

# Citizens' Uncivil Personalities, Political Discourse, and Religion

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While there is considerable research about political incivility in campaign advertising and on cable television, there is scant research that examines incivility within the electorate. That is, to what extent are ordinary citizens uncivil and what difference does it make? Using data from the 2012 American National Election Studies surveys, this research examines relationships between religion and two measures of mass-level incivility: uncivil personality traits and uncivil comments in open-ended mentions of dislikes of the major-party presidential candidates. We find that the relationships between religion and incivility differ significantly across our measures of incivility. While religiosity tends to promote civil personality characteristics and positive attitudes about members of religious groups this is not necessarily the case for civility in remarks about candidates. These findings underscore the importance of refining our conceptualizations and measures of civility as we attempt to understand the causes and consequences of citizen incivility.

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Americans are frequently admonished not to talk about politics or religion in polite company. The fear, of course, is that initially civil discussions can quickly turn into uncivil arguments that can ruin a perfectly good social event or endanger personal relationships. Yet it is clear that Americans not only talk about these two topics, but frequently do so together. For example, a recent Pew Research Center poll finds that about half of Americans think it is appropriate for churches and other religious institutions to express their views about political matters and day-to-day social issues, and a third say that churches should actively endorse political candidates—percentages that have increased in recent years (Lipka 2014).

At the same time, political commentators have become increasingly concerned by the perceived growth in political incivility. A decade ago, former member of Congress and Republican National Committee chair William Brock (2004, p. B7) wrote that “the evidence is compelling that we are today seeing a serious deterioration in political civility.” The perception of politics as uncivil continues to this day. For example, a recent article in *USA Today* makes the unsubstantiated claim that criticism of President Obama could be due to “the general rise of incivility in the culture at large” (Jackson 2012). Certainly a low point for civility was the 2009 outburst by Representative Joe Wilson (R-SC) who interrupted President Obama’s address to a joint session of Congress by yelling “You lie!” in response to Obama’s claim that this proposed healthcare legislation would not benefit those in the country illegally.

Some observers have also noted an uptick in incivility by ordinary citizens, and at least one has proposed mechanisms for handling uncivil outbursts at public meetings (Witt 2010). The public itself has also noted the growth of incivility, with half indicating that the tone of politics has declined since Obama has been in office, and only a scant few indicating that it has gotten

better (Page 2010). Respondents made it known that they blame the political elites for this, with more than two-thirds indicating that Americans should be ashamed of the way elected officials acted during the healthcare debate. In a recent Harris Poll, a similar percentage believed that the political climate was angrier and worse tempered than it had been in the past (Harper 2014).

Motivated by concerns that it may negatively impact democratic health, political scientists have also examined incivility. Most of this scholarly attention has focused on elite-level incivility—not the sort of mass-level incivility that may erupt around the Thanksgiving table when talk turns to religion or politics. That is, extant research mostly examines elite-level incivility (in campaign rhetoric, the media, or in other forms of political discourse) and how citizens respond to this incivility. Very little research examines incivility within the general public. The little mass-level research that does exist focuses mostly on the civility of online political communication. We are not aware of any research that uses public opinion data to examine mass-level incivility in the American public and its relationship with religion. This research attempts to help fill this gap in the literature, focusing on the relationship between incivility and various religious attitudes and beliefs.

### **Defining Incivility**

According to Bryan Gervais (2014a), uncivil discourse consists of confrontational or exaggerated comments made with an intentionally disrespectful tone. That is, uncivil discourse is intentionally disrespectful, insulting, or hyperbolic (Gervais 2014c). Incivility therefore includes mockery, name-calling, character attacks, exaggeration, histrionics, and conspiracy theories. Brooks and Greer (2007) define incivility as language that is inflammatory and superfluous. For Herbst (2010), civility is most closely related to respect for the democratic decision-making

process and includes a willingness to openly express one's opinion, listen to the opinions of others, and deliberate the issues of the day. Incivility, then, involves an unwillingness to listen to or engage with those holding different opinions.

Much research on incivility examines discourse in political campaigns, cable television news and commentary programs, talk radio, and online communications. In each of these forms of media, extreme incivility is often present (Sobieraj and Berry 2011). While the first three forms of media are dominated by political elites, the last is dominated by the general public.

### **Elite-level Incivility**

Much extant research focuses on incivility at the elite level. That is, to what extent are politicians, campaigns, and media personalities conveying uncivil information and what difference does exposure to this information make? Mutz and Reeves (2005) find that uncivil televised political discourse lowers levels of political trust. Indeed, exposure to “in-your-face” televised uncivil political discourse causes citizens to discredit opposing viewpoints (Mutz 2007). If citizens do not accept opposing arguments as legitimate, democratic society becomes less stable.

In a national, online survey-experiment, Gervais (2014c) has subjects read a short paragraph containing statements about the national debt purportedly made by party leaders. He finds that uncivil statements by party leaders are more likely to evoke uncivil written responses by subjects than are civil statements—especially when the uncivil statements are inconsistent with the subject's political predispositions.

However, not everyone agrees that elite-level incivility has deleterious effects on democracy. Brooks and Greer (2007) find that uncivil campaign ads do not significantly depress

political engagement as indicated by levels of political interest, intention to vote, and political trust. In fact, they argue that elite-level incivility may actually promote mass-level political engagement. Roderick Hart (2011) echoes this sentiment: “those who are most informed about political life and who truly care about it—that is, those who produce and consume great gobs of incivility—are precisely those who show up on Election Day. Noxious though it may be, political incivility appears to be a stimulant.” Susan Herbst (2010) argues that civility is neither inherently good nor bad, but rather is a strategic tool used (or avoided) in an attempt to gain political advantage. That is, incivility is a choice, not an inherently harmful social trait.

