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Online battles

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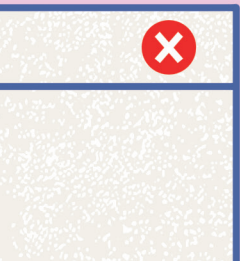
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CHAPTER 2

Online and offline battles: Usage of different political conflict frames¹

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Abstract

Conflict framing is key in political communication. Politicians use conflict framing in their online messages (e.g., criticizing other politicians) and journalists in their political coverage (e.g., reporting on political tensions). Conflicts can take a variety of forms and can provoke different reactions. However, the literature still lacks a systematic and theoretically grounded conceptual framework that accounts for the multi-dimensionality of political conflict frames. Based on literature from political epistemology, political communication, and related fields such as psychology, we present four conceptual dimensions of political conflicts: (1) the style (civil/uncivil); (2) the subject (personal/substantive); (3) whether it is about underlying moral/epistemic principles or not (deep/superficial conflict); and (4) whether it concerns a normative or factual issue. Results of a content analysis of newspaper articles and politicians' tweets confirm the usage of these conflict dimensions in the Netherlands during a non-election period. Interestingly, most of the conflicts are civil, and substantive, and do not highlight deep fundamental clashes. In light of the current societal concerns about the lack of respect in political debates and the deepening of our political divides, these findings can be considered encouraging.

Introduction

In recent years, politicians have adopted social media to communicate their viewpoints to the electorate and to compete with political elites (Ekman & Widholm, 2015; see also Chapter 1). As the clash of political beliefs is seen as a core element of politics, and debating incompatible views is one of politicians' main tasks (Schattschneider, 1975), politicians' online messages are often framed in terms of conflict with other politicians, parties, or views (Auter & Fine, 2016; Chapter 1). Politicians themselves use social media to directly attack one another or to emphasize fundamental political tensions. Journalists adopt conflict frames when covering politics too (Schuck et al., 2016): they report on political conflict in their news articles to represent political reality and showcase contrasting viewpoints. Journalists often believe it helps them to remain objective and critical (Bartholomé et al., 2015).

From a normative perspective, conflict has both positive and negative implications for democracy. According to deliberative democracy, the emphasis on conflict in the media seems valuable as debate about conflicting views is beneficial for democratic decision-making: through disagreement and discussions, decisions are made that are justifiable and acceptable to the people bound by them (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, p. 22). However, while political disagreement is inherent to politics, scholars worry that not all disagreements equally contribute to the well-functioning of democracy, especially when they are uncivil (Mutz & Reeves, 2005) and that by highlighting incompatibilities between viewpoints polarization is fostered (Van Aelst et al., 2017).

Empirical studies examining how conflict framing influences citizens report diverging findings. On the positive side, studies show that conflict informs and mobilizes citizens (Schuck et al., 2016). On the negative side, research uncovered that endless fighting can demobilize (Krupnikov, 2011; Chapter 1) and increase cynicism (Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Thorson et al., 2012). These contrasting findings may be explained by the fact that conflict, so far, has mainly been studied as a unified concept, yet conflicts can take a variety of forms. By examining what kinds of conflicts exist, we inform future endeavours to disentangle the effects of different kinds of conflict frames and assess their democratic quality.

The contribution of this study is two-fold. First, it enriches conflict-framing theory by unravelling and combining different dimensions of conflict that apply to journalistic and elite framing. While some studies did aim to disentangle the effects of specific conflicts by differentiating between one or two sub-dimensions of conflict (e.g., Bartholomé et al., 2018; Fridkin & Kenney, 2008), a comprehensive framework, that

accounts for the multi-dimensionality of conflict based on theoretical scrutiny, that is not geared to journalistic framing only (Bartholomé et al., 2018), and that discusses how different conflict characteristics relate to one another, is still missing. To do so, we draw on distinctions from political epistemology and political communication. Philosophers have discussed the concept of disagreement extensively (e.g., Frances, 2014; Kappel, 2018) and their insights provide a more nuanced and complete picture of how conflicts can vary. While civil or substantive conflicts might foster reasonable debate among citizens (Landemore, 2013), if these types of conflicts concern a longstanding entrenched political divide, they may hamper people from engaging in a fruitful discussion (De Ridder, 2021). Yet, deep conflicts have not been sufficiently accounted for in conflict framing literature, though perceptions among the public of political gridlocks may foster affective polarization (McLaughlin, 2016).

Second, we examine the conceptual dimensions of conflict framing within journalistic communication and, most importantly, direct communication by politicians on social media. The conflict frame is often studied as a journalistic news frame, yet social media offer politicians opportunities to control their messages without the interference of journalists, and the frames put forward by politicians also have an important influence on citizen's opinions and attitudes (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Hence, to understand the usage of different conflict frames, we believe it is crucial to test how well our framework applies to both traditional, as well as social media. More specifically, we conducted a content analysis of two related samples: Dutch newspaper articles and tweets.

Understanding conflict framing

Framing is a widely discussed concept in both political and communication science. Multiple definitions exist, the most prominent one referring to a process in which an actor emphasizes certain elements of a perceived reality over others in their (news) messages to foster a certain interpretation or moral evaluation of that reality (Entman, 1993, p. 52). De Vreese (2005) offers a less strict definition and defines a frame as “an emphasis in salience of different aspects of a topic” (p. 53). While its usage is heavily contested (e.g., Cacciatore et al., 2016), framing still offers a prominent approach to studying media content and effects. One of the most frequently applied types is the conflict frame. This is not surprising, given that frames result from conflicts between collective and individual social and media actors (Vliegenthart & Van Zoonen, 2011, p. 107). If those conflicting elements are emphasized, a conflict frame is present (De Vreese, et al., 2001, p. 109). It highlights opposition between individuals, groups, or

institutions in beliefs, values, and goals (Putnam, 2006). Importantly, a conflict frame is a type of generic frame which means that it is not tied to a specific topic but instead transcends themes (De Vreese, et al., 2001). The adopted conceptualization of (conflict) framing in this paper is deliberately broad, as we try to provide a comprehensive account of (types of) conflicts that occur in elite and media communication. While conflict framing does not have to be political, we focus on disagreement between political actors. Specifically, we consider multi-sided disagreement, for instance, if a journalist discusses incompatible political views, as well as one-sided confrontation, for instance when a political actor says something negative or critical about the opponent (Lengauer et al., 2012). We differentiate between strategic and journalistic framing (Hänggli & Kriesi, 2010; Lecheler & Vreese, 2019). Conflict framing in the media typically involves journalists' presentation of competing viewpoints. Journalists are not part of the conflict and instead reflect on or actively construe conflict. With strategic framing, in contrast, only one viewpoint tends to be presented, the one that is put forward by the political actor who communicates the message. Consequently, conflict framing in politicians' strategic messaging may come in the form of one-sided criticism.

