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Is Context the Key? The (Non-)Differential Effects of Mediated Incivility in Three European Countries

LUKAS P. OTTO, SOPHIE LECHELER, and ANDREAS R.T. SCHUCK

There is a worry that serious forms of political conflict, in particular, uncivil behavior of politicians, increases political cynicism and demobilizes the public. Despite the close relation of incivility with social and cultural norms of what is an acceptable form of discussion, studies are mostly restricted to one country. To overcome this blind spot, we conduct a cross-national experiment in three countries (the Netherlands, UK and Spain) testing whether civil and uncivil forms of mediated political conflict affect cynicism toward the EU, political participation intentions, and the support for the policies discussed. Results indicate that despite different levels of conflict in the news, and different levels of cynicism and participation in these countries, the effects of incivility are homogenous. Uncivil political conflict has negative effects on political participation intention and policy support but does not significantly affect cynicism – in each of the three countries. We also test the role of an individual-level factor, namely Tolerance for Disagreement (TfD). Citizens with low levels of TfD are more affected by uncivil conflict, while subjects with high TfD seem to be immune against violations of social norms. We discuss these finding against the backdrop of individual and cultural influences on political communication effects and cross-cultural experimental research in more general terms.

Keywords incivility, political conflict, cynicism, participation, cross-national experiment

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While there is widespread consensus that conflict is a prerequisite and marker of lively democracies (Steenbergen, Bächtiger, Spörndli, & Steiner, 2003), politicians, journalists and scholars share deep concerns about the nature of this conflict in contemporary political discourses. The worry is that political discussion does not follow the deliberative ideal of a "good conflict" (anymore), where "political actors listen to each other, reasonably justify their positions, show mutual respect, and are willing to re-evaluate and eventually revise their initial preference" (Steenbergen et al., 2003, p. 21). Quite contrary to the ideal of mutual respect, conflict in political communication today is increasingly perceived as "uncivil", "nasty", "mean", "outrageous", "filthy", or "rude" (Shea & Sproveri, 2012). These terms comprise the idea that politicians, journalists and citizens do not conduct political debates in a civil manner, but in a negative, disrespectful, poisonous and hyperbolic way, breaking norms of conversation – in short, they foster the rise of *incivility* (Gervais, 2017; Mutz, 2015; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011).

Incivility in politics is certainly not new. The idea is that (the portrayal of) uncivil behavior raises attention toward the own argument, or the own journalistic product, and that it lowers evaluations of a competitor. But, incivility is now increasingly paired with concerns, and many scholars argue that, when it infiltrates public or media discourse to a noticeable extent, it has detrimental effects on citizens. Or, putting it differently, a key assumption in the current literature is that *mediated incivility*, i.e., the violation of social norms by politicians in the media has undesirable effects on individual-level perceptions of the political climate and discourse as such (Mutz, 2007), political trust and cynicism (Mutz & Reeves, 2005), political participation (Borah, 2012), and voting intentions (Mutz, 2015). In short, uncivil behavior on the screen impacts how democracy functions.

In this paper, we argue that available evidence on the effects of mediated political incivility still suffers from two important weaknesses. First, there is a contextual gap. Most incivility research is US based, but, at the same time, researchers assume that the effects of uncivil discussions and conflict are deeply contextual, interwoven with the political and media system they appear in, depending on cultural perceptions of what is acceptable and what is not (Mutz, 2015). We address this by testing effects of uncivil conflict in three European countries (UK, Spain, the Netherlands), which means we test whether uncivil political discourse is a contextual variable.

Second, there are likely interindividual differences that remain unexplored. We argue that effects most likely depend on "consonant" personality traits that influence how conflict is experienced and processed in the first place (Richmond & McCroskey, 2010). Therefore, we will test whether the personality predisposition of tolerance for disagreement accounts for differential effects of incivility. Tolerance for disagreement was developed to distinguish perceptions of "good" and "bad conflict" (Teven, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1998) and seems especially suitable to investigate individual differences in *mediated* conflict. In other words, we will investigate whether some recipients react strongly to contentious incivility, while others are almost "immune", even when it comes to uncivil forms of dispute.

Civil and Uncivil Conflict

There are many dimensions along which one can distinguish "good" from "bad" conflict in the political realm (Fridkin & Kenney, 2008), but referring to incivility and the *tone* of the debate is one of the most crucial parts (Shea & Sproveri, 2012). Most scholars refer to

define incivility along *social norms* or rules of conversation (Muddiman, 2013; Stryker, Conway, & Danielson, 2016). In this sense, incivility includes statements that show not only divergence of opinion and confrontation–which are part of every conflict–but that also show a deliberate lack of respect for an opponent, as well as language and behavior that expresses this lack of respect in a hyperbolic manner. This also distinguishes incivility from negativity (i.e., a negative statement can be respectful and moderate). The core of incivility is defined as a "(…) violation of norms of interpersonal interaction" (Mutz, 2015, p. 6). This means that it has nothing to do with the substance of the conflict, i.e., an uncivil statement can be about an issue or a person, and it can also be distinguished from polarized discussions (Mutz, 2015; Stryker et al., 2016). While Mutz (2015) argues that incivility is not *per se* negative, and that even a positive statement can be uncivil in the sense of an exaggeration, incivility is hard to imagine without a clash or conflict at its center, and even a positive uncivil statement is a marker for conflict rather than compromise. The manifestations of a norm violation through incivility can be manifold: Incivility can occur through verbal behavior, such as name calling, exaggeration, insulting language, but also through non-verbal behavior, such as eye-rolling or ignoring the opponent (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011; Stryker et al., 2016). When distinguishing uncivil from civil conflict, it is important to note that civil conflict does still include interaction between participants, otherwise we would rather speak of disagreement or controversy (Richmond & McCroskey, 2010; Steenbergen et al., 2003). However, civil conflict, in its purest form, would be characterized as respectful interaction, consideration of different viewpoints and affirmation of all societal groups in contrast to the norm-violating communication mentioned above (Stryker et al., 2016).[1]

