

# **Evaluations and Perceptions of political incivility**

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## **Abstract**

Incivility in public discourse has become a central concern. This research develops an approach based on citizens' perceptions of incivility in order to assess predictors of such perceptions.

Starting from an articulation of the concept that can be easily translated into operational terms, we identified five types of incivility (discursive, vulgar, informative, violent and discriminatory) that together constitute political incivility in a multidimensional sense.

Through a survey of a representative sample of the Italian population, we found that citizens' perception of incivility is not uniform, but varies depending on the context and individual characteristics (socio-demographic variables, news consumption and relationship with politics). On the whole, the importance of disentangling the concept into different types has emerged, because continuing to speak of “incivility” in a broad sense does not help to clarify the nature of the phenomenon nor to identify the consequences reflected on the front of citizens' relationship with politics.

**Keywords: Political Incivility, Predictors, social media, desensitisation, citizens perceptions**

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## **Evaluations and Perceptions of political incivility**

### **1. Introduction**

Attention and concern about the increasing prevalence of political incivility is not only evident among scholars but also among citizens themselves: in Italy, for example, 75.8% of respondents in a representative sample of the population believe that, in recent years, politics has become more uncivil (i.e. characterised by a lack of respect for others and/or democratic mechanisms), while 81.9% state that civility is important for the functioning of democracy<sup>1</sup>. In the United States, 93% of respondents in recent polling believe that incivility is a problem, 75% that it is getting worse, and 80% that it creates serious problems for society (Weber Shandwick, 2019). There is little doubt, therefore, that there is a broad awareness of an uncivil drift in politics. There are, however, many doubts as to what exactly is meant by incivility. Or rather, what citizens mean when they report an increase in it and consider its presence a significant problem in democratic societies.

The awareness of the need to define the concept of incivility more precisely has been present among scholars for quite some time. That is, since Stryker and his colleagues (2016) defined incivility as a three-dimensional construct (Utterance Incivility, Discursive Incivility, and Deception Incivility) and Muddiman (2017) introduced the distinction between personal and public incivility. Since then, the multidimensionality of the concept has been a shared heritage among scholars (Bentivegna & Rega, 2022a; Bormann, 2022; Hopp, 2019; Muddiman, 2019, 2021; Stryker et al., 2016). The articulation of the concept into different dimensions that refer to different “types” of incivility not only helps us clear the field of ambiguities and opaque interpretations but, at the same time, allows to shed light on the variables that most influence citizens' perceptions. If it is true, as Susan Herbst (2010) argues, that incivility is in the eye of the beholder, knowing what citizens see can only help us better understand the nature and evolution of the phenomenon.

Aim of this paper is to identify the predictors of political impoliteness, starting from an extremely simple articulation of the concept that can be easily translated into operational terms, as shown in the second paragraph. On the basis of literature that considers not only the most traditional dimension of impoliteness, but also those dimensions that represent a threat to the “collective face” – understood both as the set of institutional actors and as functioning mechanisms (Bentivegna & Rega, 2022a) – we have identified these types of incivility: discursive incivility, vulgar incivility, informational incivility, violent incivility and discriminatory incivility, which together combine to constitute political incivility in a multidimensional sense. In the empirical work presented here, we first recorded the respondents' perceptions of different types of incivility to understand which were perceived as most problematic; secondly, we identified predictors of perception through the application of regression models. In the third section, we illustrate our working hypotheses and the research questions that guided our data collection and analysis. This is followed by a presentation of the results achieved and then a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of our work in which we also explain the need to continue along this line of research. A line of research that has confirmed the need to specify the type of incivility referred to both in the detection of incivility episodes and in the perception of citizens, and the need to enrich and consolidate the literature on the predictors of the phenomenon in a comparative context so as to identify the relevance of the single variables.

### **2. Talking about political incivility**

Research about political incivility has recently grown worldwide, becoming an increasingly central field of investigation not only in the United States but progressively in other countries as well (see Walter, 2021). The expansion of research contexts, however, poses new challenges to researchers, both in relation to the definition of the concept as well as its empirical detection. It has been shown, for instance, that standard American measures of incivility do not always work within other countries

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<sup>1</sup> These data were collected in the survey conducted by the IPSOS Institute in January 2022.

(see Walter, 2021) and that different ways of defining and conceptualising incivility lead to heterogeneous results that are difficult to compare (Van't Riet & Van Stekelenburg, 2022). This is due to the fact that, although most scholars agree that incivility is a violation of norms, there is no agreement on which norms should be considered. Some approaches focus almost exclusively on the norms of interpersonal politeness, on the basis of the relative ease with which they can be observed empirically, and, conceiving incivility as a function of the tone and form of the message, trace it back to the forms of violation of 'good manners' (shouting, interrupting the other, use of vulgar terms, etc.). But this is an unconvincing approach in our view because it does not take into account the collective dimension of the concept and its political significance.

We prefer to develop our reflection about incivility from the observation of its multidimensional nature that encompasses references to both the individual and collective spheres. Hence our proposal to define incivility as *a lack of respect for the social and cultural norms that govern personal interactions as much as those that govern the functioning of democratic systems* (Bentivegna & Rega, 2022a). And it is precisely this second core of meanings, linked to the role of (in)civility in the functioning of democratic life, that in our view takes on particular relevance today and makes the study of this phenomenon even more important. The changes in the political and social context, in fact – the growth of “affective polarization” (Iyengar et al., 2012) and the strengthening of populist and anti-system political forces – have transformed the mechanisms that regulate the democratic game, bringing to light a more nonchalant use by politicians of behaviour that disregards democratic rules and principles<sup>2</sup>.

