Abstract

This study uses data from a representative sample of undergraduates at a large southwestern university to: 1) construct a new measure of tolerance for political incivility, and 2) examine how demographic and political factors, media consumption and online political engagement are associated with variable tolerance for political incivility. Among our findings, women, relative to men, exhibit less tolerance for political incivility, as do Democrats relative to Republicans. Participants in online political discussion, relative to non-participants, exhibit more tolerance, as do viewers of The Daily Show and Fox News relative to non-viewers.

Theoretical Frame and Relevant Prior Research

The harmful consequences associated with political incivility range from extreme partisan polarization among government officials to reduced trust in and legitimacy of government in the eyes of the public. In relation to the current study, those with little tolerance for political incivility may avoid politics or isolate themselves in like-minded communities where they may be less likely to encounter incivility but also will be less likely to bend or engage in political discussion with un-like-minded others (Fever Research Center 2014). Conversely, those with high tolerance for incivility may contribute disproportionately to hyper-partisanship and political polarization (Kenn & Kenney, 1999; Nutz, 2007; Stryker, 2011).

We used a representative sample of the full population of undergraduates at a large southwestern university to examine factors shaping variable tolerance for political incivility. Building on the conceptual overlaps in prior literature on political incivility, we constructed 21 potential indicators of various types of perceived incivility with a five-category Likert scale from “not at all incivil” to “very incivil” (Stryker, Conway & Danielson, 2016). We then used latent class analysis (LCA) to discover the structured variability in our data across this set of individual indicators of perceived political incivility, using this structure to construct our measure of tolerance for incivility.

Our hypotheses are grounded in the two premises, as well as in prior findings by Frieden & Kenney (2013) and Hight & Wenzlaff (2015). These premises include:

1) People differ in their sensitivity and response to various types of negative, offensive or threatening stimuli.
2) Primary and secondary political socialization, learning and acculturation shape diverse political attitudes and behaviors, including tolerance for political incivility.

Hypotheses

Formulated hypotheses, pertaining to four block of factors: demographic, political, media consumption and online political engagement.

Demographics:

1. Females will be less tolerant of political incivility than males.
2. Republicans will be less tolerant of political incivility than Democrats.
3. Media Consumption:
   - Those who watch Fox News will be more tolerant of political incivility than those who do not.
   - Those who watch CNN and MSNBC will be less tolerant of political incivility than those who do not.
   - Those who watch The Daily Show will be more tolerant of political incivility than those who do not.
   - Those who watch The Colbert Report will be more tolerant of political incivility than those who do not.

Online Political Engagement:

Those who watch the political news on TV are more likely to be tolerant of political incivility than those who do not. Those who watch the political news on the internet are less likely to be tolerant of political incivility than those who do not.

Method

Data. Representative sample of UA undergraduate population (N = 1,218).

Latent Class Analysis (LCA):

1. Identify groups of respondents who share similar views of the civility/incivility of diverse speech/behavior in politics.
2. Create: strong and nuanced measure of tolerance for incivility.
3. Respondents to the level of incivility of 23 different types of speech or behavior using a 5-point Likert scale to estimate our latent classes.
4. Results used to construct dependent variables in cumulative logit models.

Cumulative Logit Models:

1. Performed forward deletion of cases missing data on independent variables (N=831).
2. Performed a series of cumulative logit models. For independent variables, we assigned all respondents to one of the four latent classes:
   - Low tolerance
   - Moderate tolerance
   - High tolerance
   - Extreme tolerance

3. Employed manually iterated, post-stratification weights to ensure that our results are representative of the attitudes of our student population.

Results

LCA. Model converged on a four class model. The four latent classes profiles presented show a clear downward shift in the percentage of persons stating that a given action is “Very Unlikely” (see Figure 2).

Cumulative Log. Likelihood ratio tests (LRTs) and the Akaike’s and Bayesian information criterion (AIC and BIC) indicate the final model was the best fitting model. The above results come from the final model.

Women: More likely than men to be low, rather than high tolerance.

Republicans: Less likely than independents to be low, rather than high tolerance.

Democrats: More likely than independents to be low, rather than high tolerance.

Respondents who watch Fox: Less likely to express low, rather than high tolerance.

Respondents who watch MSNBC: More likely to express low, rather than high tolerance.

Respondents who watch NPR: More likely to express low, rather than high tolerance.

Respondents who watch CNN and MSNBC: More likely to express low, rather than high tolerance.

Respondents who watch The Daily Show: Less likely to express low, rather than high tolerance.

Respondents who watch The Colbert Report: More likely to express low, rather than high tolerance.

Participation in online discussion: Less likely to express low, rather than high tolerance.

Discussion and Conclusions

Important contributions:

1. Demonstrate the utility of using latent class analysis to construct a measure of tolerance.
2. Shed new light on the factors that shape variable tolerance, including the relevance of media consumption and participating in online political discussion.
3. Provide a unified theoretical framework as a starting point for future hypothesis testing research.
4. Demonstrate empirically the relevance of media consumption and participating in online political discussion to explain variable tolerance for political incivility.

Unanticipated findings:

1. While findings for Daily Show are in expected direction (exposure associated with increased tolerance for incivility) findings for Colbert are in opposite direction. Does exposure to different types of satire have different effects?

"It's one thing to express your views. It's another thing for those views to be different from mine." - Stephen Colbert

Future research:

1. Longitudinal studies to examine causation.
2. More reliable measures of media exposure.
3. Research on nationwide sample and various subpopulations.

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