When taking a closer look at the definition above, the impression may arise that any discussion about the differences between civil and uncivil conflicts is a mere five-finger exercise of deliberative theorists, complaining about the lack of respect in political discourse. It is, however, become increasingly obvious in public debate that uncivil conflict is not only a topic for elite discourse, but that media portrayals of such discourse have rendered it an issue at heart of political communication effects research. After all, conflict and incivility are regarded as newsworthy (Muddiman, 2013) and incivility, despite being prevalent in the history of politics (Shea & Sproveri, 2012), has been shown to be on the rise – be it online (Borah, 2012) or on television (Mutz, 2015). While the role journalism plays in this development is still under scrutiny (Muddiman, 2018), it seems almost trivial to argue that this kind of mediated political discourse will affect citizens.

The Effects of Incivility

In this paper, we focus on three of the most important, yet surprisingly disputed, outcomes of incivility: We investigate whether incivility is *mobilizing* or demobilizing, whether it contributes to *cynical* attitudes toward politics and politicians, and whether recipients' of civil and uncivil conflict show *support* for the arguments and *policies* discussed or not.

There is mixed evidence whether uncivil discourse is mobilizing or demobilizing for the public. On the one hand, scholars have argued that *every* form of disagreement is hindering political participation (Lupia, McCubbins, & Popkin, 2000). Take as an example, game frames that often include the portrayal of conflict between two or more political actors and are evidently demobilizing for recipients of such news (Cappella & Jamieson,

1997). On the other hand, scholars find that *conflict framing* is mobilizing as it is portraying politics as interesting and contested and thus motivating citizens to participate, but only if they understand that this is part of the democratic process (De Vreese & Tobiasen, 2007). In the context of EU elections, Schuck, Vliegenthart, and De Vreese (2016) found in a multi-country study positive effects of conflict framing on voting, with effects – however – depending on the *country context*. Bjarnøe, de Vreese and Albæk (2019) found conflict framing to increase participation for citizens with low conflict avoidance (see individual differences below).

Similar to the portrayal of conflict as such, evidence on the effects of incivility on political participation is mixed. When investigating mediated elite incivility, i.e., uncivil behavior of politicians in the news or televised debates most scholars argue that incivility increases cynicism (Mutz, 2015; Mutz & Reeves, 2005), undermines political efficacy (Borah, 2013) and thus demobilizes citizens to participate (Forgette & Morris, 2006; Fridkin & Kenney, 2011, 2008; Kleinnijenhuis, van Hoof, & Oegema, 2006). It is, however, it is important to note the *form of participation or engagement* scholars are measuring, when investigating the effects of incivility and conflict. Linkage studies are mostly concerned with broader outcomes of conflict reception such as election turnout (Bjarnøe, de Vreese, & Albæk, 2019; Schuck et al., 2016). Others focus on the willingness to take part in political discussions when being exposed to uncivil discussion online (Gervais, 2014). In sum, evidence is mixed, when it comes to the effect of incivility on deliberation and engagement in political discourse. On the one hand, incivility can lead to higher participation as it triggers aggression and negative emotion (Lu & Gall Myrick, 2016), on the other hand, people may get annoyed by these forms of discussions and turn away from them (Chen & Lu, 2017) – especially those who are conflict avoidant (Bjarnøe et al., 2019).

Because our conceptualization of incivility, as well as that of our moderator (tolerance for disagreement), stem from interpersonal communication we are mostly interested in communication-related forms of political participation, i.e., taking part in discussions, and convincing others. We assume that civil political conflict increases the intention to participate in political discussions (**H1a**), while exposure to incivility will decrease the intention to engage (**H1b**) in comparison to a control group.

A rich literature on strategic framing, game framing and negativity has been focusing on the effects of political communication on *political trust* and *cynicism*. These variables are equally likely to be influenced by incivility. In fact, rude forms of conflict, it seems to be evident that uncivil behavior of politicians in the media undermines trust in politicians and increases political cynicism (Forgette & Morris, 2006; Mutz, 2007, 2015; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). The idea is that incivility, as a violation of social norms, makes citizens lose trust in political actors and question the willingness to come to a conflict solution, which, in turn, contributes to political cynicism. In sum, we expect uncivil (**H2a**), but not civil, forms of conflict to affect cynical attitudes (**H2b**).