Starting from this definition of incivility, in this paper we have traced the different dimensions of the concept to five main types of political incivility, in order to capture citizens' perceptions in relation to each type and subsequently identify their predictors. The types used in this research (discursive incivility, vulgar incivility, informational incivility, violent incivility and discriminatory incivility) refer to aspects of the concept already identified in the literature and most significant to us.

By *discursive incivility* we refer to the lack of communicative reciprocity and manifests itself through the repeated forms of interrupting the interlocutor, the use of shouting to drown out his voice and the use of extremely offensive terms ('nazi', 'communist', 'taliban', etc.) that close the way to any possibility of interaction. Already present in the literature for some time, this aspect of incivility is traditionally detected in relation to behaviours that highlight the refusal to engage in dialogue with the other (e.g. refuse to listen, interrupt, roll eyes, etc.; Stryker et al., 2016) or aimed at "suppressing all discussion" (Hopp 2019, p. 208), as well as in relation to forms of violation of normative expectations related to the "connectivity of participants' contributions" (Bormann, 2022, p. 3). Our choice to include in discursive incivility also extreme forms of name-calling is based on the observation of how the use of such appellations to label political opponents has become a widely used mode of discursive interaction in public debate today.

By *vulgar incivility* we refer to scurrilous and vulgar language used against an individual opponent or, more generally, to attack opposing political forces within an institutional or other public context. Regardless of whether such language takes the form of a gesture (e.g. showing the middle finger) or a verbal externality ('that bi\*\*\*'), we intended to investigate the perception of this type of incivility both in reference to the individual sphere (against a political opponent) and the collective sphere (within the parliament or another institutional venue). Again, this is an aspect of incivility that has long been the focus of scholars, who, albeit from sometimes different perspectives, have collectively highlighted its importance for understanding the phenomenon (Coe et al., 2014; Kenski et al., 2019; Kenski et al., 2020; Massaro & Stryker, 2012; Santana, 2015). If the ease with which the presence of

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<sup>2</sup> The events on Capitol Hill are perhaps the most explicit and recent example of this drift, but equally eloquent are those forms of incivility variously spread at the political level both in the US (Kenski et al., 2018; Pain & Masullo Chen, 2019) and in Europe (Jaki & De Smedt, 2019; Rega & Marchetti, 2021). These range from the dissemination of stereotyping and forms of demonisation of political opponents and other subjects (e.g. immigrants, refugees, minorities, etc.) to the systematic use of lies and falsehoods and the organisation of smear campaigns, and which collectively produce a delegitimisation of democratic politics.

vulgar language can be empirically identified and detected helps to explain its centrality, in the strand of perception studies it should be mentioned that the use of vulgarity has received more problematic ratings from citizens in comparison to other categories of incivility such as aspersion and lying accusation (Kenski et al., 2020).

As far as *informational incivility* is concerned, we have included within it the activities of spreading false or inaccurate news in order to strengthen one's own positions and participation in defamation campaigns (use of slander and unproven accusations) against political opponents. In this case, we are dealing with an ad-hoc constructed distortion, aimed at manipulating the rules of the democratic game and, not surprisingly, its importance for incivility studies boasts a long tradition, especially in approaches that refer to deliberative democracy (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). Delineating itself as a highly corrosive type of incivility for democratic systems, its empirical detection has frequently been traced back to lying accusation, misleading or persuasive deception activities (Hopp, 2019; Kenski, et al., 2019; Kenski et al., 2020). In this direction, Stryker and colleagues (2016) refer to deception incivility to indicate the use of slander and exaggeration or the lack of evidence to support what is claimed; while Bormann (2022) refers to forms of violation of information norms (e.g. conspiracy theories and misleading exaggerations).

Another mode of alteration of the democratic game and its operating principles concerns *violent incivility*, which refers to political behaviour characterised by an extreme aggressive mode, for instance, the use of physical violence during a discussion in institutional venues or the threat to use force against people with whom one disagrees. This type of incivility has been gaining ground in the attention of researchers especially in recent years (cf. Bormann et al., 2021 and Bormann, 2022) and it finds important assonances with 'immoral-criminal incivility', a category identified by Muddiman (2021) to illustrate some examples of incivility provided by respondents, including acting violently or doing drugs, which are in addition to those (paying people for votes, protesting) previously detected in another study carried out in a similar way (Muddiman, 2019).

Finally, *discriminatory incivility* concerns the stigmatisation of particular subjects/groups (immigrants, LGBTQ+, religious minorities, etc.), the denial to them of the right to speak, as well as the use of racist, sexist or religious epithets. Again, this is a type of incivility that delegitimises the basic principles of democracy such as pluralism, equal rights, inclusiveness. In the literature, these forms of incivility have been examined more in relation to citizens' online discussions (e.g. Masullo Chen, 2017; Papacharissi, 2004, Rowe, 2015) than to the behaviour of political elites, and some recent studies have labelled discourse that undermines respect for minority rights or groups as 'intolerant discourse' (Lugosi-Schimpf & Thorlakson, 2021; Rossini, 2019; 2020). In the context of research on perceptions of political incivility, the data confirm that the use of racist and discriminatory stereotypes and/or slurs is indeed recognised by citizens as a form of uncivil discourse (Muddimann, 2017; Stryker et al. 2016), but the evaluations they express are still far from conclusive, making it all the more important to verify its empirical hold on time.

These five types of political incivility, which collectively contribute to the definition of the concept, allow us to analyse how perceptions change across different kinds of uncivil discourse and simultaneously measure how meanings change in relation to the point of observation. In this direction, it should not be forgotten that recent studies have shown that the perception of different types of uncivil discourse is influenced by both contextual and subjective factors (Britzman & Kantack, 2022; Gubitz, 2022). And since the dividing line between what is deemed civil or uncivil changes as contexts and observers themselves vary, it even becomes "difficult to know when incivility actually exists" (Masullo Chen et al., 2019, p. 2). Hence the importance of pursuing this line of research and consolidating knowledge regarding the predictors of perception.

