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# Political Incivility of Leaders: Public Perception, Political Trust and Civic Participation

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## Abstract

Political incivility has become an important phenomenon in recent ages. Political leaders' incivility is related to their tone and language, or in other words, to their style of interaction rather than their opinions. This study intends to examine the perception of incivility amongst the public and explore what personal and demographic characteristics are associated with the perception of incivility. Furthermore, it observes the effects of political incivility on public behavior, especially political trust and political participation. For this purpose, cross sectional research design employed, and a survey (*n*=200) was carried out. Results suggest that demographically, men are likely to engage in uncivil conduct or observe political speech as being more uncivil than women. Moreover, certain personality traits align with the sense of incivility and others are not affected by it at all. Likewise, the result shows inversely proportional relationship between political incivility and political trust indicating individuals repeatedly exposed to uncivil behavior may become de-sensitized to its effects.

*Keywords*: political incivility, perception of civility, political trust, political participation

## Introduction

In today's world, the behavior and conduct of political leaders significantly influence both the functioning of societies and the dynamics of politics. Their language, tone, and conduct significantly influence public opinion, political trust, and citizen engagement (Carpini, & Keeter, 1996). Nevertheless, the realm of political struggle has consistently been characterized by heated debates, with politicians resorting to caustic and vitriolic exchanges to define power dynamics (Jungherr, 2016). The show of disrespectful and offensive conduct and the use of derogatory language and inflammatory remarks can witness Political Incivility among leaders. Mutz (2018) defines Incivility as communication that violates the norms of

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politeness for a particular culture". Incivility in political discourse pertains to the use of language and conduct that is disrespectful, rude, or aggressive during political exchanges (Bentivegna et al., 2022). This phenomenon comprises a variety of transgressions against interpersonal norms, such as disrespectful tones, insults, sarcasm and shouting (Gervais, 2013).

Political Incivility has received considerable attention, prompting concerns regarding its diverse implications for society and politics. Disrespecting political opponents will likely have a negative fallout on democracy itself. They switch from a mode of persuasion, compromise and the feeling the other side, to win an argument as we all should, actually deserves to win the argument, to a mode in which the other side is so engaged in a fight they must win at any cost (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).The usage of unpleasant language not only impedes the development of constructive discussion but also serves to normalize such language, exacerbating societal polarization (Mudde, 2019). Citizens are more likely to side with one end of the political spectrum in a setting where leaders engage in hostile rhetoric, which widens the gap between various ideological groups (Smith et al., 2020). Therefore, the impact of political Incivility on public perceptions should not be underestimated. In recent years, social media and round-the-clock news coverage have made political interactions more transparent and accessible to the public (Brown & Garcia, 2022). This visibility has increased the public's awareness and concern regarding the tone and behavior of political leaders (Bentivegna et al., 2022).

The perception of Incivility can have detrimental effects on political arguments, trust in government, and the favorability ratings of political institutions. This negative impact has been demonstrated in laboratory experiments, showing the correlation between Incivility and perceived political polarization among the public (Mutz & Reeves, 2005). Many instances from various countries demonstrate that uncivil language and unethical behavior are common phenomena in global political discourse. During the 2016 presidential election in the United States, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton ran heated and nasty campaigns that hurt people's political trust. Mr. Trump said that negative stories about him in the media were "fake news" and called his opponents "crooked Hilary," "rocket man," and "losers." So, when both candidates used personal attacks and insulting language, it gave people a bad impression of politics and made people doubt

it more (The Washington Post, 2016). In the UK's Brexit arguments, derogatory language and insults deepened the divides between people, making the country more divided (The Guardian, 2018). President Rodrigo Duterte's profane and insulting language in the Philippines caused domestic and worldwide outrage (Montiel et al., 2022). Rising political incivility in domestic politics can spill over into foreign policy, damaging diplomatic relations (Gervais, 2019; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011).

As Political Incivility has become a troubling trend in recent years, so Pakistan's political discourse is no exception. Politicians' intentional use of incivility is often viewed as a communication strategy to garner public attention, motivate supporters, and increase visibility. The study is conducted to address these issues, studying how political disrespect impacts public confidence and participation. This research holds crucial importance as it investigates the relationship between personality traits and the impression of political Incivility. It offers significant insights into individual characteristics influence responses to uncivil political behavior. Furthermore, this article tries to find the relationship between consumption patterns of news media and incivility perception. In addition, it attempts to provide insights into how demographic features affect such impression. Furthermore, the study analyzes the ramifications of political leaders' Incivility on political trust and participation.

## Research Objectives

- To identify the relationship between personality traits and the perception of incivility.

