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The role of democratic values in shaping perceptions of political incivility in European liberal democracies

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Abstract

This study investigates whether citizens' perceptions of political incivility converge across liberal democracies and the extent to which individual orientations towards democracy and democratic values are associated with sensitivity to incivility. Drawing on a comparative survey conducted in Italy, Germany, and the United Kingdom ($N = 3500$), it examines the individual factors associated with sensitivity to incivility. The results show that support for democracy and endorsement of democratic values are the most influential predictors of sensitivity to incivility, with higher levels associated with greater sensitivity, whereas anti-political attitudes are associated with lower sensitivity. These findings indicate that sensitivity to incivility is primarily associated with citizens' orientations towards democracy and its normative principles rather than with national contextual differences. Citizens in Italy, Germany, and the United Kingdom assess incivility in remarkably similar ways, despite differences in electoral systems, media systems, and political cultures.

Keywords

Political incivility, democratic values, comparative research, political communication, political culture, liberal democracies

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Introduction

For decades, scholarship on political incivility has assumed it to be a highly context-dependent phenomenon, whereby what is perceived as uncivil 'varies across time and space' (Strachan and Wolf, 2012: 5) and is in 'the eye of the beholder' (Mutz, 2015). Accordingly, cultural traditions, social norms, and national specificities are thought to shape perceptions of incivility to the extent that they differ considerably across countries. Studies conducted beyond American borders have indirectly supported this view by demonstrating that measurement standards developed in the United States fail to work in other contexts (Walter, 2021).

Political incivility is commonly understood as a lack of respect for social and cultural norms that govern personal interactions as well as those that regulate the functioning of democratic systems (Bentivegna and Rega, 2022; Papacharissi, 2004). So defined, incivility is not merely a matter of tone or good manners: while it encompasses interpersonal rudeness, it extends to discourses and behaviours that delegitimise political opponents, democratic values, and the institutions that embody them. This distinction matters for democracy. A measure of impoliteness may be tolerated, or even enliven debate (Schudson, 1997), but the erosion of mutual respect and of the legitimacy of dissent strikes at what Barber (1984) called 'strong democracy' – the capacity of citizens to disagree without ceasing to recognise one another as legitimate interlocutors (Dahl, 1971; Laden, 2019). It is for this reason that rising incivility is widely feared as a driver of democratic degradation, from declining trust to the reframing of rivals as enemies (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). Understanding how citizens themselves recognise and evaluate incivility is therefore a democratic question, not a stylistic one: in the end, citizens are crucial arbiters of which behaviours cross the line (Kenski et al., 2020).

Yet how citizens draw this line is generally assumed to depend on context. While the relevance attributed to social, cultural, and political dimensions across contexts is theoretically sound, empirical evidence supporting this assumption remains scarce. To address this gap, we conducted a comparative study of political incivility perceptions in three European liberal democracies – Italy, Germany, and the United Kingdom – selected for their shared democratic foundations and contrasting electoral systems, media environments, and political cultures.

Under the context-dependency assumption, cross-national differences should produce varying perceptions of political incivility. Countries characterised by majoritarian systems, partisan media, strong anti-political sentiment, and a substantial neo-populist presence are expected to exhibit lower sensitivity to incivility due to greater exposure to norm-violating behaviours typical of highly conflictual electoral contexts (Klinger et al., 2022). Conversely, in countries with proportional systems, highly professionalised media, limited anti-political sentiment, and marginal neo-populist forces, citizens should display heightened sensitivity, given their lower exposure to such conduct.

However, our findings point in a different direction. Despite contextual variations, perceptions of incivility converge remarkably across the three countries. Citizens tend to recognise and evaluate uncivil behaviour by political elites in similar ways, suggesting the existence of shared evaluative criteria, while context-related differences prove marginal.

Moreover, what citizens identify as incivility extends beyond style or language to the violation of fundamental norms of democratic coexistence, including mutual respect, commitment to truth, and the legitimacy of dissent. The convergence observed shifts attention from national context to citizens' individual political orientations. In particular, endorsement of democratic values and support for democracy emerge as the strongest predictors of sensitivity to incivility across the three countries.

In the following sections, we first examine cross-national differences to explain why we selected these three countries; we then present the data, methods, and main findings, before concluding with a discussion of the study's implications and limitations.

How contextual and individual factors shape perceptions of political incivility

Before turning to what shapes citizens' perceptions of incivility, it is necessary to specify how incivility is structured. The three-dimensional structure adopted here derives from a cumulative line of conceptualisation. Building on the recognition that incivility is multidimensional (Bormann et al., 2022; Muddiman, 2017; Stryker et al., 2016), we distinguish three domains in which disrespect may be expressed: towards other participants (insults, ridicule, shouting), towards democratic values (demonisation, discrimination, deliberate falsehood), and towards democratic institutions (delegitimisation of rules, incitement to violence, contempt for representative bodies). This tripartite structure follows from the twofold nature of civility itself, which pertains at once to the individual (*cives*) and to the collectivity (*civitas*), and it was empirically validated through confirmatory factor analysis, which showed that a three-factor solution fits citizens' perceptions better than one- or two-factor alternatives (Authors, 2022). Having clarified the three dimensions of the concept, we now examine the factors – contextual and individual – that the literature considers capable of shaping it.

