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Article

Examining the Role of Online Uncivil Discussion and Ideological Extremity on Illegal Protest

Bingbing Zhang [1,2,*], Isabel Inguanzo [2], and Homero Gil de Zúñiga [1,2,3]

[1] Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications, Pennsylvania State University, USA
[2] Democracy Research Unit, University of Salamanca, Spain
[3] Faculty of Communication and Humanities, Diego Portales University, Santiago, Chile

* Corresponding author (bpz5077@psu.edu)

Abstract

In recent years, there has been an increased academic interest revolving around the beneficial or pernicious effects of ideological extremity and (uncivil) political discussion over democracy. For instance, citizens' ideological predispositions and higher levels of political discussion have been linked with a more active and vibrant political life. In fact, ideological extremity and uncivil discussion foster institutionalized political engagement. However, less explored in the literature remains whether such polarization and uncivil discussions may be related to unlawful political behavior such as illegal protest. This study contends that one of the main drivers of illegal protest behavior lies in online uncivil political discussion, specifically through the normalization and activation of further incivility. We tested this through a two-wave panel data drawn from a diverse US sample and cross-sectional, lagged, and autoregressive regression models. Mediation analysis was also conducted to test whether uncivil online discussion mediated the relationship between frequency of online political discussion and illegal protest engagement. Overall, we found that illegal protest was particularly associated with online uncivil discussion, while ideological extremity and other forms of online and offline discussions seemed to have no effect on unlawful protest over time.

Keywords

ideological extremity; illegal protest; online political discussion; offline uncivil discussion; online uncivil discussion

1. Introduction

In the US more people are increasingly becoming polarized, biased, politically active, and angry (Mason, 2013; West & Iyengar, 2020). Parallel to this pattern of polarization is the rise in non-violent protests (Fisher et al., 2019; Griffin et al., 2021). Protest aims at bringing about social change and often takes the form of civil displays such as demonstrations, sittings, petitions, and other more or less disruptive actions (Wang & Piazza, 2016). However, not all protest is civil and legal. Some protests can break the law or turn violent.

These facts raise questions about increasing political incivility in the US. Based on Phillips and Smith (2003, p. 85), we understand political incivility as political "actions and interactions that are perceived to be rude or inconsiderate" towards others. Such a broad definition allows us to encompass a wide variety of political situations where incivility can arise, from online political discussions (Coe et al., 2014) to offline political behaviors intended to harm others (Braunstein, 2018). So, while unlawful protest can be considered an extreme act of political incivility, in this age of rampant polarization and widespread use of social media

and computer-mediated communication, the US is parallelly witnessing other uncivil behaviors online, such as uncivil discussion (Bimber & Gil de Zúñiga, 2020; Lee et al., 2019). These three paralleled phenomena serve as the initial puzzle for the present study: what are the antecedents of illegal protest? Do ideological extremity and/or uncivil discussions foster unlawful protest behavior or are they just correlated phenomena with no causal relation between them?

In order to answer these questions, we rely on three sets of literature: ideological extremity, political discussion, and high-risk protest behavior. Ideological extremity and political discussion were both found to foster diverse political participatory behaviors (Schussman & Soule, 2005; van der Meer et al., 2009). However, even in a polarized setting, not every political discussion might be of relevance to explaining engagement in unlawful activities. Recent studies show that sharing political content through social media, such as WhatsApp, specifically fuels illegal protests (Gil de Zúñiga & Goyanes, 2021). We argue that specifically online uncivil discussions may trigger unlawful protest. Due to social norms, uncivil discussion takes place more frequently across online than offline settings (Barnidge, 2017), and frequent exposure to uncivil discussion normalizes incivility and encourages further uncivil behavior (Hmielowski et al., 2014). We, therefore, contend that it is precisely online uncivil discussion as opposed to other forms of discussion that drives unlawful protest behavior.

