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Online battles

Conflict frames in political actors' online communication: Context, content, and consequences
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CONCLUSION OF THE DISSERTATION

This dissertation set out to investigate the content and consequences of political conflict frames used by political actors online and how the context of a mediated environment predominantly focused on conflict and negativity influences politicians' usage of these conflict frames. It aimed to fill three gaps in the literature, as explained in the introduction. To recap, first, the existing literature has yielded mixed evidence on the effects of conflict framing. Some studies suggest that conflicts can inform and engage citizens in politics (e.g., Bene, 2017; Bjarnøe, 2022; Sahly et al., 2019; Schuck et al., 2016), while others indicate that conflicts may lead to cynicism and disengagement (Ansolabehere et al., 1994; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2006; Otto, Lecheler, et al., 2020). To address these conflicting findings, previous work has examined how the type of conflict moderates their effects, often focusing on non-substantive rhetorical elements like incivility or personal attacks, thereby ignoring potential substantive variations of conflict, such as the depth of the opposition between camps, or the cleavage between factual versus normative oppositions. Second, the literature about the content and effects of conflict in the communication of politicians is still highly focused on the US, and the outcomes found in a bi-partisan setting may not easily transpose to a multi-party-setting. Since people in multi-party settings also expect consensus-seeking behaviour from politicians (Lijphart, 1999), they may be more alarmed by conflict, potentially causing political distrust and disengaging them. At the same time, conflicts in these settings can also be informative and mobilizing, revealing differences among closely aligned political parties (Bjarnøe, 2022). Third, we have a limited understanding of politicians' intentions and rationales for (not) using conflict frames in their online communication. This dissertation sought to fill these gaps by contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the usage of various conflict frames and their potential consequences in the Dutch multi-party setting. Specifically, the objectives of this dissertation were (1) to examine how and why politicians employ conflict frames in their online messages (2) to identify the various types of conflict frames employed, and (3) to investigate the impact of these frames on citizens and democracy.

First, through a four-wave panel survey combined with a content analysis, the effects of online conflict framing in general were explored. Then, Chapter 2 employed content analysis to investigate the complexity and multifaceted nature of conflict frames. Chapter 3 examined the effects of different online conflict frames on citizens' political attitudes. Chapter 4 addressed why politicians use conflict frames. Finally, Chapter 5 critically assessed the role of conflicts from the perspective of deliberative democracy. Together, the dissertation integrates the fragmented literature on different types of conflict and tries to pinpoint under what conditions online political conflict frames can be conducive to deliberative democracy. Thereby it advances our understanding of when conflict serves democratic ends, and when it may be regarded as an undermining

threat to (deliberative) democracy. Additionally, it allows us to inform political actors and political journalists about the potential negative unintended consequences of their communication about conflict.

In this concluding chapter, I will integrate and discuss the main findings of the empirical chapters of this dissertation. In doing so, I will focus on the content, consequences, and context of online political conflict frames. In addition, I will report the theoretical and social implications of these findings, identify the limitations of the empirical chapters, and provide suggestions for further research addressing these limitations.

Main conclusions

Content: This dissertation identified four prominent dimensions of (online) political conflict frames

Considering the first element, the *content* of online conflicts, this dissertation revealed that there are four prominent dimensions of political conflict frames: (1) the extent to which conflicts are *uncivil*; (2) whether *personal* attacks are used or not; (3) whether they concern a *deep* or *ordinary* conflict; (4) and are about a *factual* or *normative* issue. The dissertation focused on dimensions that are apparent and for which we, as researchers but also citizens, do not require knowledge of underlying intentions. This means, for instance, that the focus was not on the difference between genuine and merely verbal conflicts. While genuine conflicts arise due to conflicting views, merely verbal conflicts arise due to a misunderstanding, leading the involved actors to believe that the other is mistaken (e.g., 'Trump won the 2016 election' versus 'More people voted for Clinton in the 2016 election'; Ballantyne, 2016). Although it is always possible that we have overlooked certain dimensions of conflict, we found an overlap between our dimensions and types of conflict identified in related fields, such as interpersonal conflict (Drake & Donohue, 1996), suggesting that our distinctions capture the fundamentals of conflict. The first two dimensions we identified concern the non-substantive stylistic elements of the conflict and signal to voters the extent to which politicians engage in a respectful discussion and resort to unwarranted attacks. The latter two dimensions are substantive and concern the depth of the conflict and whether its subject is a factual/scientific or a normative/moral issue.