The third research strand concerns the persuasiveness of uncivil messages or the question whether citizens support standpoints, presented in a heated and uncivil way. On the one hand, there is, of course, a huge body of literature on negativity in campaigning, investigating whether conflict and incivility are appealing and persuasive. In general, the evidence on this issue is largely inconclusive, but pointing to the direction that moderators have to be taken into account (Lau, Sigelman, Heldman, & Babbitt, 1999; Lau, Sigelman, & Rovner, 2007; Sigelman & Kugler, 2003). Generally speaking, scholars claim that arguments raised in an uncivil manner are less persuasive (Hwang, Borah,

Namkoong, & Veenstra, 2008) as it correlates with perceived "message-quality" which, in turn, predicts the persuasiveness of a message (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Mutz (2007, 2015) finds that arguments, i.e., rationales for political policies presented in an uncivil manner to be perceived as less "legitimate" than arguments presented in a respectful way. Anderson, Yeo, Brossard, Scheufele, and Xenos (2016) find for discussions about science and technology that incivility increases the perception of a message being biased. In sum, one could say that incivility lowers the evaluation of a message and is thus less persuasive. In a similar vein, we assume that uncivil conversation lead to less support for policies presented by the politicians **(H3).**

Contextual Differences: A Cross-Country Comparison of Incivility Effects

It seems obvious to assume that effects of mediated incivility are contextual. After all, perceptions of incivility in political communication are crucially dependent on the question what is "acceptable" in a society, or put simply, incivility "shifts over time and place" (Strachan & Wolf, 2012, p. 412). Despite this notion, research on incivility is still predominantly based in the US, and only a few scholars have studied incivility elsewhere in the world or cross-nationally.

We assumed four country differences to play a role for the perception and effects of mediated incivility: (1) cultural norms and perceptions of communication, (2) different journalistic cultures and media systems in the three countries at hand and, following these norms, (3) different levels of mediated conflict, both for EU politics and negative reporting in general and (4) differences in support for the EU.

Firstly, *perceptions* and *effects* of communication in general, and conflicts, in particular, are dependent on cultural norms, i.e., the shared tendency to prefer certain affairs of affairs over others (Hofstede, 2011). Even early distinctions between different cultures already considered communication differences for high- and low-context cultures, where conflicts and discussions are either implicit or explicit (Hofstede, 2011). As norms of conversation differ between countries, regions and cultures, the effects of political discourse as a conversation between actors in the news media might thus also be influenced by their geographical context. In fact, what is perceived as fierce incivility in one country could be a standard conversation in another (Muddiman, 2018). Indeed, when, for example, considering *individualism* (vs. collectivism) as a cultural variable, it seems that culture influences how we *communicate* (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002), how we *perceive* communication (Gudykunst, Yoon, & Nishida, 1987) as well as our interpersonal conflicts (Trubisky, Ting-Toomey, & Lin, 1991). Individualism is strongly related to communication perception and behavior as this variable explains differences in group and interpersonal relations; conflict is a key variable here as collectivist societies are concerned with hurting other's feeling – which should prevent and punish uncivil communication. More specifically, collectivist societies seem to notice conflict more easily than individualist societies, and the expression of conflict in individualist countries is more direct and confrontational (Hofstede, 2011; Oyserman et al., 2002). Even within Europe, there is a variation of the extent to which individualism can be found (Oyserman et al., 2002). Applying this to our study context, we test the effects of mediated incivility in the most individualistic country in Europe – the UK—as well as in a country with rather low individualism score – Spain (Hofstede Insights, 2019). Adding to this, it is not only the case that culture affects whether we *perceive* communication as more or less confrontational. First of all, different perceptions of

communication and conflict lead to different communication behavior, for example, conflict avoidance or trying to reach a compromise (Kim, Aune, Hunter, Kim, & Kim, 2001; Oyserman et al., 2002), whether somebody feels competent to communicate and solve conflicts (Hsu, 2007).

Besides this very broad and general cultural influence, it seems worthwhile to consider that individual-level perceptions of what is acceptable in political communication heavily depend on how communication has previously used and addressed uncivil political debate (Muddiman, 2013). After all, comparative research acknowledges the fact that the effect of cultural norms is mostly mediated by individual-level factors, be it personal values, traits attitudes (Gudykunst, 1997). In this sense, variations in incivility effects should also depend on *journalistic culture*, the *information environment*, as well as *attitudes* toward politics. The interaction between context and idiosyncratic differences is crucial for this paper, as investigate both contextual *and* personality variables as moderators of the effects of mediated political conflict.

Journalistic culture in the context of incivility matters, because journalists differ in how acceptable they find the inclusion of hyperbole, negativity and conflict within their work. In that sense, the three countries do not only differ in journalistic role perceptions as we will explain later, but are also representative for Hallin and Mancini (2004) three media system clusters. The Dutch media landscape is part of the *Northern European Democratic Corporatist* cluster, Great Britain represents the *North Atlantic Liberal* media system and Spain the *Mediterranean Polarized Pluralist* cluster. Research within this framework and on comparative political journalism has shown that competitive media systems foster the usage of negativity and conflict. The idea of being objective in reporting is used to construct news coverage that actively involves "fights" between two or more opposing actors, and by heightening these conflicts through insidious questions or juxtapositions (Bartholomé, Lecheler, & de Vreese, 2015, 2018). Along the same lines, negativity is not only a news value in some journalistic cultures, but an almost ideological component of critical and investigative journalism (e.g., Lengauer, Esser, & Berganza, 2011). This is likely particularly the case in journalistic cultures where a majority of journalists see themselves as critical advisories or hunters of information, rather than as ore passive observers and educators of the public (Köcher, 1986). The consequence of this centrality of negative and contentious newsmaking could make journalists in these countries accomplices in inserting incivility into their reporting and thus the public agenda (Meltzer, 2014; Muddiman, 2013).

