the sphere of political communication.

However, the broad consensus on awareness of the importance of the problem breaks down when we attempt to define the concept itself. In short, the very question "what is political incivility?" introduces so many distinctions that a single definition has yet to be established. Several factors make the definition process complex, from the theoretical framework of reference—traditionally identified as either that of politeness or that of deliberative democracy,—to the actor's subjectivity ("incivility is in the eye of the beholder," according to Susan Herbst, 2010, p. 3), to its contextualization in a given time and place (Strachan & Wolf, 2012).

Our reflection on political incivility springs from the etymology of the term civility, which centers around the *cives* (citizen) and the *civitas* (city), that is, the individual actor and the collectivity. The governance of the *civitas* is based on the examination of various requests or petitions and the selection of those favored by the citizens. For such decisions to be made, positions on all sides must be publicly known and appraisable, and the mechanisms of choice and decision-making must be well-established and accepted. From this point of view, civility entails listening (Bennett, 2011) and respect for all views and the actors who hold them (Massaro & Stryker, 2012). There must also be respect for the mechanisms that govern decision-making, and more in general for the institutions that represent the collectivity, that is, for "the collective traditions of democracy" (Papacharissi, 2004). Civility is thus not limited to polite behavior on the part of individuals, but requires the self-responsibilization ("responsiveness"; Laden, 2019) of the individual (and of political actors all the more so) toward the collectivity (Shils, 1992). Attention is focused on *what* people do, not *how* they do it, and the concept of civility takes on the proactive nature of those who collaborate for the prosperity of the community (Boyd, 2006; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Rawls, 1993, 2001).

If civility is understood in these terms, incivility must also translate as a lack of respect for the shared principles and democratic traditions that govern the collectivity. Political

[1]Sapienza University of Rome, Italy
[2]University of Siena, Italy

Corresponding Author:
Sara Bentivegna, Department of Communication and Social Research – CORIS, Sapienza University of Rome, 00185 Rome, Italy.
Email: sara.bentivegna@uniroma1.it

incivility entails the breakdown of social and cultural norms that govern personal interactions, but those that govern community life and allow for debate among different positions develop within the common framework of democratic tradition. The undermining of such democratic community norms is the clearest delineator of political incivility and is rendering our democracies increasingly unstable. In fact, lack of recognition of others and lack of the mechanisms that regulate the game of democratic politics produce a delegitimization that involves not only individual actors (leaders and/or parties) but also democratic institutions (intended as the places and mechanisms of political decision-making). This delegitimization is all the more consequential if it is set in motion by political exponents themselves, thrust into the dual role of contested subjects (given their front-line involvement in the functioning of democratic institutions) and contesting subjects (in that they are committed to denying the legitimacy of others or even the very existence of debate in the places for which it is designated).

To better understand this phenomenon and fine-tune indicators of political incivility that can be replicated for successive research, in this initial inquiry, we have adopted an approach based on perceptions of incivility on the part of citizens. In other words, in line with previous research (Hopp, 2019; Kenski et al., 2020; Muddiman, 2017; Stryker et al., 2016), we have tested our definition of the concept of incivility by studying citizens' perception of the speech and behaviors of political figures. Here, we illustrate the working definition of political incivility developed through this approach.

Before describing our proposal, we review the debate that has arisen in recent years, illustrating strengths and weaknesses, and we explain why we believe that the dimension of impoliteness, although still the most-studied, has several limitations in terms of grasping the meaning of political incivility. We then go on to outline the dimensions that make up the concept of political incivility (incivility as impoliteness, as individual delegitimization and as institutional delegitimization), providing a working definition. Next, we present the empirical results of data collection surveys designed to measure the perceptions of political incivility of 797 students, to verify the robustness of the operationalization of our concept. Finally, we discuss the main results of the research and their broader implications.

Main Perspectives on Political Incivility

Why is civility important in political life? What problems are triggered by its disruption? Clearly, the answers to these questions depend on how we define political civility and its opposite, incivility. But, we are immediately hindered by the lack of generally accepted definitions. In fact, the few things scholars tend to agree on is that incivility "is a challenging concept to define" (Rossini, 2019), and its evaluation and definition depend on numerous contextual elements (temporal, geographic, cultural, communicative, etc.) and the subjectivity of the observer.

This elusiveness of the concept explains the abundance and heterogeneity of suggested interpretations; the resulting confusion risks transforming incivility into a useless concept for political communications research. In this paragraph, we focus on the specific sphere of political incivility, clarifying the main theoretical-empirical approaches to it, and then formulating our own definition of the concept and its constitutive elements.

It should be reiterated that the semantic origin of the term civility refers to a multidimensional concept that comprises both an individual (the citizen) and a collective (the governance of the city) dimension. That notwithstanding, the "collective" component of the term and its political meaning have been scaled down over time, in favor of the individual one reflected in people's outward behaviors. In fact, the approach that has the widest following in the literature is one that conceives of civility as politeness, and incivility as the challenging of behavioral codes and "good manners" within the context of a political exchange (Laden, 2019, p. 11). In this definition, the working translation of incivility has been associated with disparate forms of violation of interpersonal norms, such as gratuitous offenses, a disrespectful tone, the use of insults, sarcasm, interruptions, and shouting (Brooks & Geer, 2007; Gervais, 2015; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Sydnor, 2018). Incivility thus becomes a function of the tone and language used by political communicators—in other words, a characteristic "of the style of interaction rather than of any given individual's opinions per se" (Mutz, 2015, p. 7). And the shift from legitimate criticism to uncivil attack is associated with the use of various superfluous adverbs and adjectives that "actively" highlight a lack of respect for the adversary (Brooks & Geer, 2007).