A content analysis of the usage of these frames by politicians (Chapter 2) showed that most of the conflicts employed by politicians online are civil and substantive. Furthermore, a great deal of the disagreement concerns normative issues and only a

smaller part of the conflicts concerns facts. Lastly, it is not uncommon for politicians to highlight deep disagreement, but the bigger share of conflicts concerns ordinary disagreements. While this dissertation focused mainly on the strategic framing of politicians, the applicability of the framework to journalistic framing was also investigated. The results of a content analysis of news articles showed similar patterns: most journalistic conflict frames are civil, substantive, ordinary, and normative. This seems to be an indication that the conflicts in the digitalized media environment do not necessarily take on a different shape than the ones reported in newspapers.

The findings align with previous research. Hopmann et al. (2018), show that candidates' statements in German election debates are most often positive, and when they are negative, they focus on policy rather than on the character of other candidates and are rarely uncivil. Likewise, Auter and Fine (2016) found that when politicians engage in online attacks against their opponents, they are more inclined to focus on substantive issues rather than resorting to personal attacks. Furthermore, it shows that political battles centred around facts and epistemic norms have not yet become a distinctive feature of the online communication of politicians nor is it reported on in news articles, something that scholars have warned about (see e.g., Van Aelst et al., 2017; Waisbord, 2018). Some scholars have expressed concern that political camps increasingly disagree on epistemic norms (Van Aelst et al., 2017) and that the rise of populism has led to increased post-truth communication (Waisbord, 2018). While this dissertation does not examine trends, it does show that deep factual conflicts, that is conflicts over established or demonstrable scientific facts, account for only a small proportion of the conflicts in politicians' online communication. Below, I will discuss what these findings mean in relation to the consequences for citizens' political attitudes.

Consequences: Only when the conflict is uncivil, factual, or when used by disliked parties, conflict frames can have negative effects

Second, regarding the *consequences* of political conflict frames, this dissertation shows that most online conflicts do not affect citizens' attitudes toward politics either positively or negatively. Only under specific conditions, they may have negative unintended consequences for political attitudes or behaviours. These findings contradict research that highlights the clear benefits of conflict frames or negative campaigns for citizens and democracy (e.g., Bjarnøe, 2022; Mattes & Redlawsk, 2014; Schuck et al., 2016), but also the concerns raised by others (Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2006; Lau et al., 2007; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Walter & Van der Eijk, 2019).

In Chapter 1, it is revealed that exposure to conflict frames from disliked political parties during electoral campaigns can diminish individuals' intention to engage in

low-effort forms of participation. Such forms include discussing politics with friends and family, visiting political websites for information, and signing petitions. This finding stands in contrast to studies that suggested conflict news framing could stimulate voters' intention to vote during the European Parliament election (Schuck et al., 2016), or research that showed that exposure to conflict news framing boosted political participation in non-election periods in Denmark (Bjarnøe, 2022; Bjarnøe et al., 2019). However, Otto et al. (2020) did report a lack of positive effects of civil conflict news frames, aligning more closely with the findings of this dissertation. Notably, their findings indicate that uncivil conflict news has a demobilizing effect. Consistent with this, a meta-analysis underscores that uncivil behaviour by politicians can exert a negative impact on political participation within the European context (Van't Riet & Van Stekelenburg, 2022). Chapter 1 could not examine the effects of various dimensions of conflict, leaving room for the possibility that incivility in campaign ads played a role in shaping the results. Another potential explanation is that our focus on conflict frames employed by politicians on social media, as opposed to those used by journalists in news articles, could have affected the results. News articles from mainstream sources often present a more objective portrayal of both sides of an issue (Bartholomé et al., 2015), whereas politicians, when adopting a conflict frame, inherently favour their standpoint. Coming across these more biased conflict frames, especially from parties they dislike, could perhaps explain why people disengage from politics. Even though we are unsure about the mechanism at play, it is evident that the relationship between conflict and political participation is complex and multifaceted.