### **Mass-level incivility**

Exposure to uncivil discourse through the media may increase the willingness of the public to use uncivil discourse itself. Indeed, Gervais (2014a) finds that some consumers of talk radio and cable news programs (both of which often feature considerable uncivil ideological or partisan commentary) are also more likely to use uncivil discourse when evaluating presidential candidates. Thus, it appears that consumers of such programs may be adopting the sort of discourse that is often showcased by these programs—especially when the ideological or partisan slant of the program is consistent with their own political leanings.

In addition to being influenced by incivility broadcast by the media, citizens may also be influenced by uncivil discourse by fellow citizens. Gervais (2014b) finds that citizens mimic the incivility they are exposed to in online forums. He finds that being exposed to uncivil information that one disagrees with tends to evoke a strong sense of dislike or even anger. Being exposed to uncivil posts that the citizen agrees with, however, increases the likelihood that he or she will respond with additional uncivil posts of his or her own. This sort of discourse can

depresses the willingness of citizens to engage in productive deliberation about political issues, jeopardizing democratic legitimacy in the process.

### **Expectations about Incivility and Religion**

Very little research directly examines political incivility as it relates to religion. An exception is a survey of university students in Georgia that was conducted in response to legislative fears that colleges and universities were not fully respecting the range of political opinions. Herbst (2010) found that more students reported feeling comfortable talking about politics (70%) than about religion (58%). Students were also less inclined to discuss religious incivility than political incivility in open-ended questions, even though equal space was devoted to each topic on the survey.

In this research, we examine the relationship between mass-level incivility and attitudes about religion. While some of the research reported above examines the causes of mass-level incivility, it does not examine how incivility in the public is related to other attitudes and behaviors—and it certainly does not examine how mass-level incivility is related to attitudes about religion. Much (but not all) of the research reviewed above suggests that exposure to incivility has deleterious effects on citizens' attitudes and on democracy.

Incivility may be related to religiosity, although the direction of the relationship is uncertain. Those who are religious may also act more civilly, as most religious doctrine stresses ideas such as respect for your neighbors. Additionally, political discussions at church may make some citizens more politically engaged (Brown 2011). On the other hand, those who are more religious may be more certain about their beliefs and attitudes, making them less willing to respect the ideas of others. Those who are exposed to incivility through the television are less

likely to perceive opposing viewpoints as legitimate (Mutz 2007). Thus, exposure to uncompromising religious doctrine at church might have a similar effect since there appears to be declining respect for those with opposing views.

There may also be a relationship between incivility and holding factually accurate information related to religion. Those who are high in incivility may be less likely to have accurate religious knowledge as they may be less likely to expose themselves to diverse viewpoints. On the other hand, some research suggests that incivility may be acquired by following politics and consuming information from the media, characteristics that may be associated with holding factually accurate political information.

Incivility may also be related to attitudes towards religious groups, with those holding uncivil attitudes having more negative views, feelings, and stereotypes of religious groups. These expectations, however, are highly speculative, as there is very little previous research that examines relationships between mass-level incivility and religious attitudes and beliefs.

## **Data and Measures**

To examine the relationship between citizens' levels of incivility and their attitudes about religion, we rely on the 2012 American National Election Study. We employ two different conceptualizations and measures of incivility. First, we use a series of ten questions that are designed to measure respondents' underlying personality traits. Four of these questions are closely related to our understanding of incivility. These are the questions designed to measure respondents' agreeableness and their emotional stability (Gosling et al. 2003). These questions were asked of respondents who participated in either the internet or the computer-assisted, face-to-face administration of the 2012 ANES. Respondents were instructed, "Please mark how well

the following pair of words describes you, even if one word describes you better than the other.” The two pairs of words that measure agreeableness are “*critical, quarrelsome*” and “*warm, sympathetic*.” The two pairs of words that measure emotional stability are “*anxious, easily upset*” and “*calm, emotionally stable*.” For each pair of words, respondents indicated how well the pair described themselves using a seven-point scale ranging from extremely poorly to extremely well. We contend that those who act uncivilly are more likely to be critical, quarrelsome, anxious, and easily upset. Those who act civilly are more likely to be warm, sympathetic, calm, and emotionally stable. The questions containing the civil words were reverse coded and then the four personality items were averaged to create an incivility index ranging from 1 (most civil) to 7 (most uncivil).

Using this measure, the mean incivility score among the 5,499 respondents was 2.96 with a standard deviation of 0.96. The lowest score was 0 and the highest score was 6.75. The distribution of incivility scores is presented as Figure 1 and shows that there are relatively few respondents at the uncivil end of the scale and more respondents at the civil end of the scale.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Our second measure of incivility taps into political discourse as opposed to personality. In both the in-person and internet administrations of the pre-election survey, respondents were queried about their likes and dislikes of the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates. The series of specific questions were prefaced by the following: “Now I’d like to ask you about the good and bad points of the major candidates for President.” Because uncivil comments would not be expected when respondents indicate what they like about candidates, we focus just on candidate dislikes. For each of the candidates, respondents were asked: “Is there anything in particular about [Barack Obama/Mitt Romney] that might make you want to vote against him?”



Respondents indicating they had particular dislikes received the follow-up question, “What is that?” Internet respondents typed their responses in a text box while in-person interviewees were probed for additional dislikes until they had no more to mention. The publicly available data we use have verbatim responses with the exception of the redaction of information that could be used to personally identify the respondent.