In order to test this hypothesis, the present study collected two-wave data from a nationally drawn online panel survey to investigate the impact of online uncivil political discussion on illegal protest over time, controlling for ideological extremity and other forms of political discussions. More specifically, this study uses Ordinary Least Square cross-sectional, lagged, and autoregressive regression models to examine whether online uncivil discussion is associated with illegal protest concurrently, and over time when ideological extremity remains constant. Some mediating mechanisms are further explored. Overall, results show that uncivil online discussion is positively associated with engagement with illegal protest while ideological extremity and other forms of political discussion do not yield statistically significant effects on illegal protest over time.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. The Influence of Ideology on Protest Participation

Past studies have found a connection between ideology and protest participation (Kostelka & Rovny, 2019). Research has for a long time suggested that in Western and well-established democracies left-wing ideology and post-materialist values are associated with higher protest participation (Schussman & Soule, 2005; van der Meer et al., 2009), while in other regions such as Eastern Europe, protest is traditionally associated with a

right-wing ideology (Borbáth & Gessler, 2020). Therefore, in many countries protest is ideologically structured.

However, Snow (2004) has warned about the risks of assuming great ideological coherence and unanimity among protest participants, which would neglect individual and group contradictions between ideology and behavior, as well as transversal collective action frames that transcend ideological categorizations. Consequently, it is not aligning with a particular ideology that drives individuals into a protest, but instead having a higher level of ideological extremity. Indeed, ideological extremity fosters all kinds of political behavior both legal and illegal (van der Meer et al., 2009; Yaziji & Doh, 2013). In extreme cases, ideological extremity can contribute to framing participation in unconventional and unlawful political activities as a moral obligation to the community (Bosi & Della Porta, 2012; Della Porta, 2018). In these cases, radical individuals might consider that a superior end justifies illegal means. As a result, high-risk protest is positively associated with ideological extremity (DiGrazia, 2014). Consequently, our first hypothesis reads as follows:

H1: Ideological extremity is positively associated to illegal protest participation.

2.2. Online Incivility and Its Potential Role on Protest Participation

Parallelly to polarization, the US is witnessing a rise in uncivil discourse (Dodd & Schraufnagel, 2013). Although connected, the ideological polarization of certain sectors of society and the rise of uncivil discussion are separate phenomena (Goovaerts & Marien, 2020). Most of the uncivil comments revolving around newspaper stories are about "politics, law and order, taxes, and foreign affairs" (Coe et al., 2014). Consequently, researchers in the field have studied the potentially ambivalent effects of this type of political discussion on democratic attitudes and behaviors.

On the one hand, some studies point to a "political activation effect." It is well known that incivility exposure activates social and political identities (Muddiman & Stroud, 2017). In fact, in the context of protests, online uncivil discussion exposure has also been positively related to cyberbalkanization (Lee et al., 2019) and "increased identification with violent like-minded protesters through malevolence attributions" (Muddiman et al., 2021). Brooks and Geer (2007) also found that exposure to an uncivil political debate seemed to increase the political interest of the audience and the intention to vote, thus fueling political engagement. Similarly, uncivil discussion was found to foster people's intention to participate politically (Masullo Chen & Lu, 2017).

On the other hand, other research suggests a "democratic backsliding effect." Indeed, civil interactions are sometimes understood as necessary for an

orderly and democratic society (Phillips & Smith, 2003). In fact, exposure to uncivil political discussions was found to increase affective polarization, decrease political trust, and lower the expectation of public deliberation (Goovaerts & Marien, 2020; Hwang et al., 2014; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Skytte, 2021). While the effects of online incivility on democracy are far from being settled (Miller & Vaccari, 2020), in this study, we argue that the combination of both effects could trigger not only uncivil protest, but also specifically illegal protest.

So far, studies have found that online uncivil political discussion renders uncivil behavior, such as flaming, acceptable, and the more acceptable incivility is perceived and normalized, the higher the intention to incur this type of uncivil behavior (Hmielowski et al., 2014). An innovative study using a combination of machine-learning tools and qualitative analysis found that violent and dehumanizing rhetoric on online platforms legitimizes acts of political violence against out-group members and increases the motivation for violent and illegal actions (Wahlström et al., 2021). Recent research found that hate speech on social media is positively associated with hate crimes on the streets (Müller & Schwarz, 2021; Williams et al., 2020). However, while the existing literature has managed to connect online incivility with illegal behaviors (e.g., crime), to our knowledge, there are no studies specifically analyzing online incivility with illegal political protest behavior. Therefore, our second hypothesis is as follows:

H2: Online uncivil discussion is positively associated with illegal protest participation.

