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The Impact of Online Political Conflict Frames on Party Evaluations and Trust in Politicians

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ABSTRACT

Politicians' emphasis on conflict has been linked to public dislike of political parties and political distrust. Previous research has focused on how different conflict types, such as civil versus uncivil conflicts, impact perceptions of political actors and politics. However, little is known about how other relevant dimensions of conflict affect evaluations of political actors and trust in politicians. To address this gap and reconcile fragmented accounts and mixed evidence on the effects of conflict frames, this study explores how four dimensions of political conflict framing affect evaluations of the frame sponsor and trust in politicians. We specifically consider the impact of (1) uncivil versus civil conflicts, (2) substantive conflicts with or without personal attacks, (3) ordinary conflicts versus deep conflicts that concern underlying moral/epistemic principles, and (4) normative versus factual conflicts. An online experiment in the Netherlands ($N = 1{,}376$) was conducted. The results indicate that uncivil conflict frames can negatively affect voters' evaluation of political parties, whereas factual conflict can fuel political distrust. However, most conflicts do not affect voters' political attitudes. These findings suggest that most voters are resilient to conflict or have become numb to such messages due to prolonged exposure in our current information ecology.

Introduction

Politicians' use of loud, negative, and confrontational rhetoric has been associated with negative and distrustful attitudes toward politics and politicians (e.g., Lau et al., 2007; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Walter & Van der Eijk, 2019). Politicians frequently use conflict frames to emphasize opposition, criticize opponents, and contrast their political agenda to those of competitors (van der Goot et al., 2024). A conflict frame "emphasizes conflict between individuals, groups, or institutions as a means of capturing audience interest" (Semetko &

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Valkenburg, 2000, p. 95). While conflicts are a natural part of politics (Schattschneider, 1960) and can help voters comprehend party differences and motivate participation (Bjarnøe et al., 2019), they can also fuel political distrust (Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Skytte, 2021) and create negative perceptions toward the parties that use them (Lau et al., 2007; Walter & Van der Eijk, 2019). However, it remains unclear under what conditions conflict frames produce these negative effects.

To understand which kinds of conflicts are potentially harmful, previous studies have investigated how certain conflict types, such as civil versus uncivil conflict, or policy versus character attacks, affect voters' perceptions of political actors and the overall political system (Brooks & Geer, 2007; Fridkin & Kenney, 2011; Mutz, 2007; Nai & Maier, 2021). However, it is unknown to what extent and how other dimensions of conflict – such as whether they are factual or normative, and ordinary or deep – impact evaluations of parties endorsing such frames. We also know little about how these frames contribute to a distrustful attitude toward politicians in general. It is important to study the consequences of different dimensions of political conflict as they can shape voters' views of politics in important ways. Witnessing political parties disagree about basic facts may, for instance, contribute to perceptions of political actors' dishonesty.

This study examines the effects of four key dimensions of political conflict frames. The first dimension is (in)civility, which refers to whether political actors are respectful toward each other. The second dimension involves the content of the criticism and concerns the frame's emphasis on substantive matters or personal attacks. The third dimension considers the depth of the conflict, distinguishing between conflicts that take place in a shared framework of moral and epistemic norms (*ordinary*, or *superficial*, see van der Goot et al., 2024), versus conflicts that question those very frameworks themselves (*deep*). The fourth dimension differentiates between conflicts about normative issues (how things *should* be) and conflicts about factual matters (how things *are)*. We focus on these four dimensions because they are prominent in politicians' communication (van der Goot et al., 2024) and reflect key societal challenges in today's digital age. There are growing concerns that political debates have increasingly become uncivil (Klinger et al., 2022) and that personal attacks have become more common due to the personalization of politics (Pruysers & Cross, 2016). Furthermore, worries exist that political divides are becoming more entrenched and that deep conflicts lead political opponents to see each other as irrational or morally bad, thereby fueling polarization (e.g., De Ridder, 2021). Finally, we also witness a trend toward post-factual relativism, with individuals holding different interpretations of facts and rejecting facts that contradict their beliefs (e.g., Van Aelst et al., 2017). By examining uncivil, personal, deep, and factual conflicts, we aim to explore how these trends may foster negative attitudes toward political actors.

In addition, by exploring these dimensions, we aim to reconcile fragmented accounts of conflict frames, which have produced mixed and context-dependent evidence (see, e.g., Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2006; Otto et al., 2020; Schuck et al., 2016). Previous research has conceptualized conflict in various ways. Some studies focus on uncivil forms of political conflict (Forgette & Morris, 2006), while others examine deep partisan conflict. As Skytte (2021) notes, conflating these forms complicates our understanding of how conflict impacts citizens and democracy. Furthermore, evidence on the impact of political conflicts is inconsistent, with some studies highlighting potential benefits for citizens and democracy (Bjarnøe, 2022; Mattes & Redlawsk, 2014; Schuck et al., 2016), and others emphasizing negative consequences, such as heightened political distrust (Forgette & Morris, 2006; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2006; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). Therefore, we believe it is crucial to understand what specific aspects of conflict drive these varied effects. Testing a comprehensive typology of conflict frames can reconcile the fragmented literature and advance our understanding of which types of conflict yield undesirable effects. Against this backdrop, our study aims to explore the extent to which exposure to different types of conflict frames in political communication negatively impacts the evaluation of parties employing such frames and politicians in general.