To be sure, expressing specific reasons for wanting to vote against a candidate does not automatically constitute incivility. Negative claims are often civil. Rather, it is typically how people express negativity that leads to comments being regarded as uncivil. In examining our open-ended responses, we follow the four criteria outlined by Gervais (2014a) to identify those that are uncivil.<sup>1</sup> Table 1 presents the criteria and examples of civil and uncivil responses for each of them.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Given the outcome of the election, it is perhaps unsurprising that more respondents indicated having a specific reason to vote against Romney, 58%, than to vote against Obama, 46%.<sup>2</sup> Since only individuals citing a reason to vote against a candidate could demonstrate incivility, responses to the initial questions significantly limit the potential incidence rate of uncivil comments. In fact, only about 10% of all respondents exhibited incivility toward each candidate (9.8% for Obama, 10.6% for Romney). Of course, among respondents who provided a specific reason for voting against a candidate, the percentage of uncivil responses was higher.

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<sup>1</sup> As of now, one of the authors (Gershtenson) and a graduate assistant have independently coded the responses. The other author will also be coding the responses and we will then make assessments of reliability. For the purposes of this paper, the codings by Gershtenson are used for all analyses.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that one might expect differences as a function of the survey administration with respondents completing surveys via the internet exhibiting greater likelihood to cite reasons for voting against candidates, and, in particular, feeling more open to be uncivil in their comments. The first of these conjectures is partly supported—internet respondents were more likely to indicate a specific reason to vote against Obama than their face-to-face counterparts but were less likely to cite a rationale for voting against Romney. For both candidates (though much more so with Obama than with Romney), of those respondents indicating a reason to vote against the candidate, internet respondents were more likely than in-person respondents to demonstrate incivility.

Here, just over 21% of respondents were uncivil toward Obama and just less than 19% were toward Romney. On the whole, while incivility in American politics may indeed be on the rise, open-ended queries about attitudes toward presidential candidates do not suggest a pervasive culture of nastiness among the public.

A quick examination of the two measures of incivility suggests that they are indeed tapping into quite different conceptualizations. Independent samples difference of means tests for the personality-based incivility index as a function of respondents providing uncivil responses in the open-ended queries about voting against presidential candidates are statistically insignificant.<sup>3</sup> In other words, there appears to be no relationship between respondents' personality traits that may be associated with incivility and their use of uncivil discourse when evaluating the major party candidates in the 2012 presidential election.

Our interest is in the relationship between religion and incivility, and the 2012 ANES contains several questions that measure religiosity. Respondents are asked whether religion is important in their lives (coded 0 or 1), if they ever attend church (coded 0 or 1), the frequency of their church attendance (coded from 0, indicating never, to 5, indicating church attendance more than once a week), and the frequency with which they pray (coded from 0, indicating never, to 4, indicating more than once a day). Another way of gauging how religious respondents is through questions asking whether they consider themselves "born again" (coded 0 or 1) and the extent to which they view the Bible as the literal word of god (coded from 0, indicating that the Bible is the word of humans, to 2, indicating that the Bible is the literal word of god).

Three measures of religious knowledge are available. Respondents are asked to identify the religious affiliation of the major presidential candidates: Barack Obama and Mitt Romney.

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<sup>3</sup> This is true when just looking at responses about Obama, just Romney, or when distinguishing between respondents giving an uncivil response about either candidate and those not being uncivil toward either.

Respondents are considered to have given a correct answer (coded 1) if they indicate that Obama is Protestant or Christian and if they indicate that Romney is Mormon or Christian.<sup>4</sup> To examine whether incivility is positively associated with the belief that Obama is a Muslim, we use a dummy variable for the belief that Obama is a Muslim (coded 1).

To examine the relationship between incivility and exposure to potentially uncivil media sources, we use a series of questions that ask respondents whether they regularly watch, listen to, or read various television programs, radio programs, or websites with a known ideological perspective. Seventeen media sources have a clear conservative perspective: eight television programs, seven radio programs, and two websites. Four media sources have a clear liberal perspective: three radio programs and one website. In addition, we calculated the total number of conservative programs respondents regularly consume and the total number of liberal programs they consume to see how total consumption is related to incivility.

The last set of measures taps into respondents' attitudes about specific religious groups. The ANES contains a couple of questions about perceptions of Mormons. Respondents are asked whether Mormons are Christians (coded 1 for those who say they are) and the extent to which Mormon beliefs are in common with the respondents' beliefs (coded from 1, nothing in common, to 5, a great deal in common). In addition, respondents are asked to summarize their feelings toward various religious groups using feeling thermometer scales ranging from 0 (coldest) to 100 (warmest). Respondents were asked about their feelings toward atheists, Catholics, Mormons, Muslims, Christian fundamentalists, and Christians. Finally, respondents were asked a series of questions designed to tap into stereotypes they might hold about certain religious groups. Respondents were asked the extent to which they thought Catholics, Protestants, Muslims,

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<sup>4</sup> The results (presented in the next section) are substantively similar whether or not Christian is considered a correct answer for Mitt Romney's religion.

Mormons, and the non-religious were violent and patriotic. Each question is coded to range from 1 (indicating that the group is not violent or patriotic) to 5 (indicating that the group is violent or patriotic).

## **Results**

We begin examining relationships between incivility and religion by comparing incivility across major religious affiliations, including among those with no religious attachment. These results are presented as Table 2. Considering uncivil personalities, the most obvious observation is that there is little difference in incivility across major religious affiliations. In general, mainline protestants are the most civil, with an average score of 2.83 and Jews are the most uncivil, with an average score of 2.98—a range of only 0.15. The most distinctive group is the non-religious, who have a mean of 3.15, which is considerably higher than for those with a religious affiliation. Thus, those who lack a religious affiliation have slightly less civil personality traits than do those with a religious affiliation.