2.3. The Mediating Role of Online Incivility Between Online Discussion and Illegal Protest

Luckily, although online incivility is becoming more frequent, it is still a rare behavior. Previous research found that generally, not all online political discussions are equally civil, but most of them are (Papacharissi, 2004). Even more, those who frequently engage in online political discussions are more civil than rare online political discussers (Coe et al., 2014). Recent experimental evidence shows how in the context of a high issue and affective polarization, civil deliberation while not changing position on particular issues, does decrease affective polarization (Shen & Yu, 2021). Moreover, frequent online political discussion is positively related not only to democratic attitudes such as higher political efficacy (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2019), but also to civil and democratic forms of political participation, both conventional and unconventional (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2021; Kwak et al., 2005; Wojcieszak, 2009).

However, the literature is both scarce and inconclusive regarding whether *regular online political discussion* fosters or discourages *particularly unlawful* political actions. On the one hand, online discussion is positively related to the willingness to stand up against

out-group members (Wojcieszak, 2009). Moreover, frequent online discussions between opposed groups are positively related to more frequent violent confrontations between groups on the streets (Gallacher et al., 2021). On the other hand, there is no solid empirical evidence supporting that political discussion in online echo-chambers per se lead to offline violent extremism (O'Hara & Stevens, 2015).

We argue these mixed results could be clarified by introducing incivility into the equation. In the previous section, we argued that the style of online discussions matters in explaining illegal political acts. So, while regular online political discussions seem to foster democratic attitudes and behaviors, if these online discussions turn uncivil, the latter might reverse democratic attitudes and activate illegal protestors. As a result, we contend that to the extent that online political discussion increases the chances of being engaged in both civil and uncivil discussion, the above-mentioned mixed results of online discussion on illegal protest could be a product of the mediating role of uncivil discussion. Therefore, considering the somewhat contradictory results found in the literature between online discussion and illegal political activity, we pose the following research question:

RQ1: Is the relationship between online discussion and illegal protest participation mediated by online uncivil discussion?

3. Methods

3.1. Sample

This study employed data from a diverse US online panel survey collected for a large research project on attitudinal and behavioral outcomes of uses of new and traditional media across two waves (June 2019 for Wave 1, October 2019 for Wave 2 [hereafter W1 and W2]). The research unit at the University of Vienna contracted IPSOS Austria to provide the subjects for the survey which was fielded in the US from a nationally drawn sample. All questions in the questionnaire were administered via Qualtrics at the University of Vienna, Austria. Aiming at US national representativeness, IPSOS curates a massive opt-in panel of respondents of hundreds of thousands of US individuals. They collected a subsample of 3,000 individuals from this pool, matching key demographic elements from the US census. The final sample left 1,338 valid cases in W1, yielding a cooperation rate of 45.5%, and 511 valid cases in W2, yielding a cooperation rate of 40.9%. We found that there might be some systematic differences between Wave 1 to Wave 2 for the strengthening of the relationship among key variables (see Table 3 in the Supplementary File). However, given the case differences in W1 and W2, our findings over time are more critical since the sample attrition makes it harder to capture participation behaviors.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Criterion Variable

The dependent variable illegal protest participation measures engagement with illegal protest. Adapted from Gil de Zúñiga and Goyanes (2021), participants were asked how frequently (1 = *never*; 10 = *all the time*) they have participated in the following activities: (a) Participating in political rallies or protests that break the law; (b) seizing buildings such as factories, government buildings, university offices, etc.; (c) participating in a confrontation with police or other governmental authorities.; and (e) being part of political activities that may result in public or private property damage (e.g., breaking windows, vehicles, street signs, etc.; W1 Cronbach's α = .98; M = 2.30; SD = 2.35; W2 Cronbach's α = .98; M = 1.90; SD = 2.03). Since our criterion variable "illegal protest participation" was skewed, which might lead to problems in model fit. Therefore, we have transformed our criterion variable by square rooting it (W1 M = 1.37; SD = .64; W2 M = 1.27; SD = .58) before including it in all of our regression models.