Furthermore, in Chapter 3, an experiment revealed that online incivility by politicians can trigger a backlash effect: voters lowered their evaluation and trust towards the source of the message when the source employed an uncivil conflict frame. This effect holds regardless of voters' preferences for the party utilizing the uncivil conflict frame. Notably, this backlash effect aligns with existing literature (Gervais, 2021; Goovaerts & Marien, 2020; Mutz, 2007), and this dissertation underscores its presence. Additionally, our findings indicated that factual (deep) conflict has the potential to foster cynical attitudes. This shows the importance of not only considering incivility and personal attacks as elements of conflict but also of recognising that differences in the content of conflict (i.e. ordinary/deep; factual/normative) can explain why some conflicts have negative or positive effects. It is worth noting that the effects observed in this dissertation are small. This may not be surprising, as it is unlikely that someone's political attitude undergoes a drastic shift merely from encountering a single social media post. Nonetheless, the findings do suggest that voters respond negatively to uncivil and factual conflicts and when voters are repeatedly exposed to such conflicts in their daily news routines this could have an amplifying effect over time. However,

assuming they have a more balanced information diet and are only exposed to these factual and uncivil conflicts incidentally, we expect little effect.

When integrating the findings from the usage of conflict frames with the results on their potential consequences, it is somewhat reassuring that this dissertation did not find factual or uncivil conflict frames to be commonly employed. The type of conflict frames most used by politicians in the digitalized media environment did not influence citizens' political attitudes. However, while most conflict frames did not negatively affect citizens' attitudes or behaviour, it is important to note that they also did not yield clear positive effects. As mentioned before, this dissertation did not find a mobilizing effect. Moreover, it is argued in the literature that conflict frames and negativity are informative to voters because they show where parties stand relative to one another and highlight potential shortcomings about the ideas or character of the political opponent (Geer, 2006). However, Chapter 1 found that conflict frames were perceived as less informative or interesting, provoking anger and less enthusiasm.

Overall, this dissertation demonstrates that conflict frames can only under certain conditions yield negative effects and that the effects observed are small. In most cases, conflicts did not affect citizens' political behaviour or attitudes. While scholars have often raised concerns about conflict and its negative effects on citizens and democracy, this dissertation shows that most conflicts are not all that bad.

Context: Politicians respond differently to media preferences for conflict frames

Third, based on qualitative interviews with political actors (Chapter 4), this dissertation shows how the *context* of a mediatized environment influences politicians' use of conflict frames in their (online) communication. The results of the interview study show that politicians adapt to the media's preferences for conflict and negativity to different extents, depending on the political and media context they are part of. Thus, politicians adapt their strategic use of conflict to the context and only use it when they perceive it as a viable means to reach their political goals whilst staying true to their (political) identities and profiles. While some politicians actively incorporate these preferences in their behaviour or online communication to attract media attention, others try to either ignore or actively resist the media's logic by emphasizing positive things instead.

Politicians who adapt also mention that this adaptation is conditional, depending on whether it is election time or not, whether they are representing a party in opposition or government, and the type of conflict. During the interviews, politicians noted that it is less beneficial if you represent a government party to seek out conflict with other

parties. This aligns with the results from the content analysis of politicians' social media messages (Chapter 2). As observed in Chapter 2, politicians representing government parties were less likely to adopt conflict frames in their online communication than politicians representing opposition parties.