One of the strengths of this conceptualization is the relative simplicity with which the phenomenon can be observed and quantified. However, it does appear to de-emphasize the substance of the message, so that—as Laden (2019) observed—"Yelling truths at someone who is insisting on falsehoods is just as impolite as yelling falsehoods at someone who is insisting on truth" (p. 12). This is by no means a denial of the importance of respecting the formal or informal norms that guide conversation (Papacharissi, 2014), especially in exchanges involving political representatives. One of the consequences noted by many researchers is that when excessive tones and gratuitous offenses are used by political subjects, there is more likely to be an increase in mistrust and disaffection regarding politics among citizens, with potentially damaging repercussions for democracy (Fridkin & Kenney, 2008; Haselmayer, 2019; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). Even more concerningly, the use of such tones and language by the elite can create an imitation effect, leading to a further proliferation of political incivility (Rega & Marchetti, 2021; Walter, 2021).

Aside from civility-as-politeness, there are other approaches based on the idea that civility, considered the quintessence of democratic political life, is put into practice by members of the community through attitudes and behaviors geared toward cooperation, inclusion, reciprocity and equality, as well as a willingness to listen and to debate (Gastil, 2008; Laden, 2019; Rawls, 1993, 2001). Although varied, these approaches tend to highlight the fact that civility arises from learning and understanding the democratic process and its underlying values, which include manners, morals and etiquette, but which also go well beyond these (Peck, 2002) to comprise each individual's sense of responsibility and awareness ("responsiveness"; Laden, 2019; "self-consciousness"; Shils, 1992) as part of a wider community. Hence, civility is expressed through one's capacity to balance individual needs in favor of collective needs, and to actively contribute to upholding the interests of society as a whole (Shils, 1992). In this view, incivility is consequently expressed through behaviors of the opposite nature—intolerance, abuse, or exclusion of others—which undermine the basic principles of pluralistic and democratic systems. Unlike the previously described approach, here incivility is not merely a matter of the speaker's tone or language, which could in fact be perfectly polite and respectful in formal terms while at the same time alluding to racist, discriminatory, or intentionally misleading ideas. The substance of the message (textual or behavioral as the case may be) is more relevant than manifestations of impoliteness. Substance is certainly more complex to examine in empirical terms, but it is crucial, since its implications could be potentially damaging to democratic institutions.

It should be noted that this broader definition of civility/ incivility and its applications to democratic processes is constant over time, unlike the specific forms it assumes (manners, habits, features), which vary in relation to the period and the political-cultural contexts examined (Walter, 2021). Such variations actually appear to be tied to something more profound, which directly touches on the conception of "politics" underlying this approach. In fact, we are far removed from the idea of politics as competitive strategy used "to win an argument" (Laden, 2019, p. 20); on the contrary, what prevails is a conception of politics as a cooperative activity aimed at reaching the best agreements and decisions for the collectivity. When we examine political representatives through this lens, it is clear that the elements that concern scholars who apply this approach are not so much the tones/ language used by political subjects, but the nature of their actions. Resorting to "any means" to increase consensus and visibility, from lying, to distortion of information, to the use of campaigns to defame and demonize adversaries, to other forms of delegitimization of the rules of the democratic game, are all manifestations of this type of incivility that have the overall effect of delegitimizing democratic politics.

And this is where we believe the study of incivility should focus, beginning by ascertaining how changes have impacted politics in recent years—particularly the emergence of a "toxic polarization" in many Western democracies (Lührmann et al., 2019)—have led to an exacerbation of conflict. These changes have given rise to two interconnected dynamics: the normalization (often boosted by populist figures) of "bad manners" in public debate (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014), which somewhat limits the efficacy of using impoliteness to explain the concept of incivility, and the systemic presence of delegitimization, which has made forms of incivility that undermine democratic life more widespread and complex. In the next section, we illustrate the changes that lie behind our proposed definition of political incivility today.

Beyond Impoliteness: Our Proposed Definition of Political Incivility

We set out here from the premise that the functioning of the democratic process is based on the certainty, as Mutz puts it, "that each side in any given political controversy perceives the opposition as having some reasonable foundation for its positions" (Mutz, 2015, p. 50). This premise explains the concept of the legitimacy of different positions/opinions and the actors who express those positions, and shows how political disagreement can be transformed into dialogue and become an element that enriches politics. While the literature has already explored the value of divergences in public debate (Carey, 1995; Schudson, 1997), we are interested in examining how the delegitimization of actors and/or institutions that express the principles underlying democratic rules of play subverts this premise.

This is where we enter the field of political incivility, along the lines of what Papacharissi referred to as "disrespect for the collective traditions of democracy" (Papacharissi, 2004, p. 267). This definition alludes to the almost binding relationship between political (in)civility and democracy, which becomes even clearer when we define civility as "collective politeness with consideration for the democratic consequences of impolite behavior" (Papacharissi, 2004). Given that our conception of political (in)civility builds upon this definition, it is important to clearly understand what "collective politeness" is, and how it differs from standard politeness.