### **3. Perceiving Political Incivility**

The brief illustration of political incivility that we have outlined has made its complexity emerge with sufficient clarity in relation to its constituent dimensions, the plurality of actors involved, the specificity of the contexts in which it takes place – both political and cultural – and the diversity of

the media environments in which it manifests itself. These are issues that have been the focus of scholars' attention for years, the object of theoretical reflections and empirical research. A much more limited attention can be found, instead, with regard to citizens' perception of the incivility, evidenced by the small number of researches dedicated to investigating this aspect. It has to be said that such inattention is quite singular given that "in a democracy, regular citizens – not just political elites or scholars – are crucial arbiters of what constitutes incivility and whether there is too much of it in a public discourse" (Kenski et al., 2020, p. 798). With our research, we wanted to contribute to filling this gap by empirically investigating citizens' evaluation of the incivility of political actors.

Starting from the recognition of the multidimensional articulation of the concept and from the evidence in the literature about the fact that the level of incivility perceived by people changes in conjunction with different types of incivility (Bentivegna & Rega, 2022a; Muddiman, 2017; Stryker et al., 2016), we formulated our first hypothesis which argues that not all dimensions of political incivility are perceived in the same way. This diversification allows for a more precise attribution of contextual relevance. For example, referring to Muddiman's (2017) study, it would appear that American citizens perceive the problematic nature of personal-level incivility (e.g. name-calling, pejorative speech, etc.) more clearly than public-level forms (e.g. racial slurs, misleading, etc.). Although using indicators that are not perfectly homogeneous, similar results are also found in the work of Kenski et al. (2020) – also situated in the USA – which shows that people perceive forms of vulgarity and name-calling as more uncivil than aspersions and lying accusation. It should also be noted that these results are also consistent with the findings on citizens' reactions to incivility, which similarly showed that forms of rudeness such as name-calling elicit more reactions and sanctioning activities than forms of non-respect for democratic life (Kalch & Naab, 2017).

While in all the examples mentioned the context considered is the US, recent surveys conducted in Europe suggest quite different results (see Bormann, 2022; Bentivegna & Rega, 2022a). Concerning the Italian context, we believe that the spread of a populist communicative style – first with the Lega party and then with that of the Five Star Movement – may have influenced the perception of discursive incivility – both on the side of language and discursive interactions – to the point of leading to its normalisation. In summary, after years of experience of political actors who have made 'bad manners' (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014) their communicative style, adopting them in all spheres of expression, we hypothesise that they may be perceived as less uncivil. It must be considered, then, again in relation to the different types of incivility, that the rise of populist communication is often accompanied by partisan disinformation (Bennett & Livingston, 2018), which is used to discredit the actors and communication of the opposing party, accuse the news media of producing and distributing 'fake news' and spread alternative views and sometimes even conspiracy theories useful to support one's own point of view and discredit those of others (Humprecht et al., 2020). This may imply, again, a normalisation of those behaviours ascribable to informational incivility (Bormann, 2022).

The above considerations have led to the following hypotheses:

H1: The five types of political incivility – discursive, vulgar, informational, violent, and discriminatory – are perceived differently by citizens.

H2: Discursive incivility is rated as less 'serious' than the other types in light of its gradual spread in contemporary communicative political contexts.

H3: Informational incivility is rated as less "serious" in light of the spread of the phenomenon of informational bias.

The research questions arising from these considerations are therefore:

RQ1: Are the different types of political incivility perceived equally by citizens?

RQ2: Which dimensions are perceived as most serious by citizens?

In addition to the identification of the types of incivility perceived most clearly by the respondents, our research interest concerns the individual characteristics of citizens that are associated with greater or lesser tolerance towards the phenomenon. In other words, if it is true, as has long been argued, that incivility is in the eye of the observer: what characteristics have those observers who are more 'sensitive' in grasping the presence of incivility?

The literature on the subject, almost exclusively from the US, offers contradictory results regarding the socio-demographic characteristics of citizens. Women appear to be more sensitive than men to incivility, especially if it is attributable to impoliteness (Kenski et al., 2020), but not so sensitive to information manipulation (Conway & Stryker, 2021). Another variable often present within socio-demographic predictors of incivility is the generational one: previous studies have shown that age is inversely correlated with tolerance towards incivility, whereby, while older adults, who grew up in an environment where uncivil content was less prevalent, perceive incivility problematically, younger adults, socialised from the beginning to digital platforms, show greater tolerance towards it (Ben-Porath, 2008; Fredkin & Kenney, 2011; 2019). This different sensitivity can be interpreted by taking into account that “even within a given political culture, norms of civility may change over time as generational shifts in politics, technology, and culture are reflected in interpersonal relationship” (Flores et al., 2021, p. 24). The increased frequentation of social media by the younger generation – with its well-known traits of informality, directness and accessibility to information from the most diverse sources – certainly represents a contextual condition that facilitates greater tolerance of expressions of incivility, as demonstrated by recent studies concerning more extreme forms of incivility such as incitement to hate (Gubitz, 2022). Finally, the education variable must be considered to identify the contribution made by the cultural level to the perception of the phenomenon. In reality, this is still a poorly explored issue and, even spanning areas other than political communication, very few studies show an impact of this variable on perception. However, some indicative evidence emerges from research conducted on students that shows greater sensitivity to incivility on the part of those with highly educated parents than those with lower-educated parents (Aul, 2017). Probably, as the author speculates, people with less educated parents are more exposed to harassing comments, perceiving them as normal and acceptable. Moreover, consistent with this explanation, it has also been found that uncivil behaviour is more prevalent among students on undergraduate courses than among those on graduate courses (Wahler & Badger, 2017).