A review of the literature reveals four prominent dimensions of political conflict frames. We have identified these dimensions by focusing on theories that clarify how people and politicians can disagree with each other. We left dimensions out that are not empirically observable². Moreover, since the conflict frame is generic, we focus on overarching dimensions that can be applied to any kind of topic. Our framework is largely based on literature from political epistemology and communication, but we have also considered conceptualizations of conflict in related fields (e.g., interpersonal conflict), and find that there is sufficient overlap between dimensions, signalling that our distinctions grasp the fundamental dimensions of conflict.

According to political communication literature, there are two dimensions of conflicts: first, the style of the conflict (i.e., civil or uncivil) and, second, the target of the conflict (i.e., personal or substantive; Brooks & Geer, 2007; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). The latter distinction is often found in studies on interpersonal conflict that differentiate between conflicts over issues/tasks and disagreements that arise due to personal animosity

2. We excluded the difference between genuine or merely apparent conflict (Frances, 2014, p. 18). Apparent conflicts arise because people are using the same terms but with different meanings. According to Ballantyne (2016), it is hard to recognize these conflicts. Since this study is concerned with empirically investigating the presence of conflict frames, we left the dimension out. Another related distinction we left out is between realistic and nonrealistic conflict as we cannot classify the underlying motives of a conflict. While realistic conflict is characterized by incompatibilities of values and interests, nonrealistic conflict arises for other reasons such as tension release or an error (Mack & Snyder, 1957).

between people (Bruk-Lee et al., 2013). Furthermore, in political epistemology, two other dimensions feature prominently: the extent to which we are fundamentally divided on issues. This means whether the disagreement takes place within a common framework of epistemic and moral presuppositions (i.e., superficial conflict) or not (i.e., deep conflict; Kappel, 2018); and whether the disagreement concerns factual matters, or normative ideals and values (Frances, 2014). Similar conceptualizations can be found outside the political realm. In the literature on interpersonal conflict, scholars differentiate between fact-based (diverging appraisals of reality), interest-based (incompatible preferences), and value-based conflict (different ideas on what's right and wrong based on other moral foundations; Drake & Donohue, 1996). We will elaborate on each dimension in more detail below.

Dimensions of political conflict frames

Style of conflict

Uncivil versus civil conflict. Conflicts vary in their style. Political conflicts can take place in a civil manner, where each party listens to the other, shows respect, justifies its beliefs, and is willing to reevaluate them when faced with reasonable counterarguments (Steenbergen et al., 2003). From a deliberative democracy perspective, civil conflict is essential for democracy as it enables citizens to understand societal problems and to cast an informed vote, thus legitimizing political decision-making (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Landmore, 2013).³ However, political debates are also often characterized by uncivil communication (Otto, Lecheler, et al., 2020). Goovaerts and Marien (2020) define political incivility as a violation of the social norms of conversation, or specifically, as “politicians’ use of impolite, rude or disrespectful language” (p.2). Incivility can be directed toward other politicians or policies and ideas (Brooks & Geer, 2007; Goovaerts & Marien, 2020). Examples of incivility include insulting language, name-calling, exaggeration, or digital “shouting” (Gervais, 2015, p. 171). While incivility seems more straightforward when an individual politician is attacked, statements about substantive matters can also come across as uncivil, for instance, by disrespecting the positions of political adversaries (e.g., “That’s a ridiculous policy proposal!”). Importantly, incivility can be used in combination with any type of content characteristic we will discuss below, and a (un)civil conflict is thus not a standalone frame (see for examples Table 1 or Table A1 from the Appendix).

It should be noted that classifying something as closer or further apart from civil discourse is subjective and dependent on context and time. Yet, earlier studies have

3. Other normative perspectives may value civil conflict differently (Strömbäck, 2005)

shown that we can identify incivility when we are confronted with it (Otto, Lecheler, et al., 2020; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). For this study, as we deal with short social media messages and newspaper items, we rely on the binary distinction between civil and uncivil conflict.

Content of conflict

Substantive versus non-substantive conflicts. The substance also matters. Political conflict can concern disagreement about substantive political issues, but also less substantive matters. One of the key developments in political discourse has been “personalization”, the increasing focus on individual politicians and competencies (Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010, p. 46). This also transfers to political conflict. Politicians increasingly critique each other’s personality traits or misdeeds instead of views (Auter & Fine, 2016). If conflict is about political ideas, issues, or policies it can be classified as a substantive conflict frame but if one political actor attacks another on personal matters this can be understood as a non-substantive conflict frame (Bartholomé et al., 2018). We explicitly refer to the term ‘non-substantive’ here and not ‘personal’, as the subject of a critique is not necessarily a person. A political party, the coalition/opposition, or institutions can also be criticized, for instance, by being called ‘untrustworthy’ (Auter & Fine, 2016). Importantly, the substantive and non-substantive conflict frames can also co-exist in one statement, for instance, if both the character and the views of a politician are criticized (e.g., “You are a liar, there is no climate crisis!”). This means that the non-substantive attack does not cease to exist, even though the conflict is also substantive.

Subdimensions of substantive conflict. Political epistemologists construe disagreement as two (or more) parties holding incompatible doxastic attitudes towards a proposition. For instance, one person believes that the minimum wage should be raised while the other does not (Matheson, 2015). This definition presupposes that a substantive proposition is under discussion, which means that the distinctions drawn by epistemologists should be considered as subdimensions of the substantive conflict frame. We do not further classify non-substantive attacks, except when the discrediting of someone’s personality or actions is accompanied by an explanation, and thus combined with a substantive conflict frame, the subdimensions apply. The literature differentiates between (1) superficial or deep disagreement, and (2) normative or factual disagreement.