Furthermore, we contribute to the literature by studying the Dutch multi-party system, broadening the focus beyond the commonly studied context of the United States. This is important since results may be country-specific (Walter & Van der Eijk, 2019). While emphasizing conflict between two parties might be beneficial in a bipartisan context like the US (Lau et al., 2007), in multi-party systems, consensus and compromise are key for efficient governance (Lijphart, 1999). However, articulating differences between parties remains essential, also in multi-party systems, explaining why politicians may still use conflict framing in less polarized settings. Nevertheless, the impact of conflict frames on voters' political attitudes in multi-party systems remains unclear.

To answer our research questions, we conducted an online experiment in the Netherlands. We explored how the different dimensions of conflict framing affected voters' perceptions of political parties and politicians. Our results reveal that voters lower their perception of parties if they are uncivil and that factual conflicts foster distrust of politicians in general. However, other dimensions of political conflict do not seem to affect voters, suggesting either that voters are resilient to conflict or apathetic due to frequent prolonged exposure.

Defining conflict framing

This paper examines political parties' use of strategic conflict framing. Since framing is a debated concept (e.g., Cacciatore et al., 2016), we begin by defining the frames central to our analysis. Conflict frames can be defined as

generic emphasis frames (De Vreese, 2005). Such frames are utilized to selectively emphasize certain aspects of perceived reality to shape the public's and media's perception of political issues and events (Entman, 1993). Emphasis frames generally help make "sense of relevant events" and suggest "what is at issue" (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 3). Conflict framing, more specifically, involves framing an issue as a conflict between opposing sides (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). By employing conflict frames, politicians create an opposition between themselves and their opponents and emphasize contrasting viewpoints on pressing issues. While conflict framing often includes criticism toward the opponent, making it very similar to negative campaigning (Geer, 2006), its scope is broader. Negative campaigning focuses primarily on attacking the opponent and undermining the opponent's popularity (Geer, 2006), whereas conflict framing centers on disagreement, emphasizing how or why political actors hold opposing positions, values, or interests (Otto et al., 2020; Schuck et al., 2016).

We focus on conflict framing since we are interested in how differences in *content* and *style* of communicating conflicting viewpoints affect voters. Adopting a conflict-framing approach allows us to investigate differences in patterns of emphasis, thereby providing insight into how substantive and stylistic components of conflict affect recipients' political attitudes. Style-based conflict frames (e.g., civil vs. uncivil tone) are likely to influence voters through perceptions of political actors' adherence to social norms, while substantive dimensions (e.g., deep or ordinary conflict) highlight the extent and nature of political disagreement, providing voters with information about the functioning of democracy.

In line with this approach, we regard the different dimensions – such as tone (civil vs. uncivil) or the depth of the conflict (deep vs. ordinary) – as framing devices that shape how political actors communicate their viewpoints. The tone of a message not only reflects a stylistic choice but also frames the issue to convey urgency or severity. For instance, a politician discussing migration may frame it as a "crisis" by asserting that the "country will be flooded with migrants," invoking a sense of threat. Similarly, the depth of a conflict serves as a framing device: some issues more naturally reflect deep divisions because they are often linked to epistemic or moral norms (e.g., climate change or immigration), while others can be framed as such, for example by linking a seemingly ordinary issue as speed limits to an attack on core liberal values.

By exploring the style and content dimensions of conflict framing, we aim to provide a nuanced understanding of how political actors' conflict frames can influence public perceptions of political parties and trust in politicians more generally.

The impact of communicating conflict on voters

Since extant literature has predominately treated conflict as a unified concept without distinguishing between different types of conflict, we deem it important to first understand its general effect on recipients' evaluation of parties employing conflict frames and trust in politicians in general.

Regarding the first outcome variable, most literature to date has dealt with the question how conflict frames and negative campaigns impact voters' evaluation of political parties and, more specifically, whether adopting them can be an advantageous strategy for parties by promoting a more positive evaluation of these parties (see, e.g., Berntzen, 2020; Forgette & Morris, 2006; Lau et al., 2007; Nai & Maier, 2021). Hence, in line with this strategic approach to conflict framing, by criticizing their opponent's views and presenting their own ideas as a better alternative, parties aim to demobilize support for opponents while mobilizing their supporters and persuading undecided voters (Lau et al., 2007). However, this strategy can also have negative consequences for evaluations of the political actor communicating conflict frames. Specifically, it may hurt the reputation of the sponsor of the conflict frame if voters dislike the criticism and perceive it to be unfounded or inappropriate. This is known as the "backlash" effect (Lau et al., 2007). Especially in a multi-party setting, this backlash effect may be more pronounced since voters expect politicians to cooperate, seek allies, and consensus (Lijphart, 1999). To capture voters' evaluations of the sponsor of the conflict frame comprehensively, we examine two dimensions: the extent to which voters hold positive feelings toward the sponsor (Fridkin & Kenney, 2004; Iyengar et al., 2019; Lau et al., 2007), and voters' judgment about the extent to which the sponsor has the motivation and competence to act in their best interest, that is, whether citizens trust the sponsor (Warren, 2017). Trust plays a central role in voters' evaluation of political parties (Funk, 1999), and by examining both favorability and trust, we aim to provide a comprehensive perception of how conflict framing can affect voters' evaluations.

Research on voters' evaluation of parties employing a conflict frame has produced contrasting results. Some studies show that highlighting conflict with an opponent and criticizing them can benefit the evaluation of the sponsor (Ceron & d'Adda, 2016; Mattes & Redlawsk, 2015). Conflict frames can carry crucial information about party differences (Geer, 2006; Schuck et al., 2016), and when voters identify with the values communicated about the parties, they tend to evaluate the sponsor more positively (Mattes & Redlawsk, 2015). However, other studies find that conflict frames can backfire, leading voters to view the sponsor more negatively after exposure to such messages (e.g., Nai & Maier, 2021; Walter & Van der Eijk, 2019). Given the mixed evidence on the effect of conflict framing *in general*, we refrain from formulating opposing hypotheses and instead pose research questions:

RQ1: How does exposure to a conflict frame affect (a) participants' feelings toward and (b) trust in the sponsor of the conflict frame?