[Insert Table 2 here]

The relationship between religious affiliation and uncivil discourse, however, appears different. Here we witness Jews and Catholics (who had the most uncivil personality means of those with identified religious affiliations) exhibiting the lowest percentages of respondents offering uncivil comments about the presidential candidates. And, those lacking a religious affiliation are no more likely to be uncivil than are most Protestants, including mainline Protestants. As might be anticipated, but not shown in Table 2, the patterns are more complicated when distinguishing between assessments of Obama and Romney. While black protestants are the least likely to be uncivil toward Obama, they are the most likely to be uncivil toward

Romney. Jews and the non-religious exhibit a similar pattern, while the differences across candidates for the other religious groups are not as pronounced. These results suggest that other factors may be at least as important as religion in promoting uncivil discourse.

The results from Table 2 suggest that religiosity may be negatively correlated with uncivil personality traits. That is, those who are more active in their religious practice may also have more civil personalities. To examine this, we correlate incivility with four measures of religiosity: the importance of religion in the respondent's life, whether the respondent ever attends church, the frequency of church attendance, and the frequency of prayer. In addition, we include two variables that may measure the depth of one's religious commitment: whether the respondent is born again and whether the Bible is the literal word of god. The results, presented in Table 3, suggest a small but statistically significant negative relationship between incivility and all four direct measures of religiosity. That is, individuals more involved in religious activities exhibit fewer uncivil personality traits. Neither of the two variables that may indicate the depth of one's religious commitment is statistically significant.

[Insert Table 3 here]

The relationship between religiosity and uncivil political discourse again differs somewhat from that between religiosity and uncivil personal characteristics. Perhaps the most notable feature of the relationship between religiosity and uncivil discourse is its general weakness or absence. As shown in Table 3, the proportions of respondents displaying incivility toward either Obama or Romney did not vary dramatically across the categories of the religiosity measures. For example, virtually identical percentages of individuals saying religion was not important in their lives and those saying it was important were uncivil (19.3% v. 19.9%). For both the frequency of church attendance and the frequency of prayer, the relationship with

uncivil discourse is not monotonic. Individuals most and least religious by these measures were more likely to be uncivil than were their counterparts with more “moderate” levels of religiosity. Limiting the analysis to just respondents indicating they had anything in particular leading them to vote against either of the candidates yields substantively similar results.

If uncivil dispositions discourage deliberation and open dialogue about important political issues, those dispositions may be negatively correlated with factual information about religion. Thus, we examine the relationship between incivility and factual information about Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. We also examine the relationship between incivility and thinking that Obama is a Muslim. The results are presented as Table 4. Once again, the results show a modest but significant negative relationship between uncivil personality characteristics and knowing that Obama is a Protestant (or Christian) ( $r = -.10$ ) and knowing that Romney is Mormon (or Christian) ( $r = -.12$ ). This supports that notion that incivility and knowledge of the candidates may both be derived from political media exposure. Believing that Obama is a Muslim is not significantly related to uncivil attitudes, despite the observations of many that much incivility seems to be associated with false claims that Obama is a Muslim.

[Insert Table 4 here]

When considering discourse about the candidates, the relationship between incivility and factual information is more complicated. Here our interest is in the extent to which incivility appears rooted in factual awareness. Of respondents giving uncivil comments 33.2% correctly identified Obama’s religion while 36.8% of their civil counterparts knew this factual information. The gap in beliefs about Obama being a Muslim is more pronounced, with only 64.0% of uncivil respondents being factually correct compared to 78.8% of civil respondents. Together, these suggest that incivility may be at least partly rooted in a lack of factual

knowledge. However, the results for Romney offer a different picture. Knowledge of Romney's religion was considerably higher among uncivil respondents, 81.7%, than among others, 65.1%. So, while incivility may result from lack of knowledge, it may also result from possessing information about candidates that individuals find undesirable. And, the mentions of Romney's religion in uncivil comments about him would bear this out. The potential role of religion in the 2012 election is also illustrated by fact that far more individuals correctly identified Romney's religion than they did Obama's.

Previous studies argue that exposure to media that features commentators or guests engaging in uncivil discourse may promote incivility among the public. Table 5 includes the correlation between our uncivil personality index and several television, radio, and internet programs that may have an ideological slant and on which there may be exposure to incivility. While we include shows with both a liberal and conservative perspective, respondents reported watching many more conservative than liberal shows. Overall, there is little evidence to support a systematic link between exposure to ideological media and incivility. For 17 of the 21 programs, there is no significant correlation with incivility. There is, however, a small but statistically significant correlation between incivility and exposure to four of the media programs: *Hannity*, *Huckabee*, *On the Record with Greta Van Susteren*, and *The Ed Shultz Show*. Three of these programs come from a conservative perspective, while one (*The Ed Shultz Show*) has a liberal perspective. *Hannity* features considerably more incivility than do the other three shows, which feature incivility with less frequency. In each case, the correlation coefficient is negative, indicating that exposure to these four shows is actually associated with more civility, not less—although the correlations are fairly modest ( $r \leq .06$ ).

[Insert Table 5 here]

The relationships between uncivil comments about presidential candidates and media consumption are in direct contrast. To begin, the direction of the relationship is different. With the lone exception of the *America Live* television program, individuals receiving information from the sources analyzed have higher percentages that give uncivil comments about either Obama or Romney than do those not using the given media outlets. Furthermore, the magnitudes of the differences appear quite substantive for many of the programs, and the relationship between using the source and incivility is statistically significant for 16 of the 21 programs. Finally, in contrast to uncivil personality characteristics, none of the liberal media sources have a significant relationship with uncivil discourse. Overall, it appears that those individuals consulting conservative media outlets for political information are more prone to use uncivil language in evaluating presidential candidates.