Generally, the literature on politeness refers to Goffman's notion of "face" (defined as "an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes"; Goffman, 1955, p. 213), and extends its meaning to comprise two faces, *positive face* and *negative face* (Brown & Levinson, 1978). While the former refers to the desire for social approval that guides polite behavior in interactions with others, the latter alludes to the desire for autonomy and lack of restraint that sometimes entails rude behaviors (Papacharissi, 2004). In both cases, the focus is on interactions between individuals in which "consideration" and "respect" for the other person are central, as is mitigation of behaviors that might jeopardize his or her "face." However, once we shift to the sphere of community and social life, to which the concept of civility is bound, that

"face" assumes different features which allude to the mechanisms that regulate communal life and its organization through specific institutions, principles, and norms. In this sense, expressions of incivility are understood as threats to the positive collective face of a community, and in democratic systems specifically, as behaviors that undermine democratic institutions and values. While Papacharissi (2004) indicated behaviors that deny people their personal freedoms and stereotype social groups as examples of this type of behavior, today the list is much longer and more developed. The many recent changes that have occurred in political and social contexts have in fact exacerbated political conflict, engendering various forms and degrees of delegitimization of "collective face." Several studies have shown that in both the United States and Europe, the growth of political polarization in its various forms (ideological, psychological, and emotional) has generated a vicious circle between polarization of the elite and polarization of electors (Jacobson, 2000). The resulting reciprocal distrust and an "Us against Them" mentality have made both groups increasingly resistant to the idea of dialogue with the other side and respect for their positions (Lugosi-Schimpf & Thorlakson, 2021). This process, in correlation with the strengthening of populism, which by its nature tends to simplify politics along very clear lines of demarcation (the elite vs the people) has further fueled political polarization, turning disdain for the opposition and for "'appropriate' ways of acting in the political realm" into a communications style (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014, p. 392).

This is the context within which we can interpret recent episodes that underscore how the delegitimization of adversaries as well as the organizations/institutions of democracy can create openings for those who would disregard the rules of democracy in their struggle for political power. While the most evident example is the assault on Capitol Hill, the phenomenon is not confined to the United States. Several European countries have also recently been the object of analyses regarding the weakening of support for the deliberative principles of democratic systems (Lührmann et al., 2019). Indeed, in Europe, where the combination of polarization and populism has created a breeding ground for forms of attacks on democracy and the principles that inspire it, "antidemocratic discourse" is being examined as a specific sub-set of uncivil political discourse (Lugosi-Schimpf & Thorlakson, 2021). The emergence of a "politics of exclusion" fueled by a combination of incivility, racism, and populism has also recently been noted (Krzyżanowski et al., 2021). In other words, we are seeing a widespread diffusion (and consequent normalization) among political actors of both impoliteness and undemocratic content which circulates, reverberates, and gains visibility very quickly in today's hybridized, hyperconnected world. This dynamic is invigorated by the newsworthy nature of incivility, the emotional and interactive components that make it a weapon capable of capturing the public's attention and provoking knee-jerk reactions. Confirming Herbst's idea (2010) of incivility as a strategic resource intentionally utilized by politicians to increase media and public attention, motivate supporters, and gain visibility and success, this also explains why today, incivility is spreading through nontraditional as well as traditional means and forms.

All of these changes together prompt us to suggest that a reformulation of the characteristics and constitutive elements of incivility is necessary at this stage. Hence, our proposal to define political incivility as a communications strategy utilized by political subjects, expressed as a lack of respect for the social and cultural norms that govern personal interactions as well as those that govern the functioning of democratic systems. This lack of respect can manifest itself through forms of interpersonal impoliteness, but can also be expressed through behaviors and/or discourses aimed at delegitimizing systems (the mechanisms, principles, and values of democracy) and the individual and collective actors that allow them to function.

Rethinking Indicators of Political Incivility

Having defined political incivility as a lack of respect for both the social and cultural norms that govern personal interactions and those that govern the functioning of democratic systems, our next step is to identify its constitutive elements and propose a working definition to empirically test its soundness. In our view, the concept of political incivility can be described in terms of the following elements: impoliteness, individual delegitimization, and institutional delegitimization. In addition to maintaining the multidimensionality of the concept, which has already been highlighted in the literature (Muddiman, 2017; Stryker et al., 2016), this formulation also comprises references to the individual and collective spheres, which are both central to reconstructing the concept of political (in)civility, especially when it is understood in reference to the *cives* and *civitas*.

The first element, impoliteness, has been the subject of the longest and best-developed tradition of study. But it is evident and undeniable that in interpersonal relations, regardless of the context, the use of vulgarity, disrespectful behavior, insults, or ridicule of others is readily identifiable as forms of impoliteness that impede or complicate debate between any actors with differing positions and/or demands. Such expressions were in fact the first to be identified as indicators of political incivility (Massaro & Stryker, 2012) and used to analyze the behaviors of political actors and measure citizens' perceptions of the phenomenon. In keeping with this approach, numerous empirical studies (Coe et al., 2014; Mutz, 2007; Otto et al., 2019; Sydnor, 2017) have confirmed the centrality of this element, and have also launched a strand of research based on recording the presence of items like vulgarity, name-calling, insults, disrespect, shouts, attacks on character, making fun, attacks on reputation, highlighting flubs, demonizing, interruption, verbal jousting, and

Table 1. Dimension of Impoliteness Incivility.[a]

Indicator labels	Statements
Insulting	Using offensive language in a political discussion.
Making fun	Mocking or making fun of one's political opponents
Rolling eyes	Rolling one's eyes while a political opponent is speaking
Shouting	Shouting at one's political opponents
Interrupting	Repeatedly interrupting those with whom one disagrees in a political discussion
Belittling	Diminishing a political opponent or a political proposal with which you disagree
Attacking character	Attacking a political opponent's personal character or conduct

[a]All indicators refer to politicians' behaviors.