Besides impacting the evaluation of the party employing the conflict frame, extant literature has also extensively focused on whether conflict frames could have unintended negative side effects. Concerns have been raised that the extensive focus on conflict by politicians and the media does not only increase voters distrust of specific parties but also contributes to a distrustful attitude toward politicians more generally (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2006; Lau et al., 2007). It is important to disentangle trust in specific political actors from trust in politicians in general. While voters may maintain a positive view of a particular political party after seeing a conflict frame, exposure to such frames may also foster a more general skepticism about the competences and performance of politicians (Norris, 2011).

For instance, since conflict frames make irreconcilable differences, personal attacks, and uncivil behavior of politicians more salient, they may foster the perception of politics being a nasty game between self-interested actors (Nai & Walter, 2015). According to Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002), voters are generally conflict-averse and prefer not to be confronted with conflict. They perceive endless fighting and power struggles as obstacles to genuine problem-solving. Strategic use of conflict frames may suggest to voters that politicians prioritize their own success over dealing with substantive policy issues (Lau et al., 2007). As a result, conflict frames can contribute to negative evaluations of politicians. Prior research showed that negative campaigning reduced trust in governments (Lau et al., 2007) and increased political cynicism (Yoon et al., 2005). Similarly, conflict-oriented news has been found to foster political distrust (Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2006). Since the literature seems to agree that conflict decreases political trust, and attacking the opponent contradicts the consensus-seeking culture inherent in multi-party systems (Lijphart, 1999), we anticipate a similar effect:

H1: Exposure to a conflict frame decreases political trust compared to not being exposed to a conflict frame.

Dimensions of Conflict Frames and Their Distinct Effects

Previous research revealed four dimensions of political conflict frames (van der Goot et al., 2024): (1) *civil* versus *uncivil*; (2) substantive conflict with or without *personal* attacks; (3) *deep* versus *ordinary* conflicts; and (4) conflicts concerning *factual* or *normative* issues. The first two conflict sub-types, being stylistic and non-substantive, signal to voters whether politicians engage in reasonable discussions or resort to inappropriate

behavior. The other two dimensions are substantive, indicating the depth of disagreement among politicians and the nature of the issue they disagree on (factual/normative). Importantly, conflict frames can vary based on different combinations of style and content dimensions (van der Goot et al., 2024). Together, they are the building blocks of conflict frames that emphasize and promote a suggested interpretation of political battles.

Incivility

Research has considered how voters perceive uncivil political parties (Fridkin & Kenney, 2011; Frimer & Skitka, 2018; Gervais, 2021; Nai & Maier, 2021). Incivility, understood as violations of politeness norms (Brooks & Geer, 2007), manifests itself in a variety of ways, including disrespectful language, name-calling, (digital) shouting, and hyperbolic accusations (Gervais, 2021). It is assumed that politicians, by employing impolite rhetoric, heighten arousal and intensify voters' preexisting negative evaluations of the out-group (Mutz, 2007). However, most studies find that being disrespectful is a risky approach that can backfire (Frimer & Skitka, 2018; Gervais, 2021; Nai & Maier, 2021). Incivility is likely to provoke feelings of aversion, causing people to distance themselves from the actor who triggered it (Gervais, 2021). Frimer and Skitka (2018), for instance, showed that uncivil rhetoric harms the speaker's reputation. Moreover, uncivil conflict during debates has been found to negatively impact feelings voters had toward both the Democratic and the Republican party (Forgette & Morris, 2006). Based on this unambiguous evidence, we expect that voters will evaluate parties employing uncivil conflict frames more negatively:

H2: Exposure to an uncivil conflict frame decreases (a) the positive feelings toward and (b) trust in the sponsor compared to a civil conflict frame.

Furthermore, several studies have shown that incivility decreases trust in politicians. The reasoning behind this is that voters consider to what extent politicians "observe the rules of the game" (Citrin & Muste, 1999, p. 465). Voters expect politicians to adhere to the social norms they observe in their everyday social interactions with others. When politicians violate these norms, and engage in behavior that is frowned upon by voters, this creates the view that politicians do not behave in the way that they are expected to, and this provokes a "gut-level negative reaction" (Mutz & Reeves, 2005, p. 7). Empirical evidence indeed reveals that uncivil communication lowers political trust and increases cynical attitudes (Forgette & Morris, 2006; Goovaerts & Marien, 2020; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Reiter & Matthes, 2021; Yoon et al., 2005). Here again, the findings in the literature seem to point in the same direction, allowing us to formulate the following hypothesis:

H2c: Exposure to an uncivil conflict frame decreases political trust compared to a civil conflict frame.

Personal Attacks

Furthermore, while conflicts can be substantive and focus on clashes between policy positions or ideological beliefs, politicians can also attack their opponents, for instance, by focusing on their character or behavior. In this paper, we consider what it means if politicians employ conflict frames not to focus on their opponents' policy positions, but to attack their character. Such a personal attack is often considered uncivil (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). Personal attacks are a style dimension rather than a substantive one; they add little to no information about the substance of a conflict but rather show the extent to which politicians engage in respectful debate.

