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The strategic use of incivility in contemporary politics. The case of the 2018 Italian general election on Facebook

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ABSTRACT

The study addresses central issues in contemporary politics in response to growing concern about the impoverishment of political discourse that has become increasingly uncivil. In particular it analyzes citizens' reactions to leaders' uncivil posts on Facebook during the 2018 Italian General Election, by adopting a theoretical-operational model based on a dual approach (top down – bottom up) that examines the forms of adverse communication used by politicians online, and the consequences of these forms on users' discussion (analyzing both ranking behaviors and users' comments).

Political incivility is operationalized as a multidimensional concept and specific types are proposed, starting from violations of norms of politeness (interpersonal-level) and proceeding to violation of public norms of civility (public-level). Results show that leaders' use of uncivil messages trigger greater online participation, thus increasing the visibility of their posts. However, the emotional excitement elicited by these triggering forms of elite communication encourage antagonistic and rude behaviors among users, leading to an increase in incivil comments and thus jeopardizing the quality of online discussion. Overall, it emerges that incivility combined with divisive issues can be thought of as a tool of communication used strategically by politicians to mobilize voters and to strengthen their political affiliation.

KEYWORDS

Political incivility; online political discussion; polarization; political leaders; user comments

How does political leaders' use of uncivil language affect online users' political discussion? This is the main question raised in this article, which analyzes the reactions of citizens to political leaders' uncivil posts on Facebook during the 2018 Italian electoral campaign. Described by pundits and journalists as “the ugliest ever” (Bobbà & Seddone, 2018, p. 19), this campaign will be remembered not only for the extraordinary results (with anti-establishment forces winning a majority), but also for the worsening decorum of political debate and the pervasiveness of candidates' use of uncivil forms of communication. In particular in social media, candidates alternated deliberate attacks against opponents with hateful messages on highly polarizing social and ethical issues

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(Amnesty International, 2018, 2019). The use of uncivil discourse by political elites during the election campaign is neither a new strategy nor a unique feature of the Italian case. Evidence of “coarsening campaigns” (Stevens, Banducci, Horvath, & Krouwel, 2019) can be found in many recent elections, i.e. the 2014 and 2016 US election campaigns (Kenski, Filer, & Conway-Silva, 2018; Ott, 2017; Pain & Masullo Chen, 2019; Zompetti, 2019), the 2016 Brexit referendum (Usherwood & Wright, 2017), the 2017 French Presidential Election (Gerstlé & Nai, 2019) and the 2019 UK Election (Jackson, Thorsen, Lilleker, & Weidhase, 2019). Thus, scholars have started to argue that politics has become more polarized, rude, detached from the truth and, above all “uncivil” (Stevens et al., 2019). Incivility itself has become one of the most studied topics among political communication scholars, as stressed by Patricia Moy in her presidential address at the 2019 ICA Conference.

Despite the growing amount of attention devoted to this topic, several questions about incivility in public life must be further investigated. While incivility has mainly been scrutinized in discussion forums and in comments on news websites, less attention has been devoted to the implications of political representatives’ uncivil messages on social media. In focusing attention on these types of messages, two main issues deserve attention. Firstly, the question arises as to whether politicians’ uncivil messages are more appealing to the public than civil ones, thereby encouraging the public to share, like or comment on them. According to this view, political incivility can be understood as a strategic weapon (Herbst, 2010) used by leaders in order to attract users’ attention and increase the visibility of their posts. Secondly, another question arises as to whether politicians’ uncivil messages prompt users to behave like them by, for instance, responding in turn with uncivil comments; the idea being that incivility begets further incivility (San Pascual, 2019), and elites’ uncivil messages can lead to bottom-up, imitational behavior (Gervais, 2016). Both issues generate relevant consequences regarding the quality of online political discussion. In the first case, the high level of engagement of uncivil messages increases their visibility and propagation. At this point, it is useful to highlight the fact that although political debate has always suffered from incivility, the scale and speed at which hostile and rude messages spread in the current interactive media environment today is new (Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014; Maisel, 2012). In the second case, the spread of users’ uncivil comments can impoverish the confrontation, hinder open, rational discussion, questioning the overall value of online political talk. Several studies have shown that the pervasiveness of uncivil discourse can compromise the democratically relevant debate and the participation of citizens in public life (Coles & West, 2016; Hwang, Kim, & Kim, 2018). Theoreticians of deliberative democracy, in particular, understand political debate to be an organizing principle of social life and define deliberation as a discursive, inclusive and rationally-motivated process. Although empirical research on deliberative