These differences in journalistic norms and media systems translate into differences in reporting about EU politics and politics in general. In the context of EU Elections, Schuck et al. (2016), as well as Vliegenthart, Schuck, Boomgaarden and de Vreese (2008), could show that conflict framing differs a lot across countries, with the UK scoring highest on conflict framing between 1996 and 2006, while Spain had amongst lowest overall scores for this type of framing in the EU. Furthermore, and most important for our purpose, the effects of conflict framing are not the same, but conflict could be perceived as stimulating in one country, while in another country it is perceived toxic and has negative outcomes (Vliegenthart, Schuck, Boomgaarden, & De Vreese, 2008). Building on the comparison of different media systems and explaining negativity in the news by structural variables in the political and media system, Esser, Engesser, Matthes, and Berganza (2017) show that countries with fewer parties and a polarized political system, such as the UK, are more prone to negative and conflict-laden news coverage. Following this idea, they found mentions of conflict in more than half (56%) of the

newspaper articles under study in the UK, while the Netherlands (39%) and Spain (38%) were much more consensus-centered. Note that, while Spain is characterized as polarized pluralist media system, it features the levels of negativity and conflict in the news that are rather low in comparison to other southern European countries (e.g., Greece, France), both for reporting of European politics (Vliegenthart et al., 2008), as well as for general negativity in the news (Esser et al., 2017).

Finally, one of our main dependent variables – cynicism toward the EU – differs significantly between the three countries, with UK citizens holding very cynical attitudes toward the EU, while Dutch citizens are relatively positive toward EU politicians and politics and Spain lying in between those countries (European Union, 2018). The question is thus, whether different levels of potential exposure to conflict, different levels of initial cynicism as well as different communication cultures may influence the effects of mediated incivility. In sum, we expect British citizens due to their high scores of individualism, conflict in the news, and high initial levels of cynicism to be least affected by uncivil conflict (in contrast to civil forms of conflict and a control condition). In contrast to that, Spanish participants should be affected most by incivility due to low/medium scores in individualism and low conflict-scores, as well as high support for the EU. The Netherlands should score between these countries due to medium levels of conflict in the media, low levels of EU-cynicism, but high individualism and appreciation of conflict (**H4**).

Individual Differences: The Moderating Effect of Tolerance for Disagreement

Of course, culture or country context are not the only determinants of how we perceive mediated conflict, and individual differences are crucial when it comes to perception and effects of incivility in the media. This general notion becomes relevant for this study as we assume that both contextual and personal influences account for perceptions and effects of incivility.

There is, on the one hand, a large number of studies investigating individual differences for the effect of political negativity. Weinschenk and Panagopoulos (2014) found people scoring low on *agreeableness* seem to be "immune" toward negative political messages. Similar to that Kenski, Coe, and Rains (2017) found agreeableness to affect the perception of online incivility. On the other hand, Fridkin and Kenney (2011) established a very specific moderator, namely "tolerance towards negativity" and found incivility to be especially powerful for citizens low in tolerance for uncivil and negative messages.

In our effort to specify our knowledge on the influence of incivility in democracies, we found individual-level factors closely linked to conflict most relevant to our study. This approach has been chosen by scholars before: for instance, "conflict avoidance" has been assumed to be crucial for elite incivility (Mutz & Reeves, 2005), in televised debates (Maier & Faas, 2015) and for the perception of online incivility (Kenski et al., 2017) as well as for the effect of conflict framing on political participation (Bjarnøe et al., 2019). We add to this literature by considering *tolerance for disagreement* as a new moderator for the effects of different types of conflict. TfD is an individual difference variable that entails the tendency of people to perceive a disagreement between two or more people as a "bad conflict" or not (Teven et al., 1998, p. 210). It thus described stable differences in the *perception* of whether a conflict is appropriate to a person.

TfD, like other stable personality variables, is shaped through culture, parenting, peer influences but can also be altered situationally, e.g., when informing people about norms of conversation (Richmond & McCroskey, 2010). TfD seems to be especially appropriate to test the effects of different kinds of conflict as it stems from an interpersonal communication background making it easy to apply to mediated political conflict, especially as we operationalize incivility along norms of politeness. Moreover, TfD does not only shape the perception as a conflict as good or bad, heated or calm, it also alters the *effects* of conflict, e.g., concerning the expectation of a positive outcome of the conflict or positive vs. negative affect related to the conflict at hand (Richmond & McCroskey, 2010). Drawing on this, we assume that TfD will moderate the effect of different kinds of conflict on participation (**H5a**), cynicism (**H5b**) and policy support (**H5c**).

Method

Design

In order to test the effects of different forms of conflict in the three different countries (The UK, The Netherlands, Spain), we used a single-factor, post-test only, between-subjects experimental design with random assignment to one of the four conditions. As stated above, we choose these three countries as they were at the time of the study (a) part of the EU (b) different levels of cynicism or negative attitudes toward the EU with the UK being rather critical, the Netherlands positive and Spain between those two countries (e.g., European Union, 2018). Furthermore (c), they share a different amount of conflict framing – the portrayal is rather contested for the UK, but less so for Spain. These differences can be explained through difference in journalism cultures in these three countries (see above).

All participants were exposed to newspaper articles about the issue "labelling of genetically modified (GM) crops in supermarkets" and a debate between two fictive Members of the European Parliament on that issue.[2] After completing the questionnaire, participants were debriefed and informed about the purpose of the study and participants were able to obtain correct information on GM-labeling.