Voters are generally conflict-averse (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002), making harsh conflict especially unpopular. While conflict over substantive matters, such as policy issues, is fundamental to politics, personal attacks, especially in the form of unfounded personal slander, may be considered as less helpful. Voters are likely to view such attacks as a distraction from the important issues facing their country (Brooks & Geer, 2007; Nai & Maier, 2021). Because they may view these attacks as unfair, offensive, or inappropriate, employing them can cause voters to negatively evaluate parties that use them. Empirical evidence shows that personal attacks rarely harm the opponent's reputation but frequently damage the reputation of the attacker (e.g., Carraro & Castelli, 2010; Nai & Maier, 2021). Given the tendency of personal attacks to backfire, we anticipate similar outcomes:

H3: Exposure to a conflict frame with a personal attack decreases (a) positive feelings toward and (b) trust in the sponsor compared to a conflict frame without a personal attack.

Only little research has examined how personal attacks affect trust in politicians in general. An exception is Brooks and Geer (2007), who found no difference in the impact of issue-based or personal attacks on political trust. However, since personal attacks are seen as inappropriate and norm-violating behavior (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011), they may contribute to political distrust in a similar manner as incivility, eliciting a gut-level negative reaction. Additionally, personal attacks can be perceived as a calculated and strategic tactic, reinforcing perceptions that politicians are primarily concerned with attracting votes instead of engaging in meaningful debate and that they prioritize their self-interest over the interest of the public (Brooks & Geer, 2007), fueling a more distrusting attitude toward politicians. However, due to a lack of empirical evidence supporting this expectation, we pose a research question:

RQ2: How does the effect of conflict framing on participants' political trust differ between conflict frames with and without a personal attack?

Deep and Ordinary Conflict

Independent of the stylistic and non-substantive dimensions, the substance of the conflict itself can differ. While little research has considered the effects of different substantive conflicts, this is crucial to consider as they can indicate to voters the extent to which political actors are divided, which is found to contribute to, for instance, affective polarization (Skytte, 2021).

To understand how substantive conflicts influence perceptions of political parties and trust in politicians, we distinguish between deep and ordinary conflicts. In deep conflicts, politicians disagree about core moral values or epistemic principles, making it difficult to find common ground. In ordinary conflicts, instead, politicians have largely overlapping moral and epistemic frameworks, but differ in their opinions on the applications and implications of the principles and values (De Ridder, 2021). Resolving deep disagreements is exceptionally challenging because parties lack enough common ground from which to address them. For instance, while Social Democrats believe the moral obligation to offer shelter to refugees should take priority, populists might believe it is a premier moral duty to protect the nation-state, resulting in a gridlock. In the context of ordinary conflicts, politicians disagree on specific, more isolated issues, such as whether the maximum highway speed ought to be decreased but agree on the basic values and facts surrounding the issue (e.g., people need cars, driving faster increases emissions) and share moral/epistemic principles. Consequently, both parties can typically agree on a method for resolving the issue, such as further investigation or compromise.

De Ridder (2021) argues that in deep disagreements, politicians often reject the legitimacy of the opponent's way of thinking, reinforcing the perception that the opponent is irrational or immoral, while presenting their own side as more reasonable or morally upstanding. This could signal to voters that the attacker represents a better alternative and result in voters having a more favorable view of the political party employing a deep conflict frame, as opposed to an ordinary conflict frame. Consequently, as Guerrero (2021) argues, political candidates may strategically emphasize deep disagreements to attract electoral support. However, given the lack of empirical evidence on voters' perceptions of deep conflict, we know little about whether and how deep conflict frames impact sponsor evaluations, and therefore formulated exploratory research questions:

RQ3: How does the effect of conflict framing on (a) participants' feelings toward and (b) trust in the sponsor differ between a deep and ordinary conflict frame?

The impact of deep disagreements expressed in conflict frames on trust in politicians in general is also under-researched. On the one hand, they may not increase distrust in politicians because disagreements stemming from fundamentally different worldviews are inherent to politics (Schattschneider, 1960), and voters may anticipate politicians attacking each other over what they see as irrational or immoral policy proposals. On the other hand, voters may also be alarmed when political parties claim an inability to find common ground, as this creates a hostile environment and impedes effective government. If a political party emphasizes its unwillingness to cooperate with others, this may give the impression that the party is solely pursuing its own interests at the expense of finding solutions (Uslaner, 2015). Furthermore, it has been suggested that if politicians are more deeply divided than the public is, this creates political distrust, as more moderate voters can no longer identify with parties and therefore do not feel represented by them (Citrin & Stoker, 2018). Since the theoretical expectations diverge, we refrain from formulating a hypothesis and instead pose the following question:

RQ3c: How does the effect of conflict framing on voters' political trust differ between a deep and ordinary conflict frame?

Factual and Normative Conflict

Finally, conflicts can vary to the extent that they concern normative issues, essentially addressing what politicians think *ought* to be the case or *ought* to be done, and factual issues, which pertain to what politicians think *is* the case (Frances, 2014). Since the foundation of politics is a clash between political values, most conflicts revolve around normative issues (Schattschneider, 1960). Politicians disagree due to different preferences, adherence to other values, or distinct moral beliefs. Moral principles and values differ from mere preferences and conventions because they are supposed to apply universally, whereas preferences and conventions can differ between individuals (Skitka, 2010). Additionally, politicians can disagree on facts and scientific information, or hold differing interpretations of commonly accepted information, data, or statistical trends (De Ridder, 2021; Frances, 2014). While disagreements about facts are not a new phenomenon, facts or science appear increasingly debated (Van Aelst et al., 2017).