approaches has often produced controversial results, scholars agree about the importance of the “quality” of the discursive context that should give participants the chance to discuss and explain their opinions and to discover those of other people to identify the best solution for the community (Habermas, 1989). While civility has always been considered a requirement of democratic discourse and an indicator of a strong democracy (Papacharissi, 2004), the breakdown of this condition inhibits the possibility of informed exchange on the issues and of an orientation toward mutual understanding and respect. Instead, defensive and hostile reactions based on the denial of the opinions and rights of others prevails (Kingwell, 1995), undermining the value of discussion and deliberative processes.

Furthermore, recent studies also show that elite incivility primes citizens for partisan combat, reducing their commitment to compromise and bipartisanship (Jamieson & Hardy, 2012; Strachan & Wolf, 2012). Thus, exposure to increased hostility between political representatives can fuel polarized and anti-deliberative attitudes among citizens (Gervais, 2019), compelling them to disregard democratic principles and values. Emotional excitement, elicited by these triggering forms of elite communication, generally seems to delegitimize collective democratic traditions and jeopardizes the development of the online public sphere. In relation to these dynamics, one must also consider that politicians’ use of incessant attacks against rivals contributes to the amplification of “psychological polarization”. This term captures the different types of polarization (Settle, 2018), including *perceptual polarization* – where people perceive greater policy and social distances between the parties than exist in reality (Lelkes, 2016) – and *affective polarization*, i.e. partisans’ increasingly negative feelings and attribution of negative traits toward the opposing party, its politicians and supporters (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012). These various types of polarization, and the ways they vary and grow, are, of course, intertwined. In any case, as McCoy and Somer (2019) have shown, the manner in which these distances and differences between political parties and groups are interpreted by the public, and the way they are used by some political actors, fuel an even more antagonistic perception of “us” versus “them” referring to other groups. Specifically, when audiences witness emotionally extreme language being used by political representatives with a mutual lack of respect, affective polarization can increase, because incivility creates arousal, which can “intensify the negative effect viewers have for disliked people” (Mutz, 2007, p. 624).

Against this background the article explores political incivility based on the idea that it represents a strategic tool of communication used by politicians to acquire more visibility in the public sphere. In particular, the study adopts a theoretical-operational model based on a dual approach (top-down – bottom-up), by examining politicians’ use of forms of adverse communication in their online posts and the consequences of these forms on users’ discussion

(analyzing both ranking behaviors and users' comments). Considering these two levels simultaneously helps us to answer a decisive question: does political elites' resorting to incivility affect users'/citizens' attitudes to the point of jeopardizing civil and informed discussion on issues? It should be noted that this is an original theoretical-operational model. In fact, previous studies on political incivility can be traced back to two main strands: those focused on the use of incivility by parliamentarians in their speeches to Congress (Jamieson, 1997; Uslaner, 2000), by candidates engaged in electoral campaigns and by elected presidents (Coe & Park-Ozee, 2020; Haynes & Rhine, 1998; Kenski et al., 2018; Ott, 2017), and those concerning incivility on the part of users involved in online discussion forums, political talks and news commentary (Chen, 2017; Coe et al., 2004; Muddiman & Stroud, 2017; Papacharissi, 2004). However, the choice of examining the two levels and actors (politicians and citizens) in a connected way, in order to observe the effects that uncivil communication by elites produces in users who comment on these messages, has so far been poorly investigated. By taking advantage of the nature of social media as spaces of interaction and exchange, we will therefore extend the analysis to users' comments and discussions raised by politicians' hostile messages. Specifically, we will analyze Italian political leaders' Facebook posts during the 2018 General Election campaign and users' reactions to them. Three modes of Facebook communication will be examined (Larsson, 2017): redistribution (shares), interaction (comments), and acknowledgment (likes).

We chose Facebook based on the assumption that, nowadays, political discussion on social media is a significant part of citizens' participation in public life and Facebook is the social media platform with the highest number of users in Italy (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Nielsen, 2018).