The concentration of incivility research in the United States has hindered empirical verification of a core theoretical assumption – that incivility is inherently context-dependent. In the absence of systematic comparative studies, the literature has largely assumed that perceptions of incivility depend on the cultural and political context in which it takes shape. However, emerging empirical evidence suggests a more complex picture. Otto et al. (2020) found that many forms of incivility are perceived as unacceptable everywhere, suggesting that its perception is more 'psychological than cultural'. Van't Riet and Van Stekelenburg (2022) showed that the effects of incivility (on political trust and participation) vary between the United States and Europe, though without questioning the underlying assumption. Salgado et al. (2023), analysing over two million comments across six countries, identified common predictors of incivility – right-wing orientation, populist rhetoric, migration issues, false information perception – that operate consistently across national boundaries.

These findings raise important theoretical questions, yet direct and systematic empirical verification remains lacking. Our research addresses this need by comparing perceptions of incivility in three countries that differ in how democracy is practised. In doing so,

we focus on three contextual dimensions that the literature considers potentially relevant: electoral systems, media systems, and broader political culture. Table 1 summarises the key features of each country across these dimensions.

The theoretical rationale linking context and individual factors to how citizens evaluate uncivil conduct works through the norm-setting that surrounds them. Norms of acceptable political behaviour are shaped by what citizens repeatedly encounter: where aggressive, polarising, or delegitimising conduct pervades the electoral and media environment, it comes to be seen as an ordinary feature of political life and is perceived as less uncivil – a desensitisation mechanism documented in prior work on exposure to uncivil and violent media content (Bentivegna and Rega, 2024b; Gervais, 2014; Kenski et al., 2020). This logic operates at two levels. At the collective level, it generates cross-national variation, as citizens in more conflictual contexts are more heavily exposed and, on average, less sensitive to incivility. At the individual level, the same logic explains differences among citizens living in the same context. Those most exposed to incivility – through heavy news or social media use – tend to grow accustomed to it and evaluate such conduct as less uncivil.

By contrast, those who more strongly support democracy and endorse democratic values remain more sensitive to breaches of democratic norms and continue to perceive incivility as a violation. It is against this logic that the contextual differences summarised in Table 1, and the individual predictors introduced below, take on their theoretical significance.

Starting with the electoral dimension, the United Kingdom operates under a majoritarian system that, by design, fosters adversarial competition, embodying the conflictual model par excellence. Such systems are inherently competitive and conflictual, amplifying confrontation particularly during electoral campaigns (Lijphart, 2012). Italy and Germany, by contrast, adopt mixed proportional-majoritarian systems that theoretically encourage coalition-building and more moderate inter-party relations in view of potential post-electoral alliances.

Regarding media system characteristics, Italy exemplifies the pluralist-polarised model, characterised by strong ties between media and political actors, partisan narratives, and stereotyped portrayals of opponents (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Germany represents the democratic-corporatist model, with a fact-oriented journalistic culture and higher professional standards (Van Kempen, 2007). The United Kingdom fits the liberal model, though its hybrid nature – combining public service broadcasting with aggressive tabloid journalism – creates a context prone to negative coverage (Esser et al., 2017).

These structural differences are reflected in citizens' media perceptions: Italy registers the highest perception of source partisanship (42%) and Germany the lowest (26%), with the United Kingdom in between (37%). A similar pattern emerges for audience polarisation (Germany 8.7%; Italy 16.6%; United Kingdom 23.2%). We use this term in the specific sense of *news audience* polarisation proposed by Fletcher et al. (2020): an audience-centric, cross-platform measure of the extent to which a media system contains outlets with distinctly left- and right-leaning audiences, rather than outlets whose audiences are mixed or centrist. It thus captures a behavioural, exposure-based phenomenon – the degree to which citizens of differing political leanings rely on separate news sources – and should not be conflated with ideological polarisation (the divergence of citizens'

Table 1. Main characteristics of the countries included in the study.

Characteristics	Countries		
	Italy	Germany	United Kingdom
Electoral system[a]	Mixed proportional-majoritarian	Mixed proportional-majoritarian	Majoritarian
Media system[b]	Pluralist-polarised	Democratic-corporatist	Liberal
Social media use for news[c]	39	34	37
Perception of source partisanship[d]	42	26	37
Level of audience polarisation[e]	16.6	8.7	23.2
Trust in news[f]	34	43	36
Anti-politics index[g]	0.65	0.49	0.53
Distrust in parties[h]	78.5	59	83.2
Dissatisfaction with democracy[i]	67	45	60

[a]Lijphart (2012); [b]Hallin and Mancini (2004); [c]Newman et al. (2024) (Digital News Report); [d]Newman et al. (2022) (Digital News Report); [e]Fletcher et al. (2020); [f]Newman et al. (2024) (Digital News Report); [g]Mete (2022); [h]Tufiș et al. (2023) (TRUEDEM); [i]Wike and Fetterolf (2024) (Pew Research Center).

attitudes) or affective polarisation (hostility between opposing partisans). Trust in news, by contrast, follows the opposite trajectory (Germany 43%; United Kingdom 36%; Italy 34%).