In relation to socio-demographic characteristics, we therefore formulated the following hypotheses:

H4a: Female have a lower level of tolerance towards political incivility.

H4b: Younger have a higher level of tolerance towards political incivility.

H4c: People with a higher level of education have a lower level of tolerance towards political incivility.

After the socio-demographic area, we focus our attention on the news consumption, a topic on which the discourse becomes more complex. In general, being strong consumers of information should indicate a greater interest in public and collective life and, consequently, a greater sensitivity to incivility. At the same time, however, media discourses are often characterised by the presence of incivility (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011), whereby a significant part of the experience of political incivility is experienced by citizens through the daily consumption of news (print, TV or web) or exposure to TV programmes in which politicians are involved. This is especially the case with specific information sources, e.g. talk shows, which have not surprisingly been identified as predictors of the predominantly negative characterisation of the "overall tone and level of civility in politics today" (York, 2013, p. 117). Indeed, these shows have been the focus of scholarly attention for years due to the numerous episodes of political incivility present (Berry & Sobieraj, 2013; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011) frequently reported in political news coverage or shared and commented on social media. In our opinion, the consumption of information related to political events in which incivility often occurs can contribute to creating the conditions for that desensitisation process already known in the context

of studies on media violence (Kenski et al., 2020) and indirectly emerged among consumers of uncivil political media, who are led, as a result of the consumption of such sources, to express themselves in a less civil manner (Gervais, 2014). In short, the news consumption – regardless of the information source used – offers numerous opportunities to acquire information on political events, including those on the side of incivility.

We therefore developed the following hypothesis with regard to information consumption:

H5: People with higher information consumption have a higher level of tolerance of political incivility.

The third and final investigated area is about political interest and political orientation. It could be said that the chances of encountering uncivil episodes or comments about uncivil episodes are particularly high when a subject has a strong interest in politics. In this case, the probability that a process of desensitisation has taken place (or is underway) seems very high, especially in a context like the Italian one in which the populist communication style has long taken root. However, it has also emerged in the literature that the perception of incivility varies in relation to the partisanship of subjects. Not only has it been seen that people tend to be less sensitive to displays of incivility that come from co-partisan subjects (Gervais, 2019; Muddiman, 2017; Mutz, 2015), but more generally, some studies have shown differences in perceptions between people aligned on conservative and right-wing positions compared to more progressive and left-wing subjects. Kenski and colleagues (2020), in particular, showed that conservatives perceive incivility significantly less than liberals, especially with regard to lying accusation. This is a finding that seems coherent with what has been said so far in relation to the desensitisation effect: if we consider, in fact, the prevalence of uncivil content on the part of pro-Republican newspapers (Berry & Sobieraj, 2013), as well as the more pronounced use of incivility by conservative political leaders and candidates, it is plausible to assume that voters of this line-up perceive incivility as a regular practice of public debate<sup>3</sup>. In Italy, where there is no bipartisan tradition like that of the United States, the discourse is more complex, especially following the strengthening of political forces like the Five Star Movement that reject political self-location on the left-right axis. Coinciding with the growth of support around such political forces, which have made incivility a strategic communicative resource used to mark their distance from the elite and proximity to the people (Bentivegna & Rega, 2022b), it is reasonable to think that the supporters and voters of these forces themselves perceive incivility as a normal aspect of politics. Finally, we considered the frequency and quality of consumption of political content on social media. It is well known, in fact, that the use of social media can lead people to come across different types of political content (news, memes, parodies, discussions) with respect to which minimal forms of involvement can be activated (such as the mere consumption of the communicative content and/or the expression of a comment through a reaction) and more engaging forms such as sharing, commenting and contents production. Here, we are not interested in the declination of these activities in terms of new forms of political participation. Rather, we are interested in detecting a propensity for greater tolerance of incivility on the part of individuals in the light of their probable interaction with problematic online content, which can be defined as uncivil and which sometimes crosses over into actual coordinated campaigns of disinformation, hatred and defamation<sup>4</sup> (Giglietto et al., 2020). Given this picture, it is clear that people who use social media more often are more likely to come across uncivil speech and, consequently, manifest less sensitivity towards it (i.e. lower perceptions).

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<sup>3</sup> A partial exception to this reading is the work of Muddiman (2021, p. 18) who concludes that “there are not many differences in how Democrats and Republicans think about and react to political incivility”. The same scholar, however, points out that within the project, the presence of the Republicans was more contained.

<sup>4</sup> Moreover, much of the problematic and uncivil content circulating on online platforms is directed against women, politicians and minorities, characterised by gender and sexist stereotypes or focused on race, religion and/or sexual orientation.

The area of political interest and involvement gave rise to the following hypotheses:

H6a: People with a strong interest in politics have a higher level of tolerance towards political incivility.

H6b: People who do not self-relate on the left-right axis have a higher level of tolerance towards political incivility.

H6c: People who place themselves on the right have a different level of tolerance of political incivility than individuals who place themselves on the left.

H6d: People who are more active on social media have a higher level of tolerance of political incivility.

The set of hypotheses formulated so far resulted in the following research questions:

RQ3: Which characteristics of people are associated with a greater or lesser perception of political incivility?

RQ4: Do these characteristics vary across different types of incivility?

#### 4. Data and methods

To verify our hypotheses and answer our research questions, we conducted a survey of a representative sample of the Italian population (1000 respondents) during the second week of January 2022<sup>5</sup>.