- To examine the influence of news media consumption habits on consumers' perception of civil and uncivil behavior displayed by politicians.

- To explore the relationship of political leaders' incivility with political trust and political participation of Public.

## Research Questions

RQ1. Which personality traits are associated with the perception of political incivility?

RQ2. How does the habit of news media consumption influence the perception of political incivility?

RQ3. How does the political incivility of politicians affect political trust and political participation of the public?

## Literature Review

Research findings indicate that there has been a growing scholarly worry about the impact of uncivil speech on political polarization (Bentivegna et al., 2022; Gervais, 2013; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). This tendency is attributed to political leaders and partisans' escalation of incivility in the media (Muddiman, 2013). It has been shown that incivility increases significantly when people are personally attacked, as opposed to when the focus is on addressing specific concerns. The presence of online incivility can potentially intensify the polarization of individuals' views of media material, especially among those who already have strong pre-existing viewpoints (Anderson et al., 2014). Researchers have identified many different effects of online incivility, such as decreased open-mindedness and changed expectations of plurality in discourse, increased political activity (Brooks& Geer, 2007), and effects on the credibility perception of blogs. Researchers reveal that the usage of discourteous language and participation in uncivil speech significantly affects the voters' impression of leaders. This incivility distorts public perceptions of leaders and policies, depleting their credibility in the public eye (Brooks & Geer, 2007).

The erosion of political trust—arguably one of the fundamental building blocks of democratic government—is a worrisome result of the incivility exhibited by political leaders. Mishler and Rose (2001) found that political institution trust impacts citizen engagement. However, leaders' uncivil behavior may undermine public trust in political authority. For instance, a study conducted in the US by Mutz and Reeves (2005) indicated that uncivil political speech led to increased citizen distrust of political institutions and a rise in disillusionment with political involvement. The conduct of political rulers determines the level of public trust in governmental organizations within Pakistan's vibrant political environment and the broader Asian context. Studies in Asia and beyond also explore the link between political incivility and trust. Razaq et al. (2023) research in Pakistan revealed that political leaders tend to choose rude language and behaviors in order to overpower conversation and disqualify their adversaries. Political discourse is made increasingly rude and polarizing by this type of talk. Such communication can result in adverse implications for democracy—it

discourages polite discussion and may escalate public annoyance and distrust of politicians.

Maisel (2012) suggests that increasing incivility in political discourse could shift politicians' focus away from solving societal issues. Paradoxically, however, citizens sometimes derive pleasure from watching politicians engage in such incivility, especially when they demonize dissenting opinions. According to Caprara et al. (2006) this behavior can be observed in routine social interactions and on digital platforms dedicated to political discourse (Papacharissi, 2004). Moreover, Gervais (2014) highlights the transition of incivility from television to online platforms, showing that those exposed to uncivil political content on TV are more likely to engage in uncivil communication online. In a similar way, Boggild and Jensen (2024) writes that engaging in uncivil political discourse creates a recurring pattern that negatively shapes perceptions of government. Additionally, a study found that impolite political discussions on social media contribute to disengagement and disinterest in political matters (Druckman et al., 2018). However, since active citizenship is vital for a well-functioning democracy, both Hetherington (2005) and Putnam (2000) argue that trust in government is essential for active citizenship. When leaders behave uncouthly, it signals to their constituents that participating in politics is a waste of time. As Lee et al. (2025) contented that uncivil behavior of political leaders can create the perception among individuals' political engagement activities is meaningless and discourage them to actively participate in the electoral process. Likewise, Iyengar and Westwood (2015) found negative political campaigns and use of uncivil language by the leaders could make voters disengage themselves from political activities. Another research work demonstrated the effect of uncivil speeches, and hostile or trait-based messages considerably harm democratic participation (Brook & Geer, 2007).

This research utilizes a combination of the Social Learning Theory and Social Cognitive Theory in its conceptual framework. The Social Learning Theory gives us a better understanding of how people learn to be rude in politics by watching others and learning from them (Bandura, 1977). In the realm of political incivility, it is plausible that when political leaders engage in uncivil conduct, they may garner attention and popularity, leading onlookers to regard such behavior as efficacious in attaining desired results (Bandura, 1986). The correlation between heightened media exposure and