Table 2. Dimension of Individual Delegitimization.[a]

Indicator labels	Statements
Using racial slurs	Use of racial, sexist, ethnic, or religious slurs in a political discussion
Misleading	Intentionally making false or misleading statements in a political discussion
Using discriminatory stereotypes	Using racial, sexist, ethnic, or religious stereotypes in a political discussion
Demonizing	Demonizing and exaggerating the positions of an opponent during a political discussion (Nazis, unpatriotic, and so on)
Disseminating slander	Corroborating and disseminating slander against other political opponents
Threatening harm	Threatening others with physical harm in a political discussion
Excluding the other	Denying the right of those with whom one disagrees taking part in political discussion

[a]All indicators refer to politicians' behaviors.

rolling eyes. In short, the impoliteness dimension of incivility comprises all of those indicators that account for the most common forms of impoliteness in the speech/behavior of political subjects and citizens alike. We must then consider that political incivility understood as impoliteness "is easy to observe, count and quantify" (Laden, 2019, p. 12) and is also easy to update or modify depending on contexts and cultural transformations (Flores et al., 2021). In our case, for example, the adoption of indicators referring to impoliteness allows us to verify their robustness in a context other than the United States, where they have traditionally been used (Walter, 2021), at a time when the rise of populism has made bad manners so pervasive in political communication that they have become almost normalized. In light of these considerations, we have identified a set of seven indicators of the dimension of impoliteness, frequently employed in analyses of the political sphere and its actors. As shown in Table 1, these indicators refer not only to discursive/spoken interactions but also to behaviors that may be encountered in contexts linked to political communication.

The second dimension that contributes to defining political incivility is what we call incivility as "individual delegitimization." It includes the delegitimizing of other political subjects or groups, intentional misleading, the use of racial slurs, the denial of individuals' or target groups' right to speak (excluding the other), and the use of discriminatory stereotypes. The decision to label this dimension *delegitimization* is based on the recognition of the presence of a specific strategy aimed at discrediting the other (whether an individual or a group) through intentionally harmful actions and the distortion of facts or information—in other words, distortions constructed ad hoc for the purpose of exclusion and discrimination. This aspect of incivility has long been present in the literature, although defined and labeled in different ways. For example, in studies on citizens' perception of political incivility, Stryker and colleagues (2016) refer to *deception incivility* to indicate the use of denigration, exaggeration, or lack of evidence to support what is being said. In the same research

sphere, there are also frequent references to misleading or accusations of lying (Kenski et al., 2019; Kenski et al., 2020; Stryker et al., 2016), the exclusion of others, discussion suppression (Hopp, 2019; Otto et al., 2019) and preventing discussion (Stryker et al., 2016). One significant exception is the work of Ashley Muddiman (2017, 2019, 2021) whose definition of the concept of incivility includes some of the indicators we have used to describe delegitimization, but without distinguishing between the individual and institutional levels. We think that the two levels should be kept distinct from one another to capture the many nuances of political incivility today. Thus, the dimension of political incivility as delegitimization at the *individual* level is elaborated in the seven indicators shown in Table 2.

Finally, the dimension of incivility as institutional delegitimization refers to lack of respect for democratic institutions and the mechanisms that govern them. In this case, incivility is directed and expressed not toward individuals or groups but toward the wider democratic system. More specifically, incivility here is directed against democratic traditions (Papacharissi, 2004) and is expressed as lack of respect for democratic institutions, symbols, and principles. An affinity between this dimension and that of public-level incivility concerning common violations of democratic norms can be found in the literature (Muddiman, 2017). This latter behavior is expressed as "refusing to work with an opposing political party" (Muddiman, 2017, p. 3197), for instance, not voting on a bill presented by an opponent.

Both institutional delegitimization and public-level incivility represent uncivil behaviors because they damage the democratic system. However, in the case of the former, the objective is twofold: to block the decision-making process or

Table 3. Dimension of Institutional Delegitimization.[a]

Indicator labels	Statements
Encouraging harm	Encouraging unlawful protest actions against democratic institutions
Denigrating national symbols	Publicly denigrating the national flag or other national symbols
Behaving inappropriately	Behaving inappropriately during an institutional or public event
Occupying symbolically significant sites	Occupying or threatening to occupy sites representing democratic institutions (Parliament and other legislative institutions)
Displaying inappropriate objects	Displaying inappropriate objects (such as a noose, a tin opener, placards) in places that are symbolic for democratic institutions (Parliament and other legislative institutions)
Physical confrontation	Taking part in a physical confrontation in an institutional arena (Parliament and other legislative institutions)

[a]All indicators refer to politicians' behaviors.

the approval of a particular law, and to obtain visibility in the mainstream media. Thus, when politicians engage in outrageous forms of anti-institutional protest during parliamentary debate, such as brandishing a hangman's noose in a symbolic threat to the established order or waving a can opener to indicate that Parliament will be "ripped apart," the aim is not only to delegitimize the institution but also to attract the attention of the media, which are known to be sensitive to such outrageous means of communication (see Berry & Sobieraj, 2013).