Perhaps media exposure has a cumulative effect. That is, overall consumption of these news sources may be related to increased incivility. Similarly, those whose primary information source about the campaign is from opinionated media and those who are simply more inclined to follow the campaign may also be more likely to be exposed to uncivil discourse. These results are presented as Table 6. For three of the four variables, media consumption once again seems to share a small but significant negative relationship with uncivil personality traits; those who consume more media or follow politics more closely (presumably through the media) are also slightly more civil.

[Insert Table 6 here]

As with use of individual media sources, the analysis of uncivil political discourse yields different conclusions. While individuals who rely primarily on opinionated news sources are not more likely than others to be uncivil about candidates, the other measures of media consumption



and interest in politics do appear to be linked to incivility. Specifically, while over one-quarter of respondents saying they were “very much interested” in politics were uncivil, only 13% of those saying they were “not much interested” in politics were uncivil. Similarly, as consumption of media with a given ideological orientation increased, individuals were increasingly likely to demonstrate incivility. On the whole then, these results suggest that people more engaged in politics are more willing to voice uncivil assessments of candidates.

The next analyses examine the relationship between incivility and attitudes about members of different religious groups. The 2012 ANES contains three groups of questions that are helpful in this regard: attitudes about Mormons, feeling thermometer scores for members of various religious groups, and questions tapping into stereotypes about members of certain groups being violent or patriotic. Correlations between the uncivil personality index and these attitudes are presented as Table 7. The results here are largely as expected. Having more traditional or welcoming views about Mormons (those who consider Mormons to be Christians and those who view Mormon beliefs as similar to their own beliefs) is negatively correlated with incivility. Similarly, having warmer feelings towards Catholics, Mormons, Muslims, and Christians is negatively correlated with incivility. Simply put, those with warm feelings towards members of these groups are also more civil. Correlations between incivility and feelings toward atheists and Christian fundamentalists are not statistically significant. The results related to stereotypes are also as expected: incivility is positively correlated with thinking that other religious groups are violent and negatively correlated with thinking that other religious groups are patriotic. These relationships hold for all groups included in these questions: Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Mormons, and the non-religious.

[Insert Table 7 here]

To examine relationships between attitudes toward religious groups and uncivil political discourse, we compare mean values for the attitudinal variables for individuals who were uncivil toward either presidential candidate and those who were not. Table 7 displays differences in means and paints a rather complicated picture. In a number of instances, the results are consistent with those for uncivil personality traits and expectations: incivility is associated with cooler feelings toward the religious groups and with less positive stereotypes about the groups. For example, individuals engaging in uncivil discourse had statistically significant lower values on their feeling thermometer ratings for atheists, Catholics, and Muslims. Similarly, the uncivil were more likely to view Muslims as violent and unpatriotic.

In contrast, there are several relationships with attitudes toward religious groups that differ across the incivility measures, and where the relationships can be regarded as somewhat surprising for uncivil political discourse. For example, individuals using uncivil discourse exhibited a greater propensity to indicate Mormons' beliefs were like their own than did their civil counterparts. Uncivil respondents were also less likely than the civil to regard Protestants and Mormons as violent, and, the uncivil actually had more positive assessments of the patriotism of Catholics, Mormons, and the non-religious than did the civil.

The results presented so far examine a variety of relationships between incivility and other variables. In our final analyses we estimate multivariate models explaining incivility, as measured by both personality traits and open-ended comments about the presidential candidates. Here, the independent variables are religiosity (frequency of church attendance), closeness of following the election, the number of conservative and liberal news sources consumed, and the strength of partisanship. The news consumption variables are suggested by the existing literature linking mass-level incivility to elite-level incivility showcased in the media. Thus, higher news

consumption should lead to greater incivility. Closely following the election means that respondents are more likely to be exposed to both uncivil media coverage and to uncivil television advertisements and this variable should also therefore have a positive effect on incivility. Having stronger partisan attachments should similarly promote incivility as such individuals may be more passionate about politics and more convinced that their policy preferences are the best (or only) way to go. Our expectations regarding the effect of religiosity are complicated by the preceding analyses. The correlations with the uncivil personality index suggest that religiosity should depress incivility (that is, encourage civility). On the other hand, we anticipate a positive relationship between religiosity and uncivil political discourse.

The results of these analyses are presented as Table 8. Consistent with the bivariate results, the ordinary least squares estimation show that church attendance and following politics depress uncivil personality traits while media consumption has no independent effect. Contrary to expectations, strength of partisanship also depresses incivility. While these results are statistically significant, they are substantively modest, and the model  $R^2$  only explains 3 percent of the variation in incivility.

[Insert Table 8 here]

As with the model for uncivil personality traits, the logistic regression model for uncivil discourse leaves much unexplained. Beyond that, however, there are few similarities between the results. The models share only one independent variable that is statistically significant, and it carries opposite signs in the two models. In explaining the likelihood of incivility in comments about candidates, following politics more closely has the expected positive effect. Also consistent with expectations, greater consumption of conservative media promotes incivility among citizens. On the other hand, religiosity, at least as measured by the frequency of church

attendance, has no discernible effect on engaging in uncivil political discourse.