Of the participants, 52% identified as female and reported their ages as follows: 18-24 (9%), 25-34 (16%), 35-44 (20%), 45-54 (17%), and 55-75 and above (38%). The educational level of the respondents was low (41.9%), medium (41%) and high (17%). When asked about their political position, 35.4% declared no position, 28.7% said they were right-wing, 28.7% left-wing and 8.2% centre. Alongside socio-demographic data and political location, respondents were asked to indicate their information sources and frequency of use, social media usage practices in relation to political topics and interest in politics.

Respondents were then given descriptions of statements and behaviour of politicians in news, TV programmes or online posts. For each statement, respondents were asked to rate the degree of civility/incivility using a scale of 1 to 5. In addition to ten statements containing elements of incivility, two statements in which no elements of incivility were present were included as control items.

The 12 statements – shown in Table 1 – are the result of a reworking of the list drawn up by Bentivegna & Rega (2022a)<sup>6</sup>. The items in the list were rotated to avoid the response-set phenomenon. As can be seen from reading the table, the two control items obtain a rating that places them on the side of civil behaviour.

*Tab. 1 – Items used to evaluate the different types of Incivility*

| How do you judge the behaviour of a political actor who:   | Incivility types | Extremely civil | Somewhat civil | Neither civil nor uncivil | Uncivil | Extremely uncivil |
|--|------------------|-----------------|----------------|---------------------------|---------|-------------------|
| Intentionally spreads fake or inaccurate news to reinforce their political positions (e.g. 'all cancelled ballots were in our favour') | Informational    | 3,5             | 8,2            | 14,2                      | 22,7    | 51,5              |
| Actively participates in a defamatory campaign - by means of slander and unsubstantiated accusations -                                 | Informational    | 3               | 3,4            | 12,8                      | 27,3    | 53,6              |

<sup>5</sup> The survey, in CAWI mode, was conducted by the IPSOS Institute.

<sup>6</sup> Of the previous 23 items, one control item ("harshly criticise a proposal put forward by another political force") was eliminated because it was considered redundant to the other two items present. Items that had the lowest or uncertain ratings in terms of the incivility present and were strongly correlated with each other were also eliminated.



|   |                |      |      |      |      |      |
|---|----------------|------|------|------|------|------|
| against a political opponent ('I'm telling you, that guy has weird sexual preferences')   |                |      |      |      |      |      |
| During a confrontation between members of different parties, he repeatedly interrupts, shouts at and/or talks over others, preventing the debate from taking place        | Discursive     | 3,7  | 5,5  | 13,8 | 29,2 | 47,8 |
| Publicly describing a political opponent as a 'traitor to the homeland', 'Taliban', 'Nazi', etc.  | Discursive     | 3,1  | 5    | 15,5 | 32,3 | 44   |
| During a parliamentary debate in the Chamber, he ostentatiously shows the middle finger or uses bad language referring to the opposition forces ('those sons of a *****') | Vulgar         | 2,9  | 5,7  | 12   | 17,2 | 62,3 |
| Publicly uses vulgar and insulting language against another politician ('that ass***** is still talking')   | Vulgar         | 3    | 4,6  | 11,7 | 28   | 52,7 |
| During a particularly heated debate in Parliament, he puts his hands on other politicians   | Violent        | 2,9  | 5,7  | 12,2 | 9,9  | 69,2 |
| Physically threatening an interlocutor with whom he disagrees during a public debate  | Violent        | 2    | 4,5  | 11,7 | 20,5 | 61,2 |
| He refers to another politician with racist, sexist, religious, etc. epithets.  | Discriminatory | 2,8  | 5,3  | 12,8 | 18,2 | 60,9 |
| It publicly denies the right to speak to minorities/groups, such as immigrants, LGBT, Muslims, etc.   | Discriminatory | 2,5  | 6,7  | 14,4 | 25,7 | 50,7 |
| He seeks an agreement in parliament with other political forces for the swift approval of a bill  | Not incivil    | 23,3 | 31   | 30,8 | 10   | 4,9  |
| Publicly disagreeing with what was claimed by a member of another party   | Not incivil    | 18,1 | 17,2 | 36,1 | 17,2 | 11,4 |

To assess the congruence within each pair of items, Cronbach's alpha was calculated (Table 2), which confirmed, in light of the data, the goodness of our choice to respect and reproduce the multidimensionality of the concept.

*Table 2 – Mean ratings for different types of incivility*

| Type of incivility            | $\alpha$ | M    | SD  |
|-------------------------------|----------|------|-----|
| Informational incivility      | .77      | 4.18 | .96 |
| Discursive incivility         | .74      | 4.10 | .94 |
| Vulgar incivility             | .84      | 4.26 | .97 |
| Violent incivility            | .86      | 4.36 | .97 |
| Discriminatory incivility     | .86      | 4.22 | .99 |
| General incivility            | .96      | 4.23 | .90 |
| Civility (control statements) | .74      | 2.65 | .90 |

The mean value of incivility within the 10 items was 4.23 (SD=.90) while that of violent incivility was 4.36 and that of discursive incivility was 4.10.

Already these initial data provide us with interesting insights into the different degree of sensitivity expressed by respondents for each type of incivility. However, before commenting on this data, it is good to go on to illustrate the variables used as predictors of respondents' perception of political incivility. The demographic variables used were gender, age and education transformed into dummy-coded variables.

Media information consumption was structured into five items that recorded the frequency of reading news newspapers (both print and digital), exposure to TV news, exposure to radio and TV talk-shows, reading news online only, and acquiring information through social media. Interest in politics was recorded on a scale from 0 to 10.