3.2.2. Independent Variables

Uncivil discussion measures the frequency individuals engage in uncivil online discussion with others based on a scale from Goyanes et al. (2021). Participants were asked how often (1 = *never*; 10 = *all the time*) they talked about politics or public affairs *online* with the following people: (a) People who do NOT discuss politics in a civil manner, and (b) people who have insulted/intimidated/threatened you (W1 Spear-Brown ρ = .89; M = 2.53; SD = 2.40).

Ideological extremity measures the distance to the mean ideological position on both political and economic issues (Bartels, 2002; Huckfeldt et al., 2004), and it is constructed in two steps. First, we constructed a two-item index for which participants were asked to answer the following two questions: (a) On political issues, where would you place yourself on a scale of 0–10, where 10 = *strong conservative* and 0 = *strong liberal*?; and (b) on economic issues, where would you place yourself on a scale of 0–10, where 10 = *strong conservative* and 0 = *strong liberal*? (W1 Spearman-Brown ρ = .85; M = 6.44; SD = 2.80). In the beginning, the ideological position of each individual in the sample was calculated by averaging these two items. Next, we subtracted individuals' ideological position from the mean of the entire sample, which gave us the distance of the individuals' ideological position from the whole sample's ideological position. Then, ideological extremity was constructed by obtaining the absolute values of the distance of the ideological position (M = .80; SD = .60). In this case, the higher value indicated the higher ideological extremity.

3.2.3. Control Variables

Legal protest participation measures individuals' engagement with legal protest which will be controlled in this study. Based on measures from Gil de Zúñiga and Goyanes (2021), respondents were asked how frequently they did (1 = *not at all*; 10 = *a great deal*) (a) participate in permitted demonstrations and political rallies, (b) participate in peaceful protests, and (c) partake in legal protests for political reasons (W1 Cronbach's α = .96; M = 2.86; SD = 2.58).

Political interest taps into subjects' overall interest in politics and current affairs (Lupia & Philpot, 2005; Verba & Nie, 1987) by including the following two questions (1 = *not at all*; 10 = *a great deal*): (a) How interested are you in information about what is going on in politics and public affairs?; and (b) how closely do you pay attention to information about what's going on in politics and public affairs? The two items were combined into an index that yielded a robust reliability Spearman-Brown coefficient (W1 Spearman-Brown ρ = .90; M = 6.13; SD = 2.72).

Traditional media news use was measured by asking respondents to indicate how often (1 = *never*; 10 = *all the time*) in the past month they did get news from the following media sources: (a) network TV news (e.g., ABC, CBS, NBC); (b) local television news (cf. local affiliate stations); (c) national newspapers (e.g., *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*); (d) local newspapers (e.g., *The Oregonian*, *Houston Chronicle*, *The Miami Herald*); (e) MSNBC cable news; (f) CNN cable news; (g) FOX cable news; and (h) radio news (e.g., NPR, talk shows; 8 items, W1 Cronbach's α = .88; M = 4.50; SD = 1.91).

Social media news use was captured by multiple scales that were used to measure the frequency with which subjects use social media to consume news and public affairs information (Goyanes et al., 2021). Respondents were asked to indicate how often in the past month they got news from the following sources including "local news on social media," "national news on social media," "Facebook," "Twitter," "Snapchat," "LinkedIn," "WhatsApp" or "Instagram." Additionally, respondents were asked to think of the social media they use the most and how often they did use it to "stay informed about current events and public affairs," "stay informed about my local community," and "get news about current events from mainstream media (such as CNN or ABC)." All 11 items are measured on a 1–10 Likert type scale (1 = *never*; 10 = *all the time*) and combined into an index after examining its construct reliability (W1 Cronbach's α = .91, M = 3.60, SD = 2.07).