Procedure and Sample

The experiment was conducted in July 2014 by ResearchNow/SSI a global market research company, simultaneously in the Netherlands, UK and Spain. Participants were randomly allocated to one of the conditions. The ResearchNow/SSI panel is an online access panel, and participants received compensation for joining the study. The total sample size was $N = 1038$ participants with 82–87 participants per group and country. The mean age of the whole sample was 45.8 years ($SD = 17.6$) with 51% indicating male and 48% indicating female gender. While the sample statistics are not representative for any of the three countries,[3] we still have a high variance for demographics and made sure that, due to quotas, these demographics did not differ across countries and experimental groups. Data quality was ensured by the research company by excluding speeders from the sample, i.e., those who spent very little time with either the whole survey or the stimulus (under 5 min and under 30 s, respectively).

Stimulus Material

The experimental manipulation in all three countries consisted of a news article describing a debate between EP-politicians about the labeling of GM-crops.

The *control condition* consisted of information about GM-fodder in the EU without the portrayal of disagreement or conflict between politicians. It was made clear that the standpoints on GM-food had been raised *independently* in that condition. In the *disagreement* condition, opposing views on the issue were portrayed, however without explicitly relating one politician to the opposing politician, and without any sort of negative affect being expressed. In the disagreement condition, both politicians describe their arguments without evaluating the arguments of the other politician, and without explicitly mentioning the other politician, thus the disagreement condition consists of competing arguments, the control condition consists of independent arguments. In the *civil conflict* condition, however, the politicians *related* to each other, but in an objective manner and no personal insults or hyperbole were involved, the discussion is described as "passionate", but respectful. The politician's do not explicitly show signs of respect, thus one could argue that civil conflict is rather operationalized as an absence of incivility. In the *incivility condition*, characteristics of uncivil conflict were shown, such as name-calling the opponent or conspiracy theories aboutp the opponent, all aimed at attacking and discrediting this opponent. We chose the most common ways to define (Muddiman, 2017; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011) and operationalize (Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014) (personal) incivility. Beyond the manipulation, all other information content of the articles was kept constant, and the articles had almost equal length. It is important to note that both politicians were generally critical toward GM-food, but had opposing standpoints on how to minimize the usage of GM-fodder in the EU in the experimental conditions (labeling vs. subsidies). All texts were translated by native speakers and checked by a second native speaker to adjust for possible wording errors.

Dependent Variables

To measure whether the conditions carried the different forms of conflict, participants rated the conflict on three different semantic differentials on a seven-point scale (1-friendly – 7-hostile; 1-polite – 7-rude; 1-calm – 7-agitated). The combined scale had a high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$; $M = 4.4$, $SD = 1.2$). We used this measure not only to check whether the manipulation worked as intended but also to capture the *perception of the message*.

Intention to participate in the political discourse was measured using a three-item scale with the following items: "How likely is it that you openly voice your opinion on the issue of GM food", "How likely is it that you sign an online petition on GM food" and "How likely or unlikely is it that you try to convince other on your opinion about GM food" (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$; $M = 4.01$; $SD = 1.45$).

EU-cynicism was measured using a three-item scale, asking whether or not the participants agreed with the statements that "In European (EU) politics many promises are made that are never kept", "Almost all EU politicians will sell out their ideals or break their promises if it will increase their power" and "Most EU politicians are in politics for what they can get out of it personally". The scale was based on earlier measures of political cynicism (e.g., Boukes & Boomgaarden, 2015), and showed satisfying measures of internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$; $M = 5.01$; $SD = 1.31$).

We measured *policy support* with three items, picking up the arguments raised by the politicians in each condition: "The European Union (EU) should implement further labelling on animal products such as meat and dairy that indicates if animals have been fed genetically modified fodder", "Genetically unmodified fodder should be subsidized by the European Union (EU), so that the use of cheap genetically modified fodder becomes obsolete", "All genetically modified products, including animal fodder, should be banned in Britain/the Netherlands/Spain". This means that higher scores on this scale indicated support for stricter handling and also support for the arguments voiced by the politicians in the discussion (Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$; $M = 4.5$; $SD = 1.09$). Participants indicated their answers on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

Finally, *TfD* was measured using the scale based on the work by Teven et al. (1998). This scale contains seven items, asking whether participants agree with the following statements: "It is more fun to be involved in a discussion, where there is a lot of disagreement", "In enjoy arguing with other people about things on which we disagree" "I don't like to be in situations, where people are in disagreement", I prefer to be in groups where everyone's beliefs are the same as mine" "Disagreements are generally helpful" "I prefer to change the topic of discussion when disagreement occurs" "I don't like to disagree with other people. (Cronbach's $\alpha = .71$; $M = 4.05$; $SD = 0.94$).

Results

Message Perception

A first round of ANOVAs confirmed that, in all countries, the news article presented in the control condition was perceived as the friendliest, and that the incivility condition article was seen as most hostile ($F = 75.8$; $p < .001$; see Appendix A for means and post-hoc analysis) - this means that our manipulation was successful. However, the *perception* of conflict did not differ across countries or with different levels of TfD. The interaction for TfD and the experimental condition was only marginally significant ($F = 2.46$, $p = .062$) and the interaction term of the conditions and the country was nonsignificant ($F = 1.37$; $p = .42$). These results contradict the expectations that country differences and personality differences already operate at the conflict perception level.

Intention to Participate in the Political Discussion

Hypothesis **H1a** and **H1b** predict that the likelihood to participate in the discussion will increase for civil conflict, but will decrease for harsh political conflict. The ANOVA,[4] indeed, yields significant results for the condition ($F = 6.922$; $p = .015$; $\eta^2 = 0.01$); there are also significant differences between the three countries ($F = 31.492$; $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = 0.06$) for participation intention. A Post-Hoc analysis reveals that participation does not increase or decrease significantly for the *civil* conflict in contrast to the control groups, but for the incivility condition, which is significantly lower than for all the other conditions, supporting **H1b**, but not **H1a** ($t = 3.238$; $p = .007$). The ANOVA does not yield a significant interaction between the condition and the country ($F = 0.774$; $p = .590$), indicating that we cannot speak of contextual influences on the reaction toward incivility.[5]

While the country context does not moderate the relationship between conflict exposure and participation intention (see Figure 1), TfD does.