The social media experience was investigated by means of 5 items that recorded the frequency with which over the past week (from 'never' to 'as often as I log on') and participated in online discussions, posted political content or posted comments or reactions to political posts. To answer our research questions and test the validity of our hypotheses regarding the variables predicting greater or lesser tolerance of political incivility, five regression models were constructed (one for incivility in general and four others for the distinct forms identified).

## 5. Findings

The data very clearly confirm the multidimensionality of the concept (H1), as evidenced by the different values attributed by the respondents to the five forms of incivility, in a way that is entirely consistent with the tradition of empirical research on the subject. In addition to this confirmation, the data allow us to reflect more closely on the differences between the different types and confirm the hypotheses of a perception of less 'seriousness' in the case of discursive incivility (H2) and informational incivility (H3). We will return to this aspect in our discussion but, as of now, we can already interpret these results as being linked to the characteristics of the context, in the case of the Italian context marked by the affirmation of a populist communicative style – which makes extensive use of bad manners – and by the progressive spread of a post-truth climate such as to normalise the use of lies and slander. Close to the average value of perceived incivility, or even higher, are, on the other hand, the values recorded by the other types that would thus seem to confirm themselves as the true core of political incivility in Italy.

To answer our RQ2 concerning individual characteristics associated with the perception of incivility, regression models were tested. First, a model was constructed for incivility as a whole and, in a second step, five other models were constructed for each type of incivility. The results of the regression models are reported in tables 3 and 4.

*Table 3 – Results of the Regression Model Predicting General Perceptions of Incivility*

| Predictors   | Measure of perceived incivility |
|--|---------------------------------|
|  | $\beta$                         |
| Sex: female  | 0.2                             |
| Age: 18-24   | -0.4                            |
| Age >55  | .10***                          |
| Education: low                                       | -.10***                         |
| Newspaper (print and website)                        | -.10****                        |
| TV news  | .07*                            |
| Social Media   | .01                             |
| Online News  | .02                             |
| Political TV-Radio Talk-show                         | -.09***                         |
| Interest for politics: 0-10                          | .05                             |
| Political Collocation: no collocation                | .01                             |
| Political collocation: right                         | .03                             |
| Political Collocation: left                          | .12*                            |
| Engagement on social media around political contents | -.35****                        |

R:0,43; R<sup>2</sup>= 0,18; R<sup>2</sup> adattato= 0,17

Errore std della stima= 0,82

\*  $p < 0,10$ ; \*\*  $p < 0,05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0,01$ ; \*\*\*\*  $p < 0,001$ .

From reading table 3, a few results immediately strike the eye. Firstly, contrary to findings in other research, in our case, the gender variable does not influence the perception of incivility in any way. This means that our H4a is not confirmed by the data. In the same direction is the data for those aged between 18 and 24: young age is not a predictor of greater tolerance of incivility, so that the H4b hypothesis is also not confirmed. Regarding the age variable, however, it must be said that older age is a predictor of lower tolerance to incivility. Finally, among the demographic variables, low education level emerges as a predictor of higher tolerance to the phenomenon, confirming our H4c. On the information consumption front, the data confirm our H5 hypothesis, which held that higher consumption was a predictor of higher tolerance. This applies, in the first place, to news newspapers and radio and television talk-shows. The consumption of television news, on the other hand, goes against the trend (albeit with a low level of significance), confirming the nature of superficial and distracted consumption traditionally attributed to the users of such news. In short, the intentional consumption of news typical of reading a daily newspaper (whether printed or online) and/or exposure to a talk-show that deals with political issues offers numerous opportunities for contact with episodes (or narratives of episodes) that can be traced back to incivility to the point of activating a sort of desensitisation in citizens. Lastly, interest in politics, refusal to self-position along the left-right axis and self-positioning to the right are entirely marginal in the perception of political incivility. Self-positioning to the left, on the other hand, is a predictor of greater sensitivity to incivility.

Engagement on social media around political content emerges as the clearest predictor of lower sensitivity to incivility.

In conclusion, while our hypotheses H6a, H6b are not confirmed and H6c is only partially confirmed, H6d is fully confirmed to the extent that the predictor of engagement on social media is the most consistent predictor of perceived political incivility.

*Table 4 – Results of the Regression Model Predicting Perceptions of the different Types of Incivility*

|  | Informational Incivility | Discursive Incivility | Vulgar Incivility | Violent Incivility | Discriminatory Incivility |
|--|--------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|
|  | $\beta$                  | $\beta$               | $\beta$           | B                  | $\beta$                   |
| Sex: female  | -.03                     | .06                   | .06               | .00                | .01                       |
| Age: 18-24   | -.02                     | -.06                  | -.03              | -.05               | -.03                      |
| Age: >55   | .12****                  | .08**                 | .11***            | .10***             | .05                       |
| Education: low                                       | -.10****                 | -.10***               | -.10***           | -.08*              | -.10**                    |
| Newspaper (print and website)                        | -.07*                    | -.09***               | -.10****          | -.09***            | -.08**                    |
| TV news  | .06                      | .05                   | .08*              | .07*               | .07*                      |
| Social Media   | .02                      | .01                   | .02               | -.01               | .01                       |
| Online News  | .04                      | .02                   | .00               | .03                | .00                       |
| Political TV-Radio Talk-show                         | -.07*                    | -.07                  | -.08*             | -.08*              | -.11****                  |
| Interest for politics: 0-10                          | .04                      | .05                   | .04               | .04                | .06                       |
| Political Collocation: no collocation                | .06                      | -.03                  | -.01              | .02                | .03                       |
| Political collocation: right                         | .10                      | -.02                  | -.06              | .07                | .03                       |
| Political Collocation: left                          | .15**                    | -.04                  | .08               | .14**              | .14***                    |
| Engagement on social media around political contents | -.35****                 | -.33****              | -.32****          | -.32****           | -.29****                  |
| R  | .41                      | .39                   | .40               | .41                | .38                       |
| R <sup>2</sup>                                       | .17                      | .15                   | .16               | .16                | .15                       |
| R <sup>2</sup> adattato                              | .16                      | .14                   | .15               | .15                | .13                       |
| Std. Error della stima                               | .88                      | .86                   | .89               | .89                | .91                       |

\*  $p < 0,10$ ; \*\*  $p < 0,05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0,01$ ; \*\*\*\*  $p < 0,001$ .