Adapted from Eveland and Hively's (2009), offline political discussion measures the frequency individuals discuss politics with others offline. Participants were asked how often (1 = *never*; 10 = *all the time*) they talked about politics or public affairs *offline* with the following people: spouse/partner, family, relatives; friends; neighbors, co-workers you know well; acquaintances;

strangers; neighbors, co-workers you don't know well; people who agree with you; people whose political views are similar to yours; people from a different race or ethnicity; people from a different social class (W1 Cronbach's α = .93, M = 3.85, SD = 2.07).

Online political discussion measures the frequency individuals discuss politics with others online (Eveland & Hively, 2009). Participants were asked how often (1 = *never*; 10 = *all the time*) they talked about politics or public affairs *online* with the following people: spouse/partner, family, relatives; friends; neighbors, co-workers you know well; acquaintances; strangers; neighbors, co-workers you don't know well; people who agree with you; people whose political views are similar to yours; people from a different race or ethnicity; people from a different social class (W1 Cronbach's α = .96, M = 3.33, SD = 2.75).

Adapted from Goyanes et al. (2021), offline uncivil discussion measures the frequency individuals engage in uncivil discussion with others offline. Participants were asked how often (1 = *never* to 10 = *all the time*) they talked about politics or public affairs *offline* with the following people: (a) people who do NOT discuss politics in a civil manner, and (b) people who have insulted/intimidated/threatened you (W1 Spearman-Brown ρ = .87, M = 2.62, SD = 2.33).

The following demographic variables were also controlled in the present study (see Bachmann & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013): age (18–22 years: 7.1; 36–55: 39.7%; 23–35: 25.2%; 56 or older: 28%), education (less than high school: 3.6%; high school: 31.6%; some college: 25%; Master's degree: 15.5%; Bachelor's degree: 11.8%; some graduate education 6.7%; professional certificate: 4%; and Doctoral degree: 1.9%), ethnicity or race (75.2% majority: white), and income (annual household income where 1 = *0 to 14,999* and 7 = *2000,000 or more*; M = 3.6, SD = 1.47).

3.3. Data Analysis

First, we ran a bivariate zero-order correlation to showcase the association between all the variables of interest (see Table 1). Second, cross-sectional, lagged, and autoregressive regression models were executed to test the relationship between ideological extremity, offline/online uncivil discussion, and illegal protest. Third, PROCESS model 4 (Hayes, 2017) was used to test whether online uncivil discussion mediated the relationship between online political discussion and illegal protest.

4. Results

H1 proposed that ideological extremity would be positively related to illegal protest participation. Surprisingly, the cross-sectional regression model showed that ideological extremity was negatively associated with illegal protest (β = −.042, p < .01). This means that the

higher ideological extremity led to lower engagement with illegal protest. The lagged regression model illustrated that ideological extremity was not significantly associated with illegal protest (β = .013, p > .05) and so did the autoregressive model (β = .053, p > .05; see Table 2). As a result, we reject H1.

H2 proposed that online uncivil discussion would be positively related to illegal protest participation when controlling for other forms of political discussion. Our cross-sectional (β = .206, p < .001), lagged (β = .260, p < .001) regression model showed that online uncivil discussion was the only form of political discussion that remains significantly and positively associated with illegal protest over time. However, online uncivil discussion was marginally positively related to illegal protest participation in the autoregressive regression model (β = .120, p = .07).

RQ1 asked whether there was any indirect effect between online discussion and illegal protest participation. A possible mediating role of online uncivil discussion among online political discussion and illegal protest was tested through PROCESS model 4 (Hayes, 2017). As depicted in Figure 1, the indirect effect of online discussion on illegal protest engagement through online uncivil discussion was significant in the cross-sectional model (β = .020, p < .001, 95% CI = [.012, .029]). More specifically, online political discussion was positively related to online uncivil discussion significantly (β = .369, p < .001) and which in turn was positively associated with illegal protest engagement (β = .055, p < .001). Interestingly, the direct effect of online political discussion was significantly and negatively associated with illegal protest engagement (β = −.021, p < .01).