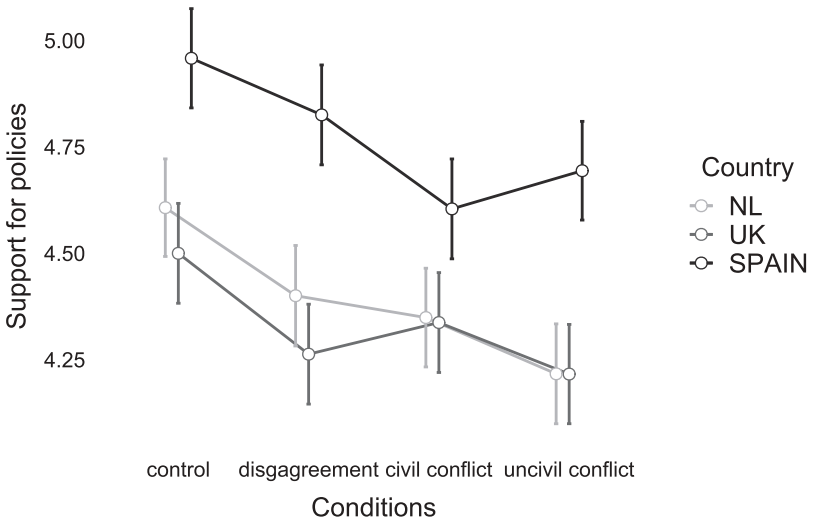

Figure 1. Support for the arguments/policies discussed per country and condition.

Cynicism

We do not find significant differences for the experimental groups for EU cynicism (F = 0.450, p = .718), thus rejecting **H2b**, assuming cynicism to be highest in the incivility group and supporting **H2a**, which assumed no effect for the conflict condition. Similar to the other dependent variables, the interaction between the country and the experimental condition remains insignificant (F = 1.322; p = .244), indicating that the different country contexts are not an explanation for the non-effect. Differences between the countries (F = 9.162; p < .001) are in the expected direction with the Netherlands being least cynical about politicians and politics in the EU and British participants scoring highest on cynical attitudes toward the EU (see Table 1).

Table 1.
Country differences

Factors	UK	Netherlands	Spain
Individualism[1]	HIGH	MEAN/HIGH	LOW
Media system[2]	Atlantic Liberal	Democratic Corporatist	Polarized pluralist
Level of conflict[3]	HIGH	MEAN	LOW
EU support[4]	LOW	HIGH	MEAN

Note: [1]Individualism in a European conext, see Hofstede Insights (2019), [2]see Hallin & Mancini (2004), [3]see Esser et al. (2017) and Vliegenthart et al. (2008), [4]see e.g. Eurobarometer (2018).

Policy Support

The ANOVA yields significant parameters for the experimental condition (F = 4.121, p = .006; η^2 = 0.011) and the country (F = 16.651, p < .001; η^2 = 0.03) indicating that both

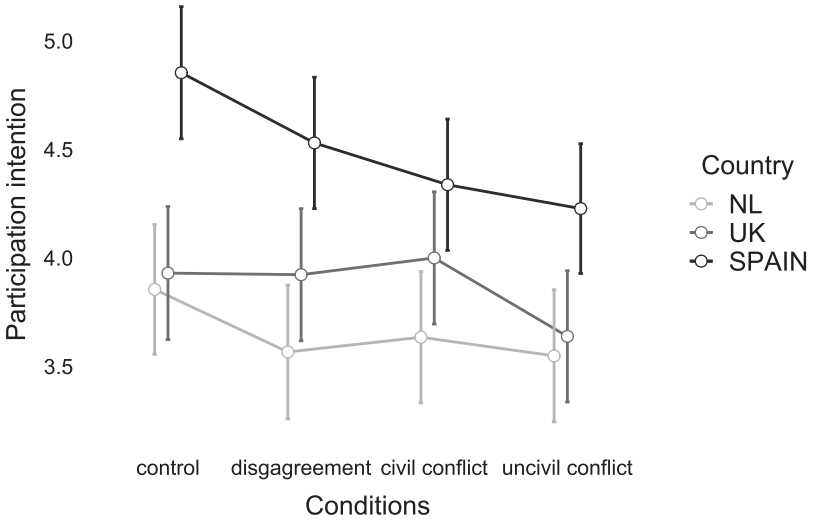

Figure 2. Intention to participate in discussion per country and condition.

variables contribute to the explanation of the evaluation of policies discussed in the conflict (see Figure 2). However, as Table 2 shows, the pattern of effects was quite similar in each country. It is, again, the incivility condition that is significantly different from the other conditions (p = .014), supporting **H3**. However, there is no effect for the disagreement condition (p = .183), so it seems to be incivility that lowers the support for the proposed policies. This effect is the same in each country as the interaction between the experimental group and the country remains insignificant (F = .35, p = .905). In other words, there are, of course, different levels of approval for stricter policies toward GM-