In short, we seem to be dealing with an attempt to delegitimize democracy as a whole through behaviors aimed at desacralizing places and symbols.

In many ways, this type of incivility recalls the "immoral-criminal incivility" noted by respondents who were asked to provide examples of incivility in the context of empirical research on the subject (Muddiman, 2021). This category comprises behaviors like acting violently or doing drugs, in addition to others (paying people for votes, protesting) reported by the same researcher a few years earlier in a study that employed a similar approach (Muddiman, 2019). Before illustrating the indicators we identified for this dimension, we want to point out a recent study that proposes a multidimensional structure of the concept of incivility and introduces the dimension of violations of political context norms, which include attacks against liberty rights and attacks against democratic and constitutional principles (Bormann et al., 2021). Institutional delegitimization incivility is clearly garnering increasing attention among researchers, and this makes the assessment of its empirical robustness in terms of citizens' perception of the phenomenon all the more urgent. Table 3 shows the seven indicators we have identified in operationalizing the dimension of incivility as institutional delegitimization.

It seems evident that the three-dimensional nature of the concept of political incivility we propose requires empirical confirmation. Toward this end, we asked interview subjects to evaluate 20 items regarding the different dimensions of political incivility, with the following hypotheses:

H1. The majority of the items proposed to the respondents will be deemed uncivil (albeit with varying degrees of intensity, that is, very, mostly, and somewhat uncivil).

And,

H2. The 20 items will generate not a single, one-dimensional structure, but a three-dimensional structure which comprises impoliteness incivility, individual delegitimization, and institutional delegitimization.

Data and Methods

To test our hypotheses, we administered a questionnaire made available via a Google platform link during the week of 12–19 April 2021. Participants were students in Communications Sciences, Sociology and Political Science degree programs at a number of Italian universities.[1] Student participation was voluntary and respondents were given a brief written description of the research objectives. Overall, 797 students responded to the questionnaire. Of the participants, 68.7% identified as female and 31.3% as male, and reported their ages as follows: 18–20 (44.1%), 21–22 (29.6%), and 23 and above (26.1%). Participants were asked to provide demographic data and information about their interest in politics and media exposure, and then to evaluate whether, in general, Italian politics has become more uncivil over the years.

After these initial questions, participants were asked to read the 20 statements and evaluate the incivility[2] present in the situation described by means of a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from "not at all uncivil" (1) to "very uncivil" (5). Three other statements in which there were no elements of incivility present were used as a control ("participating in an intense and particularly heated debate with members of another party," "criticizing an adversary's political positions," and "trying to reach an agreement with opposition parties to approve a proposed law in parliament"), and all 23 were randomized to avoid order effects. The statements used are in

Table 4. Respondents' Evaluation of the Items.

Statements	Mdn	SD
Using of racial, sexist, ethnic, or religious slurs in a political discussion	4.75	.772
Intentionally making false or misleading statements in a political discussion	4.73	.825
Denying the right of those with whom one disagrees taking part in a political discussion	4.62	.874
Corroborating and disseminating slander on other political opponents	4.57	.853
Taking part in a physical confrontation in an institutional arena (Parliament and other legislative institutions)	4.55	.963
Behaving inappropriately during an institutional or public event	4.54	.858
Encourage unlawful protest actions against democratic institutions	4.53	.938
Attacking a political opponent's personal character or conduct	4.43	.953
Using offensive language in a political discussion	4.42	.888
Using racial, sexist, ethnic, or religious stereotypes in a political discussion	4.41	.942
Threatening others with physical harm in a political discussion	4.24	.973
Mocking or making fun of one's political opponents	4.17	.985
Shouting at one's political opponents	4.15	1.008
Repeatedly interrupting those with whom one disagrees in a political discussion	4.15	.955
Publicly denigrating the national flag or other national symbols	4.10	1.168
Diminishing a political opponent or a political proposal with which you disagree	3.80	1.025
Displaying inappropriate objects (such as a noose, a tin opener, placards) in symbolic places for the democratic institutions (Parliament and other legislative institutions)	3.79	1.238
Demonizing and exaggerating the positions of an opponent during a political discussion (Nazis, unpatriotic, and so on)	3.72	1.047
Occupying or to threatening to occupy sites representing democratic institutions (Parliament and other legislative institutions)	3.68	1.283
Rolling one's eyes while a political opponent is speaking	3.43	1.139
Participating in an intense and particularly heated debate with members of another party	1.98	1.185
Criticizing an adversary's political positions	1.90	1.230
Trying to reach an agreement with opposition parties to approve a proposed law in Parliament	1.79	1.204

part modeled on the consolidated approach found in the literature (Coe et al., 2014; Hopp, 2019; Kenski et al., 2020; Massaro & Stryker, 2012; Muddiman, 2017, 2019; Stryker et al., 2016) and in part based on our evaluations of the presence of uncivil actions in the current political context.

Main Findings

Asked to evaluate whether politics in Italy has become more uncivil in recent times (in the sense that "there is a lack of politeness and reciprocal respect and it is often impossible to compare and debate different proposals and ideas"), over 95% of the subjects surveyed declared that they agreed. This testifies to the widespread perception of a climate of incivility even among younger subjects who, despite having grown up in a period already marked by the rise of populism as well as extremist and divisive rhetoric, nonetheless appear to be sensitive to the problem. However, the general agreement regarding the climate of incivility in the political sphere does not carry over when it comes to evaluating what exactly is considered uncivil. Nonetheless, although the evaluations reflected various levels of intensity, respondents considered all of the items presented to be indicators of political incivility, thus confirming our H1 at the empirical level (Table 4).