Political incivility: how to define and operationalize it

To understand what civility is and its deterioration is a complex and important challenge. Although incivility has always been a prominent issue in reflections on the quality of democratic debate (Herbst, 2010), many scholars agree that providing a clear definition of incivility "is all but impossible" (Jamieson, Volinsky, Weitz, & Kenski, 2015). Civility and incivility are "communicative, rhetorical practices" and hence "are always situational and contestable" (Benson, 2011). The concept's slippery nature and the difficulty of translating it empirically have resulted in a variety of interpretations and operational proposals in research findings. Starting from the definition of incivility as a breach of social norms, scholars are divided about which breached norms actually give rise to incivility. One approach defines incivility as a breach of interpersonal norms (Brooks & Geer, 2007; Coe et al., 2014; Gervais, 2015, 2016; Hwang et al., 2018; Kenski, Coe, & Rains, 2017; Mutz & Reeves, 2005).

According to this view, incivility refers to intentional disrespectful criticism and gratuitous offense that shows a lack of respect toward others i.e. insults, shouting, sarcasm or vulgarity. Other approaches adopt a more restrictive definition of incivility, identifying it as a threat to democratic pluralism through the violation of collective democratic traditions and norms (Jamieson & Hardy, 2012; Papacharissi, 2004; Rowe, 2015). Such examples are to be seen as threats to democracy as they question the rights of others.

More recent studies stress that incivility is both anti-normative and multi-dimensional (Hopp, 2019; Muddiman, 2017). Muddiman (2017) suggests that incivility includes violations of interpersonal and public norms, and that it “cannot be constrained to one or the other of these conceptualizations”. While the first relates to norms governing interpersonal interactions (the empirical indicators of which refer mainly to impoliteness), public-level incivility consists in the violation of norms governing democratic and deliberative communication processes. Presenting false information, refusing to compromise, stereotyping citizens and threatening the rights of other individuals or, focusing on political attacks, delegitimizing the opponents are a few such examples.

Finally, other authors draw attention to the rhetorical-communicative nature of incivility (Benson, 2011), defining it as a communicative tool intentionally used by politicians to achieve success, for example, in electoral campaigns (Herbst, 2010). In line with this approach and trying to avoid yet another attempt to determine to what extent and whether incivility has increased in current political debate, we are interested in understanding the tactics and strategies behind the use of this tool by political leaders. This interpretation seems appropriate to study the communicative behaviors of politicians interested in taking advantage of the emotionally engaging component of incivility to gain more public attention, especially in social media, where the engagement power of aggressive and violent messages has readily been observed (Hopp & Vargo, 2017; Samuel-Azran, Yarchi, & Wolfsfeld, 2017). Attention to the communicative and emotional components of incivility implies accepting that there are different types of incivility (linked to different strategic purposes) and that not all forms necessarily present a challenge to constructive discussion and its democratic-deliberative foundations. For instance, Rossini (2019) distinguishes between uncivil discourse (vulgarity, profanity, pejorative language) and intolerant discourse (racism, hate speech, offensive stereotyping, etc.), claiming that only the latter poses a threat to democratic values. The former, however, is not generally perceived as undesirable by participants in online discussions, who, being less constrained by the etiquette of face-to-face interactions, may interpret certain forms of incivility as acceptable.

Table 1. Operational definitions and examples of five forms of incivility.