Deep disagreement. Philosophers distinguish between superficial and deep disagreements. Deep disagreements are about fundamental epistemic or moral principles (De Ridder, 2021; Kappel, 2018). An epistemic principle tells us how to

form our beliefs, or what evidence or experts we should rely on. People do not only disagree about the issue itself, but also about how to gather evidence about the issue, for example, by relying either on scientific evidence, personal experience, or religion. Deep disagreements can be difficult, if not impossible to resolve because people hold different ideas on how to solve them and hence have trouble recognizing their opponents' ideas as rational contributions to the discussion. Scholars argue that political discussions have increasingly become concerned with the epistemic status of facts and experts (Van Aelst et al., 2017). De Ridder (2021) points out that deep disagreements can also revolve around conflicting moral principles or conflicting prioritization of those principles (e.g., libertarians have different views on equality or individual freedom than socialists). Consequently, people may come to see the reasoning of others not only as irrational but also as immoral, which further complicates the discussion.

In deep disagreements, a policy dispute around, for example, immigration is connected to longstanding and entrenched political divides between left and right, conservatives and liberals, or religious and non-religious views (De Ridder, 2021). While it is possible to have a deep disagreement about one policy issue, deep disagreements often tend to involve several related issues: if you disagree with someone about immigration, you are likely to also disagree on the importance of the nation-state and the causes of economic inequality. More extreme cases of deep disagreement take shape in the form of conspiracy theories, where one group believes that the others are systematically being deceived and that their perception about politics or history is fundamentally wrong (Ranalli, 2018a).

Superficial, or ordinary, disagreements, in contrast, concern isolated issues and they tend to be rationally resolvable because they take place in a common normative and/or epistemic framework. This means that the actors involved in a superficial conflict tend to either share core moral values or have a similar understanding of what counts as reliable evidence (De Ridder, 2021). This is not to say that superficial disagreements are always easy to solve, but while they can still concern complex and uncertain issues, the disputants agree on how to approach the issue. So, for example, when politicians have a conflict about housing shortages, they may suggest very different approaches to solve the issue, but they do have a common understanding that people need a home, and they recognize that further scientific investigation into the effects of the different approaches could settle the disagreement.

Factual and normative disagreement. Finally, the philosophical literature distinguishes between disagreement about normative questions, about what ought to be the case,

and factual questions, about what is the case (Frances, 2014). The majority of political conflicts concern normative issues. Political parties generally disagree because they have conflicting ideas about what the right, fair, or morally permissible decisions are in a certain situation. However, political conflict can also involve factual matters, examples include whether a policy is effective, or what the causes are of social problems (Frances, 2014). Although information is abundant, politicians can still disagree about facts as the relevant facts and evidence may be mixed (e.g., unclarity whether the death penalty deters violent crime). Importantly, the difference between normative and factual disagreement is independent of the earlier distinction between deep and superficial disagreements. Both factual and normative disagreements can be deep and superficial (See Appendix Table A1 for examples).

Table 1. Operationalization of the Conflict Dimensions

	Type of frame	Example statement
Incivility		
Criterion 1: “insulting or belittling language” (that makes the opponent or his/her ideas look foolish, deceitful, hypocritical, dangerous, or inept)	Strategic (non-substantive): <i>Civil</i>	“Politician B is not honest”
	<i>Uncivil</i>	“Politician B is a <i>hypocrite</i> and a <i>liar!</i> ”
	Media (non-substantive): <i>Civil</i>	“Politician A questioned the integrity of Politician B”
	<i>Uncivil</i>	“Politician A mentioned that politician B is “a <i>hypocrite</i> and a <i>liar!</i> ”
Criterion 2: “exaggerated negative language” (hyperbolic, misrepresentative exaggeration, and digital shouting)	Strategic (substantive) <i>Civil</i>	“Politician B gives in to the political demands of the left we disagree with”
	<i>Uncivil</i>	“We believe these ideas are RIDICULOUS, and will not give in to left-wing terror”
	Media (substantive) <i>Civil</i>	“Coalition members are divided about the measures”
	<i>Uncivil</i>	“Tension is rising because the cabinet is adopting <i>poisonous green</i> measures”
Non-substantiveness		
“Criticism on character traits, capabilities, physical appearances or performances of political actors”	Strategic	“Politician B has lost his credibility”
	Media	“Politician A states that politician B has lost his credibility”
Substantiveness		
“Disagreement about, or criticism on, political idea, problem, legislation or policy”	Strategic	“We disagree with the government, and propose an alternative solution”
	Media	“The opposition parties are critical about the ideas of the coalition”

Table 1. Continued

	Type of frame	Example statement
Deep		
Criterion 1: “mentioning of a traditional political division or ideological clash”	Strategic	“The government should not leave it to the ‘housing market’ but should take on its task of <i>public housing</i> .”
	Media	“The party deals with an <i>ideological struggle</i> .”
Criterion 2: “conflict about trusting or denying scientific evidence, facts or experts”	Strategic	“It is nonsense that humans influence climate change, the climate agreement of Party B is irrational.”
	Media	“Party A believes that the climate agreement of Party B is irrational because they deny that humans can influence climate change”
Criterion 3: “conflict about deep-rooted norms or national identity”	Strategic	“Adjusting the appearance of “Black Pete” is an attack on our culture”
	Media	“Party A called “Black Pete” racism. Party B emphasized its importance for Dutch tradition”.
Factual		
“It is a lie that Party B will solve the emission crisis, the numbers will stay equal”	Strategic	“Claims about what is the case” (whether something is true or not)
	Media	“While party A believes there is a crisis that needs solving, party B questions the existence of the crisis all together”
Normative		
“Claims about what ought to be the case” (morally right, permissible, acceptable, necessary or fair)	Strategic	“This is <i>unacceptable</i> , we <i>should</i> take in more refugees, but the coalition is blocking this”
	Media	“Party A stresses the need to take in more refugees. The government parties, however, disagree”

Exploring the use of conflict frames

To explore the usage of the conflicts, this study focuses on the conflict frames adopted by journalists in news articles and by politicians on Twitter. Conflict framing has often been studied as a mediated phenomenon: how journalists report on disagreement between political actors (e.g., Schuck et al., 2016). Importantly, we also need to account for the frames in the direct communication of politicians because they influence citizens’ opinions and attitudes (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Both political elites and journalists are important actors in the news frame-building process. They mimic but also alter each other frames (Chong & Druckman, 2007). The type of frames political

actors and journalists adopt may vary because they do not always have the same incentives to adopt a conflict frame or are not constrained by similar professional and ethical rules (Ekman & Widholm, 2015). For instance, whereas journalists report on conflicting views to meet journalistic criteria of critical and balanced reporting (Bartholomé et al., 2015), politicians' main aim is to advertise their views by discrediting those of the opponent (Auter & Fine, 2016). Politician's communication is examined using Twitter because it is often used by politicians (Ekman & Widholm, 2015; Jacobs & Spierings, 2016), and tweets tend to have a broad reach: they get frequently picked up by the mass media and are thus also visible to citizens who do not use Twitter (Ekman & Widholm, 2015). Moreover, Twitter appears to be suited to political discussions and conflict as it offers many possibilities for interaction. We pose:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): To what extent are the different conflict frames used in newspaper articles and political tweets?