Table 2.
Means and standard deviation for groups and countries

		M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Country	Condition	*Participation*		*Policy Support*		*EU-cynicism*	
Netherlands	Control	3.855	1.327	4.607	1.015	4.498	1.012
	Disagreement	3.567	1.266	4.400	0.931	4.626	0.912
	Civil conflict	3.635	1.305	4.349	1.108	4.674	1.022
	Incivility	3.549	1.443	4.217	1.121	4.817	0.998
UK	Control	3.930	1.497	4.500	1.090	4.981	1.116
	Disagreement	3.923	1.507	4.263	1.124	5.153	1.159
	Civil conflict	4.000	1.324	4.337	1.244	4.964	1.103
	Incivility	3.639	1.415	4.216	1.147	4.866	1.076
Spain	Control	4.854	1.241	4.958	0.966	4.921	1.188
	Disagreement	4.530	1.502	4.825	0.919	4.787	1.162
	Civil conflict	4.337	1.330	4.604	1.040	4.971	1.162
	Incivility	4.227	1.643	4.694	1.075	5.050	1.100

food per country. However, in each country, arguments raised in the discussion are not appreciated if presented in an uncivil way.

Tolerance for Disagreement as Moderator

While the country context does not moderator the effects of conflict and incivility, personality differences do account for reactions toward incivility. The interaction term for the incivility condition and TfD is significant for participation (t = 2.583; p = .009). Table 3 shows that, as expected, effects of conflict are highest for participants with low scores of TfD, while participants with high TfD are not demobilized – even when being exposed to incivility, supporting **H5a**. Similar to participation intention, effects are highest for participants who do not appreciate conflict, yielding a significant interaction effect for the condition and TfD on policy support (t = 2.604; p = .009). As Table 3 shows, participants with low TfD are even affected by more civil forms of disagreement and do not appreciate the arguments raised in the conflict, while participants with higher TfD do not react in such a strong way toward (uncivil) conflict (**H5c**). In contrast to the other dependent variables, we do not find an interaction of exposure to (uncivil) conflict and TfD (F = 0.987; p = .398), thus finding no support for **H5b**.

Conclusion and Discussion

By conducting a multi-country experiment in the Netherlands, Spain and the UK, we tested whether uncivil and civil forms of conflict affect citizens' participation intentions, cynicism toward EU politicians, and policy support. Our results contribute to the existing literature in a number of ways. First, we provide further insights into the differential effects of conflict versus incivility. In our study, we find that incivility decreases the propensity to participate in politics. However, cynicism does not seem to be the driver of this effect in this study; uncivil political conflict did not have any effect on political cynicism. Future research needs to consider other variables to explain the demobilizing

Table 3.
Conditional effects at different levels of TfD

	Participation intention		
	Disagreement *B (SE)*	Civil conflict *B (SE)*	Incivility *B (SE)*
TfD low	−.464 (.204)	−.437 (.209)	−.779** (.207)
TfD medium	−.252 (.147)	−.281 (.147)	−.419** (.147)
TfD high	−.039 (.193)	−.125 (.191)	−.059 (.197)
	Policy support		
TfD low	−.441*** (.134)	−.487*** (.136)	−.522*** (.136)
TfD medium	−.215* (.097)	−.281** (.097)	−.333*** (.096)
TfD high	.012 (.126)	−.075 (.126)	−.144 (.129)

Note: Results are for the mean of each country. TfD values are the sample mean and plus/minus one *SD* from the mean. *p< .05, **p< .01, ***p< .001. Control is reference category.

effect of mediated incivility. Interestingly, we could also not detect positive effects of civil conflict, thereby contradicting earlier studies on conflict framing and participation in the EU (Schuck et al., 2016), which might be due to the different study designs, i.e., linking media content with survey data and our experimental approach. After all, a positive relationship between conflict and participation is far from being established. Quite on the contrary, conflict-avoidant citizens also tend to avoid participation, because this is a further possible environment for disagreeing positions and discussions. Thus, there are citizens, who react negatively to every form of conflict and who also do not like to engage in politics (Ulbig & Funk, 1999). Furthermore, one could interpret the findings against the backdrop of game- vs. issue- or substantive framing. If participants see the conflict and the portrayal of it as part of the political game and journalistic framing, and not as a real (issue) discussion, this tends to decrease engagement; the control condition, in contrast, could be seen as an issue-frame, which increases participation (Shehata, 2013). Of course, the specific form of participation should not remain unmentioned. While conflict in the news could lead to more participation, when speaking about turnout and other institutionalized forms of participation, it could be detrimental to engaging in political discussions. To put it simply – even fierce conflict could make people go out and vote, but it does not provide a basis for a deliberative political conversation.

Secondly, we are the first to show how context changes our view of incivility in political communication. In an intra-European study, we found that the effects were similar across country. This means that, even though research has shown that British citizens are routinely exposed to increased levels of conflict in politics and media and uncivil elite discourse is also prevalent in the British parliament (Muddiman, 2018), they *perceived* incivility in a similar way as their Dutch and Spanish European neighbors. Up until know it was rather an implicit assumption that perceptions of incivility being strongly dependent on social norms, differ with country context (Strachan & Wolf, 2012). Following our results, it could be the case that some, if not most, forms of incivility are *not* dependent on country-context but rather unacceptable everywhere. Uncivil conversation characteristics like insulting language, name-calling and the like could be a shared social norm across cultures and the country differences are rather nuanced.