## **Discussion**

The results of our analyses present a rather complicated portrait for the relationship between religion and civility in the U.S. electorate. Religion appears to diminish incivility (or, to state the same thing in reverse, religion appears to encourage civility) when measuring incivility by considering individuals' self-identifications with pairs of words describing their personalities. Those who regard religion as more important in their lives, who attend religious services more frequently, and who pray more often are more likely to indicate that they are warm, sympathetic, calm, and emotionally stable. This is consistent with the notion that religion may encourage respect for and empathy toward others who might be different. Likewise, those who know that Obama is a Protestant or that Romney is a Mormon have more civil dispositions than those who do not know these things. In general, the evidence does not support the notion that those who are more religiously observant possess personality characteristics that might be regarded as uncivil and lead to incivility in politics. In a similar vein, individuals with warmer feelings toward a variety of religious groups and those who have more positive stereotypes of religious groups (less likely to regard them as violent and more likely to regard them as patriotic) also display lower propensities to have uncivil personality traits than do those more critical of those groups.

While measuring incivility through the personality items suggests religion may make society more civil rather than less so, our examination of uncivil political discourse does not necessarily support this assessment. It is those individuals who attend religious services at least once a week and who pray more than once a day who illustrate the greatest tendency to make uncivil comments when asked about presidential candidates. Negative stereotypes of some religious groups and cooler feelings toward them also are associated with higher rates of

incivility. The analyses of uncivil comments, however, do not suggest that religion always promotes incivility. For example, individuals with accurate knowledge of Obama's religion were less likely to be uncivil than those believing he is a Muslim. And, respondents giving uncivil responses held several more positive stereotypes of religious groups, including Catholics, Protestants, and Mormons.

As with religion, our findings regarding relationships between media consumption and incivility differed across the incivility measures. There appears to be little connection between uncivil personality traits and media consumption, even of specific shows that feature high levels of elite incivility like *The O'Reilly Factor*, the *Glenn Beck Program*, and *The Rush Limbaugh Show*. If anything, the results hint that the relationship may work the other way around—that exposure to uncivil media programs may actually reduce incivility (all four significant correlations showed a negative relationship with incivility). On the other hand, media consumption appears to have a much greater impact on citizens' uncivil discourse toward presidential candidates. And, these relationships were consistent with expectations: for the vast majority of individual programs examined, individuals consuming the programs demonstrated greater incivility than did non-consumers.

Taken together, our findings suggest that there is considerable work to be done to understand incivility at the mass level. To our knowledge, this research marks the first effort to measure incivility with close-ended public opinion data. We have done so using four of the personality measures in the ANES that are suggestive of incivility. Yet, we recognize that possessing personality traits that might be regarded as uncivil and might promote uncivil behavior is not equivalent to incivility itself. The indirect nature of the personality measure is underscored by the lack of a significant relationship with our other measure of incivility, the

nature of citizens' responses to open-ended queries about reasons to vote against the major party presidential candidates. While the use of specific language and the tone of comments more directly tap into the civility of mass-level discourse, this measure also has potential problems. A willingness to express incivility in an interview with a stranger, or when typing in a text box, may not translate into uncivil behavior in other contexts. Thus, there is a clear need to more fully explore how mass-level incivility is measured

The fact that very little extant research exists about mass-level incivility also means that hypotheses about its potential causes and effects needs to be further refined. This manuscript examines some potential relationships involving incivility and religion, but it not intended to be as theoretically driven as is ultimately desired. Furthermore, our findings are consistent with some expectations and popular beliefs but also differ in many regards. The results here do suggest, however, that there is likely a beneficial relationship between religion and civility that is deserving of further study with more fully developed theoretical expectations. A more thoroughly tested measure of incivility that can be used to test a more theoretically driven set of hypotheses has the potential for uncovering important relationships about incivility in the public and the role of religion in shaping political attitudes. Given the continued importance of religion in the everyday lives of so many Americans and apparent increases in incivility at the elite level, refining measures and more fully developing and testing hypotheses about the relationships between religion and mass incivility would appear critical to a better understanding of the American electorate.

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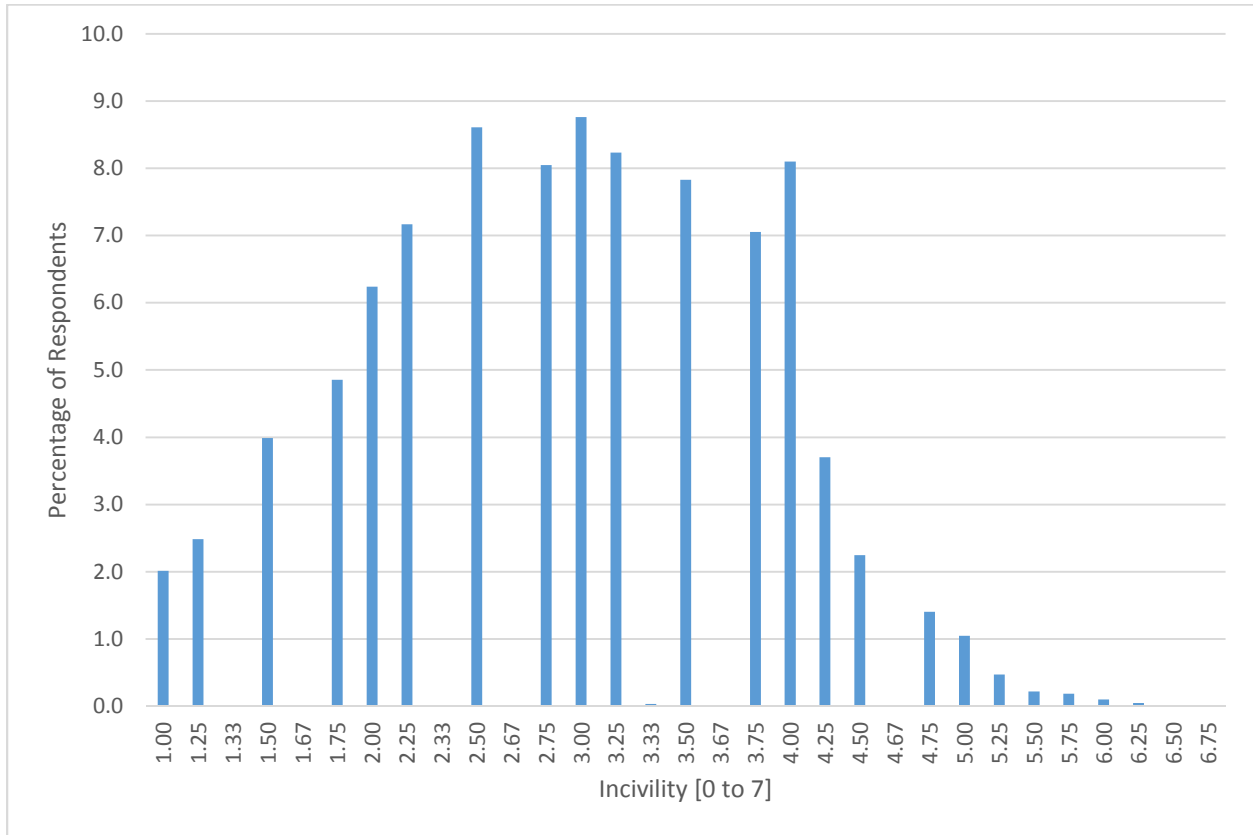
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**Figure 1**  
**Mass-level Incivility in the 2012 ANES**