The third dimension concerns broader political culture. Italy shows the highest anti-politics index (0.65), substantial party distrust (78.5%), and democratic dissatisfaction (67%) – a configuration linked to the rise of populist formations that normalise contemptuous rhetoric towards elites (Bentivegna and Rega, 2024a; Humprecht et al., 2020; Mete, 2022). The United Kingdom presents similarly elevated party distrust (83.2%) and dissatisfaction (60%), but a more moderate anti-politics index (0.53), suggesting discontent has not undermined commitment to democratic principles (Clarke et al., 2018). Germany stands apart, with the lowest values across all indicators (anti-politics: 0.49; party distrust: 59%; dissatisfaction: 45%), reflecting a post-war political culture oriented towards moderation and consensus (Mommsen, 1996).

Overall, the three countries show nuanced differences across the dimensions considered – electoral systems, media models, and political culture – and share a common foundation as consolidated liberal democracies. This combination lends itself to a most-similar-systems logic: because the three cases converge on their liberal-democratic framework but diverge on the specific contextual features, they allow us to test whether such contextual variation actually translates into different levels of sensitivity, or whether the latter are driven by individual-level factors.

This design lets the comparison speak to the question. If context matters in the way the literature assumes, these differences should be reflected in cross-national gaps; if instead citizens react in broadly similar ways regardless of where they live, this would suggest that context plays a more limited role than commonly assumed.

Turning to the influence of individual factors shaping perceptions of incivility, established studies take into account socio-demographic variables and media consumption. Gender consistently emerges as influential, with women exhibiting greater sensitivity (Bentivegna et al., 2024; Conway and Stryker, 2021; Kenski et al., 2020). Age operates as a generational factor: older cohorts, socialised when civility norms were less contested, tend to show greater sensitivity; younger people, raised in digital environments where algorithms reward aggressive and emotional content, embrace different norms of acceptability (Frimer et al., 2023; Theocharis et al., 2020).

Media consumption and social media use are also crucial in shaping attitudes towards conflict. Frequent exposure to media coverage of uncivil behaviour by political actors, as well as direct experiences of incivility on social media platforms (Anderson et al., 2014; Song and Wu, 2018), can lead to familiarisation, causing individuals to perceive such behaviour as an inherent feature of political action. Empirical evidence on this remains mixed: some studies support the normalisation hypothesis, while others indicate that repeated exposure may heighten sensitivity to incivility (Authors, 2024b; Gervais, 2014; Kenski et al., 2020).

A further set of individual factors concerns citizens' relationship with politics and democracy. Among these, anti-political attitudes, support for democracy, and endorsement of democratic values are particularly relevant to our argument. Anti-political attitudes capture a broader negative orientation towards politics and political representation, whereas support for democracy concerns citizens' preference for democratic rule over non-democratic

alternatives. Previous research on anti-politics and challenges to representative democracy provides the broader conceptual basis for these orientations (Bertsou and Caramani, 2020; Mete, 2022). Stronger support for democracy should heighten sensitivity to breaches of democratic norms, while anti-political attitudes may dampen it by making uncivil conduct more consistent with an already negative view of politics.

Endorsement of democratic values concerns a broader normative orientation: citizens' adherence to principles concerning how democratic political life should be conducted. A broad tradition in democratic theory conceives democracy as resting not only on support for democratic rule, but also on normative commitments concerning political equality, pluralism, democratic citizenship, and the conduct of political disagreement (Barber, 1984; Dahl, 1971; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Papacharissi, 2004). These principles provide standards for evaluating political conduct, including truthfulness, openness to dissent, equal rights, recognition of the continuing relevance of politics to collective life, and respect towards others. Citizens who more strongly endorse these standards should therefore have a firmer normative benchmark against which uncivil conduct registers as a breach (Bentivegna and Rega, 2025).

Given these considerations, our analysis aims to assess the extent to which the perception of political incivility in European democracies is influenced by contextual differences and/or by individual factors independent of the context. We therefore formulate the following hypotheses:

H1: If sensitivity to incivility is context-dependent, citizens in countries where conflict has been normalised – electorally, in media coverage, and through widespread anti-political sentiment (Italy and the United Kingdom) – will perceive uncivil behaviours as less uncivil than citizens in a context of greater moderation (Germany), as repeated exposure desensitises them to norm-violating conduct.

Conversely, if perceptions do not depend on context, we should observe similar levels of sensitivity across the three countries, with citizens' individual orientations rather than national specificities accounting for the differences that remain.

H2: Beyond context-related variables, individual factors affect sensitivity to incivility: gender (a). women show greater sensitivity than men); age (b). older generations show greater sensitivity than younger ones); news consumption and social media use (c). heavy news consumers and more frequent social media users show lower sensitivity to incivility, as they have become accustomed to constant exposure to divisive content in public discourse).

H3: Independently of context, citizens who more strongly endorse democratic values and support democracy show greater sensitivity to incivility, whereas those holding anti-political attitudes show lower sensitivity.