Interpersonal-level of Incivility	Types of incivility	Operational definitions	Examples
1 Mockery/Sarcasm	Derisive remarks, mockery and use of sarcasm (Papacharissi, 2004). Mocking or making fun of one's political opponents or party (Stryker et al., 2016). Use of hashtags expressing derision.	Operational definitions	Examples Meloni: Canton delle busie (lies corner) in Padua. Never was there a better name for a DP (Democratic Party) stand. #VotaGiorgiaMeloni (picture of Canton delle busie). Salvini: "Tomorrow, Renzi will end up like this cute snowman: he will melt! (snowman pictured) Salvini ●●● UNEMPLOYMENT FALLING? BALLS! It is easy for Renzi to say that new jobs have been created if you include contracts for FOUR HOURS PER MONTH! I'd like to see work being DIGNIFIED once again! #4marzovotoLega Meloni: + STOP DO-GOODISM ON IMMIGRATION!+ it only takes two minutes to deny all of the lies about Renzi, Gentiloni, Minniti and Boldrini's do-good policies. #VotaGiorgiaMeloni
2 Misrepresentative exaggeration	Outrage discourse, based on dramatization, sensationalism, use of misleading or manifestly inaccurate information, and aimed at provoking emotional responses (Berry and Sobieraj, 2014). Use of uppercase, exclamation marks, enlarged text, and so on (Gervais, 2015, 2016; Stryker et al., 2016). Distortion or negative exaggeration in reference to behaviors, policies, or views of a person or group of people, branch of government, political party (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014). Inflammatory/sectitious words and phrases to describe opponents and others as more radical and extreme than they actually are (Groshek & Cutino, 2016; Hill et al., 2015).	Operational definitions	Examples
3 Insulting language	Name calling; use of vulgarities and offensive and/or denigrating language, targeting a person or group of people, branch of government, political party (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014). Making disrespectful statements (Stryker et al., 2016), including deliberately offensive, belittling and degrading adjectives and adverbs (Brooks & Geer, 2007; Coe et al., 2014; Gervais, 2015; Stryker et al., 2016).	Operational definitions	Examples Salvini: What is wrong with Boldrini and Renzi, who spend their days – today as well – explaining that Salvini and “fascism” pose a danger in Italy???? Are they stupid or just acting like it??? Meloni: Luigi Di Maio is like a returnable bottle: you fill it with any sort of content. He claims that Italy has to abandon the Euro in the morning, and he returns to it in the evening. As to immigration, on Monday he wants to be more inclusive; on Tuesday he supports the naval blockade. [...] If Grillo's followers were not ridiculous, they would be frightening.

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Public-level of Incivility	Types of incivility	Operational definitions	Examples
4 Defamation/Mudslinging		<p>Misleading charge, attack on reputation and personal integrity (Hill et al., 2015). Smear tactics, relentless attacks and deceptive messages (Massaro & Stryker, 2012). Activities aimed at misinforming people and arguments based on conspiracy theories, or accusations of extremely sinister motives/ actions presented as facts, although completely unfounded (Gervais 2015, 2016; Muddiman, 2017).</p>	<p>Di Maio: [...] Renzi has the shamelessness to preach at us about the relationships of a candidate who has undertaken to renounce his candidacy and election; he, who is secretary of a party that has taken thousands of euros from Buzzi, with his mafia capital⁽¹⁾, who has even attended a DP (Democratic Party) dinner aimed at financing the party. He, who is secretary of a party that has received €9 million of funding in four years, without anybody knowing where it came from (from people like Buzzi)? [...]]</p> <p>Meloni: Minniti: Now migratory flows are under control. Yeah, of course; in January 2018, about 4800 migrants arrived, more than twice compared to December 2017. What do you say: shall we send these liars home and actually stop immigration? On 4 March, vote FdI.</p> <p>Salvini: YET ANOTHER protest in the province of Padua: they are unhappy with their hotel accommodation! It's sheer madness! GO HOME EVERYONE!!! #4marzovotoLega (Video: Do you really think these people are fleeing from war??).</p> <p>Salvini: IMMIGRANTS protest because they want to watch the matches on Sky!!! After all, Italians are paying for it. We are in the province of Verona, this is crazy. P.S. The facility is run by the Versoprobo Cooperative, which has a turnover of millions of euros throughout Italy thanks to immigration business... #tuttiacasa (#gohomeeveryone).</p>
5 Intolerant speech		<p>Refusal to recognize respectable and equal rights for all individuals in a democratic, pluralistic society; use of stereotypes to label social or ethnic groups (Papacharissi, 2004). Use of racial, sexist, ethnic, or religious slurs (Stryker et al., 2016). Hate speech, which is an aversive form of communication based on the use of abusive or harassing language towards specific groups, due to their race, ethnic origin, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or other attributes (Chen, 2017). Expressions of racism, xenophobia, homophobia, sexism or other forms of discriminatory stereotyping (Rossini, 2019).</p>	

Building upon a synthesis of prior studies, we develop a relatively complete corpus of attributes of incivility. We classify specific types of incivility¹ (Table 1), starting from violations of norms of politeness (like mockery/sarcasm; i.e. interpersonal-level) and proceeding to intolerant discourse and antidemocratic comments (public-level), highlighting the transition from impolite messages to those that threaten citizens' rights and democratic values.