However, when these same effects were analyzed over time, both direct effects of online discussion on illegal protest disappeared (p > .05) in lagged an autoregressive analysis, while the indirect effect of online discussion through online uncivil discussion also turned non-significant (β = .013, p > .05, 95% CI = [−.004, .031] in the autoregressive model). The only relationship that remained significant across all models was the positive and direct association over time between online uncivil discussion and illegal protest engagement.

5. Conclusions

While deliberative theory would suggest that ideological extremity and uncivil discussion have pernicious effects on democracy (Benhabib, 2021), some researchers found that under certain contexts, both phenomena could also have beneficial effects in terms of political engagement (Brooks & Geer, 2007; van der Meer et al., 2009). However, all political behaviors might not equally contribute to the sustainment of democracy (Chadha et al., 2012), and this is why this paper explored how both phenomena—ideological extremity and uncivil discussion—impact uncivil and unlawful political behavior, such as illegal protest.
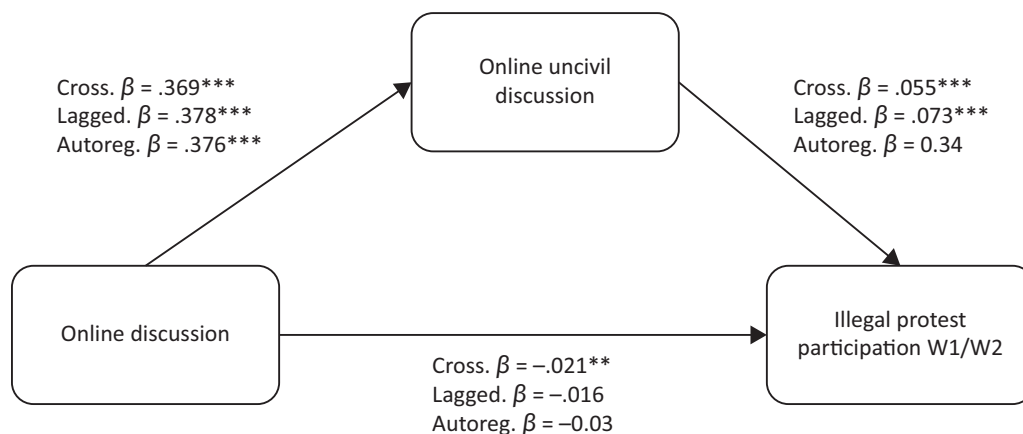
Table 1. Zero-order correlations of key variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1. Age	1															
2. Gender (female)	.142**	1														
3. Education	.199**	−.077**	1													
4. Income	.158**	.119**	.481**	1												
5. Race (white)	.332**	−.128**	.094**	.159**	1											
6. Traditional news use [W1]	−.003	−.076**	.096**	.121**	−.120**	1										
7. Social media news use [W1]	−.409**	−.185**	−.05	−.060*	−.227**	.566**	1									
8. Legal protest [W1]	−.288**	−.162**	−.012	−.082**	−.228**	.420**	.528**	1								
9. Political interest [W1]	.223**	−.035	.247**	.231**	.055	.423**	.088**	.117**	1							
10. Ideological extremity [W1]	.052	−.149**	.026	.024	.022	.01	−0.02	0.037	.211**	1						
11. Offline discussion [W1]	−.070*	−.162**	.134**	.129**	−.107**	.409**	.353**	.373**	.463**	.205**	1					
12. Online discussion [W1]	−.252**	−.223**	.000	−.043	−.195**	.389**	.531**	.507**	.292**	.128**	.673**	1				
13. Offline uncivil discussion [W1]	−.287**	−.192**	−.04	−.063*	−.177**	.412**	.529**	.557**	.143**	0.014	.534**	.595**	1			
14. Online uncivil discussion [W1]	−.324**	−.211**	−.028	−.062*	−.193**	.387**	.547**	.576**	.129**	0.043	.481**	.730**	.795**	1		
15. Illegal protest participation [W1]	−.346**	−.212**	−.062*	−.088**	−.229**	.394**	.587**	.787**	0.03	−0.059*	.274**	.449**	.593**	.623**	1	
16. Illegal protest participation [W2]	−.308**	−.132**	.042	−.053	−.221**	.318**	.545**	.489**	0.040	−0.038	.130**	.315**	.417**	.499**	.629**	1