Data and methods

The research is based on a survey conducted in November 2024 using CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing) methodology, carried out by Ipsos on representative samples of the adult population (18+) in Italy ($N = 1500$), Germany ($N = 1000$), and the United

Kingdom ($N = 1000$), stratified by gender, age, education level, and geographic area in accordance with the socio-demographic structure of the national populations and subsequently weighted to correct any imbalances.

Throughout, we use the term 'sensitivity to political incivility' to denote the degree to which citizens recognise and evaluate a given behaviour as uncivil, with higher sensitivity corresponding to higher ratings of incivility (Authors, 2024b). Lower sensitivity reflects desensitisation, whereby repeated exposure renders such behaviour less salient or more acceptable (Gervais, 2014; Kenski et al., 2020).

Following the three-dimensional conceptualisation set out above (Authors, 2022), a battery of 12 items was developed (nine referring to instances of incivility and three control items), derived from reworking previous empirical contributions (Authors, 2022; Muddiman, 2017) and episodes drawn from international political discourse. Items were presented as images or screenshots, with identifying features modified to ensure anonymity and standardise content (e.g. for disrespect towards others: 'A councillor loses his temper and tells a colleague, "You're a piece of sh…"'). The complete list is provided in Appendix A1. Respondents rated each item on a scale from 1 ('*very civil*') to 10 ('*very uncivil*'). Scale reliability proved satisfactory across all contexts (Cronbach's alpha: Italy = 0.791; Germany = 0.855; United Kingdom = 0.853).

Beyond the direct measurement of incivility perception, individual variables considered to be potential predictors were also examined: socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, education level, and perceived economic condition), news consumption, social media use, citizens' relationship with politics and democratic values.

The analysis of information practices considered both the type of sources used (mainstream vs non-mainstream[1]) and their frequency of use. Based on these variables, a cluster analysis was conducted that distinguished four user profiles: non-news consumers, who systematically avoid exposure to both mainstream and non-mainstream news, confirming documented trends of citizen indifference towards news (Bentivegna and Rega, 2024c; Castro et al., 2022; Strömbäck et al., 2018); news traditionalists, who consume mainstream sources (TV, print, radio) several times a week, rarely using alternative sources; news encounterers, who access news predominantly incidentally through non-mainstream sources, following the 'news finds me' logic (Gil De Zúñiga et al., 2017); and news seekers who show high exposure to multiple information sources with intense and diversified daily consumption.

Social media use intensity was measured through an index structured in four classes (from low to high), based on frequency of use of major digital platforms. Online political engagement was also measured, distinguishing between passive social media consumption and active participation (viewing, reacting, sharing, commenting, content creation), as such experiences – as noted above – can lead to a heightened acceptance (Hmielowski et al., 2014) and diminished sensitivity to incivility, influencing its overall perception.

Respondents' relationship with politics was captured with indicators related to interest in politics, left–right self-placement, anti-political attitude, support for democracy, and endorsement of democratic values. For the first two, respondents reported their level of interest in politics (from 'not at all' to 'very much') and their placement on the left–right axis (or non-placement: 'neither right, nor left, nor centre'). For anti-political attitude

and support for democracy, we relied on multiple indicators informed by previous research on anti-politics and challenges to representative democracy (Bertsou and Caramani, 2020; Mete, 2022). A principal component analysis confirmed the two-component structure. The first component captures a broader anti-political orientation, encompassing perceived lack of political influence, difficulty in making sense of politics, distrust of elected representatives, scepticism towards political compromise, and a preference for unmediated citizen rule, broadly consistent with established conceptualisations of anti-politics (Mete, 2022). The second component captures support for democratic rule over non-democratic alternatives, combining a preference for democracy over other forms of government with opposition to leadership that disregards democratic rules. The latter item was reverse-coded so that higher scores consistently indicate greater support for democracy.

Run separately for each country, the analysis reproduced this structure.[2]

The full list of indicators is reported in Appendix A2.

To operationalise this normative orientation, respondents were asked to position themselves on a semantic differential comprising five opposing pairs of statements. The pairs capture the domains outlined above: respect for truth, inclusion of dissent, equal rights, relevance of politics, and respect for others. The five items were combined into a single index of endorsement of democratic values (full wording in Appendix A3).

The variables and indices described were used to construct block linear regression models, aimed at identifying predictors of political incivility in the three countries. For each model, blocks of predictors were entered relating to socio-demographic characteristics, media consumption, social media use, and political attitudes. The choice of block regression was driven by the interest in capturing the multiple relationships between sets of variables and political incivility, which we would otherwise risk losing with simultaneous entry of all variables.

Different countries, similar perceptions

The structural differences between Italy, Germany, and the United Kingdom – as described in Table 1 – led us to hypothesise variation in the perception of incivility (H1). Specifically, we expected that contexts with greater polarisation and political-institutional distrust would have normalised political incivility, thus decreasing sensitivity towards its various manifestations: disrespect for others, democratic values, and institutions.

The results contradict this expectation. There is a substantial overlap in the distribution of the incivility factor across the three countries. The overall means (Table 2) show Italy with the highest sensitivity (8.37), followed by Germany (8.01) and the United Kingdom (7.81); the gaps are minimal, and well below what a context-dependency account would predict. The Italian case offers the strongest test of this convergence. Despite decades of exposure to aggressive and polarising communication – conditions under which desensitisation would be most expected – Italy records the highest sensitivity of the three countries. That recognition of violations of democratic respect holds precisely where exposure is greatest suggests that greater exposure does not necessarily translate into lower sensitivity to uncivil discourse.