The decision to start from sarcastic quips (mockery/sarcasm) (the first type of incivility), i.e. those forms of impoliteness that depend more on contextual factors (Papacharissi, 2004), speak to the need to account for those characteristics of discourse that are typical of social media platforms where irony and sarcasm loom large.

The second type of incivility (misrepresentative exaggeration) – always included in the category of interpersonal level incivility – measures whether the author engages in making exaggerated statements that misrepresent the real political debate (Stryker, Conway, & Danielson, 2016). This category includes: a) outrage discourse, based on dramatization, sensationalism, use of misleading or manifestly inaccurate information, and which is aimed at provoking emotional responses (anger, fear, moral indignation) in the public (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014); in online text (blogs/Facebook posts, etc.), these feelings are likely to be communicated through “shouting” via the deliberate use of all caps, multiple exclamation points and enlarged text; and b) distortion, which consists in resorting to verbal extremes to describe opponents/situations in terms more radical than they actually are (Groshek & Cutino, 2016; Hill, Capella, & Cho, 2015).

The third type of incivility (insulting language) also concerns the interpersonal level category and measures whether the author engages in name-calling of a person/group of people (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014). This category includes *ad hominem* attacks, disrespectful statements, vulgarities, offensive and derogatory language (Stryker et al., 2016) as well as deliberately pejorative use of superfluous adverbs and adjectives (Brooks & Geer, 2007; Coe et al., 2014), all to express dislike or contempt for a target.

The fourth type of incivility (defamation/mudslinging) marks the transition towards the public-level incivility. Indeed, we are dealing with attacks aimed at delegitimizing opponents by questioning their integrity (Groshek & Cutino, 2016; Hill et al., 2015; Kenski et al., 2017, 2018). They may be accused of corruption, betraying the country, lying or other sinister actions, including

¹In the case of posts that involve more than one type of incivility, we focused on the one that exhibited public-level incivility.

activities intended to misinform people (Muddiman & Stroud, 2017).

Finally, intolerant discourse is the type of incivility that depends less on contextual factors and more directly on questioning collective democratic principles as well as the equality of all members of a pluralist democracy. In fact, political intolerance denies the recognition of free and equal rights for all individuals within a democratic and pluralistic society (Habermas, 2003). Therefore, it concerns the public-level incivility and includes politicians' messages that offend targeted groups, who are discriminated on the basis of their cultural, social and ethnic characteristics, religion, gender or sexual orientation, etc. (Rossini, 2019).

Online incivility and divisive issues

Internet-based technologies have afforded citizens with opportunities to engage and discuss current events (Papacharissi, 2002). These new spaces were expected to encourage bottom-up participation and strengthen public discourse, to allow free and equal access to debate and to promote citizens' confrontation on issues of mutual interest. Nevertheless, critical approaches stress that web platforms can accentuate antagonism and hostility among participants, damaging online discussion's potential for upholding the public sphere (Dahlberg, 2001). This "dual nature" of the internet has manifested since the very beginning of online communication (Ledwich & Zaitsev, 2019), where "flame-wars" (Kayany, 1998) and trolling behavior were already common practice in the everyday life of online communities. With the success of social media, behaviors previously confined to Usenet message boards and limited IRC channels such as inflammatory behavior, antisocial messaging and polarized extremism (Ledwich & Zaitsev, 2019) have become commonplace in the public consciousness. Thus, while everyday political discussion might help participants to learn and understand matters of public concerns (Rossini, 2019), narratives emerging on social media do not necessarily seem civil (Rohlinger & Williams, 2019). Some works have explained this matter by discussing the role of contextual factors, social media affordances and the specificities of different platforms in influencing the degree of civility in which people discuss politics (Rossini, 2018; Rowe, 2015; Sydnor, 2018a). Anonymity and a lack of social cues in some online environments can accentuate, for instance, a sense of "deindividuation with the effect of disinhibiting users' behavior (Chen & Berger, 2013; Oz, Zheng, & Chen, 2018).

