
Book Review

Emily Syndor (2019) *Disrespectful Democracy. The Psychology of Political Incivility*. New York: Columbia University Press. 243 pages.

As regular observers of politics know, public discourse is rife with disrespectful language and rudeness. Nowadays, the growing concern about uncivil politics it is coupled with the apprehension that the verbal, gestural and, sometimes, physical aggression is no longer a subcultural or marginal phenomenon, but increasingly becoming the mainstream way of doing politics (see Herbst, 2010). Scholarly literature investigates political incivility by focusing on ad hominem attacks, name-calling, obscenity, mockery, belittlement, cursing, aspersion, knowingly false accusations, emotional display, misrepresentative exaggeration, conflagration, ideologically extremizing language, etc. in the interactions between politicians, journalists, and citizens (see Sobieraj and Berry, 2011; Coe et al., 2014; Stryker et al., 2016). There is a wide consensus about the view that incivility shapes citizens' political perceptions and behaviour (see Gervais, 2015; Santana, 2014; Stroud et al., 2015). Our knowledge is, however, surprisingly limited about the psychological predispositions of individuals which make people to respond differently to the exposure to political incivility. Emily Syndor addresses this gap by providing a political psychological analysis to illuminate the interplay between personality traits, incivility and their effect on political behaviour in the context of the United States of America.

This book is divided into six chapters with the first and last dedicating to conceptual issues. The introductory chapter provides an overview of how the author integrates political science and psychology. Chapter two poses the hypotheses and connects them to the existing knowledge of the field. Chapter three through chapter five are data analysis sections and they offer the core information and main arguments of the book.

The monograph starts with a thorough review of the existing literature and guides the reader through the evolution of the concept of incivility in politics. This volume joins the series of research studies that ground the analysis in politeness theory by considering incivility as a social norm violation that breaks the rules of accepted communication tonality (see Mutz, 2015; Muddimann, 2017). Inspired by the studies which are concentrating on the style of political communication, incivility is considered as a collective label for 'name-calling, finger-pointing, aggressive language, interruption, and insults' (p. 15). Syndor notes that incivility in politics is a contested concept with a variety of ways to approach (pp. 12–16), the problematic nature of defining incivility, however, remains under-reflected in the introductory chapter. The author forgets to ask: on what basis does a researcher define what counts as uncivil political communication and what does not?; who sets the discursive norms in the commentary platforms?; what if the labelled words and expressions are not perceived uncivil by the users? In other words, I miss the critical account of the norm violation approach. Besides, Syndor does not discuss the situational character of incivility which raises doubt whether

it is possible to develop a general vocabulary for the norm violating words and expressions that work across different contexts and periods. It would have been extremely useful if the author could have discussed the assumption that the individuals define incivility in different ways and the boundaries between acceptable and insulting language vary across demographic groups and sub-cultures.

In the second chapter, Syndor introduces the personality traits which, she believes, matter the most in relation to political incivility. The author convincingly argues that the conflict orientation of a personality is a specific type of 'approach/avoidance motivation, stable within an individual but with variation across different people' (p. 45). In order to influence someone's political behaviour, the conflict has to be manifest and incivility in politics is a perfect way to study manifest conflicts. Previous studies highlight that the effects of incivility are context-specific, while the main contribution of Emily Syndor's book is the demonstration that the impact also depends on the individuals' personality. The main hypothesis of the volume is that people's conflict orientations shape political behaviour, but the effects differ across civil and uncivil media environments (p. 8). The thesis is supported by four sub-hypotheses: an emotional hypothesis which is about the positive correlation between individuals' conflict avoidance/conflict approach and negative/positive feelings when exposed to incivility (p. 47). Then, an information-seeking hypothesis was formulated which is to test whether individuals' conflict orientations influence the level of motivation to look for the uncivil media content (p. 48). Engagement quantity and quality hypotheses orientate the empirical investigation on political behaviour: Syndor examines if the more conflict-approaching personality one has, the more likely he or she is to participate in political activities with high incivility and use uncivil language in political discussion (p. 49).

The sets of the empirical analysis are presented in the third, fourth and fifth chapters. The empirical data of the book relies on qualitative surveys and survey experiments. It is an appropriate method to study whether people's psychological predispositions towards conflict lead them to respond differently to the same stimuli of media content with a civil and an uncivil message. More precisely, pre-selected visual treatments were used: participants were requested to watch video clips with and without uncivil content. The statistical analysis (OLS regressions mostly) are convincing and quite complex. Sometimes it may be difficult for the non-statisticians to understand, although the author does her best to help the readers to navigate the tables and figures.

The sampling strategy is, however, less impressive. Each hypothesis is tested on data coming from a different sample source. The conflict orientation of individuals is based on the two-wave panel study which is nationally representative for the U.S. in 2016, while the emotional responses are tested with the aid of an omnibus survey. There are three different sources of data related to media habits and political participation which are mostly online convenience. The date of the data collection might also be problematic since it ranges from March 2012 to August 2016. Citizens' responses to incivility are very much likely to change over those years in the U.S., especially after the electoral victory of Donald

Trump who uses insulting language as a key component of his rhetoric. In my opinion, such a limitation should have been recognized more explicitly.

In spite of my criticism on some aspects of the data collection, I should give Emily Syndor credit for the methodological transparency of the examination. The author provides a remarkably detailed description of the survey experiment variables. Appendix A is a valuable part of the book for those who are novice researchers or anyone who wants to improve his/her methodological expertise.

As for the substance of the investigation, the third chapter reveals that individuals who are conflict-approaching feel more positive emotions – greater amusement, entertainment, and enthusiasm – when faced with incivility. Evidence is offered that the conflict-avoiding persons are more likely to experience negative feelings such as anxiety, anger, and disgust in the same situations. Syndor has controlled for the topic as well, but the psychological pattern seems to be consistent when the respondents had been watching political news and non-political content. The book, however, presents a somewhat counterintuitive finding concerning the information-seeking hypothesis in chapter 4: conflict-avoidant persons are more likely to keep looking for uncivil news media content. More specifically, social media and heavily biased blogs and television programs are preferred by those who tend to stay away from conflicts. The experiments suggest that conflict approaching persons spend less time with uncivil political content. The chapter carefully describes the finding, but unfortunately leaves a possible explanation to the readers. This might be the case because the statistics provide only weak support for the expectation that conflict orientation has any impact on media consumption.

In chapter 5, it is demonstrated that there are no significant connections between conflict orientation and participating in donating money and voting. When the risk of potential exposure to incivility is increasing, like for example commenting on a political blog or persuading others to vote, the conflict-approaching respondents tend to get involved in the activity. It means that conflict-approaching people are better able to cope with the rudeness of contemporary politics in the United States, while incivility negatively affects conflict avoidant people. Those individuals become less powerful citizens since they associate politics with disrespectful and aggressive behaviour, therefore they are less likely to engage with politics.

Given the fact that aggressive verbal and nonverbal behaviour has become more and more visible in the U.S., the results of the book lead us to realize that a previously undiscovered type of political inequality might be on the rise. Citizens with a low level of conflict-tolerance are more likely to be marginalized in politics since their psychological predispositions are simply incompatible with the rudeness of contemporary American politics. Although, it is not advisable to eliminate incivility from politics since certain Americans find vitriol in political conversation very amusing and it even motivates them to participate in public discourse. With this conclusion, Emily Syndor's book on political incivility is a must-read for those who are interested in the psychological background of political behaviour.

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