In a similar vein, the *effects* of mediated conflict were not influenced by variations in attitudes toward the EU, EU integration, EU politicians, journalistic norms or social norms in these countries. So, we must conclude that, at least for these countries, incivility effects are of a psychological rather than a cultural nature. Of course, further research is needed to support this claim. Due to the EU context of the study, we only used three EU countries. One could argue that these three countries are perhaps too similar in terms of levels of conflict and incivility in the news (e.g., in comparison to the US, see e.g., Shea & Sproveri, 2012) as well as perception of conflict (e.g., in comparison to Japan, see e.g., Barnlund, 1989), leading to the homogenous effects presented here. It would thus be worthwhile to consider collectivist countries, where direct conflict, maybe even without clear characteristics of incivility, could be perceived as a violation of norms. A further explanation for the absence of cultural differences is the notion that social norms are "context specific" (Henrich et al., 2012). While the context of politicians in the media, i.e., elite political discourse, does not vary in our case, it is not possible to rule out the possibility that in another context, e.g., interpersonal communication, incivility is perceived totally different and differences in social norms play a crucial role. We also want to note that we based our assumptions and manipulation of incivility on personal-level

uncivil behavior, i.e., the violation of *interpersonal* norms of conversation. It thus remains an open question, whether public-level incivility, i.e., breaking democratic norms (e.g., reciprocity and deliberative norms) is country-specific. After all, not only social norms differ across countries, but also political systems or practices. Take as an example differences between two-party, presidential systems like the US, where it is absolutely necessary to present real alternatives in comparison to multiparty systems, where it is often necessary to form coalitions and compromise – even with a political opponent.

Third, we could show that individual differences in conflict perception, more precisely, tolerance for disagreement, accounts for different perceptions and effects of mediated political discussion. While citizens with low tolerance for disagreement are affected by civil forms of conflict, people with high TfD scores, seem to be immune – even against mediated violations of social norms, i.e., incivility. It is, at that point, important to notice that TfD did not affect the *perception* of the conflict as heated, hostile and unfriendly in the incivility condition, but the *effects* of incivility. In other words, even participants with high levels of TfD *perceive* a norm violation but are not as *affected* by it.

Lastly, this study contributes to the development of cross-national investigation and more particularly cross-national experimental designs. We believe that it is a promising approach to study political communication phenomena via cross-cultural experiments. It is almost trivial to note that culture, of course, accounts for differences in perception and effects of media phenomena. However, most of the time, these differences are investigated by means of representative surveys, sometimes linked with content analysis. This carries the strength of actually combining real-world political media in a country with citizens' political attitudes or behavior. However, of course, the media within a country is also largely influenced by culture, thus these factors are confounded in linkage analysis – it is hard if not impossible to disentangle cultural differences in political reporting and the perception and effects of it. In contrast to that, cross-cultural experiments test cultural influences toward similar stimuli, thus ruling out differences in the media landscape, media system and (political) reporting as explanation. Taking the phenomenon of incivility as an example, journalists and politicians like the recipients would base their judgment about a conflict on the social norms of their country and what is or what is not acceptable. So, if we are to determine what is socially acceptable in a political discussion across different cultures, we need to keep the stimulus as similar as possible otherwise confounding media differences and differences in recipients' social norm perceptions. While the notion of internal validity is true for most experiments, it is crucial for cross-cultural comparisons. In other words, keeping the media stimulus as constant as possible is a way of excluding alternative explanations for cultural differences.[6] In sum, cross-cultural experiments are able to overcome airy assumptions about how culture intervenes with the effects of political communication in general and incivility research in particular. They provide valid insights to the constant call for the linkage between cultural differences and individual processes in political communication research. Even if, as in our case, effects are homogenous across countries it advances the investigation of this phenomenon and faces the challenge of "political communication case studies" for specific media landscapes and political systems.

Notes

1. It should not remain unmentioned that there is a second dimension of incivility that can be distinguished from impoliteness. Muddiman (2017) calls this dimension public-level incivility (in contrast to personal-level incivility). In contrast to violating norms of (interpersonal) conversation,

public-level incivility deals with the violation of democratic norms, e.g., refusing to accept opposing views or blocking compromise in political processes. We focus on the personal-level dimension within this paper.

2. All materials and anonymous data are available at https://osf.io/zm7yn/?view_only=32974feaa691404faf9b851621df8ca9.

3. Research on experimentation has shown that the lack of representative samples is a considerably low threat to causal inferences (Druckman & Kam, 2011) and generalizability of treatment effects (Mullinix, Leeper, Druckman, & Freese, 2015).

4. We are aware of the fact that our data structure would suggest a multilevel approach with participants nested in countries. However, given the fact that we only have three data points on the country level and were interested in a cross-level comparison. As it is recommended not to use (traditional) multilevel analysis with $N < 10$ at the country level (Stegmueller, 2013), we refrained from doing so.

5. The result that there is no interaction of country context with the stimulus is supported by the fact that the pattern of means is rather similar in each country (see Figures 1 and 2) and conducting separated analyses for each country yields largely the same results; however, some differences are only marginally significant for one of the countries.

6. Of course, cross-cultural experiments cannot fully overcome the problem of causality as all of them are quasi-experiments. After all, it is impossible to randomly assign people to countries thus we cannot speak of causal influences of culture (van Hoorn, 2012).

Data availability statement

The data described in this article are openly available in the Open Science Framework at https://osf.io/zm7yn/?view_only=32974feaa691404faf9b851621df8ca9

Open Scholarship

This article has earned the Center for Open Science badge for Open Data through Open Practices Disclosure. The data and materials are openly accessible at https://osf.io/zm7yn/?view_only=32974feaa691404faf9b851621df8ca9.

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