Along with media affordances, the type of issue under discussion is another element that influences the content of users' comments. When issues under discussion are especially divisive, studies have shown that the discussion deteriorates as evidenced by a steady increase of aggressiveness, acrimony and incivility. Divisive issues may increase the emotional involvement of

those taking part in the debate (Papacharissi, 2015), as well as hostility toward divergent opinions, potentially increasing incivility. Many scholars have shown that in cases of divisive issues affecting people's principles and moral convictions, debates elicit stronger emotions, making it more likely that a discussion degenerates into incivility (Chen, 2017). Such cases occur, above all, when the issue in question pertains to race, sexuality, religion, political current affairs, immigration and social issues (such as civil rights, abortion, minorities and racial discriminations) (Santana, 2016).

Another element to consider is the polarization process and its relationship with the political leaders' strategies of communication. In a current political landscape largely characterized by personalized parties, political leaders who are increasingly able "to ignite public emotions (frequently through the media) can become 'cleavages', and thus polarize the electorate" (Bordignon, 2020: 4). Their exploitative use of divisive and polarized issues together with specific communication styles and narratives, increasingly based on the expression of hostile attitudes toward opponents, on the one hand simplifies citizens' understanding of social reality, reducing its complexity through binary logic and black-and-white-thinking. On the other hand, it increases both the public's perception of the distances between parties (perceptual polarization) and the negative feelings and prejudices that members of the in-group have toward the out-group party, its leader and its supporters (affective polarization). On closer inspection, elite-driven polarization, and in particular leaders' tapping into polarizing issues such as insecurity and immigration, is growing not only in the US but also in Europe and Italy (Bordignon, 2020). Furthermore, issue polarization by elites creates attitude polarization among partisans (Bordignon, 2020; Skytte, 2020), especially in an already polarized context such as the online environment, which exacerbates perceived political polarization among citizens (Yang et al., 2016).

In this paper, we consider in particular divisive issues related to incivility. The level of division over an issue can change from one context to another – arms control, for example, is a key issue in the U.S., but not in Europe – and according to the time when it is examined. Thus, issues once deemed essential, i.e. the fight for abortion or divorce, can lose their centrality and topicality. The definition of "divisive issue" must, therefore, take into account the agendas of mainstream media and social media at the time data are collected (Groshek & Cutino, 2016).

Based on these considerations, we maintain that "divisive issues" refer to those that are more sensitive and ideologically charged (immigration, corruption, etc.) and which are at the heart of the political during an election campaign. Empirically, we consider the use of divisive issues by political leaders as an indicator of polarization.

Aims and hypotheses

The present aim is to analyze how users react to political leaders' communication strategies on Facebook. In particular, we want to understand whether a leader's communication strategy based on political incivility and divisive issues can serve to galvanize their followers and with what consequences for the quality of discussion. Previous studies offer useful data for formulating certain hypotheses in response to these questions. There is a general consensus that uncivil discourse is emotionally arousing (Mutz, 2007) and that the motivating power of emotions should not be underestimated, as noted by Martin (2004) in a study of the relationship between negative campaigning and voter turnout. Mutz and Reeves (2005) observe that leaders and candidates' resorting to incivility during televised debates can attract the public's attention and increase the size of an audience. These trends become even stronger on digital platforms. Indeed, some features of new digital cultures help create an environment that enables hostility (cultures of vitriol, aggression, etc.), while also providing a pool of resources that further fuel this hostility (Udupa & Pohjonen, 2019). The polarized nature of political discussion on social media can better facilitate the circulation of uncivil messages (Back Vianna, 2018; Song & Wu, 2018). Regarding politics, Brady and colleagues found that the increased "virality" of morally-charged messages can also fuel polarization in certain political groups (Brady, Wills, Jost, Tucker, & Van Bavel, 2017). Coe et al. (2014), in turn, found that uncivil comments were more likely to receive thumbs-down reactions from readers, thus contributing to their increased online visibility. Additionally, Hasell and Weeks (2016) demonstrated that anger associated with election campaign information prompts users to share contents on social media, while a survey carried out on 9.6 million comments collected from the *New York Times*' website (Muddiman & Stroud, 2017) shows that uncivil or partisan comments generate an increased number of bottom-up reactions (approving and disapproving ones). When examining politicians' communications on social media, it is important to emphasize the central role played by web platforms themselves, as they allow immediate and uncensored communication; thanks to these tools, politicians have a broader scope within which to argue with their opponents (Usherwood & Wright, 2017), as they may use them to criticize opponents in a succinct (van Kessel & Castelein, 2016), unambiguous and often uncivil way. On this matter, scholars have found that the more offensive and violent that politicians' posts and tweets are, the more they are able to trigger user engagement, thus speeding up the online diffusion and circulation of their original message, and improving their overall media exposure. Faris and colleagues' study (2017) of the 2016 US presidential campaign clearly showed this type of dynamic in relation to Donald Trump. Precisely through his outrageous statements, Trump managed to gain "algorithmic" power over