Table 2. Assessment of political incivility and its dimensions in Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom (averages).

	Italy (N = 1500)	Germany (N = 1000)	United Kingdom (N = 1000)
Overall evaluation of political incivility	8.37 (2.07)	8.01 (2.04)	7.81 (2.10)
Evaluation of political incivility as disrespect for others	8.38 (2.01)	7.84 (2.02)	7.83 (2.05)
Evaluation of political incivility as disrespect for democratic values	8.47 (2.08)	8.16 (2.01)	7.94 (2.09)
Evaluation of political incivility as disrespect for democratic institutions	8.27 (2.12)	8.05 (2.09)	7.68 (2.16)

Germany illustrates the same convergence from the opposite end: despite an almost inverse context, its mean level of sensitivity remains close to Italy's. Where moderation is an entrenched trait of political culture, uncivil behaviour should be more visible and thus perceived as more uncivil; yet Germany's mean sensitivity is 0.36 points lower than Italy's rather than higher, as this expectation would suggest. This indicates that differences in contextual moderation translate into only limited differences in sensitivity, pointing instead to more general evaluative frameworks of correctness and legitimacy in political discourse.

The United Kingdom confirms convergence in sensitivity despite its distinctive political and media features. The country is experiencing a deep crisis of representation, exacerbated by Brexit and the emergence of populist and anti-establishment movements (Clarke et al., 2018). According to our hypotheses, the combination of crisis of representation, democratic dissatisfaction, and audience polarisation should have generated marked desensitisation towards incivility. Here too, however, convergence prevails over contextual differences. The distances remain minimal (0.56 points from Italy, 0.20 from Germany), indicating that even in such a context, citizens recognise and evaluate the same behaviours as uncivil.

In summary, cross-national differences in sensitivity to incivility remain below 0.6 points despite variation in electoral and media systems, news audience characteristics, and political culture, providing little support for the context-dependency expectation in H1.

This homogeneity holds across all three dimensions, with disrespect for democratic values receiving the highest incivility ratings in every country (Table 2) – a shared core of sensitivity that persists despite national differences.

Analysis of mean values for each item (Table 3) reinforces this picture: the middle finger gesture in parliament, stereotyping of women, and incitement to violence are perceived as similarly uncivil across the three countries, despite the contextual differences considered in our comparison.

In brief, while not constituting a true theoretical shift, our results contribute to downscaling the centrality of the context-dependency assumption, suggesting – as already prefigured by Otto et al. (2020) – that some forms of incivility are perceived as violations of political civility norms even in profoundly different contexts.

Table 3. Mean and standard deviation for each indicator.

Indicator	Italy ($N = 1500$)	Germany ($N = 1000$)	United Kingdom ($N = 1000$)
1. Raising voice, insulting (you're a piece of shit) *Disrespect for others*	8.20 (2.12)	8.39 (2.02)	7.78 (2.01)
2. Criticising opposition positions *Control item*	5.28 (2.77)	4.60 (2.39)	5.22 (2.35)
3. Discrimination (against people of specific region) *Disrespect for democratic values*	8.33 (2.11)	7.73 (2.06)	7.79 (2.10)
4. Disrespect for collective memory (Auschwitz) *Disrespect for democratic institutions*	7.33 (2.54)	6.95 (2.45)	6.48 (2.48)
5. Call for responsible behaviour *Control item*	3.35 (2.97)	3.27 (2.62)	3.15 (2.70)
6. Using vulgar language about an opponent (kiss my arse) *Disrespect for others*	8.54 (1.97)	7.29 (2.02)	7.52 (2.12)
7. Stereotyping (women less intelligent) *Disrespect for democratic values*	8.68 (2.05)	8.61 (1.93)	8.39 (2.09)
8. Building shared political ground *Control item*	4.25 (2.75)	3.89 (2.40)	4.07 (2.50)
9. Accusing of defending mafia interests (lies, slander) *Disrespect for democratic values*	8.41 (2.09)	8.14 (2.04)	7.66 (2.07)
10. Ridiculing opponents (the usual shorty) *Disrespect for others*	8.40 (1.93)	7.84 (2.03)	8.19 (2.03)
11. Encouraging violence to contest unwelcome choices or policies (French senator) *Disrespect for democratic institutions*	8.60 (1.99)	8.49 (2.02)	8.16 (2.10)
12. Behaving inappropriately in places symbolic for democracy (middle finger) *Disrespect for democratic institutions*	8.89 (1.82)	8.72 (1.79)	8.40 (1.90)

Individual factors: the centrality of democratic values

If context-related differences prove limited, we need to identify which individual variables are associated with variation in sensitivity to incivility. Block regression analysis (Table 4) reveals a partly unexpected hierarchy among the individual predictors.

Socio-demographic variables confirm some established findings. Gender emerges as a constant factor across all three countries: men systematically show lower sensitivity to incivility, supporting H2a and replicating previous findings (Author et al., 2024; Conway and Stryker, 2021; Kenski et al., 2020).