Notes: Sample size = 1,337 (W1); 511 (W2); cell entries are two-tailed zero-order correlation coefficients; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; Pearson coefficients based on bootstrapping to 5,000 samples with confidence intervals set at 95%.

Table 2. Cross-sectional, lagged, and autoregressive regression models testing uncivil discussion (offline & online) and illegal protest.

	Illegal protest participation W1 (crossectional)	Illegal protest participation W2 (lagged)	Illegal protest participation W2 (autoregressive)
Block 1: Autoregressive term			
Illegal protest participation W1	—	—	.478***
ΔR^2	—	—	45.5%
Block 2: Demographics			
Age	–.016	–.078	–.074
Gender (female)	–.061**	–.114**	–.093*
Education	–.014	.126**	.102*
Income	.006	–.100*	–.089*
Race (white)	.013	–.032	–.009
ΔR^2	13.8%	14.6%	3.2%
Block 3: News use			
Traditional news use W1	.037	–.043	–.045
Social media news use W1	.182***	.304***	.222***
ΔR^2	25.5%	18.6%	3.1%
Block 4: Political attitudes			
Legal protest W1	.571***	.274***	.022
Political interest W1	–.087***	–.063	–.035
Ideological extremity W1	–.042*	.013	.053
ΔR^2	27.6%	8.2%	0.3%
Block 5: Discussion			
Offline discussion W1	–.061*	–.077	–.053
Online discussion W1	–.091**	–.074	–.012
Offline uncivil discussion W1	.082**	.037	–.006
Online uncivil discussion W1	.206***	.260***	.120 (*p* = .07)
ΔR^2	3.0%	4.0%	.7%
Total R^2	69.9%	45.3%	52.9%

Notes: Sample size = 1,337 (W1), 511 (W2); cell entries are final-entry standardized Beta (β) coefficients; * *p* < .05, ** *p* < .01, *** *p* < .001.

Figure 1. Cross-sectional, lagged, and autoregressive effects of online political discussion on illegal protest, mediated through online uncivil discussion. Notes: Sample size = 1,337 (W1), 511 (W2); path entries are standardized Beta coefficients; the variables in Table 2 were included as control variables in the model; bootstrap samples for CI—5,000 simulations; the model includes the same controls and predictors as the models in Table 2; the point estimates of the indirect effects are Cross-sectional—β = .020, *p* < .001, 95% CI = [.012, .029]; Lagged—β = .028, *p* < .001, 95% CI = [.009, .047]; Autoregressive—β = .013, *p* > .05, 95% CI = [–.004, .031].

We found that online incivility in political discussion is positively associated with unlawful protest across different models while ideological extremity and other forms of political discussion become less relevant. However, the significance of the role of online incivility in autoregressive model is marginally significant ($p < .10$) compared to cross-sectional model ($p < .001$) and lagged model ($p < .001$). Our findings contribute to the literature pointing at the pernicious effects of exposure to uncivil political discussion (Goovaerts & Marien, 2020; Hwang et al., 2014; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). More specifically, these results build upon previous studies which found that exposure to incivility fosters uncivil reactions (Barnidge, 2017; Masullo Chen & Lu, 2017).

While the previous studies mostly analyzed uncivil reactions in the digital sphere, this study goes further and shows how incivility online can also foster incivility on the streets. Our research confirms recent studies exploring whether exposure to incivility online could lead to uncivil behavior offline (Müller & Schwarz, 2021). In that sense, more research is needed to search for more uncivil political behaviors offline as a result of past experiences of online incivility. Interestingly, we also found that uncivil offline discussion does not impact illegal protest engagement over time, suggesting there are specific features in online discussions that fuel uncivil behavior (Barnidge, 2017; Eveland et al., 2011).