Normative and factual conflicts can both be deep or ordinary. For instance, within a normative *ordinary* conflict, political actors agree on core moral values such as equality but differ in how they think equality ought to be achieved. In contrast, in a *deep* normative conflict, political actors do not agree on core moral values or their priority. An example of this is a conflict between politicians who prioritize protecting the life of an unborn child versus those who emphasize

safeguarding a woman's right to abortion. A similar distinction applies to factual conflicts. In an *ordinary* factual conflict, politicians may differ in their interpretation of empirical evidence or the extent to which it supports a specific claim. However, in a *deep* factual conflict, disagreements stem from contrasting epistemic principles, such as whether a body of established scientific knowledge can be trusted.

Only little research has explored how normative and factual conflict affects party perceptions or trust in politicians. It is argued that both moral and factual conflicts may reinforce existing party preferences, contributing to affective polarization (Rekker, 2022; Simonsen & Bonikowski, 2022). Both types of conflicts could, thus, strengthen support for the sponsor if people already like this party. However, concerning trust in politicians, a different pattern may emerge. Factual conflict may contribute to a negative understanding of politicians in general. When a politician emphasizes that the opponent misunderstands or misinterprets facts, it could foster perceptions of dishonesty or incompetence. Additionally, disagreement over widely established facts may contribute to the belief that politicians purposefully spread misinformation. Since empirical evidence is lacking to date, we pose research questions to explore effects on party evaluations and political distrust.

RQ4: How does the effect of conflict framing on (a) participants' feelings toward and (b) trust in the sponsor differ between a factual and normative conflict frame?

RQ4c: How does the effect of conflict framing on participants' level of political trust differ between a factual and a normative conflict frame?

Method

Design

To investigate the impact of conflict framing on voters' evaluation of political parties and trust in politicians, we conducted a survey experiment.[1] Across conditions, participants were exposed to a social media message by a political party. By manipulating the dimensions of the conflict frame and the sponsor/target of the message, we employed a 2 (civil vs. uncivil conflict) x 2 (personal attack vs. no personal attack) x 2 (deep vs. ordinary conflict) x 2 (normative vs. factual conflict) x 2 (left-wing opposition party vs. right-wing government party) + 2 control groups between-subjects design. For the control group, we showed respondents a positive message coming from the left-wing opposition party or the right-wing government party. This means we have 34 different between-subjects

conditions to which participants have been randomly assigned. The details of the study are pre-registered on OSF.[2]

Sample

We conducted an a-priori power analysis to determine the necessary sample size. To reliably detect a small effect size (0.10)[3] with a power of 0.95 and alpha set to 0.05, we needed 1302 participants.[4] I&O Research, an independent research company, collected the data in March/April 2023. Among the 2075 participants who accessed the survey, 1378 completed it. We checked the data for straight-liners by considering the row standard deviation of a respondent across all important variables (i.e., evaluation of the target and sponsor, trust in politicians, the manipulation checks, and attitude toward the topic of the conflict frame). If a respondent is a straight-liner, they should have no variation across their answers and this standard deviation would be zero. We did not identify any straight-liners.[5] In addition, we considered how fast participants filled out the survey: 25% of the respondents took less than 5 minutes for the survey of approximately 15 minutes. If respondents fell within this group of 25% and failed the attention check, we excluded them. Based on this criterion, only two participants were excluded, resulting in a final sample of 1376 participants. The mean age of participants is 52.07 ($SD = 17.16$), comparable to the average age in the Dutch population of people over 18 (49.6), and 52.62% are male. Regarding education, 20.78% are lower educated, 36.70% have a moderate level of education, and 42.51% are higher educated (compared to 26%, 38%, and 36% respectively in the general population; CBS, 2022). Consequently, the sample contains slightly more highly educated people than the general population. Respondents are evenly divided along the left-right political continuum ($M = 4.99$; $SE = 2.58$). We also asked participants about their general political trust in institutions such as the Dutch government and their trust in politics, which is around the midpoint of the scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.91; $M = 3.34$; $SE = 1.26$). The experimental groups varied in size from 36 participants to 45.

Procedure

The survey was conducted online and administered in Dutch. After informed consent, participants completed a questionnaire including demographics and control variables. Following this, participants were randomly assigned to one of the experimental conditions. Across conditions, they were presented with a fictitious Facebook post from either the left-wing opposition party GroenLinks or the right-wing government party VVD. The stimulus material was visible for at least 20 seconds. After reading, participants were directed to

the posttest questionnaire, which contained questions about the dependent variables and manipulation.

Stimuli

We exposed participants to a realistic Facebook post, mimicking genuine social media communication by political parties, with different types of conflict frames. In the messages, a party highlighted its disagreement with a political opponent regarding a piece of advice about the nitrogen crisis (the left-wing party disagrees with the right-wing party and vice versa). At the time of the experiment, the nitrogen crisis was a salient political issue in the Netherlands surrounded by controversies, heated debates, and polarized opinions. To fulfill climate obligations, the government needs to take measures to reduce nitrogen deposition (Government of the Netherlands, n.d.), yet political parties disagree about measures that should be taken, how to distribute the burden, and what (scientific) evidence underlies the emission reduction. We provided as little information about the party's issue position as possible to make it plausible that either party could have sent out the message. The control condition was a Facebook post without conflict and consisted of a positive message in which the political party highlights that they are talking to farmers and aim to find a solution to the problem together. The control messages were similar in length to the conflict frame messages. In the messages with conflict frames, we manipulated the style of the conflict (civil vs. uncivil, personal attack vs. no personal attack) and the reasons for the conflict (ordinary vs. deep, factual vs. normative). We created dummy variables for each dimension (civil = 0 vs. uncivil = 1; no attack = 0 vs. attack = 1; ordinary = 0 vs. deep = 1; factual = 0 vs. normative = 1). We based the construction of the conflict frames on an extensive pretest ($N = 648$) among a representative sample of the Dutch general population (see Online Appendix A for details about the pretest).