Age shows generational dynamics broadly consistent with H2b: respondents aged 18–30 show lower sensitivity to incivility in Italy and especially in Germany, a pattern consistent with research on socialisation in digital environments where algorithms reward aggressive and emotional content (Frimer et al., 2023; Theocharis et al., 2020). Over-65s instead show greater sensitivity in Italy and the United Kingdom, consistent with the possibility that generational socialisation contributes to different standards of

Table 4. Models predicting the perception of political incivility in Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom.*

	Model 1 (socio-demographic)			Model 2 (information consumption)			Model 3 (social media use)			Model 4 (attitudes towards politics)		
	Italy *Beta (SE)*	Germany *Beta (SE)*	United Kingdom *Beta (SE)*	Italy *Beta (SE)*	Germany *Beta (SE)*	United Kingdom *Beta (SE)*	Italy *Beta (SE)*	Germany *Beta (SE)*	United Kingdom *Beta (SE)*	Italy *Beta (SE)*	Germany *Beta (SE)*	United Kingdom *Beta (SE)*
Socio-demographic												
Gender (male)	−.084** (.052)	−.132*** (.062)	−.140* (.097)	−.079** (.052)	−.134*** (.062)	−.138* (.098)	−.079** (.052)	−.134*** (.062)	−.135* (.099)	−.088*** (.049)	−.114*** (.055)	−.141*** (.092)
Age 18–30	−.085* (.079)	−.296*** (.097)	−.015 (.140)	−.074* (.079)	−.265*** (.099)	−.018 (.143)	−.074* (.079)	−.234*** (.110)	−.011 (.151)	−.071* (.072)	−.143*** (.096)	−.036 (.137)
Age 31–50	-	−.175*** (.082)	-	-	−.141*** (.083)	-	-	−.133*** (.089)	-	-	−.060 (.073)	-
Age 51–64	.080* (.069)	−.075 (.084)	.161** (.135)	.066* (.069)	−.065 (.084)	.140* (.142)	.066* (.069)	−.066 (.084)	.154* (.146)	.020 (.063)	−.034 (.072)	.161** (.134)
Age 65 and over	.154*** (.071)	-	.197*** (.124)	.132*** (.072)	-	.165* (.135)	.132*** (.072)	-	.188* (.141)	.047 (.067)	-	.197*** (.133)
Low education level	−.038 (.082)	-	-	−.036 (.081)	-	-	−.036 (.081)	-	-	.016 (.076)	-	-
Medium education level	.016 (.057)	-	-	.018 (.057)	-	-	.018 (.057)	-	-	.048 (.053)	-	-
Self-perceived economic status: affluent	.065 (.166)	.182** (.153)	-	.072* (.165)	.179** (.152)	-	.072* (.165)	.183*** (.152)	-	.053 (.151)	.072 (.132)	-
Self-perceived economic status: comfortable	.108 (.117)	.238** (.141)	-	.110 (.117)	.219** (.140)	-	.110 (.117)	.218*** (.140)	-	.027 (.108)	.044 (.123)	-
Self-perceived economic status: problematic	.079 (.116)	.171 (.140)	-	.083 (.116)	.165 (.139)	-	.083 (.116)	.166 (.139)	-	.012 (.107)	.039 (.120)	-
R	.202	.294	.257									
r^2	0.41	0.86	0.66									
Information consumption												
News avoiders				−.095* (.107)	-	.008 (.176)	−.095* (.107)	-	-	−.068 (.098)	-	-
News traditionalists				−.071 (.098)	−.108* (.102)	.011 (.173)	−.071 (.098)	.107* (.102)	.001 (.165)	−.041 (.089)	−.049 (.139)	.025 (.150)
News encounterers				−.033 (.125)	−.022 (.162)	.043 (.248)	−.033 (.125)	−.023 (.162)	.036 (.250)	−.052 (.114)	−.046 (.139)	.023 (.229)
News seekers				.038 (.083)	−.187* (.150)	−.054 (.243)	-	−.167* (.152)	−.065 (.252)	-	−.173** (.130)	−.057 (.230)
Political news avoiders				.137** (.104)	.008 (.145)	-	.137** (.104)	.008 (.145)	-	.120*** (.088)	−.047 (.126)	-
Political traditionalists				.033 (.102)	.029 (.132)	−.074 (.162)	.033 (.102)	.011 (.133)	−.086 (.164)	.027 (.093)	−.027 (.115)	−.078 (.150)
Political news encounterers				.139*** (.116)	.066 (.169)	−.042 (.224)	.139*** (.116)	.052 (.171)	−.007 (.240)	.104*** (.108)	−.010 (.148)	−.024 (.205)
Political news seekers				.022 (.087)	−.036 (.115)	.010 (.230)	-	−.010 (.117)	.064 (.138)	.022 (.079)	-	.032 (.221)
R				.250	.337	.274						
r^2				.062	.114	.075						
Social media use												
Medium-low social media use							-	.024 (.080)	.064 (.138)	-	.025 (.068)	.044 (.125)
Medium-high social media use							-	−.032 (.112)	.064 (.190)	-	.032 (.096)	.102 (.173)
High social media use							-	−.098* (.135)	.011 (.205)	-	.016 (.117)	.044 (.186)
R							-	.348	.283			

(continued)

Table 4. Continued.