attention and the use of positive reinforcement may foster the belief that engaging in uncivil speech is not only effective but also a tactical instrument within the realm of political communication (Rainie et al., 2017). In addition, the theory suggested the individuals modeling the behaviors of those they give respect (Bandura, 1986). According to Jamieson and Capella (2008) in political discourse, supporters of political leaders adopt the same style of communication and tone as to an effective strategy of gaining attention or attaining dominance. At the same time, the Social Cognitive Theory emphasizes the role that cognitive assessments and personal traits play in exhibiting how observed behavior affects people. Bandura (1986) postulated triadic reciprocal determinism to describe the complex relationship between people and their environments. This paradigm states that behavior, cognition, personal characteristics, and environmental effects interact bi-directionally. Self-regulation, the ability to control behavior, thoughts, and emotions according to personal and social norms, is central to Social Cognitive Theory. Self-regulation plays a crucial role in determining how individuals respond to observed uncivil conducts (Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacy influences political incivility decisions. Higher self-efficacy in constructive political dialogue may reduce the likelihood of uncivil behavior, since it may be seen as unnecessary or ineffective. Individuals with low self-efficacy may see uncivil behavior as a more effective form of interpersonal connection (Rains et al., 2017).

## Research Method

This study employed a cross-sectional research design and utilized the survey method to examine the research objectives of the current study. A closed-ended questionnaire designed with four valid scales based on existing literature. The scales were molded slightly in accordance with Pakistan's political context. To cater to research questions, the political incivility scale designed by Kenski et al. (2020) and personality traits constructed by Gosling et al. (2003) were used. Furthermore, the scales of political trust (Goovaerts, 2021) and political participation (Zaheer, 2016) were adopted. The survey was conducted in the 4 weeks of the month of March 2023, yielding a very high response rate.

The data collected from 200 respondents from residential of Lahore city, having diverse demographic background such as age, gender, academic qualification, and income. Demographic characteristics linked with this study were age (16 - 24 years); additionally, respondents were divided into

three categories (26.5% were 16-18, 34.5% were 19-21 and 39.0% were 22-24) and gender (66% female, and 34% males). Other variables were education (12.5% were matriculate, 39.5% were intermediate, 42.5% were graduate and 5.5% were masters) and family income (forty percent of the respondents described their monthly family income was ranging between 50K to 1000K PKR. In account of ethical consideration all the participants were informed about the purpose, potential benefits and risks of current research. Confidentiality was also ensured as no personal information like name, address and contact numbers were required.

## Results

To find out the answer to research question (RQ1), Pearson's Correlation was performed. Statistical analysis indicated a significant relationship between perception of political incivility and personality traits i.e. critical, qquarrelsome ($r$= .146, $p$< 0.01), calm, emotionally stable ($r$= .164, $p$< 0.01), and cconventional, uncreative ($r$= .447, $p$< 0.01). Contrarily, non-significant relationship existed between forceful, enthusiastic ($r$= -.088, $p$> 0.05) and open to new experiences, complex ($r$= .064, $p$> 0.05) perception of political incivility. It means that respondents who areforceful, enthusiastic and open to new experiences, complex personality traits, are not linked with political incivility. In other words, these personality traits do not matter when establishing a link with political incivility perception.

**Table 1**

*Correlations with Personality Traits and Perception of Political Incivility*

| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1.Forceful, enthusiastic | $r$ | 1 | .415** | .577** | .412** | -.172* | -.088 |
| | $p$ | | .000 | .000 | .000 | .015 | .217 |
| | $N$ | 200 | 200 | 200 | 200 | 200 | 200 |
| 2.Critical quarrelsome | $r$ | .415** | 1 | .490** | .371** | .038 | .146* |
| | $p$ | .000 | | .000 | .000 | .593 | .039 |
| | $N$ | 200 | 200 | 200 | 200 | 200 | 200 |
| 3.Open to new experiences, complex | $r$ | .577** | .490** | 1 | .574** | -.166* | -.064 |
| | $p$ | .000 | .000 | | .000 | .019 | .368 |
| | $N$ | 200 | 200 | 200 | 200 | 200 | 200 |
| 4.Calm, emotionally stable | $r$ | .412** | .371** | .574** | 1 | .155* | .164* |
| | $p$ | .000 | .000 | .000 | | .029 | .020 |
| | $N$ | 200 | 200 | 200 | 200 | 200 | 200 |
| 5.Conventional, uncreative | $r$ | -.172* | .038 | -.166* | .155* | 1 | .447** |
| | $p$ | .015 | .593 | .019 | .029 | | .000 |
| | $N$ | 200 | 200 | 200 | 200 | 200 | 200 |

|                        |   | 1     | 2      | 3     | 4      | 5       | 6   |
|------------------------|---|-------|--------|-------|--------|---------|-----|
|                        | r | -.088 | .146*  | -.064 | .164*  | .447**  | 1   |
| 6.Political incivility | p | .217  | .039   | .368  | .020   | .000    |     |
|                        | N | 200   | 200    | 200   | 200    | 200     | 200 |

With the purpose of examining the second research question (RQ2) of the study i.e. relationship between consumption of news (i.e. TV news, newspaper (online/ hardcopy) and political TV talk shows) and perception of political incivility, correlation has been applied.