First, to manipulate uncivil conflict, we added words that show disrespect, digital shouting, and hyperbolic accusations (Gervais, 2021). We, for instance, included sentences such as "This is madness!," "RIDICULOUS plans" and 'It frightens us."Second, while all conflicts are aimed at the political opponent's plans, to manipulate a personal conflict, we included an attack aimed at the party leader and their character: "Unfortunately, Jesse Klaver doesn't have the courage to debate it. He always runs away when it comes down to it."

Third, to manipulate a normative conflict, the political parties disagree about what measures are most fair. In the factual conflict condition, the focus was on the disagreement surrounding factual inconsistencies or different scientific understandings.

Fourth and finally, we manipulated whether the conflict was deep or ordinary. In ordinary conflict scenarios, the parties agree on the fundamental moral or epistemic values but differ on the implementation of these values. So, for

instance, in the ordinary normative conflict condition, they agree on fairness as a core value, but differ on what fairness looks like in practice. In the ordinary factual conflict condition, parties agree that the crisis needs science-based solutions, however, they disagree about the quality of the data. In the deep conditions, we made the clash of fundamental moral and epistemic values explicit by mentioning that the parties were unable to agree on basic principles of justice and equality or scientific evidence. In the following, we present an example of the final stimulus material for a civil, ordinary, normative conflict frame with a personal attack:

> Everyone agrees that the nitrogen crisis needs fair solutions, but GroenLinks is against VVD's plans. Unfortunately, Mark Rutte doesn't have the courage to debate it. He always runs away when it comes down to it. For GroenLinks, fairness means that each sector should help reduce nitrogen emissions to the best of its ability. While for VVD fairness means that farmers should bear the heaviest burden and other sectors are spared. This is unfair. The plans of VVD stand in the way of farmers' prospects. We must do what it takes to protect the farmers to get out of the crisis together.

Manipulation Checks

For the main study, all the manipulation checks were successful (see Online Appendix C, Table 1). The pretest showed that participants found it difficult to discern between deep vs. ordinary conflicts, and normative vs. factual conflicts (see Online Appendix A). Based on these outcomes of the pretest, we altered our stimulus material and focused more on emphasizing these differences. For instance, we introduced additional words signaling disagreements about facts (e.g., "incorrect measurements" and "figures from unreliable quasi-scientific sources"). To make the difference between ordinary and deep disagreements more prominent, we made the clash of core values more explicit in the deep conditions and the overlap of core values more visible in the ordinary conditions. The adjustments to the stimulus material regarding the factual/normative and deep/ordinary dimensions had the desired effect. We found, for instance, that participants in the deep conflict condition indicated more often that the parties were unable to ever come to an agreement ($M = 3.92$; $SE = 0.07$), compared to participants in the ordinary condition ($M = 3.37$; $SE = 0.07$), $t\ (1292) = -5.45$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, those participants who were exposed to a normative conflict frame were more likely to believe that the conflict was about norms ($M = 4.86$; $SE = 0.07$), as opposed to participants who were exposed to a factual conflict frame ($M = 3.61$; $SE = 0.07$), $t\ (1292) = -13.15$, $p < .001$. We also asked whether people found the message credible ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.62$), realistic ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.63$), and comparable to similar communication from this party on a seven-point scale ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 1.48$; see Online Appendix B table 3). Given that the mean scores for whether people found the message credible, realistic,

and comparable were above the midpoint of the 7-point scale, we think our stimulus material was sufficiently realistic.

Measures

We measured voters' evaluation of political parties by focusing on the feelings they have toward parties and their level of trust in these parties. To gauge respondents' evaluation of the sponsor, we relied on a commonly applied measure in the literature: a feeling thermometer (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019). We asked respondents about their feelings toward the sponsor of the message ($M = 35.72$, $SD = 27.32$), using a scale ranging from 0 ("cold & negative feelings") to 100 ("warm & positive feelings"). Additionally, we asked respondents to what extent they agreed with the statement "GroenLinks/VVD is a party that I can trust." We measured their agreement on a 7-point scale ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 1.64$). Typically, studies ask directly about the extent to which people have trust in institutions/groups (Turper & Aarts, 2017). However, since we also had that question in our survey before exposure to the stimulus material, we slightly altered the wording so that people would pay sufficient attention to it. Political trust in politicians was assessed by asking participants to indicate their agreement with seven statements, including "politicians are honest" and "politicians are mainly interested in my vote and not my opinion" (1 = completely disagree; 7 = completely agree). These seven items were combined into a scale measure (Cronbach's α =.0.76, $M = 2.89$, $SD =$ 0.94). Some of the items, e.g., "politicians act primarily out of self-interest," were reversed coded so that higher scores on the scale indicate a more trusting attitude. Other studies have relied on a similar scale (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Yoon et al., 2005).