Furthermore, we examine politicians' tweets more in detail by exploring whether the conflict dimensions differ across parties. This is important as existing research on conflict framing suggests that parties vary in the extent to which they adopt an attack message in their political campaigns (see e.g., Valli & Nai, 2020), yet we know little about politicians' conflict framing in non-election period and how the different manifestations of conflicts are used across parties. Research on negative campaigns in the US shows that candidates from challenger parties are more likely to attack their opponent than candidates from incumbent parties since politicians from an underdog position have more to gain from these attacks (Auter & Fine, 2016). In a multiparty context, opposition parties are expected to use more conflict framing than the parties in government because it is their role to criticize the government (Haselmayer, 2019; Russmann, 2017). Additionally, as a key communication strategy of populist parties is to challenge the status quo, and to put an in-group in opposition to different outgroups (e.g., ordinary citizens vs. the corrupt elite), their messages tend to be more antagonistic than those of mainstream parties (Engesser et al., 2017; Hameleers, 2018). Besides, as populist parties increasingly challenge the views and reliability of experts (Hameleers, 2018), they may use more deep conflict frames.

Research Question (RQ2): How do (1) government parties versus opposition parties and (2) populist versus non-populist parties differ in their use of the dimensions of conflict framing in Tweets?

Methods

Sample

This study focuses on the Netherlands, which is a suitable case for analysing (online) political conflicts because its political system features a broad range of political parties, and Dutch politicians are very active online (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016). Furthermore, in a multiparty system, each party (and politician) has multiple political opponents whom to disagree with and to attack. At the same time, to govern, parties also need each other to form coalitions, and conflicts may therefore be less sharp than in more polarized contexts.

To analyse the presence of conflict frames we conducted a quantitative content analysis of Dutch political news articles and tweets by Members of Parliament (MPs) and their respective political parties.⁴ The news articles come from four major newspapers, two quality (NRC Handelsblad; De Volkskrant) and two popular newspapers (De Telegraaf; Algemeen Dagblad). The articles were retrieved from the digital archive NexisUni. Articles had to contain a minimum of one reference to a political party in the headline or lead and one more time in the remainder of the article to be selected. We focus on offline news articles only, as a great deal of the news content that is spread online is also present in print (Ghersetti, 2014). The tweets of Dutch MPs and national political parties were collected by relying on the online tool Coosto (www.coosto.nl). This tool provides a complete archive of the tweets of Dutch political actors (Kruikemeier et al., 2018). We collected the tweets of all political parties (N = 906) and of all the members of parliament who are active on Twitter (147 members; N = 5412).

The research period covers 8 weeks divided over 4 months during the parliamentary year 2019–2020 (November 10–23, 2019; February 11–24, June 17–30, and September 10–23, 2020). We selected all the articles and tweets in this period that met the criteria. The sampling strategy aimed to include many variations in conflict, and therefore we focused on different periods during the year. The final sample consists of 6300 tweets and 482 articles.

Coding procedure

We developed a codebook to measure the conflict dimensions (See Table 1 and Appendix). Coders, first, had to indicate whether an article or tweet contained a conflict frame: (1) two or more opposing/conflicting perspectives on a problem (2) any conflict or disagreement; (3) a personal attack; and (4) explicit criticism (Schuck et al., 2016).

4. The data underlying this article will be shared at reasonable request to the corresponding author.

For the items with a conflict frame, the frame was analysed in more detail. For this step, the unit of analysis for articles changed. Coders had to assess for each article whether multiple conflicts were mentioned and if so, these conflicts were treated as a separate unit of analysis. Differences between conflicts were based on whether they relate to different topics or involve different actors. In total, this resulted in 550 conflicts in 482 articles.

The first dimension, incivility, was assessed by two indicators which were based on Gervais (2015). We follow the first category of incivility of Gervais (2015) which relates to the presence of insulting/belittling language (yes/no). For Gervais' (2015) second category, extremizing and inflammatory language, we altered the question wording during the coding process to "exaggerated negative language" (yes/no), as the question was initially not well understood by the coders. The general idea remained similar: coders assessed whether the statements "exaggerate in a misrepresentative fashion the behaviour and views of a target" (Gervais, 2015, p. 172). Gervais' (2015) third category, histrionics (e.g., the use of uppercase letters/exclamation marks), was added to the second category as we expected this not to be present very often and because the coders already perceived this as a form of exaggeration. Finally, we added a third category (3) perceived incivility (not, a little bit, or very uncivil). Negativity and incivility are often in the eye of the beholder (Sigelman & Kugler, 2003), and we therefore added a question on how coders perceived the conflict. This item was recoded as uncivil for both somewhat and very uncivil (1) and the rest as civil (0). If either one of the incivility items of Gervais (2015) was present and/or it was perceived as uncivil, the item was coded as uncivil. It is important to emphasize that incivility was considered for statements reported or paraphrased (mostly in newspaper coverage) as well as for direct claims (mostly on Twitter; see Table 1).

For the second dimension substantiveness (Bartholomé et al., 2018), coders specified whether the item concerned disagreement or criticism on non-substantive matters. A variable was created that indicates the presence (1) or absence (0) of a non-substantive conflict frame. Absence of a non-substantive conflict implies that a substantive conflict was present.