social media (more followers, reactions, comments, retweets, likes), which was symmetrically translated into the ability to dominate media coverage and influence the political agenda, with immigration and the Muslim/Islam issue standing out as the two most widely discussed political issues (Faris et al., 2017). Therefore, we posit the first hypothesis:

The co-presence of both types of comments further amplifies these results. In line with existing empirical studies suggesting that both features, i.e. leaders' uncivil messages and the focus on divisive issues, increase user engagement, we posit the first hypothesis:

H.1 Leaders' uncivil messages concerning divisive issues arouse a larger number of user reactions (sharing, liking, commenting) than civil ones on non-divisive issues.

Although political incivility and outrage may attract public interest, the broader consequences of this exposure can bring about negative consequences. Herbst argues that at times, incivility provides wonderful entertainment, but it also creates anxiety (2010). In the same vein, Mutz and Reeves talk about the "paradox of incivility" to describe the simultaneous feeling of attraction and repulsion by those exposed to uncivil rhetoric (2005). This ambivalence undermines peoples' confidence in the government and institutions and weakens respect for opposing views (Mutz, 2015). Likewise, Maisel (2012) observes that while increased incivility in political discourse prevents politicians from focusing on solving problems or seeking the common good, people nevertheless enjoy when politicians behave in such manner, by demonizing those who do not agree with them. Investigating this topic further, individuals appear to respond negatively to everyday incivility directed at them (Phillips & Smith, 2004); evidence of such reactions can also be found in online political forums (Papacharissi, 2004). By relating incivility on television to its use in online formats, Gervais (Gervais, 2014) shows that watching uncivil partisan TV increases an audience's propensity to use uncivil communication online, especially in the case of like-minded incivility. Similarly, Sydnor affirms that "when we talk about politics with incivility, we perpetuate a cycle that has negative effects on our attitudes toward government" (Sydnor, 2018b). By examining online discussions, San Pascual (2019) found that individuals exposed to incivility are likely to use uncivil language when participating in the ongoing discourse. Furthermore political leaders' use of incivility (top-down) can encourage bottom-up emulation and lead to incivility in users' comments (Gervais, 2015, 2016). Moreover, as far as the type of issues is concerned, scholars broadly recognize that when the issue in question is particularly divisive and central to people's fundamental principles (i.e. immigration, corruption), debates become more heated, leading participants to take on more radical tones and potentially drifting into incivility; something even more true online (Chen, 2017; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). The impact of politicians' incivility on users' online discussions (i.e. incivility in users'

comments) can even more significantly affect the nature of such online discussions. Moreover,

in a polarized environment people pay less attention to arguments and instead rely solely on party cues” (Skytte, 2020, p. 10). This circumstance could compromise the democratic potential of discussion by preventing an informed exchange of view. Hence, we come to the second hypothesis: H.2 Leaders’ uncivil messages concerning divisive issues lead to increased incivility in users’ comments in online discussions, compared to civil ones on non-divisive issues.