Looking closely at the data, we find a different sensibility on the part of our respondents than that reported in previous research. Concerning what our respondents consider decidedly uncivil in the behavior of political actors, we noted the presence of items regarding the individual delegitimization dimension, such as the use of racial, sexist, ethnic or religious slurs (4.75), misleading statements (4.73), forms of exclusion of others (4.62) and the use of slander (4.57). In these cases, we are dealing with behaviors that represent a threat to the proper functioning of democratic systems, and the sensitivity our respondents demonstrate in this regard appears solid and univocal. Taken as a whole, these data confirm the robustness of some indicators of political incivility used previously in the literature (Muddiman, 2017; Papacharissi, 2004; Stryker et al., 2016). However, they also highlight the fact that compared to data for American respondents (Muddiman, 2017), the perceived seriousness of the problem is decidedly more evident among our respondents in terms of these indicators. This difference becomes even clearer as we continue to read the table; immediately after the individual delegitimization items come those regarding incivility as institutional delegitimization: "taking part in a physical confrontation in Parliament" (4.55), "behaving inappropriately during an institutional event" (4.54) and

Table 5. Model Selection Statistics.

	Par.	*df*	RMSEA	GFI	AGFI
Single factor	42	189	.108	.754	.699
Two-factor	43	188	.100	.807	.755
Three-factor	45	186	.094	.813	.768

Note. AGFI = adjusted goodness of fit index; df = degree of freedom; GFI = goodness of fit index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation.

"encouraging unlawful protest against democratic institutions" (4.53). These data eradicate any doubt regarding the evaluation of these behaviors as uncivil. These items also received decidedly more negative evaluations in terms of incivility than some of the indicators of incivility associated with impoliteness (e.g., "rolling one's eyes while a political opponent is speaking," 3.43; "belittling," 3.80). Furthermore, as these behaviors are distinct from but nonetheless linked "to broader aspects of democratic health" (Muddiman, 2019, p. 36), they confirm the hypothesis that incivility cannot be limited to a single dimension, and that it is impacted by the context of political debate or conflict in which it occurs.

The confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was carried out specifically for the empirical confirmation of the multidimensionality of the concept expressed and summarized in our H2. Table 5 shows the goodness-of-fit of the three statistical models (mono-, bi-, and tri-factorial) subjected to empirical control. It can be seen that the best fit is obtained with the three-factor model.

The results (Figure 1) confirm the three-dimensional nature of the concept of political incivility. Impoliteness, individual delegitimization and institutional delegitimization constitute three different aspects of the concept, which are strongly correlated with one another, with values that vary from .85 to .90. This means that political incivility cannot be reduced to a single dimension, as has sometimes happened in the past, but must be considered a composite and multifaceted concept.

An analysis of each item's contribution to the dimension of reference provides further elements for reflection. The "rolling eyes" and "making fun" items, for example, are marginal in determining the dimension of impoliteness in light of the values recorded (respectively, .40 and .44). However, the items shouting (.90) and insulting (.82) contribute significantly to the dimension of impoliteness. This means that for our respondents, impoliteness in the political context plays a meaningful role only when certain expressions are present—expressions, we might add, that are clearly associated with much more blatant and aggressive attitudes than those associated with making fun of others or showing boredom and dissent by exaggeratedly rolling one's eyes. Similar considerations apply to the dimension of institutional delegitimization, which is more strongly associated with items such as "physical confrontation" (.86) and "encouraging harm" (.88) than with

others such as occupying the symbolic spaces of institutions (.49) and displaying inappropriate objects in such places (.59). In this case, the results confirm that the aggressive component of behaviors plays a greater role in the evaluation of political incivility, with the notable exception of occupying places symbolic of institutions. That item's modest contribution to the dimension can be interpreted as a consequence of the phenomenon of desensitization stemming from the frequency with which such episodes have occurred in recent years—almost to the point of "normalizing" them—or even as its full acceptance as a form of protest. Unfortunately, the available data do not allow us to dig deeper, but the question certainly remains open and calls for further study.

Finally, with regard to individual delegitimization, the significant contribution of all of the items to the determination of the dimension is a key finding, along with the clear centrality of "use of racial, sexist, ethnic or religious slurs" (.90) and "intentionally making false or misleading statements" (.90). There is only one exception to this, namely, the item referring to "demonizing and exaggerating the positions of an opponent" (.46). In this case, in comparison with the other items, we note an association between the item's marginality in the determination of the dimension and a more nuanced component of aggressivity, limited exclusively to the verbal sphere.

We will come back to these questions in section "Discussion." For now, we can state that the data confirm our hypothesis concerning the presence of three dimensions of the concept of political incivility, and contribute to shedding light on the many nuances associated with differing evaluations of the indicators.