Although politicians were not specifically asked about the types of conflict identified in this dissertation, politicians themselves also brought forward the need to differentiate between desirable and undesirable conflict types. Several MPs noted that while disagreements on substantive issues are necessary, disagreements should preferably be polite, and personal relationships should be safeguarded, meaning that politicians should refrain from burning each other down. Hence, politicians mention that the conflict frame dimensions of incivility and personal attacks are undesirable. While politicians are aware that uncivil conflict and personal attacks may attract attention from the public and the media, they are concerned that these conflict types lower the quality of debate, leave less room for nuance and substance, and ultimately negatively influence the public's perception of politics. In addition, they also differentiate between deep and ordinary conflict. Politicians argued that in some cases it is better to avoid a fundamental clash, for instance, when politicians are in a coalition together, while if politicians hold different worldviews, it can be illustrative to voters to highlight these differences. These dynamics seem to be particular for the multi-party context specifically and may not necessarily apply to, for instance, a bi-partisan system. In a multi-party setting, politicians representing government parties often have a coalition agreement which they are bound by and are therefore not supposed to attack each other on fundamental issues. For opposition parties, instead, they can strategically use deep conflicts to emphasize that they fundamentally disagree with government parties.

This dissertation was guided by the questions of how and why politicians use conflict frames, what types of conflict frames exist, and what consequences these frames have for citizens and democracy. It showed that some politicians use conflict frames in response to media preferences for conflict, but only when it helps them achieve their political goals. Second, it identified four prominent dimensions of (online) political conflict frames: (1) whether they are uncivil or civil; (2) whether personal attacks are used or not; (3) whether they are deep or ordinary; (4) and whether they concern factual or normative issues. In terms of impact on citizens and democracy, this dissertation concludes that online political conflict frames most of the time do not affect citizens and can only have a negative impact under certain conditions. Particularly, incivility and (deep) factual conflict may be at odds with the ideals of deliberative democracy. Figure 1 provides a graphical representation of the main findings.

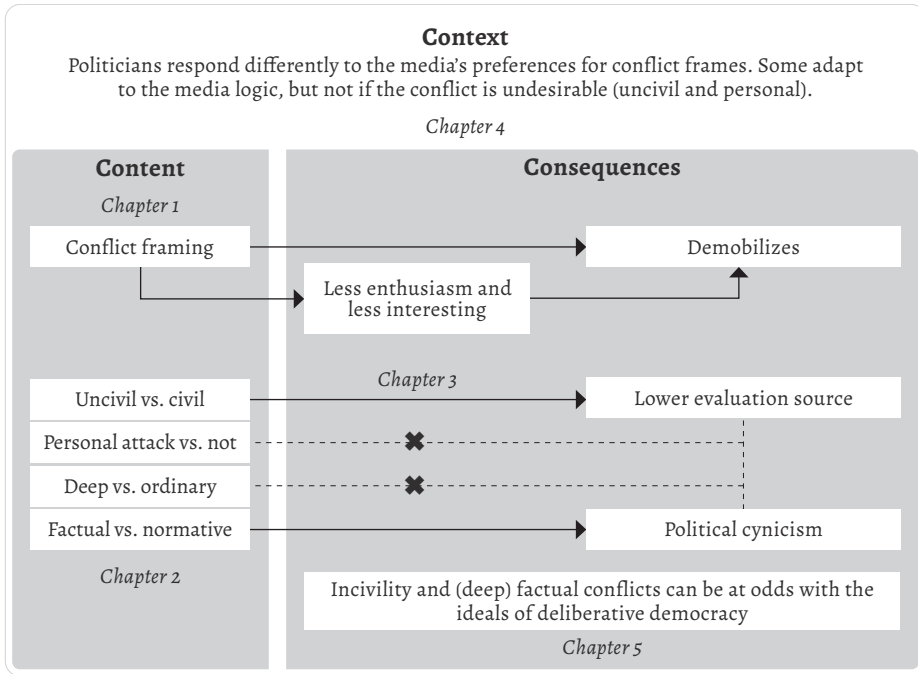


Figure 1. The graphical representation of the main findings.