Controls

We conducted randomization checks and found that age (F (33, 1342) = 0.72, $p = .881$), gender (X^2 (66, $N = 1376$) = 59.99, $p = .685$), education (X^2 (66, $N =$ 1376) 75.22, $p = .205$), and attitudes toward the nitrogen issue (F (33, 1342) = 0.69, $p = .905$), were equally distributed across the experimental and control groups. Therefore, we did not include them as control variables in our model. We did control for the type of party that sent out the message (government vs. opposition party), the vote intention for the sponsor, and the target. Vote intention was assessed by asking participants to indicate for each party currently in parliament their likelihood of ever voting for that party in the General election on an 11-point scale (0 = I will never vote, 10 = I will definitely vote for this party). We constructed a measure for people's intention to vote for the target of the message ($M = 2.54$, $SD = 3.25$) or the sponsor ($M = 2.58$, $SD =$ 3.28). The mean scores of vote intention were quite low. This is probably

because there are many different parties in the Dutch parliament, and a lot of voters also have strong preferences for other parties.

Analysis Strategy

We conducted linear regressions to predict the evaluation of the sponsor and trust in politicians. Rather than comparing each of the 34 groups with each other, we treat the four manipulated dimensions as the independent variables in the model. This approach allowed us to assess the overall effects of the conflict frame dimensions. We will first consider the main effect of conflict framing, before assessing how the different conflict frames impact participants.

Results

First, we explored the main effect of exposure to conflict framing on sponsor evaluation and trust in politicians (see Table 1 below for the results). We found no significant difference between people who were exposed to conflict frames compared to those exposed to the control condition. Hence, to answer RQ1a and RQ1b, there is no effect of conflict framing on the evaluation of the sponsor. We also reject H1, predicting that people would be less trusting of politicians in general after seeing a conflict frame.

Table 1. The effect of conflict framing on evaluations of the source, and political distrust.

	Thermometer source b (se)	Trust source b (se)	Trust in politicians b (se)
Conflict frame vs. no conflict frame	−4.09 (2.24)	−0.22 (0.15)	−0.14 (0.10)
Controls:			
Vote intention target	−0.48** (0.17)	−0.01 (0.01)	0.06*** (0.01)
Vote intention source	5.56*** (0.17)	0.31*** (0.01)	0.08*** (0.01)
Government vs. opposition party	−3.22** (1.07)	−0.22** (0.07)	0.12* (0.05)
Constant	28.03*** (2.34)	2.49*** (0.15)	2.75*** (0.11)
Adj R^2	0.48	0.39	0.09
Observations	1376	1376	1376

Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported. Standard errors are in parentheses. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

We then considered the differential effects of the individual dimensions. As visible from Table 2, incivility backlashed against the sponsor, confirming H2a&b. Participants who were exposed to an uncivil conflict frame report a significantly lower thermometer score (3.41 points less on a 0–100 scale) and lower trust in the sponsor (0.16 less on a 7-point scale) compared to those exposed to a civil conflict frame. However, contrary to H2c, we did not find that incivility decreases political trust. Concerning personal attacks, we found no supporting evidence for H3a&b: personal attacks did not backlash against the sponsor. Additionally, personal attacks did not reduce trust in politicians (RQ2).

Table 2. The effect of conflict dimensions on evaluations of the target, sponsor, and political distrust.

	Thermometer sponsor b (se)	Trust sponsor b (se)	Trust in politicians b (se)
Dimensions:			
Uncivil vs. civil	−3.41** (1.09)	−0.16* (0.07)	−0.09 (0.05)
Personal attack vs. no attack	−1.04 (1.10)	−0.07 (0.07)	−0.00 (0.05)
Deep vs. ordinary	−1.19 (1.09)	−0.06 (0.07)	−0.08 (0.05)
Normative vs. factual	1.82 (1.09)	−0.00 (0.07)	0.11* (0.05)
Controls:			
Vote intention target	*-0.54** (0.17)*	*-0.01 (0.01)*	*0.05*** (0.01)*
Vote intention sponsor	*5.54*** (0.17)*	*0.31*** (0.01)*	*0.08*** (0.01)*
Government vs. opposition party	*-2.90** (1.10)*	*-0.18* (0.07)*	*-0.11* (0.05)*
Constant	25.86*** (1.50)	2.40*** (0.10)	2.64*** (0.07)
Adj. R^2	0.48	0.39	0.09
Observations	1294	1294	1294

Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported. Standard errors are in parentheses. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

With regard to exposure to deep conflict frames, we found that this sub-type of conflict framing did not impact the thermometer score, trust toward the sponsor (RQ3a&b), or trust in politicians (RQ3c). Furthermore, we explored whether factual or normative conflict frame had different effects. Participants who saw a normative conflict did not evaluate the sponsor differently than people who saw a factual conflict frame (RQ4a&b). However, we did find that participants who were exposed to a normative conflict frame have significantly higher political trust (0.11 on a 7-point scale) compared to participants who saw a factual conflict frame. Hence, participants who saw a factual conflict frame were less trusting of politicians (RQ4c).

Discussion

In this paper, we investigated how different dimensions of conflict framing affect voters' evaluation of political parties and trust in politicians using a pre-registered experiment. We considered both stylistic and non-substantive as well as substantive elements of conflicting political messages. Despite concerns about the potential negative effects of conflict frames on attitudes toward parties and politics (e.g., Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Walter & Van der Eijk, 2019; Yoon et al., 2005), we found, in most instances, no support for the expectation that political conflict frames cause more negative evaluations of political parties or lower trust in politicians.