Discussion

Widespread concern about the diffusion of political incivility in Western democracies has been demonstrated, in different periods and with little variation, by numerous surveys reported in the literature, and our data, with 95% of respondents agreeing that incivility in the political sphere is on the increase, concord with this trend. But while general concern about the spread of political incivility appears to be a consolidated fact, the understanding of what it actually means is another matter entirely. On the subject of its definition, the literature is full of references to its ambiguousness, its "slipperiness" (Masullo Chen, 2017) or its "challenging to define" content (Rossini, 2019). Others have noted the importance of the observers' point of view (Herbst, 2010) in identifying the phenomenon, and the fact that it is "deeply contextual, interwoven with the political and media system" (Otto et al., 2019, p. 2). Despite these difficulties, numerous scholars have taken up the task of defining the concept and translating it into empirical terms, with the general principles of lack of respect for others (Mutz, 2015) and for the collective tradition of democracy (Papacharissi, 2004) as their reference point.
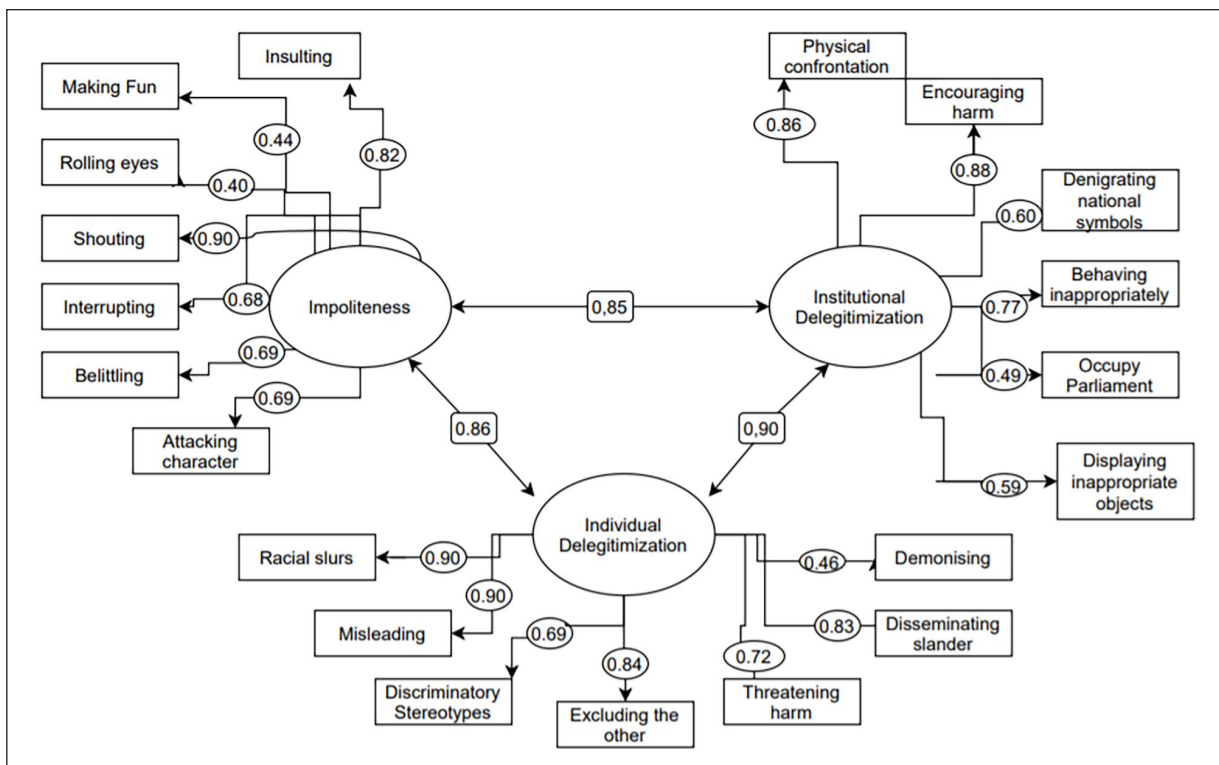
Figure 1. Diagram of three-factor model with factor loadings.
Note. Chi-square = 1,491.25; *df* = 186; RMSEA = .094.

While there are various approaches to this type of research—analysis of incivility in political communications on different media environments (Berry & Sobieraj, 2013; Mutz, 2007, 2015; Rowe, 2015; Sydnor, 2017); analysis of incivility in user comments on online news-stories (Coe et al., 2014; Masullo Chen, 2017; Santana, 2015; Ziegele et al., 2018); analysis of incivility in online political discussion among users (Rossini, 2019, 2020, 2021)—we decided to focus on ordinary people's perceptions of political incivility. This approach is based on the idea that "in a democracy, regular citizens—not just political elite or scholars—are crucial arbiters of what constitutes incivility" (Kenski et al., 2020, p. 796). In short, we intended to analyze what citizens identify as political incivility, keeping in mind the dynamic, non-static nature (Bormann et al., 2021) of this continuously changing concept.

The survey we conducted with 797 university students contributes in several ways, on both the theoretical and empirical levels, to developing understanding of the concept of political incivility. First, it confirms the concept's multidimensional nature, which we have formulated in terms of three dimensions: impoliteness, individual delegitimization and institutional delegitimization. Our data show that political incivility continues to be identified with, but not limited to impoliteness; it is also strongly associated with the infringing of norms that govern and represent liberal democracies. It can be manifested through forms of interpersonal

impoliteness aimed at damaging another person's public "face" (Goffman, 1955), and also through behaviors and/or speech aimed at delegitimizing the "collective face" of a democratic society and its operational mechanisms, as well as the institutions and actors that publicly represent it.