Note. The graph summarises some key results of this dissertation but does not show all results.

Theoretical implications

This dissertation contributes to and extends the theory of conflict framing in several ways. First, it introduces a rich multi-dimensional framework of different conflict types integrating insights from political communication, political science, and political epistemology. These fields have individually explored the concept of conflict extensively yet from distinct perspectives. This dissertation strives to bridge their perspectives, providing a more complete understanding of the variations in conflicts. Furthermore, it also introduces much-needed nuance to current work on online conflict framing and negativity. Previous research has often treated conflict as a unified concept and provided inconclusive evidence on the effects of conflict. Studies attempting to disentangle the effects of conflict types have often focused on only one or two sub-dimensions of conflict. The comprehensive framework of political conflict frames presented in this dissertation can provide a nuanced understanding of which types of conflict are desirable in a democracy. The dimensions proposed in the framework represent pressing issues faced in today's digital society. While political disagreement is of all times, we, for instance, witness trends towards increasing opposition between

factual realities (e.g., Van Aelst et al., 2017). Our current information ecology, characterized by declining trust in the media, accusations of bias, populism, and disinformation, provides a breeding ground for these conflicts to emerge. Additionally, there are concerns about the lack of respect for political opponents with whom there is deep disagreement, who are easily degraded as “extreme leftists or extreme rightists, as radical, bone-headed, ignorant, insincere, sinister, wicked, and so on” (Knoll, 2020, p. 331). By focusing on incivility, deep moral conflict, or conflict frames centred on facts and epistemic norms, we can investigate to what extent these types of conflict frames are present in politics, the media, and public discourse, and how these conflict frames impact democracy. In this dissertation, I have provided initial insights into the presence of these conflicts in politicians’ online communication and journalists’ news articles, and how these conflicts affected citizens. However, the proposed framework also offers a forward-looking perspective on how to study conflict framing and understand the democratic role of conflict frames.

In addition, this dissertation advances our understanding of when and why politicians adapt to the media’s preferences for conflict and negativity and to what extent this is a deliberate choice. This is important because it helps to show us what drives the use of conflict frames, which gives us insight into how and where we might potentially intervene if deemed necessary. On the one hand, I find that politicians perceive that the political realm is significantly influenced by the media and that the media’s preference for negativity toughens the political climate. For instance, politicians argue that only negative news makes it to the political agenda, that due to the negative coverage, other political actors behave inappropriately, and that some debates and battles are staged to attract the attention of the media. On the other hand, this dissertation shows that politicians themselves feel that they have the agency to adapt to the media logic or not. They do so only when they feel it is advantageous to their political success or profile. Hence, the findings of this dissertation align with Blumler and Esser’s (2019) idea that mediatization is a combination of both pull and push factors. The pull factor refers to politicians’ self-mediatization and their ability to strategically use media logic. The push factor refers to journalists’ power in actively shaping political discourse. For instance, as uncovered in the interviews, by reporting negatively about politics, politicians perceive that politics itself also becomes more negative. Hence, in the case that we would like to avoid the excessive presence of certain types of conflict frames in politics, we need to address both the pull and push factors as I will discuss below.

Societal implications

Democratic consequences

The findings of this dissertation can contribute to a better understanding of the role of conflict in democracy, particularly in understanding the nuanced impact of conflict. First, this dissertation demonstrates that conflict may negatively impact voters' political attitudes and behaviours only under some conditions. In short, when conflict frames come from disliked parties they may have a small demobilizing effect, uncivil conflict can backlash against the source, and factual conflict can cause cynical attitudes. Chapter 5 critically examined conflict framing within the framework of deliberative democracy. Here, it is argued that certain prerequisites must be met for conflict to align with the ideals of reasoned and respectful political discourse. Incivility is clearly at odds with the idea that both voters and politicians should participate in political disagreements respectfully. In addition, it is argued that while deep disagreements are the cornerstone of liberal democracy, politicians should also emphasize common interests beyond these deep disagreements. Emphasizing agreement on policy aims, even in the presence of differing approaches to achieving these aims, can foster a more constructive political environment. Moreover, this dissertation advocates for the avoidance of disagreements about well-established facts, as politics and the media should ensure that the public understands that established scientific truths should not be open to debate.