If the conflict was substantive, deep and factual/normative disagreement were coded. Deep disagreement was assessed with three indicators according to an iterative process. Both theories and an initial exploration of political news and tweets by political actors informed the first operationalization. The questions were refined throughout the coding process to ensure that deep disagreements were captured when present. As deep disagreements typically revolve around fundamental political clashes coders had

to indicate (1) whether a political division or ideological clash was mentioned. A list of political clashes was provided and complemented during the coding process. As deep disagreements often concern a conflict over fundamental epistemic principles, coders assessed (2) whether the conflict was about trusting or denying scientific evidence, facts, or experts. Coders considered (3) whether the disagreement concerned deep-rooted norms or national identity. If one of the indicators was present, the item was labelled 'deep' (1) and otherwise as 'superficial' (0).

Finally, coders had to analyse whether the conflict concerned facts or normative claims, or both. Not all conflicts were classified as either factual or normative, for instance when there was a reference to a conflict but not explained why (e.g., "the party voted against our motion"). Two dichotomous variables were developed that indicate the presence (0 = no; 1 = yes) of factual and normative conflict.

Coding was performed by three native coders with knowledge of Dutch politics. The coding of a member of the research team served as the gold standard. The coders followed intensive training sessions: they got acquainted with the codebook, coded examples, and refined the codebook. In the first round of coding, differences were discussed to reach complete agreement and the codebook was expanded with more detailed instructions. In a second round, significant discrepancies between one coder and the reliability coder were resolved by discussing the discrepancies and adding additional decision rules to the codebook. The intercoder reliability test of around 12% of the data indicates that the coders reached sufficient agreement for most items (see Appendix, Table A2; Krippendorff, 2004). For normative conflict, the alpha is just above the critical threshold (0.60). This is not uncommon for highly skewed dichotomous variables because the reliability scores of such variables tend to be particularly sensitive to disagreement among coders. While most items are clearly normative and contain words that express this (e.g., necessary/ unfair), the items that included a more implicit opinion were not in all cases consistently coded by the different coders. Hence, some of these implicit normative conflicts might have been overlooked. As the level of agreement still allows for drawing tentative conclusions, we consider it informative to discuss our findings related to normative conflict. However, exact numbers need to be interpreted with caution.

Independent variables

Additionally, several other binary explanatory variables were included: whether the party(member) is part of the government, a left-wing populist actor (i.e., SP), or a right-wing populist actor (i.e., PVV or FvD). For the categorization of the populist parties, we relied on the classification by 'PopuList' (Rooduijn et al., 2019).

Results

Usage of conflict dimensions

Figure 1 shows the proportion of the different dimensions in the tweets and newspaper articles with a conflict frame: 25% of the tweets and 67% of the news articles contained a conflict frame, and the figure thus shows how the conflict dimensions are used within these samples (for the nested percentages of the dimensions in the full sample see Appendix, Table A3). We will also discuss how often different dimensions occur together.

First, all political conflict frame dimensions are present in both types of media. Most conflict frames concern a substantive issue. Only 18% of the tweets and 11% of the news articles contain a non-substantive attack. Moreover, the non-substantive attacks are often combined with a substantive conflict frame: 68% of all non-substantive attacks co-occur with a substantive conflict frame. Hence, if politicians attack the personality of a politician, they often also provide a substantive reason for this attack or discuss how they disagree with the views of that politician.

Most conflicts are also civil, 38% of the tweets and 27% of the conflicts in newspapers are uncivil. Both incivility and non-substantive attacks tend to be connected, of all the non-substantive attacks in the sample, 80% is uncivil. Yet, also substantive conflicts, which are not combined with a non-substantive attack, are found to be uncivil (27%). While more common, the use of incivility is thus not limited to personal attacks.

Besides, 16% of the conflicts in tweets and 30% of the conflicts in newspapers are deep, which shows that it is important to distinguish between superficial and deep conflict. Also, deep disagreements tend to be more often uncivil (42%), than superficial conflicts (31%). Finally, normative conflict is a lot more common than the occurrence of factual disagreements, 76% of the tweets are normative and 71% of the conflicts in news articles, and only around 9% of the tweets and 8% of the articles are factual. Moreover, of the rather small occurrences of factual conflicts, 34% is also normative, so manifestations of pure factual conflict frames are rare.

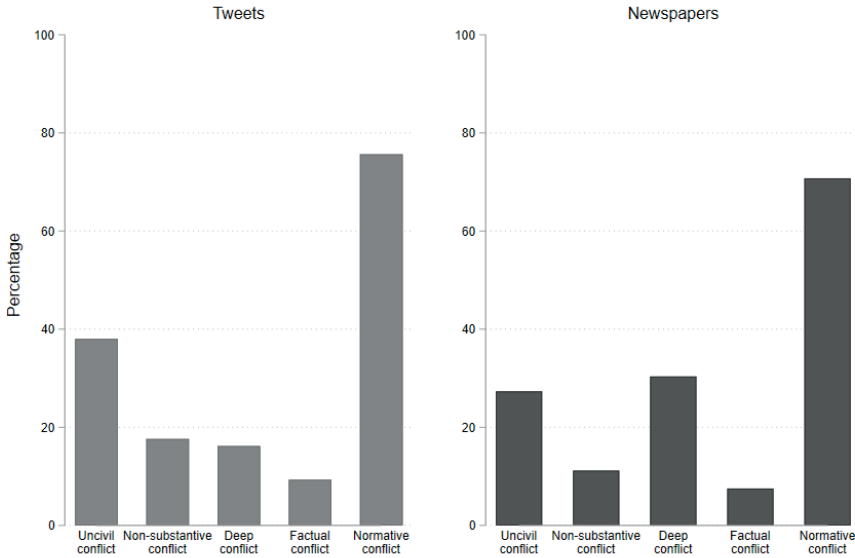


Figure 1. Percentage of the conflict frames.

Note. The figure shows the proportion of the dimensions for the sample of the data with a conflict frame. The percentages include both cases where the dimensions occur in isolation or combination with other dimensions.

Comparing usage among political actors in Tweets

In the next step, and to answer our second research question, we limited the analyses to tweets to explore which political actors are more likely to use the different conflict framing dimensions, see Table 2 for the results (See Appendix for separated analyses for parties and politicians).