Table 2 shows a correlation matrix of the consumption of news and perception of political incivility. Statistical analysis demonstrates that consumption of all selected sources of news. i.e. watching TV news ($r$= .259, $p$< 0.05), reading newspaper ($r$= .175, $p$< 0.05) and watching political talk shows ($r$= .277, $p$< 0.05) have been found to maintain strong positive correlation with perception of political incivility (see Table 2).

The findings revealed that over all news consumption has a significant relation with perception of political incivility. The more you time spent on watching TV news, political talk shows and reading newspapers the more you perceive political incivility as a positive phenomenon among political leaders.

**Table 2**

*Correlation Between Time Spent on News and Perception of Political Incivility*

|                        |   | 1       | 2       | 3        | 4       |
|------------------------|---|---------|---------|----------|---------|
| 1. Hours spent         | r | 1       | .231**  | .336**   | .259**  |
| on TV news             | p |         | .001    | .000     | .000    |
|                        | N | 200     | 200     | 200      | 200     |
| 2. Hours spent         | r | .231**  | 1       | .636**   | .175*   |
| on newspaper           | p | .001    |         | .000     | .013    |
| (online/paper)         | N | 200     | 200     | 200      | 200     |
| 3. Hours spent         | r | .336**  | .636**  | 1        | .227**  |
| on political TV        | p | .000    | .000    |          | .000    |
| Talk show              | N | 200     | 200     | 200      | 200     |
| 4. Political           | r | .259**  | .175*   | -.227**  | 1       |
| incivility             | p | .000    | .013    | .000     |         |
|                        | N | 200     | 200     | 200      | 200     |

To examine the third research question (RQ3) i.e. relationship between political inactivity and political participation and political trust, Pearson correlation has been employed to data. Statistical analysis exposes that a significant negative relationship ($r$= -.317, $p$< 0.01) exists between political trust and political incivility. Hence, the results indicated that a significant positive relationship present between political participation and political incivility ($r$= .150, $p$< 0.05). The statistical finding establishes that political incivility decreases the political trust of respondents, but political participation increases (See table 3).

**Table 3**
*Correlations among Political Incivility, Trust and Participation*

|  |  | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Political trust | $r$ | 1 | -.074 | -.317$^{**}$ |
|  | $p$ |  | .297 | .000 |
|  | $N$ | 200 | 200 | 200 |
| 2. Political participation | $r$ | -.074 | 1 | .150$^{*}$ |
|  | $p$ | .297 |  | .034 |
|  | $N$ | 200 | 200 | 200 |
| 3. Political incivility | $r$ | -.317$^{**}$ | .150$^{*}$ | 1 |
|  | $p$ | .000 | .034 |  |
|  | $N$ | 200 | 200 | 200 |

The study examined the perception of political incivility in terms of gender *t-test* was used to find the differences been applied. Table 4 shows the results from independent samples t-test. A significant difference males and females in terms of perception of political incivility ($t$= -2.138, $p$< 0.05). Mean score indicates that males ($M$= 3.19, $SD$=0.944) are more supportive to political incivility of leaders than females ($M$= 2.84, $SD$=0.712).

**Table 4**
*Descriptive Statistics of Political Incivility as per Gender*

|  | Gender | $N$ | $M$ | $SD$ | $SE$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Political incivility | Male | 132 | 3.19 | .944 | .082 |
|  | Female | 68 | 2.84 | .712 | .086 |

**Table 5**

*Difference between Male and Female Political Incivility*

| Levene's Test | | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | F | p | t | df | p | Mean Difference | SE |
| Equal variances assumed | 6.021 | .010 | 1.956 | 198 | .052 | .255 | .130 |
| Equal variances not assumed | | | 2.138 | 171.487 | .034 | .255 | .119 |

## Discussion

To fulfill the primary objective of this study opinion of public was gathered regarding uncivil statements of various political leaders. In this study various factors were explored such as personality traits and news consumption habits. The findings suggests that people who are having personality traits such as critical, quarrelsome, calm, emotionally stable, conventional, and uncreative, are highly linked with political incivility as compared to respondents who areforceful, enthusiastic and open to new experiences, complex personality traits. In other words, these personality traits do not matter when establishing a link with political incivility perception. Emotionally stable people are more likely to be caught up by the effects of political incivility by showing their less emotional reactions (Moss-Racusin et al., 2015).