Second, our study shows how this "collective face" can be defined and operationalized on the empirical level. Focusing on the context in which political incivility occurs can certainly provide useful material on this subject. For example, in recent years, the radicalization of political polemics has led to the "readmittance" into political/electoral communications of a few communication strategies that push the boundaries of legality (the systemic use of lies and untruths, the criminalization of the adversary, the use of slander and defamatory campaigns[3]); observing this phenomenon helps us to better understand the influence of the context (Bormann et al., 2021) in the spread and perception of political incivility. Polarization, fragmentation, and relativism regarding facts (Van Aelst et al., 2017) seem to be on the increase in the current political landscape, and the rules of democratic participation seem to have been waived in favor of visibility and consensus-seeking (Blumler, 2018). In this climate, behaviors once deemed inappropriate in the political sphere are becoming more and more common, and politicians have begun to use individual and institutional delegitimization as performative strategies to gain public visibility, stir up their supporters and encourage them to

band together against "the system." In updating the definition of incivility, then the performance component must be lent greater importance, since its role as an emotional and expressive binding force among subjects who identify with the same political side and who want to co-star in the "spectacle of incivility" has become increasingly evident. And in fact, the evaluations collected from our respondents for items regarding both forms of delegitimization showed very clear judgments of their uncivil connotation. In a nutshell, we found a widespread sensitivity to forms of incivility such as intolerance, manipulation, and abusing or excluding others, all of which highlight a lack of respect for the underlying principles of democratic pluralism.

Compared to these respondents' marked sensibility concerning antidemocratic speech/behavior, forms of incivility associated with impoliteness did not arouse equally strong reactions. And this finding of a reduction in the importance respondents attribute to impoliteness in political debate is another of our study's contributions. A clear explanation is difficult to pinpoint, but it may be an indicator of a sort of "normalization" resulting from habituation and desensitization linked to the spread of bad manners (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014) emblematic of the neo-populist movements now prominent in Italian politics. Populist and anti-system views have been on the upsurge for more than 20 years, generating a highly confrontational political environment that often entails antagonism expressed through personal attacks and the stigmatization and demonization of other individuals or social groups (such as immigrants, for example), and desensitization with regard to these forms of incivility is by no means an unlikely side effect. However, we cannot exclude that this greater tolerance for behaviors that flout "good manners" may be correlated with the relative youth of our respondents. Previous research (Fridkin & Kenney, 2019, 2011); has shown greater tolerance for these forms of incivility, and we cannot ignore the fact that "even within a given political culture, norms of civility may change over time as generational shifts in politics, technology, and culture are reflected in interpersonal relationship" (Flores et al., 2021, p. 24). In addition to the age factor, we must keep in mind that what people consider to be expressions of incivility changes over time and from context to context (Bormann et al., 2021). "Rolling eyes," for instance, may have lost potency as an indicator of incivility as societal norms changed (Benson, 2011), or may have stronger implications in the US context than in Italy. A similar finding has been reported with regard to the use of hyperbole, which appears to be considered a normal form of expression in the United States, but is perceived as an expression of incivility in China (Flores et al., 2021). This web of perceptions and interpretations can only be unraveled through surveys with respondents of different ages, and through comparative analysis of studies conducted in different countries.

Finally, this study contributes to the theoretical debate on political incivility, offering a definition based on three principal dimensions that embody lack of respect for the social and cultural norms governing personal interactions and democratic systems. Supported by an established strand of research that has identified several elements of the definition of political incivility in liberal democracies, our effort focused on defining the phenomenon in a very different political and cultural context than the one generally referred to in the literature. Further studies will be needed to test the robustness of these dimensions in different contexts and with respondent groups that reflect the entire population. In fact, our study's main limitations are the uniform youth and student status of our respondents, which make the results inapplicable to subjects with different characteristics. Future empirical research with a statistically representative sample of the Italian population is required to clarify this issue.

We believe that despite these limitations, this work sheds some light on the concept of political incivility in a period marked by widespread friction between the elite and the general public and an intensification of populist zeal. But while it may be true that political incivility changes with changing times and places, the cross section that this survey—conducted in Italy, beyond the domination of US-centric approaches—brings to light is a useful addition to a very broad and continuously-shifting discussion, one that will surely benefit from the additional support of empirical elements from other contexts yet to be analyzed.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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ORCID iDs

Sara Bentivegna ![ORCID icon] https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8609-4244
Rossella Rega ![ORCID icon] https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1827-7425

Notes

1. The Universities involved were: University of Siena, University of Pavia, University of Florence, University of Urbino "Carlo Bo," Sapienza University of Rome, Luiss University (Rome), University of Naples "Federico II."
2. The starting definition of political incivility is as follows: a lack of respect for the social and cultural norms that govern personal interactions or the functioning of democratic systems.
3. An example from the US 2020 Presidential campaign was the case in which Donald Trump was involved in having commissioned the Russians to investigate Joe Biden's son.

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Author Biographies

Sara Bentivegna (PhD, Sapienza University of Rome) is Professor of Digital media and Political Communication at University of Rome "Sapienza." Her current research projects are about political incivility and public debate in a time of disrupted public spheres.

Rossella Rega (Ph.D., Sapienza University of Rome) is an Assistant Professor of Journalism and New Media and Media Industry and Strategic Communication at the University of Siena. Her main research interests include political incivility, public sphere, and journalism.