As visible from Table 2, the odds of a conflict frame being present in a tweet from a government party(member) is 65% lower compared to opposition parties. We find similar negative odds ratios for uncivil ($OR = 0.557, p < .01$) and non-substantive conflict ($OR = 0.391, p < .01$). This means that government parties, or respective politicians, are less likely to adopt a conflict frame in their tweets, and if they do, these conflicts are more often civil and substantive than the tweets of opposition political actors.⁵ These

5. If we separate the results for politicians and parties, we find that the significant difference for uncivil or non-substantive conflict only holds for individual politicians (See Appendix Table A5 and A6). Opposition parties are, thus, not more likely to adopt an uncivil or non-substantive conflict frame than government parties.

results confirm that opposition parties and their members more frequently challenge the status quo, whereas government political actors need to secure it.⁶

Table 2. Binary logistic regression for the conflict framing dimensions in tweets

	Conflict frame	Uncivil	Non-substantive	Deep	Factual	Normative
Government party (member)	0.346 ^{***} (0.029)	0.557 ^{**} (0.104)	0.391 ^{**} (0.117)	0.627 (0.164)	0.746 (0.233)	1.708 ^{**} (0.346)
Left Populist party(member)	1.333 ^{***} (0.113)	1.052 (0.160)	1.071 (0.212)	0.966 (0.205)	0.993 (0.260)	1.085 (0.182)
Right Populist party(member)	2.391 ^{***} (0.208)	5.122 ^{***} (0.744)	3.005 ^{***} (0.483)	2.633 ^{***} (0.458)	1.653 [*] (0.375)	0.992 (0.161)
Observations	6132	1510	1511	1417	1417	1417
Pseudo R ²	0.0635	0.0960	0.0583	0.0372	0.0092	0.0053

Note. Odds ratio; Standard errors in parentheses

^{*} $p < 0.05$, ^{**} $p < 0.01$, ^{***} $p < 0.001$

Furthermore, both left- and right-wing populist parties tend to adopt a conflict frame more often than mainstream politicians. Moreover, there are significant positive associations with being (a member) of a populist right-wing party and using a conflict frame that is uncivil, non-substantive, deep, and factual. To understand the large odds ratios properly we present the predicted probabilities of the different dimensions for right-wing populist versus mainstream parties in Figure 2. The figure shows that the predicted probability of deep disagreement is 28% for right-wing populist parties and 13% for mainstream politicians. A key element of populist communication is emphasizing opposition between the ordinary citizens and the other (e.g., the elite), and questioning the epistemic status of experts or facts, and it is therefore not surprising that populist parties highlight deep disagreement more often.

6 We investigated whether conflict frames are also proportionally more common among opposition parties and their members. The findings remain largely similar. However, we do find that the usage of deep conflict frames is proportionally higher among politicians from opposition parties (17%), than among politicians from government parties (8%; $X^2(1, N = 1134) = 9.94, p < .01$).

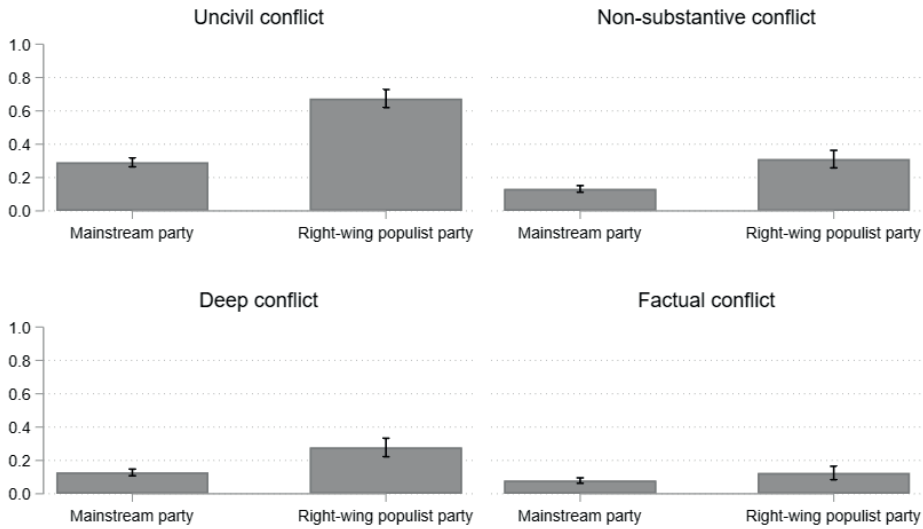


Figure 2. Predicted probabilities conflict framing for mainstream versus right-wing populist party(members).

Conclusion

This study aimed to provide a conceptual framework of different dimensions of political conflict frames. The results show the relative presence of the conceptualized dimensions, how they relate to one another, and indicate differential usage of conflict frames among politicians.

First, we found that most of the conflicts are civil. While social media are expected to provide politicians with unlimited opportunities to criticize opponents harshly (Ott, 2017), we find that politicians mostly use social media to disagree in more respectful ways. Uncivil disagreement travels across the political spectrum but is mainly associated with opposition parties and specifically right-wing populist parties. Populism is characterized by strong attacks on the elite (Engesser et al., 2017) and these attacks seem to go hand in hand with an uncivil tone. The context of this study, a multi-party system during routine periods, likely influenced the level of incivility that was found. Although there is not much comparative research on incivility in political debate across countries, especially in the US, rudeness and hostility seem to be more common, with former president Trump as a key example (Walter, 2021). Moreover, incivility is more likely during election campaigns when competition is heated (Bartholomé et al., 2018).

Furthermore, following others, we found that non-substantive conflicts are not common. Auter and Fine (2016), for instance, show that most attacks by politicians on Facebook are issue-based rather than personal. It seems that politicians need to primarily show how their ideas differ from their opponents and diminishing the credibility of the opponent is of secondary importance. However, personal attacks occur more often during elections compared to routine periods both on social media (Gross & Johnson, 2016) and in (online) newspapers (Bartholomé et al., 2018), and we focused on routine periods specifically.

We also found that conflicts emphasize deep political divides or concern fundamental epistemic principles (i.e., what counts as empirical evidence). These frames are most often used by right-wing populist parties. These types of disagreements were discussed in earlier research as constituting one of the most pressing issues in our current political landscape (Van Aelst et al., 2017). According to the ideal of deliberative democracy, decision-making should rest on the deliberation of different political views (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). The problem with deep disagreements, however, is that it is difficult for discussants to engage in a reasonable exchange of views because they see the other's way of thinking as invalid, unreasonable, or even as plain 'stupid' (De Ridder, 2021, p. 12). In this way, deep disagreements jeopardize the deliberative process. Hence, it is encouraging that we found only a limited presence of deep disagreements.