According to Anderson et al. (2014), certain personality traits influence emotional reactions to political communication. Koban et al. (2018) suggests in their study that individuals who have high level of agreeableness as a personality trait tend to perceive statements ruder than others. It explains that people having pleasant personalities are more sensitive towards disruptions in social peace, so they are keenly observing the statements having negative effects on the ongoing political debates. People possessing these personality qualities such as assertive, energetic, or open to new experiences and complexity, may not be greatly impacted by political incivility in their views or opinions. This phenomenon may be attributed to their distinct cognitive and emotional reactions to political speech (Mungall et al., 2025).

Moreover, the consumption of all selected sources of news. i.e. watching TV news, reading newspaper, and watching political talk shows have been

found to maintain a directly proportional relation with perception of political incivility indicating that the more time spent on watching TV news, political talk shows and reading newspapers the more you perceive political incivility as a positive phenomenon among political leaders. The prevalence of uncivil utterances also had a negative link with the viewership of political talk shows on television. Research highlights that incivility in political discourse, especially in online environments, can both increase and suppress political participation.

The effect often depends on factors like medium, participant attitudes, and political context. For instance, some individuals may avoid political discussion due to negativity, while others feel motivated to engage more actively in informal political spaces (Van 't Riet & Van Stekelenburg, 2021) . The individuals repeatedly exposed to uncivil behavior may become de-sensitized to its effects. An alternative explanation could be that encountering opposing viewpoints might be more challenging when reading printed narratives than online content. This may imply that persons who engage with print media are more familiar with seeing viewpoints from the other end of the ideological spectrum. As a result, they might not view strongly worded statements as concerning.

An inversely proportional relationship was found between political trust and political incivility, which establishes that political incivility decreases political trust. Contrarily, a positive relationship present between political participation and political incivility indicates that political participation increases with exposure to political incivility. Mutz (2021) investigates how incivility, especially when political leaders or elites engage in disrespectful behavior, leads to a notable decrease in trust among the public. This study reinforces that elite incivility has a more profound impact on trust than similar behavior among ordinary citizens, illustrating the influential role that high-profile figures have on public perception of political institutions.

This also relates to what Mutz (2018)has explained that the tone and behavior of political leaders and how they talk about politics can have a big effect on how the public sees politics. However, politics are becoming more polite, it is also raising a question again the political participation. A 2021 study explores how social media's facilitation of uncivil discourse can decrease trust in political leaders, especially among those who consume predominantly anti-system information. It demonstrates that low political trust correlates with increased non-traditional forms of political

participation, like protests and informal movements online, especially where distrust of political institutions is strong (Koivula et al., 2021).

Some meta-analyses have found that exposure to uncivil political discourse can impact people's perceptions of democratic legitimacy, leading them to doubt the efficacy and integrity of democratic systems. This correlation between elite incivility and public distrust underscores concerns about the health of democratic engagement (Gervais, 2019; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). A cross-national study emphasizes that low political trust often leads to non-institutional participation, such as protest and activism, rather than traditional forms like voting. This trend reflects growing skepticism about political institutions and is fueled by political incivility in media and online environments (Braun & Hutter, 2016; Hooghe & Marien, 2013).

In demographic perspective, the findings of this study indicate that, males are more supportive to political incivility of leaders than females. On average, men participants have a greater propensity for engaging in uncivil conduct or observing political speech as being more uncivil in comparison to their female counterparts. The females are likely more sensitive towards uncivil behaviors because of the different social norms from the male candidates of the society.

## Conclusion

The research examines the public perceptions of political leaders' uncivil and impolite behaviors to give a clear understanding of political incivility in Pakistan. Factors such as gender, personality attributes, and habits of news or media exposure, can significantly influence public perceptions. In Pakistan's politics, there are plenty of different politicians having different personality traits, which can be linked to political incivility like the aggressiveness leads to conflict and controlled and calm behavior leads to have empathy which in turn gives a huge psychological impact to public as their words often influences the public. The study also looked at the relationship between political politeness, political trust, and polarization. This three-way link shows how tone of political speech, public trust in political organizations, and the rise of political division all affect each other in complex ways. The individuals who have stronger emotional affiliations with certain political groups tend to cause more uncivil and polarized exchanges.

Hence, in a democratic setting, an efficient political process can only be implemented if viewpoints are being acknowledged and respected without marking them as uncivil. Moreover, the presentation of twisted statements is also the key indicator of how public perceive the incivility in politics. This urges researchers for further investigation in this domain and promote the recognition and consideration of several perspectives and background analysis to develop the interventions against it.

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