Our findings indicate that conflict in general, but also different types of conflict, have a limited effect on voters and that they can produce negative effects only under specific conditions. Consistent with prior research (Frimer & Skitka, 2018; Gervais, 2021; Nai & Maier, 2021), we found that incivility can backlash against the sponsor of the conflict frame. Furthermore, we observed that factual conflict frames can lower trust in politicians. While conflict in general has been linked to political distrust (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997;

Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2006; Lau et al., 2007), our findings indicate that factual conflict in particular may have this effect. This finding could potentially be worrying provided that scholars have raised alarms about increasing opposition to factual realities and growing relativism toward facts (Van Aelst et al., 2017). Our findings suggest that exposure to political disagreement about the epistemic status of evidence and experts can reduce voters' trust in politicians. If politicians employ a factual conflict frame, they signal disagreement not only with the opponent's truth claims but also with how evidence can reliably be obtained. By emphasizing that the opponent spreads false information and relies on questionable sources, politicians could potentially reinforce the notion that politicians are dishonest and act in their self-interest.

Nevertheless, we do not find overall support for the idea that conflict has an impact on voters' attitudes. Additional analyses, pre-registered as part of our study, further support this conclusion (see OSF). Our results may be an indication that voters are either more resilient to conflict frames, have become numb to them, or are already so deeply distrustful of politics (Van der Meer, 2017), that exposure to conflict has little additional impact on their views. The prevalence of negative campaigning, also in Europe (Klinger et al., 2022), may have made online bickering of political parties mainstream. Furthermore, with the growing popularity of populist right-wing parties, which are known for their harsh campaign tactics and uncivil rhetoric (Nai, 2021), voters may have grown accustomed to conflicts, so that these no longer alter their perceptions of parties or politics. Whether this is an indication of voters' resilience or apathy to conflict is difficult to disentangle. In the best case, people understand that conflict is a natural part of politics, and they may understand why politicians use it. Conflict frames can be informative, providing voters with relevant political insights (Geer, 2006; Mattes & Redlawsk, 2014). Our research contributes to the divided literature on whether conflicts benefit or harm democracy, by arguing that both the style of the conflict (being uncivil) and the substance matter for how voters perceive conflict. Moving forward, we believe it is of crucial importance to investigate the effects of these content features further, to get a comprehensive understanding of the role of different political conflicts in our democracy.

Furthermore, the lack of clear-cut effects may also be partly explained by the context. Unlike the US, the Netherlands is characterized by low affective polarization (Reiljan, 2020). Research suggests that the impact of conflict depends largely on the degree to which you like or dislike a party. Reiter and Matthes (2021), for instance, found that if voters see uncivil behavior from a party they strongly dislike, they are more likely to view it as problematic. However, in a context characterized by low affective polarization, where citizens do not experience strong likes or deep animosity toward parties, citizens may hold a more moderate approach to political differences.

Finally, the lack of effects may also result from our study's design. A one-time exposure to conflict may simply be insufficient to change entrenched political attitudes such as trust in politicians. However, the fact that we did observe some effects, suggests that brief exposures to some conflict frames may influence citizens' attitudes. The additional analyses on OSF, for instance, also show that uncivil communication lowers citizens' willingness to engage in politics. Future research with repeated exposure or a longitudinal design may be necessary to fully understand how the different types of conflict affect voters. Our experimental design also had other limitations. Although we aimed to study conflict framing in a multi-party setting, we only examined the communication of two political parties, despite the presence of many others in the Dutch parliament. Nonetheless, we believe that focusing on these two parties represents a common conflict scenario: between a government and an opposition party. Furthermore, we deliberately did not focus on specific voter groups. In a multi-party setting voters are often exposed to communication from political parties for which they have no strong feelings. Since all types of voters participated, the results likely paint an accurate picture of how voters in a multi-party setting react to the different conflict frames they come across. Additionally, we focused solely on one online medium, Facebook, while voters and political parties also use many other platforms. Although participants without Facebook were instructed to imagine the scenario on another platform, the restriction to one platform may limit the generalizability of our findings. On other platforms, such as TikTok, the primary means of communication is through video and these might elicit stronger emotions (Yadav et al., 2011). Furthermore, we measured trust toward specific political parties with a single item. We recognize that political trust is a multi-faceted concept (Easton, 1975; Norris, 2011), and encourage future research to understand how conflict frames affect the perception of political parties more comprehensively. Finally, our studies concentrated on one highly salient and polarized issue, leaving the generalizability of our findings to other conflicts uncertain. Nevertheless, since conflict framing around this polarized issue did not significantly impact voters' attitudes, similar results may be expected for less polarized issues.

Notes

1. The data that support the findings is openly available on OSF. This work was supported by Nederlandse organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek 406.DI.19.055 and received ethical approval from the University of Amsterdam's Ethical Review Board (ID: 2022-PCJ-15255).
2. While we pre-registered hypotheses for four outcome variables, including political participation and target evaluation, this paper focuses on political distrust and evaluation of the sponsor. The results that consider the impact of conflict frames on the other outcome variables can be found on OSF, and we will briefly discuss

them in the conclusion. Additionally, we slightly adjusted the wording of the hypotheses during the peer-review process, but the direction of the hypotheses remained the same.

3. The meta-analysis by Lau et al. (2007) reveals that average effect sizes on affect for attacker and trust are low, with values of −0.16 and −0.04, respectively.
4. See details and results of the power analysis on OSF.
5. We considered whether the results would be different if we used an alternative approach to detecting straight-lining. To do this, we focused on straight-lining within a specific question battery containing reverse-coded items, namely trust in politicians. With this approach we identified 38 straight-liners. When deleting them from the sample, we find similar results, indicating the robustness of our findings (see Online Appendix D).

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

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Open Scholarship

This article has earned the Center for Open Science badges for Open Data, Open Materials and Preregistered. The data and materials are openly accessible at https://osf.io/d6qka/.

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