Implications for (journalistic) practice and beyond

This dissertation shows that the responsibility for desirable conflict frames lies in the interplay between media and politicians. Chapter 4 found that the media's focus on negativity and conflict has a significant influence on the political arena. According to politicians, the media assert influence by toughening the political climate and rewarding conflict-seeking behaviour over consensus-building approaches. In doing so, politicians argue that the media stimulate inappropriate behaviour of politicians, and foster debates that are less about the content of issues and more about personal attacks and incivility to attract attention. This dynamic creates a reinforcing spiral: the media's focus on negativity, incivility, and personal conflict shapes political behaviour, and journalists in turn report on this behaviour. According to the politicians, breaking this cycle is crucial, especially when it comes to certain types of conflicts such as uncivil conflicts and personal attacks.

While attention to substantive reasonable conflicts may be necessary, the media's tendency to report on uncivil conflict could be more worrisome (Otto et al., 2020; Skytte, 2021). Previous research has shown that negative campaign strategies of parties do not necessarily receive more attention in media coverage, but 'nastier' campaigns do

(Gerstlé & Nai, 2019, p. 419). This dissertation did not find that journalists excessively focus on uncivil conflicts. However, at the same time, it does show that politicians feel that journalists tend to focus on the harsher types of conflict. Hence, in reporting on politics, it is important that journalists remain critical of politics, fulfilling their watchdog function (Eriksson & Östman, 2013), and refrain from rewarding the inappropriate behaviour of politicians. If there is little interest from journalists in harsh forms of conflict, and politicians also experience this as such, politicians' uncivil behaviour makes less sense. Of course, politicians themselves can also contribute to a more cooperative and civil political environment, both offline and within the digital sphere. In this sense, it is reassuring that this dissertation found that most online conflicts are substantive and civil and that some politicians indicated in the interviews that they choose to refrain from conflict in their social media messages due to the already conflictual and negative online environment. Furthermore, both politicians and journalists should be cautious when it comes to deep factual disagreements. Although the understanding of facts may differ across candidates or parties, conflict frames should preferably make clear that fundamental established facts and scientific consensus are non-negotiable. While the complete elimination of deep factual conflicts from political debates may prove impossible, journalists may carry the responsibility to accurately report on factual evidence when reporting on such conflicts.

Finally, the responsibility for fostering constructive conflict may extend to voters and social media platforms. Recent instances in the Netherlands of politicians leaving the political arena due to online hate (NOS Nieuws, 2023) underscore the urgency of creating a more respectful online political space. While it is debated whether platforms hold similar responsibilities as media producers, platforms could contribute to a more respectful political debate by changing their algorithmic logic that fosters and rewards negative and uncivil communication, as well as holding users accountable for their behaviour. For instance, they could penalize hate speech and the spread of disinformation more strictly by suspending users from the platform for a certain amount of time or flagging their accounts. For voters, promoting media literacy and critical thinking can equip them to evaluate the accuracy of information, reducing the susceptibility to dis/misinformation. Moreover, creating awareness among citizens on how their online behaviour may have harmful consequences is essential. In online environments, it is easier to be disrespectful due to the lack of formality and intimacy (Ott, 2017). However, words online can have a similar impact as in face-to-face interactions, and citizens should be made aware (again) of how their messages can affect others. Like the conditions that were laid for conflict frames of politicians, in online conflicts citizens should also preferably look for some common ground, be respectful toward one another, and potentially refrain from questioning verifiable facts.