Finally, a great deal of the disagreement in newspaper articles and tweets concerns views on how things ought to be, and only a smaller part of the conflicts concerns facts. This is not surprising, since diverging preferences and interests are defining features of democracy (Schattschneider, 1975). Emphasizing or justifying policy positions is necessary for convincing citizens of their importance. Facts, in contrast, often form the foundation of a debate (i.e., politicians use facts to back up normative statements), but are, to a lesser extent, subject to debate. The limited presence of factual conflict online may also be context-dependent and could be more common in, for instance, the US, where partisanship is often connected to which facts you believe (Hannon, 2021).

This study has some limitations. First, we examined our conceptual framework in one context. While we believe our conceptual dimensions can be used in future research to compare the usage of conflicts across different media and political systems, due to the iterative process of coding and refining the codebook the questions that help identify deep disagreement may be slightly geared to the Dutch context. These questions, therefore, may need to be fine-tuned if used in different contexts to grasp context-dependent deep conflicts. Further, it was challenging to operationalize subtle philosophical distinctions, and for normative conflict an even more precise operationalization needs to be specified.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this study has provided the much-needed nuance to current work on (online) conflict framing and functions as a starting point for further research into the desirability of conflict framing for democracy. Aggressive attacks can be appealing to citizens (Otto et al., 2020) but may also be harmful to democracy as they may increase cynical attitudes (Mutz & Reeves, 2005). Civil disagreement on substantive issues, in contrast, could foster reasonable debate among citizens (Landmore, 2013). However, for political deliberation to function properly there needs to be a willingness of both sides to understand each other's views, but deep disagreements may threaten this. If politicians cannot seem to agree on basic epistemic principles, such as what counts as evidence, deliberation may seem pointless, with increasing polarization as a result (De Ridder, 2021; Hannon, 2021). So even if political conflicts are civil and cover substantive issues, they could still impact democracy negatively if they emphasize deeply entrenched differences.

To understand the desirability of conflict framing for democracy, we will investigate in Chapter 3, how the different dimensions of conflict frames affect citizens' political attitudes. We aim to understand which conflicts may negatively impact citizens' views of political parties and politics at large. Then, building on the findings of Chapter 3 and previous work, we will critically evaluate these conflict types from a normative standpoint in Chapter 5. We will try to identify which conflict frames can contribute to the ideals of deliberative democracy and which ones may undermine them.

Appendix Chapter 2

Codebook

General conflict framing

1. Does the item mention two or more **opposing or conflicting** sides of a problem or issue? Please note that the different perspectives need to be in contrast with each other. Two or more perspectives can also be mentioned next to each other without them being conflicting. In a tweet, two sides of an issue need to be mentioned (e.g., how something is and how it should be). (Yes/No)
2. Does the item mention any **conflict or disagreement**? (Yes/No)
3. Does the news article mention a **personal attack** from one actor to another or does the tweet include a personal attack on a political actor? A personal attack is understood as a negative message that focuses on personal traits, character flaws, or wrongdoings. The subject of the personal attack can be an individual politician, but also a specific party, group of parties or politicians, the opposition, the coalition government, or an institution. (Yes/No)
4. Does the item mention or include explicit criticism from one actor to another on a political issue, political idea, problem, law or policy, etc.? (Yes/No)

Incivility

1. Does the tweet contain, or does the article contain, or refer to **insulting or belittling language** towards a political actor, or his/hers (their) (planned) behaviour, views, and/or policies? This kind of language is characterized by words that make the opponent or his/her ideas look foolish, deceitful, hypocritical, dangerous, or inept. Please keep in mind that not all criticism is insulting. (Yes/No)
2. Does the tweet contain, or does the article contain or refer to **exaggerated negative language** about the situation? Please keep in mind that the words need to be **disproportionate** with regards to the situation, sometime extreme words do fit the described situation. As the author writes something with capital letters, and it comes across as aggressive or heated, the item can also be coded as extremely negative. (Yes/No)
3. How uncivil do you perceive the item to be? (not uncivil/little bit/very uncivil)

Substantiveness

1. Does the item concern criticism of character traits, capabilities, physical appearances, or performances of political actors? (Yes/No)
2. Does the item concern disagreement about, criticism on, or opposing or conflicting sides of an issue, political idea, problem, legislation, or policy? (Yes/No)

Deep disagreement

1. Does the conflict mention a **traditional political division or ideological clash**? The word ‘ideological clash’ might be explicitly mentioned, or one of the following divisions should be explicitly mentioned:
 - Left-wing versus right-wing
 - Conservative versus liberal (or progressive)
 - Extreme (right/left) versus more moderate
 - (Neo)liberalism/capitalism versus what’s good for society/the people.
 - The market/ market forces versus the state/government support
 - The poor/ordinary people versus the rich/ the elite
 - The environment/the health care/culture versus the big companies/ multinationals/the big money/economy/profits
 - The established power versus the alternative
 - Secular versus non-secular
 - Immigrants versus ordinary citizens (Yes/No)
2. Is there a conflict about **trusting or denying the credibility** of (scientific) evidence, expertise/experts, facts, or knowledge? This can, for instance, be expressed through denying a certain (scientifically proven) problem or questioning someone’s expertise. (Yes/No)
3. Does the conflict mention **Dutch society, culture, tradition, identity, and/or deep-rooted (religious) norms** (e.g., who or what belongs to Dutch society and what does not)? Only code yes if one of these terms is explicitly mentioned. (Yes/No)

Factual

1. Does the conflict contain factual claims about **what is the case**? For instance, disagreement about whether something has caused something else, whether some policy is effective or not, whether someone is mistaken or did not keep a certain promise. Two conflicting sides must be mentioned when it concerns causes, consequences, or effectiveness, etc. (Yes/No)

Normative

- Does the conflict contain normative claims? These claims are about what **ought to be the case** or about what's **morally right, permissible, acceptable, fair, or necessary**. Please note that verbs such as “should be” or “supposed to be” are often indicative of a normative statement. Yet, these words do not have to be explicitly mentioned. If someone, for example, requests a change or mentions that something can no longer be, the statement is also normative. (Yes/No)