**Table 1**  
**Criteria and Examples of Incivility in Open-Ended Responses about Presidential Candidates**

Criterion*	Civil/Uncivil	Example Response <sup>†</sup>
Criterion 1: “Namecalling, mockery, and character assassination”	Civil	He has had four years and has done nothing to improve the economy and I don't believe he tells the public the truth.
	Uncivil	His deception and lies to the American people and inexperience on how to serve as a leader.
Criterion 2: “Spin and misrepresentative exaggeration”	Civil	he has wasted alot of borrowed money with not alot to show for it
	Uncivil	He says what we want to hear, but does what he wants. I believe he thinks we are stupid and will believe anything.
Criterion 3: “Histrionics”	Civil	He keep changing what he stands for and that worry me
	Uncivil	what has he done? signed how many hundred exect. orders giving him absolute power... no no no!!! spent more money than all past pres. combined!
Criterion 4: “Conspiracy theory”	Civil	n.a.
	Uncivil	He's a Muslim radical set to destroy the country, replace the constitution with Shariha law, and become dictator. He is an illegal sitting as president and should be on trial for treason with the senile democratic leadership.

\*The criteria here are taken directly from Gervais (2014a).

<sup>†</sup>These are the responses exactly as they appear in the ANES data, including misspellings, capitalization errors, etc.

**Table 2**  
**Uncivil Personalities and Political Discourse by Religious Affiliation**

	<u>Uncivil Personality Index</u>			<u>Uncivil Discourse</u>	
	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	% Uncivil	N
Mainline Protestant	2.83	662	0.93	20.1	703
Evangelical Protestant	2.86	1184	0.97	20.5	1268
Black Protestant	2.89	54	0.98	19.3	57
Roman Catholic	2.97	1269	0.93	15.3	1377
Undifferentiated Christian	2.90	750	0.97	24.0	803
Jewish	2.98	105	0.99	15.5	110
Other religion	2.96	239	0.96	22.1	253
Not religious	3.15	1162	0.98	20.7	1257
<b>Total</b>	<b>2.96</b>	<b>5425</b>	<b>0.96</b>	<b>19.7</b>	<b>5828</b>

**Table 3**  
**Relationships between Incivility and Religiosity**

	Correlation with Uncivil Personality Index	N	% Uncivil Discourse	N
Religion is Important	-.08**	5472		
No			19.3	1779
Yes			19.9	4103
Ever Attend Church	-.08**	5479		
No			20.9	2342
Yes			18.8	3546
Frequency of Church Attendance	-.12**	5471		
Never			20.8	2376
A few times a year			14.4	880
Once or twice a month			17.1	615
Almost every week			17.7	693
Once a week			24.2	752
More than once a week			22.2**	564
Frequency of Prayer	-.11**	5466		
Never			21.4	955
Once a week or less			16.3	987
A few times a week			17.1	1079
Once a day			17.9	1092
Several times a day			23.1**	1761
Born Again	-.02	4072		
No			18.2	2373
Yes			20.9*	1998
Bible is Word of God	-.02	5418		
Word of man			22.1	1260
Word of god, do not take literally			19.1	2660
Word of god, take literally			19.1	1904

\*Significant at .05 level; correlation for uncivil personality index, chi-square test for uncivil discourse.

\*\*Significant at .01 level; correlation for uncivil personality index, chi-square test for uncivil discourse.

**Table 4**  
**Relationships between Incivility and Factual Religious Information**

	Correlation with Uncivil Personality Index	N	Uncivil Discourse: % Correct on Factual Item	
			<u>Civil</u>	<u>Uncivil</u>
Knows Obama's Religion	-.10**	5440	36.8	33.2*
Knows Romney's Religion	-.12**	5449	65.1	81.7**
Thinks Obama is a Muslim	.004	4707	78.8	64.0**

\*Significant at .05 level; correlation for uncivil personality index, chi-square test for uncivil discourse.

\*\*Significant at .01 level; correlation for uncivil personality index, chi-square test for uncivil discourse.