	Model 1 (socio-demographic)			Model 2 (information consumption)			Model 3 (social media use)			Model 4 (attitudes towards politics)		
	Italy *Beta (SE)*	Germany *Beta (SE)*	United Kingdom *Beta (SE)*	Italy *Beta (SE)*	Germany *Beta (SE)*	United Kingdom *Beta (SE)*	Italy *Beta (SE)*	Germany *Beta (SE)*	United Kingdom *Beta (SE)*	Italy *Beta (SE)*	Germany *Beta (SE)*	United Kingdom *Beta (SE)*
r^2							-	.121	.080			
Attitudes towards politics												
No interest in politics										−.091*** (.113)	−.071* (.139)	−.044 (.193)
Little interest in politics										−.062 (.078)	−.122*** (.083)	−.019 (.148)
Quite interested in politics										−.013 (.061)	−.034 (.062)	−.047 (.113)
Centre placement										.013 (.084)	−.058 (.069)	−.002 (.141)
Centre-right placement										−.020 (.062)	−.082* (.074)	−.034 (.119)
No placement										−.001 (.067)	−.108*** (.088)	.029 (.153)
Endorsing democratic values										.201*** (.026)	.299*** (.032)	.364*** (.051)
Support for democracy										.275*** (.027)	.256*** (.031)	.195*** (.047)
Anti-political attitude										−.091*** (.024)	−.105*** (.027)	−.033*** (.049)
Number of cases	1500	1000	1000	1500	1000	1000	1500	1000	1000	1500	1000	1000
R										.483	.609	.524
r^2										.233	.371	.275

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001.

*The table does not report variables removed from the model or those that were not significant.

acceptable political behaviour. Education level is never significant, contrary to previous studies (Bentivegna and Rega, 2024b).

That said, the most unexpected result concerns the role of variables related to news consumption and social media use, which show weak, contradictory, and substantially marginal effects. In the United Kingdom, non-news consumption practice predicts the perception of incivility, a finding that foreshadows what will emerge more clearly from the analysis of political attitudes: the evaluation of incivility appears to be more dependent on citizens' relationship to politics as a whole than on patterns of media exposure. Germany and Italy present different but limited effects: in Germany, news seekers – the most intense and diversified information consumers – display the least sensitivity; in Italy, non-news consumers and news encounterers are more sensitive. Social media too, often identified as an environment that normalises incivility (Anderson et al., 2014; Song and Wu, 2018), appears insignificant, with the exception of a slight effect in Germany's case. In summary, H2c receives weak and fragmented support, suggesting that desensitisation mechanisms operate less consistently than expected. In particular, the marginality of news consumption, to which we will return later, suggests that variation in sensitivity to political incivility is more closely associated with citizens' political orientations than with their media habits.

When the variables related to citizens' relationship with politics are included in the model, the picture becomes even clearer. Within this block, endorsement of democratic values and support for democracy emerge as the strongest predictors across the three countries: endorsement shows the largest coefficient in Germany and the United Kingdom, whereas support for democracy is the strongest predictor in Italy. Conversely, anti-political attitudes are systematically associated with lower sensitivity to incivility. Individuals who more strongly endorse normative standards of democratic political life and support democratic rule therefore show greater sensitivity to incivility, while stronger anti-political attitudes are associated with lower sensitivity.

Taken together, these results support H3: independently of the limited cross-national variation identified above, sensitivity to incivility is consistently associated with citizens' orientations towards democracy, its values, and representative politics.

Discussion

The findings of this study invite a reconsideration of a common assumption in research on political incivility – that sensitivity to it depends heavily on national context (Herbst, 2010; Mutz, 2015; Strachan and Wolf, 2012). Across Italy, Germany, and the United Kingdom, which differ in their electoral systems, media systems, and political cultures, sensitivity to incivility appears largely convergent.

The overlap in mean values and the consistent hierarchy of incivility dimensions suggest that, in these three settings, citizens apply broadly similar criteria when evaluating offensive, discriminatory, or delegitimising behaviours. This pattern sits uneasily with the view that perceptions of political incivility are primarily shaped by context-specific social and cultural norms (Herbst, 2010; Mutz, 2015; Strachan and Wolf, 2012), and points instead to broadly shared principles of democratic legitimacy. Given that our

comparison rests on only three countries, however, we advance this as a plausible interpretation rather than a firm conclusion about national-level determinants.

Taken together, these findings support our central claim: sensitivity to political incivility appears to be associated less with the specific national environment than with citizens' commitment to democratic rule and to the normative principles of democratic political life – including mutual respect, truthfulness, openness to dissent, and equal standing. This pattern points to the relevance of citizens' normative benchmarks in evaluating what constitutes acceptable political behaviour, rather than to a passive response to the surrounding political environment.