Table 4 – which shows the results of the regression models for each type of incivility – confirms the centrality of the previously identified predictors, while introducing some interesting nuances. Among the variables positively correlated with the perception of incivility are education, newspaper reading and engagement on social media around political content. In the articulation of the concept of incivility into five main categories, those variables remain stably present and stand as predictors of a different perception. It is interesting to note how the respondents' self-placement on the left is a predictor of greater sensitivity to informational, violent and discriminatory incivility. These are types of incivility that, to varying degrees, refer to the violation of norms that govern the functioning of democratic institutions and contribute to the common ground for civil coexistence. As far as discriminatory incivility is concerned, exposure to talk-shows is a predictor that dampens the perception of the seriousness of the phenomenon. Lastly, it should be noted that discursive incivility – i.e. the one most directly attributable to the area of impoliteness – is not only the one perceived as less serious, but sees among its predictors only older age, a low level of education, reading newspapers and engagement in social media. In short, if older age activates greater sensitivity to the perception of discursive impoliteness, low level of education, newspaper reading and social media use go in exactly the opposite direction, producing less sensitivity.

## 6. Discussion

Despite the concern about the spread of political incivility in contemporary democracies among scholars, political actors and journalists, there is still no unambiguous definition of the concept. The

numerous nuances that accompany the definition of incivility are such that the task of clearly identifying the consequences with regard to the relationship between citizens and politics is particularly complex (Van't Riet & Van Stekelenburg, 2022). However, this does not preclude operational definitions that allow its translation into empirical terms. In this research, we have traced the main dimensions of political incivility proposed in the literature (Bentivegna & Rega, 2022a; Coe et al., 2014; Bormann, 2022; Hopp, 2019; Maisel, 2012; Muddiman, 2019, 2021; Mutz, 2015; Stryker et al., 2016) to five types that encompass both behaviours that violate interpersonal norms and those that challenge the norms that preside over the functioning of democratic systems. This articulation of incivility into different types allowed us, firstly, to confirm the multidimensionality of the concept and, secondly, to record its perceived seriousness by citizens. In this regard, the first significant element emerged from the data concerns the greater tolerance of respondents towards discursive incivility and informational incivility. The high level of tolerance for both types of incivility highlights the relevance of context in the perception of the phenomenon. In the Italian context, in fact, where populism has now firmly established itself at an institutional level, communicative practices based on the denial of respect for the other, be it a political opponent or a governmental or media institution, are so widespread that they do not raise negative evaluations by citizens. The mechanism at work is the same as that described by Muddiman and his colleagues (2022) when they argue that “it is possible that, because a person believes politicians use name-calling frequently in campaigns, the person will believe that name-calling is *not* descriptive norm violating” (p. 276). Not only are we not scandalised when political subjects shout at, interrupt or insult each other, but we are also not scandalised by political behaviour aimed at mystifying facts or spreading falsehoods to discredit the opposing party. In this second case, the desensitisation of citizens is, in our opinion, even more significant because it brings out a difficulty in perceiving the problematic nature of certain phenomena that threaten the stability of democratic institutions themselves as a result of the absence of a common base of information on which to elaborate proposals and make decisions. The increased tolerance towards informational incivility by citizens calls for further investigation also within contexts different from the Italian one, in light of the growth of so-called “information pollution” (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) in contemporary societies. In recent years, in fact, the increase in episodes of information disorder, often accompanied by their strategic use for electoral purposes, has been recorded within several countries (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Humprecht et al., 2020) and the possibility therefore of citizens' habituation to such practices could emerge as a potential risk factor for democratic arrangements.

Finally, the increased sensitivity expressed by respondents to violent incivility signals how a progressive shift in the interpretation of the phenomenon in terms of “immoral/criminal incivility” as defined by Muddiman (2021) is taking place. To tell the truth, this is a process already detected a few years ago in an earlier research conducted in the United States (Muddiman, 2019) that recorded the definition of the phenomenon given freely by the interviewees. The indication that comes from our data, recorded in a different context from that of the United States, stands as an unequivocal confirmation of the public's sensitivity to episodes of violence due to politics. It is worth emphasising that in both countries there have been episodes – albeit of varying severity – in which political incivility has resulted in calls for acts of violence against political institutions and trade unions<sup>7</sup> that have given rise to a heated and prolonged public debate – as well as legal proceedings. It cannot be excluded that it was precisely these episodes that triggered a greater sensitivity towards violent incivility by citizens.