Results

Table A1. Examples of (combined) conflict dimensions

Dimension	Example tweet	Count
Uncivil		
Non-substantive	“Rutte, the Prime Minister of deception” (Geert Wilders, 2020b)	253
Substantive		
Deep		
<i>Normative</i>	“All the money for infrastructure goes to a Green grab-bag (...) Car drivers have been financially squeezed for years, soon the money will go to left-wing projects that are of no use to them” (Roy van Aalst, 2020)	120
<i>Factual</i>	“Doomsday thinkers about the climate (...) threaten that everything will fall apart if we don't carry out a radical, left-wing, and priceless agenda. Nonsense! We must deliver feasible solutions and not exaggerate!” (Forum voor Democratie, 2019).	21
Superficial		
<i>Normative</i>	“Everyone in healthcare deserves the bonus, from the nurses to the cleaners. Idiotic idea by Hugo de Jonge to let healthcare institutions decide who gets a bonus and who doesn't” (Jesse Klaver, 2020).	360
<i>Factual</i>	“He laughs it off in the Rutte-like way. But the fact is: he invites Black Peter-haters to Catshuis but people who are against the Corona law, may not even demonstrate. Wrong wrong wrong!” (Geert Wilders, 2020a).	29
Civil		
Non-substantive	“And that's it for the moral leadership of the minister and future party leader of D66 Sigrid Kaag”(John Kerstens, 2020).	63
Substantive		
Deep		
<i>Normative</i>	“The European Green Deal bypasses ordinary people and goes straight to the rich. Our alternative: a red and fair climate policy” (SP, 2020).	136
Civil		
<i>Factual</i>	“Spreading fertilizer on land = more nitrogen emissions = bad for nature. (...). And what does Minister Schouten do? Ask the EU whether Dutch farmers are allowed to spread more fertilizer! EU thinks it's fine. Are you still following it?” (Frank Wassenberg, 2020).	32

Table A1. Continued

Dimension	Example tweet	Count
Superficial		
<i>Norm ative</i>	“Healthcare providers deserve more than applause. Our proposal for structural compensation has been blocked by VVD, CDA, D66, and CU. But we keep going (...)”(Lilian Marijnissen, 2020).	749
<i>Factual</i>	“What we said months ago, but what was denied time and time again by responsible minister @hugodejonge, now turns out to be true: the RIVM guidelines for face masks for elderly care is based on scarcity after all” (Henk Krol, 2020).	81

Table A2. Krippendorff's alpha

	Krippendorff's alpha
Conflict frame present or not	0.75
(1) Two or more opposing sides	0.64
(2) Conflict or disagreement	0.64
(3) Personal attack	0.71
(4) Explicit criticism	0.66
Uncivil Conflict	0.72
(1) insulting/belittling language	0.68
(2) Exaggerating negative language	0.58
(3) Perceived incivility	0.71
Non-substantive Conflict	0.72
Substantive Conflict	0.80
Deep Conflict	0.81
(1) Ideological clash	0.67
(2) Fundamental epistemic conflict	0.77
(3) Fundamental norms and national identity	0.75
Factual Conflict	0.69
Normative Conflict	0.60

Table A3. Descriptive statistics (dimensions of) conflict framing

	Presence in newspaper articles and tweets in %	SD	N
Conflict frame present or not	28%	0.45	1933
Uncivil conflict	10%	0.12	695
Non-substantive conflict	5%	0.05	317
Deep conflict	5%	0.07	347
Factual conflict	2%	0.03	164
Normative conflict	20%	0.42	1366
Total:			6850

Note. The dimensions show the nested percentages

Table A4. Percentages of conflict dimensions per party

Party	Incivil	Non-substantive	Deep	Factual	Normative	N
50plus	30	21	0	0	86	33
CDA	17	6	16	5	82	64
CU	1	3	3	0	87	30
D66	29	10	10	13	83	74
Denk	67	56	17	4	65	37
FvD	69	26	25	14	78	162
GroenLinks	25	10	19	9	74	318
PVV	7	39	34	11	72	177
PvdA	25	12	10	9	76	125
PvdD	46	16	9	8	73	114
SGP	32	12	4	4	79	25
SP	32	15	13	8	77	290
VVD	18	03	3	3	83	62

Note. Percentages include both the tweets by parties and politicians.

Table A5. Binary logistic regression for the conflict framing dimensions in tweets of political parties

	Conflict frame	Uncivil	Non-substantive	Deep	Factual	Normative
Government party	0.210 ^{***} (0.055)	0.815 (0.446)	0.900 (0.594)	0.961 (0.642)	0.600 (0.640)	1.176 (0.783)
Left-wing Populist party	1.277 (0.250)	1.027 (0.337)	0.659 (0.297)	0.858 (0.359)	1.000 (.)	3.276 [†] (1.819)
Right-wing Populist party	3.198 ^{***} (0.585)	4.273 ^{***} (1.102)	1.173 (0.365)	1.203 (0.380)	1.371 (0.551)	1.127 (0.363)
Observations	993	363	363	336	280	336
Pseudo R ²	0.0925	0.0795	0.0050	0.0022	0.0057	0.0191

Note. Odds ratio; Standard errors in parentheses

[†] $p < 0.05$, ^{**} $p < 0.01$, ^{***} $p < 0.001$

Table A6. Binary logistic regression for the conflict framing dimensions in tweets of politicians

	Conflict frame	Uncivil	Non-substantive	Deep	Factual	Normative
Government party member	0.392 ^{***} (0.035)	0.535 ^{**} (0.108)	0.364 ^{**} (0.123)	0.662 (0.193)	0.793 (0.266)	1.888 ^{**} (0.406)
Left-wing Populist politician	1.389 ^{***} (0.132)	1.058 (0.182)	1.244 (0.279)	1.047 (0.259)	1.341 (0.376)	0.959 (0.174)
Right-wing Populist politician	2.149 ^{***} (0.217)	5.632 ^{***} (0.999)	4.408 ^{***} (0.844)	3.740 ^{***} (0.786)	1.785 [†] (0.493)	0.893 (0.170)
Observations	5139	1147	1148	1081	1081	1081
Pseudo R ²	0.0524	0.1013	0.0932	0.0590	0.0104	0.0102

Note. Odds ratio; Standard errors in parentheses

[†] $p < 0.05$, ^{**} $p < 0.01$, ^{***} $p < 0.001$