The marginal role of media diets further reinforces this interpretation. Patterns of news consumption and social media use – though theoretically associated with processes of desensitisation or heightened sensitivity – show weak or inconsistent effects. This suggests that media exposure is only weakly associated with variation in sensitivity to incivility, which appears to be related more closely to citizens' broader orientations towards politics. As Flinders (2012) notes, when political actors are portrayed as 'folk devils' responsible for democratic dysfunction, expressions of incivility may align with an already degraded image of politics and therefore fail to elicit outrage. This logic also applies where anti-political sentiments prevail (Mete, 2022) – characterised by distrust towards political actors and institutions perceived as distant or inadequate – as incivility may become less salient when political legitimacy is already compromised. Conversely, conceiving political life in terms of shared democratic standards, and democratic rule itself as something worth defending, is associated with greater sensitivity to incivility.

The convergence we observe does not mean that context is irrelevant. Rather, it reflects what the three countries share: a consolidated liberal-democratic framework that sets broadly similar expectations about the limits of legitimate political conduct.

In democracies grounded in pluralism, the rule of law, and the separation of powers, widely recognised thresholds separate acceptable competition from conduct seen as violating the norms of civil discourse. Had the comparison included hybrid or illiberal regimes – where such breaches are often normalised – contextual differences might have emerged more sharply. The convergence we find may thus be specific to established liberal democracies, a possibility that should be tested through comparisons extending beyond these contexts.

In this respect, our findings are consistent with Pew Research Center surveys (Hernandez Ramones et al., 2025; Wike et al., 2025), which document widespread distrust towards parties and institutions across European democracies without a corresponding rejection of core democratic principles. Our results point in a similar direction: dissatisfaction with representative politics can coexist with continued attachment to democratic rule and to normative standards of political conduct. Even amidst disillusionment with political elites, citizens continue to recognise violations of norms of civility, suggesting the persistence of a shared sensitivity grounded in democratic standards.

This apparent contradiction – between negative evaluations of incivility and its persistence in public discourse – can be understood in terms of citizens' dual interpretation of incivility, consistent with Muddiman et al.'s (2022) distinction between injunctive and

descriptive incivility norms. On the one hand, a normative reading recognises incivility as a violation of the core principles of democratic coexistence – respect, truthfulness, and the legitimacy of dissent – and evaluates it through shared moral categories. On the other hand, an adaptive reading tends to accept or justify incivility when it aligns with political identities, strategic convenience, or conflictual goals, or when it is seen as consistent with an already negative image of the political class.

The coexistence of these normative and adaptive readings may help explain how citizens can condemn incivility in principle yet tolerate it when it serves their partisan or identity-based interests – a tension between adherence to democratic ideals and their pragmatic erosion in everyday political competition, with important implications for the quality of democratic public discourse.

The ability of liberal democracies to maintain this balance, however, may also be affected by transformations in political socialisation. The age differences emerging from our analysis, although not uniform across countries, are consistent with research suggesting that younger generations have developed political awareness amidst greater polarisation and normalised transgression (Vargiu, 2025). Digital environments that reward provocation and emotionality (Frimer et al., 2023; Theocharis et al., 2020) may further contribute to shifting the boundaries of acceptable political communication.

Regarding the study's limitations, the most notable is the lack of longitudinal data, which prevents an assessment of whether and how sensitivity to incivility evolves over time or in response to salient political and media events. The CAWI methodology, while standard in contemporary research, may exclude individuals with limited familiarity with digital tools, thus underrepresenting certain demographic groups. Furthermore, the exclusive focus on established liberal democracies constrains the generalisability of the findings: future research should extend the analysis to countries with different political regimes to verify whether the observed trends are contingent on a shared liberal-democratic framework. A further boundary concerns the communicative settings we examine: our items capture general perceptions of elite incivility rather than its evaluation within specific arenas – such as heated election debates or social media exchanges – where situational cues and platform norms may play a greater role in how such conduct is evaluated (cf. Rossini, 2022). Whether the convergence we observe extends to these more context-bound settings remains an open question for future research.

Despite these limitations, this study offers empirical grounds for reconsidering the role traditionally assigned to context in perceptions of political incivility. Across the three countries examined, national differences matter less than expected, while citizens' political and normative orientations provide a more consistent basis for understanding how uncivil conduct is evaluated. The broader implication is that the boundaries of acceptable political behaviour cannot be understood solely in relation to the environments in which political communication takes place; citizens' orientations towards democracy and its core principles also need to be considered. Where commitment to these principles weakens, the capacity to recognise incivility may weaken as well, suggesting that sensitivity to incivility may provide a useful perspective from which to examine the resilience of democratic norms in contemporary societies.

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Ethical considerations

The study is based on CAWI surveys conducted by Ipsos, a member of ESOMAR. Data collection was carried out in compliance with the ICC/ESOMAR International Code on Market, Opinion and Social Research and Data Analytics.

Ipsos operates in accordance with internationally recognised ethical standards and applies a global data protection policy based on the principles of the EU General Data Protection Regulation, which represents the minimum standard for all Ipsos Group activities worldwide.

According to national and international regulations, formal approval by an institutional ethics committee was not required for this study.

Consent to participate

Informed consent to participate in the study was obtained from all respondents by Ipsos prior to data collection.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. In our study, the term 'non-mainstream' is used to indicate information sources that operate outside traditional journalistic circuits.
2. The two components jointly accounted for 53.6% of the variance in Germany, 50.5% in the United Kingdom, and 49.4% in Italy.

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