Another interesting finding is that once controlling for legal protest engagement and uncivil discussion, ideological extremity does not have an impact on illegal protest over time. These results refute prior research suggesting violent and high-risk activism was primarily encouraged by radicalization (Bosi & Della Porta, 2012; Della Porta, 2018; DiGrazia, 2014). In that sense, further studies exploring how uncivil discussion could be moderating the effects of ideological extremity on illegal protest are certainly welcomed.

We also explored the mediating role of online uncivil discussion on the relationship between online discussion and illegal protest and found it is significant for the cross-sectional and lagged model, but not for the autoregressive one. These findings suggest the need for better-quality panel data to confirm or reject these preliminary findings over time. Until then, this study reveals with distinct concurrent tests that higher exposure to online incivility is positively associated with a higher probability of illegal protest engagement, thus offering support for research suggesting that incivility online can lead to incivility offline (Müller & Schwarz, 2021; Wahlström et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2020). Moreover, in an age of increasing uncivil discourse (Dodd & Schraufnagel, 2013) and normalization of uncivil disobedience (Delmas, 2018), more research is needed to better understand the consequences of uncivil and illegal protest both on activists and the political system (Davenport et al., 2019; Vestergren et al., 2017).

Albeit important, these findings do not come with trivial limitations. First, self-reported frequency of ille-

gal protest behavior may reflect an under or overestimation of protest behavior. However, online surveys have been found to be a reliable tool to measure illegal behaviors that are susceptible to desirability bias (Holbrook & Krosnick, 2010; Persson & Solevid, 2014). Also, recent research using the same instrument for the measurement of legal and illegal protest has clarified how social media affects the likelihood of engaging in illegal protest behavior (Gil de Zúñiga & Goyanes, 2021). Second, our data were collected in the US before recent waves of disruptive protests, such as Black Lives Matter or the Capitol Riot. We should take our results with caution before generalizing them to other country settings. In that regard, further studies in different environments are certainly needed. Despite these limitations, our study is among the first to examine the relationship between uncivil online discussion and illegal protest engagement. Our findings contribute to a better understanding of the role of incivility, especially online incivility, spurring offline negative consequences to democracy. Particularly, it showcases that uncivil online discussion is more powerful in activating illegal political behaviors compared to other forms of discussion or ideological extremity.

Conflict of Interests

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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About the Authors
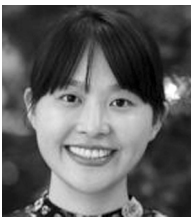
Bingbing Zhang is a Doctoral student in Mass Communications at the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications from the Pennsylvania State University in the US. She obtained a MA in Mass Communications from Texas Tech University and a MA in Journalism and Communications from Jinan University in China. Her research interests focus on political communication and media effects on individuals' political beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Email: bpz5077@psu.edu.

Isabel Inguanzo is a sociologist and holds a PhD in political science. She is associate professor at the University of Salamanca in Spain. Her research is primarily on comparative politics and activism, with a particular focus on gender and ethnic studies. She has published JCR peer-reviewed journal articles (i.e., *Information, Communication & Society*; *Territory, Politics, Governance*; *American Politics Research*). Email: isabel_io@usal.es.

Homero Gil de Zúñiga holds a PhD in Politics from Universidad Europea de Madrid and a PhD in Mass Communication from the University of Wisconsin–Madison. He serves as distinguished research professor at the University of Salamanca where he directs the Democracy Research Unit (DRU), as professor at Pennsylvania State University, and as senior research fellow at Diego Portales University, Chile. His work aims to shed an empirical social scientific light on how social media, algorithms, AI, and other technologies affect society. Relying on survey, experimental, and computational methods his work seeks to clarify the way we understand some of today's most pressing challenges for democracies. Email: hgz@usal.es.