Limitations and opportunities for further research

To study the impact of conflict framing in politicians' communication, certain (methodological) choices were necessary, and these inevitably introduced some limitations to this dissertation. I will outline those here and propose how future studies could address them.

First, while this dissertation contributed to the existing literature on conflict frames in politicians' communication by examining a multi-party setting, the focus was exclusively on the context, content, and consequences of online political conflict frames in one single country – the Netherlands. The unique features of the Dutch political system may restrict the generalizability of our findings to other countries. Notably, the perceived influence of the media on politics may vary across countries with diverse media and political systems. For example, in countries with a majoritarian political system and characterized by partisan media, such as the US, politicians may find it easier to control their news presence, potentially reducing their incentive to conform to media logic. However, in countries without partisan media, where legacy media hold similar reach and influence, and where a large number of parties compete for media attention, similar trends in politicians' adaptation to the media could potentially be observed. Countries with media and political systems similar to the Netherlands include, for example, Belgium, Germany, Austria, and Scandinavian countries (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

Additionally, the findings on the use of different types of conflict frames may be country-specific. The need for political parties in the Netherlands to form coalitions after elections may moderate the intensity of political battles, explaining why this dissertation found little incivility, personal attacks, and deep conflict. This may be different in bipartisan settings such as the US, which may provide a better opportunity structure for these harsh conflicts to emerge. However, studies on the European election or in Germany have observed similar trends in terms of levels of incivility or negativity (see e.g., Hopmann et al., 2018; Klinger et al., 2022), suggesting that the findings of this dissertation have broader applicability, and may extend to other multi-party systems in Europe. However, uncertainty remains regarding the generalizability of the presence of deep and factual conflicts. Future research could explore how these specific dimensions of conflict framing manifest themselves in political communication in different contexts.

Furthermore, in the Netherlands, affective polarization is relatively low (Reiljan, 2020) and this may partly explain the absence of clear-cut effects. Existing research suggests that the impact of conflict and negativity on citizens varies depending on

their level of support for the party exhibiting the negative behaviour (e.g., Reiter & Matthes, 2022; Somer-Topcu & Weitzel, 2022). For instance, citizens are more likely to perceive political incivility as detrimental to democracy when it is used by a party they strongly dislike (Reiter & Matthes, 2022). However, in a context characterized by low affective polarization, where citizens identify less strongly with one party and have deep animosity towards the other, and where political parties need to cooperate to govern, citizens may hold a more moderate and also pragmatic approach to political differences. Nevertheless, I believe that the conceptual dimensions can serve as a valuable framework for future research, allowing comparisons of the effects of conflicts across media and political systems.

Second, I only concentrated on specific outcome variables and the effects of the different conflict types on other outcome variables warrant further research. Partisan conflict and negative campaigns have also been associated with increasing affective polarization (Skytte, 2021; Sood & Iyengar, 2016). Especially in an online context, voters may find and seek out the conflicts that align with their previously held beliefs and therefore are less likely to be challenged in their thinking. Scholars have also indicated that citizens tend to hold increasingly polarized factual beliefs (Rekker & Hartevelt, 2022), and we need to understand how factual conflict between politicians affects this. Additionally, we witness trends toward increasing verbal aggression and violence against politicians (Kalmoe & Mason, 2022; Krook & Restrepo Sanín, 2020). It is important to understand how (online) political conflict may feed voters' aggression. Moreover, to understand the normative value of conflict we need to investigate how certain types of conflicts can foster positive outcomes. As an example, we should examine the kinds of conflicts that help people to understand more about other viewpoints, what people might learn from conflict frames, and what it is about a conflict that causes people to get engaged and interested in politics.