Turning now to examine the predictors of greater or lesser sensitivity to incivility, the first finding to reflect on is that of a lack of homogeneity in the individual characteristics of the respondents. Firstly, among the socio-demographic variables, gender is completely irrelevant in determining a greater or

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<sup>7</sup> If in the USA the assault on Capitol Hill is well known, in Italy, among the episodes of this kind, we should remember the assault of 9 October 2021 on the national headquarters of the largest Italian trade union (CGIL) in Rome, during a demonstration organised by parties and groups gravitating in the area of the extreme right against the green pass and the anti-contrast measures introduced by the government, which later turned into guerrilla warfare.

lesser sensitivity to incivility, thus departing from previous research in the US, in which a greater sensitivity on the part of women was recorded (Kenski et al., 2020; Stryker et al., 2016). Equally irrelevant is young age. The marginality of these variables emerges both in the case of incivility as a whole and in its five articulations. Mature age, then, is a predictor of greater sensitivity to the phenomenon while low education level goes in the opposite direction, being a predictor of greater tolerance. In interpreting the differences in relation to the demographic variables that emerge with respect to previous studies, and in particular that of gender, one must certainly consider the differences in the cultural and social context in which the research is set. But also the characteristics of the sample used, which while in our case consists of 1,000 subjects representative of the Italian population, in other studies refers to a more circumscribed number of people and, sometimes, to a specific part of the population (e.g. that of university students as in Stryker et al. 2016 and in the follow-up study by Kenski et al., 2020). This could affect the different evaluations of incivility found, highlighting with new impetus the need to further enrich the study of predictors from a cross-country comparative perspective, so as to more clearly identify the role of individual variables.

In the area of information consumption, both the reading of newspapers (in print and/or digital format) and exposure to radio and television talk-shows act in the direction of decreasing sensitivity to the phenomenon. In contrast, the consumption of television news increases the sensitivity of individuals especially in the presence of vulgar incivility, violent incivility, and discriminatory incivility. A possible explanation may lie in the typical format of television news (short and fast), which is combined with an equally fast consumption by the audience, aimed at a concise update on the “latest facts”. A stronger interest, combined with a good availability of time, accompanies, on the contrary, the reading of newspapers and exposure to talk-shows. Reading detailed reconstructions of uncivil episodes with politicians as protagonists or even the consumption of images of the same episodes produces a process of desensitisation towards the phenomenon. Long to the attention of scholars, the shift from news to talk (Meltzer, 2019) brings with it an increased circulation of incivility in the information supply (Coe et al., 2014; Mutz, 2015; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011; York, 2013). The strategic use of incivility made by journalists and media companies in recent decades, with the aim of capturing audience shares in a highly competitive market on the attention front (Webster, 2014) – by means of a narrative of politics marked by dramatisation and conflict in order to emotionally engage and retain audiences – thus stands as an important contextual element that cannot be overlooked. This means that, without going into the disruptive effect exerted by incivility on the state of public debate in contemporary societies (Bentivegna & Boccia Artieri, 2021), one cannot ignore the responsibilities attributable to the journalistic universe and media enterprises (Berry & Sobieraj, 2013; Mutz, 2015) in having created a climate in which witnessing incivility “can be a form of pleasurable entertainment, as well as many extreme sports” (Mutz, 2012, p. 79).

Finally, among the variables related to interest in politics, it is the respondents' self-placement to the left that pushes in the direction of heightened sensitivity to incivility, confirming the relevance of progressive and left-wing partisanship over right-wing and conservative partisanship (Kenski et al., 2020).

In this area, however, the most significant predictor of lower sensitivity to political incivility is undoubtedly the use of social media for the consumption/production of politically related content. It is worth noting in this regard that politics seems to play an almost ancillary role here – indicative of the fact that interest in politics emerges as an entirely marginal variable – and that it is the practices of social media use that function as a powerful “anaesthetiser” for the perception of incivility (both in general and for the various forms here identified). Whether they then develop around political content or other topics seems to be of secondary importance. It must be said that this is certainly not unexpected in light of the rich and established literature on the circulation of elements of incivility in social media (Anderson & Huntington, 2017; Oz et al., 2018; Rheault et al., 2019). However, it is worth noting the positive correlation to a lower sensitivity to incivility in politics that links social media engagement and news and talk-show consumption, which the data point out with great clarity, configuring itself as yet another indicator of the progressive hybridisation of the media system

(Chadwick, 2017). This contributes, albeit indirectly, to resizing those readings that attribute to social media a preponderant role in the spread of incivility, showing that its circulation and penetration in the public debate can be read as the fruit of the activation of different actors and the dynamics of message circulation that are triggered within an interconnected ecosystem between digital platforms and traditional media.

Overall, the data confirm the need to disentangle the concept of incivility into different types and record citizens' evaluations of each type. As has emerged from the most recent debate in this field (Masullo Chen et al., 2019), continuing to speak of “incivility” in a broad sense does not help to clarify the nature of the phenomenon we are dealing with nor to identify the consequences reflected on the front of citizens' relationship with politics (trust, participation). Nor, even less, to plan counteractions to limit its spread.

Likewise, the data confirm that the perception of incivility is not uniform and that the characteristics of the beholder and evaluator must be taken into due account. With this research, we wanted to make a contribution in exactly this direction by taking the empirical approach outside the US borders, where it is predominantly located. The divergences that emerged in relation to the assessment of the types of incivility as well as the different role of the predictors that emerged in the previous pages can be traced as much to the specificities of the Italian context as to the different timing of the survey (sometimes around 5 years). Needless to say, in fact, the desensitisation process can be the result of particular political, social and cultural conditions that can significantly change perception levels over even a limited time span.

One of the main limitations of our work is undoubtedly the failure to differentiate the media environments in which incivility episodes take place. As previous research has convincingly shown, the channel and structure of the media platform (Sydnor, 2018) as well as the roles of the actors involved influence the perception of the subjects (Bormann, 2022; Gubitza, 2022). Inviting respondents to judge the level of incivility present in a Facebook post, a TV talk-show clip or a newspaper article describing the political news could lead to different evaluations in the presence of similar content. Nevertheless, we believe that this work offers convincing data to support the need to specify what type of incivility we are talking about and confirms the lack of homogeneity in citizens' perceptions.

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