**Table 5**  
**Relationships between Incivility and Media Consumption**

	Correlation with Uncivil Personality Index	N	% Uncivil Discourse: Use source – Don't Use	N
<b>Television</b>				
America Live (Fox)	0.02	4916	-3.5	5281
America's Newsroom (Fox)	0.01	4916	8.4**	5281
Fox Report	-0.01	4916	9.6**	5281
Hannity	-.030*	4916	17.4**	5281
Huckabee	-.051**	4916	20.1**	5281
O'Reilly Factor	-0.01	4916	15.5**	5281
On the Record with Greta Van Susteren	-.036*	4916	19.6**	5281
Special Report with Bret Baier	-0.02	4916	17.3**	5281
<b>Radio</b>				
Glenn Beck Program	0.00	2722	15.7**	2920
The Laura Ingraham Show	-0.04	2722	17.4**	2920
The Mark Levin Show	0.00	2722	23.4**	2920
The Neal Boortz Show	0.00	2722	15.5**	2920
The Rush Limbaugh Show	0.02	2722	16.7**	2920
The Savage Nation (Michael Savage)	0.00	2722	12.2**	2920
The Sean Hannity Show	-0.01	2722	16.3**	2920
<i>The Ed Shultz Show</i> <sup>†</sup>	-0.06**	2722	8.0	2920
<i>The Power (Joe Madison)</i> <sup>†</sup>	0.00	2722	1.9	2920
<i>The Thom Hartmann Program</i> <sup>†</sup>	0.01	2722	9.2	2920
<b>Websites</b>				
Drudge Report	0.01	2609	15.6**	2774
Fox News	0.00	2609	6.8**	2774
<i>Huffington Post</i> <sup>†</sup>	-0.02	2609	1.5	2774

<sup>†</sup>Liberal sources are indicated in italics.

\*Significant at .05 level; correlation for uncivil personality index, chi-square test for uncivil discourse.

\*\*Significant at .01 level; correlation for uncivil personality index, chi-square test for uncivil discourse.

**Table 6**  
**Relationships between Incivility and Cumulative Media Consumption**

	Correlation with Uncivil Personality Index	N	% Uncivil Discourse	N
Opinionated Media Consumption <sup>†</sup>	0.04	1848		
No			14.9	1721
Yes			12.1	248
Follows Politics	-.10 <sup>**</sup>	5495		
Not much interested			13.2	895
Somewhat interested			15.8	2460
Very much interested			25.5 <sup>**</sup>	2554
Total number of conservative media sources [0-17]	-.03 <sup>*</sup>	5258		
0			16.6	3804
1			19.7	834
2			27.2	294
5			32.1	106
10			46.4 <sup>^</sup>	28
Total number of liberal media sources [0-4]	-.04 <sup>*</sup>	3654		
0			21.6	3409
1			25.1	463
2			28.6	28
3			0.0 <sup>^</sup>	2

<sup>†</sup> Primary source of information about the presidential campaign television talk, public affairs, or news analysis programs; talk or news radio; internet, chat rooms, or blogs.

<sup>^</sup> Because there are expected cell counts of less than 5, chi-square test results are not reported for these.

<sup>\*</sup>Significant at .05 level; correlation for uncivil personality index, chi-square test for uncivil discourse.

<sup>\*\*</sup>Significant at .01 level; correlation for uncivil personality index, chi-square test for uncivil discourse.

**Table 7**  
**Relationships between Incivility and Beliefs and Attitudes about Religious Groups**

	Correlation with Uncivil Personality Index	N	Uncivil Discourse: Difference in Means (Uncivil – Civil)	N
Beliefs about Mormons				
Mormons Are Christians [0, 1]	-0.04**	5035	-0.015	5038
Mormon Beliefs Are Like Mine [1-5]	-0.07**	5074	0.093**	5079
Feeling Thermometer Scores [0-100]				
Atheists	0.00	5374	-2.642**	5379
Catholics	-0.08**	5440	-1.782**	5446
Mormons	-0.10**	5366	-0.352	5373
Muslims	-0.09**	5390	-6.814**	5397
Christian Fundamentalists	-0.02	5288	0.508	5294
Christians	-0.14**	5466	0.565	5472
Religious Stereotypes [1-5]				
Catholics are Violent	0.18**	3542	-0.032	3543
Protestants are Violent	0.19**	3538	-0.074**	3539
Muslims are Violent	0.09**	3531	0.383**	3532
Mormons are Violent	0.18**	3538	-0.062**	3539
Non-religious are Violent	0.10**	3539	0.039	3540
Catholics are Patriotic	-0.11**	3525	0.149**	3526
Protestants are Patriotic	-0.11**	3515	0.072	3516
Muslims are Patriotic	-0.04**	3523	-0.146**	3524
Mormons are Patriotic	-0.10**	3518	0.196**	3519
Non-religious are Patriotic	-0.06**	3524	0.250**	3524

\*Significant at .05 level (2-tailed); correlation for uncivil personality index, independent samples difference of means test for uncivil discourse.

\*\*Significant at .01 level (2-tailed); correlation for uncivil personality index, independent samples difference of means test for uncivil discourse.



**Table 8**  
**Explaining Incivility**

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	Uncivil Personality Index	Uncivil Political Discourse
Constant	3.39 (.07)	-2.20 (.18)
Frequency of Church Attendance [0 - 5]	-0.06** (.01)	-0.00 (.02)
Follow Politics Closely [1 - 3]	-0.11** (.03)	0.30** (.07)
Consumption of Conservative News [0 - 17]	0.01 (.01)	0.11** (.02)
Consumption of Liberal News [0 - 4]	-0.08 (.04)	0.11 (.10)
Strength of Partisanship [1 - 4]	-0.04** (.02)	0.02 (.04)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.03	-
Nagelkerke Pseudo- R <sup>2</sup>	-	0.04
Percent Correctly Predicted	-	77.9
N	3636	3882

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Cell entries are unstandardized coefficient estimates with standard errors in parentheses.

\* Significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\* Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).