Lastly, this dissertation primarily focused on how conflict is presented to the public, and less on how conflict is perceived. It has been argued that the extent to which something comes across as negative or uncivil is dependent on individual perceptions (Lipsitz & Geer, 2017; Sigelman & Kugler, 2003). What may seem appropriate behaviour to some may be considered inappropriate by others. Lipsitz & Geer (2017) find that "scholar and citizen perceptions of negativity differ considerably". Hence, it is important to understand how the different dimensions identified in this dissertation are perceived by citizens. Future studies could examine whether the criteria that scholars use to define deep or factual conflicts align with individuals' perceptions of those conflicts. Moreover, research indicates that the extent to which voters are conflict-avoidant seems to explain how people respond to conflict. Bjarnøe et al. (2019),

for instance, show that voters who are conflict-avoidant are less likely to be mobilized by conflict framing in the news than voters who are not. Similarly, Mutz and Reeves (2005) find that voters who are more conflict-averse are more likely to lower their political trust after being exposed to uncivil politicians than voters low in conflict avoidance. So, future research should investigate how individuals respond differently to the types of conflict.

Concluding remarks

Starting with the premise that conflict is the essence of politics, this dissertation delved into the ongoing scholarly debate on whether the emphasis on conflict in campaign communication and political news coverage proves beneficial or detrimental to democracy. It investigated the types of conflict frames employed by politicians online and their effects on citizens and democracy.

Building upon existing research that emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between civil versus uncivil conflict, as well as conflicts centred on substantive issues versus personal attacks, this dissertation posits that it is equally crucial to consider the depth of conflicts and their substance, differentiating between deep and ordinary conflicts, and normative and factual conflicts. Focusing on the usage of these conflict types, our findings reveal that (online) political conflict frames are predominantly civil, substantive, ordinary, and normative. This has potential positive ramifications for democracy, since uncivil conflict is often found to have detrimental effects on citizen's political behaviour (e.g., Otto, et al., 2020) or political attitudes (e.g., Skytte, 2021), and substantive conflicts potentially carry more information than personal attacks about political parties' preferences and ideals, information that is needed for voters to make a political choice (Levendusky, 2010). Furthermore, while deep conflict is essential in politics, it can also signal to voters that there is a lack of common ground between parties (De Ridder, 2021), which can lead citizens to perceive political gridlock and ultimately lose trust in politics (Uslaner, 2015).

Concerning their effects, this dissertation shows that conflict frames rarely harm citizens' political attitudes or behaviour and that most conflicts are not all that bad. However, under specific conditions, conflicts may yield negative effects, though these effects are often small. Specifically, the results show that incivility negatively affects people's trust in, as well as their view of, the party that is acting uncivil. In addition, factual conflicts, especially when they are deep, cause citizens to hold more cynical attitudes toward politics. These consequences can be harmful because

according to both the participatory and deliberative ideal models of democracy, trust in political parties and the political system is crucial (Strömbäck, 2005). If citizens have confidence in their elected representatives and the functioning of institutions, there will be more support for the implementation of policies, even in cases when there is disagreement with those policies. While a certain degree of distrust or political scepticism towards political actors can be beneficial for democracy, as critical citizens are more likely to engage in politics, if this distrust turns into cynicism, it can lead to citizens' disengagement from politics (Van Der Meer & Zmerli, 2017). Thus, this dissertation advocates for the avoidance of uncivil and deep factual conflicts, with a shared responsibility placed on politicians and journalists. Politicians are encouraged to behave civilly and refrain from questioning the reliability of scientific evidence, and the media bears the responsibility to also reward politicians for doing so.

Although this dissertation provided a first investigation of the effects of identified dimensions of political conflict frames, more research in this direction is warranted. Understanding how these conflict types are present outside the political domain, in the media, and public debate and public perception remains a crucial avenue for investigation. Additionally, while this dissertation shows voters' resilience to the negative aspects of online political conflict, future research should focus on how we can ensure that political battles indeed bring about more positive change, by fostering constructive and respectful dialogue, helping us understand each other's viewpoints, and actively engaging citizens in the democratic process.