The investigation into users’ reactions to various forms of incivility (defamation, insult, etc.) is connected to those aspects outlined in H.2. Some scholars (Muddiman & Stroud, 2017; Wang & Silva, 2018) indicate the importance of considering the different forms of incivility found in messages to better account for their effects on users. This approach makes it possible to verify which of the five types of incivility (Table 1) generate the greatest amount of uncivil user comments, thus allowing us to determine whether there are differences between interpersonal-level and public-level incivility. In this regard, existing research has not yet investigated the effects of different types of incivility by the political elite. However, some suggestions emerge from Muddiman (2017), who shows that people perceive political incivility in relation to the violation of both interpersonal and public norms of civility, but tend to consider the former more unacceptable than the latter (in this case, political party orientation matters). Santana (2015), however, using a different perspective which focuses on users’ comments on newspaper articles, shows that uncivil comments increase in response to intolerant discourse. Therefore, although there has been no specific investigation of the effects of different types of leader incivility on user comments (distinguishing between interpersonal and public-level incivility), the above-mentioned studies permit us to formulate our last hypothesis:

H.3 Leaders’ messages characterized by intolerant discourse (the fifth type of incivility, in our classification, that falls into the public-level category) fuel a greater number of uncivil users’ comments in online discussions; more than other forms of incivility.

The case study

The 2018 Italian General Election campaign gives us the opportunity to examine the connection between incivility and divisive issues (issue polarization) in online political debate. The campaign was marked by particularly aggressive and hostile communication between contenders. Firstly, the stakes were very high as the opposition parties (League and M5S) aimed to overthrow the previously ruling forces and to inaugurate an anti-establishment administration (Bordignon, 2020). Secondly, during the campaign, several events took place that centered public attention on markedly polarizing issues such as

immigration, safety, corruption and the shady dealings of the political class. The episode that had the greatest impact on the public agenda during the campaign (ITANES, 2018) was the racially motivated massacre at Macerata – a town in central Italy – where a 28-year-old far-right militant fired gunshots at various people of African origin, wounding six (3 February 2018). As a highly disputed event that was closely linked with the policy issue of immigration, the “Macerata case” shook up and conditioned the public agenda, although it was not directly taken up by leaders (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). The event provokes a number of antifascist demonstrations and episodes of intolerance/violence in many Italian towns, in turn, fueling intense ideological clashes over “fascism and anti-fascism”. Alongside the “Macerata case the campaign was also marked by scandals involving exponents of various parties, from political-judicial inquiries to the various controversies over the “un-presentable” candidates, i.e. candidates who, despite facing criminal charges pertaining to conflicts of interest, had been included in the electoral lists.

Methodology

The study focused on users’ reactions to Facebook posts by the leaders of the six main Italian political parties. In particular, we focused on users’ reactions to posts by Silvio Berlusconi (Forza Italia – a center-right-wing party), Matteo Salvini (Lega, a populist, anti-immigrant right-wing party), Giorgia Meloni (Fratelli d’Italia – a right-wing conservative party), Luigi Di Maio (Movimento 5 Stelle – M5S – an anti-establishment party, which defined itself as neither right- nor left-winged), Matteo Renzi (Democratic Party – a center-left party), Pietro Grasso (LEU – a left-wing party). Posts published on Facebook (1,788) by the six leaders, as well as users’ comments (2,588,055) collected through the *Netvizz* application, during the eight weeks preceding the vote (from 6 January to 2 March 2018), were analyzed.

The leaders’ posts were analyzed by three coders, using a traditional content analysis matrix that was created for this purpose. Manual analysis of contents was subjected to reliability test, which gave satisfactory results for all the variables considered (issue: Krippendorff’s $\alpha = 0.67$ and Percent agreement = 70.7%; presence of incivility: Krippendorff’s $\alpha = 0.71$ and Percent agreement = 86.7%; type of incivility: Krippendorff’s $\alpha = 0.74$ and Percent agreement = 84%). All contents provided in the posts in addition to texts (videos, pictures, screenshots, links to articles or blog posts) were also examined to ensure that messages were precisely classified. This was deemed necessary given the large amount of photo and video content in the leaders’ posts (32.8% and 46.6%, respectively). As for the videos, the first two minutes were analyzed as this was considered the ideal length for ensuring that the average user would watch them (Source: snakez.it, ninjamarketing.it). The analysis template was

constructed to survey the following: the issue, the presence of incivility (yes/no) and the type of incivility (Table 1). The issues were classified on the basis of 18 categories.

Analysis of literature on divisive issues, as well as the media and social media agenda during the 2018 Italian election campaign (Rega & Marchetti, 2019) led to identification of the following issues: Europe, immigration/safety, taxation/taxes/flat-tax, political costs, political-judicial inquiries, fascism/anti-fascism, political malfeasance, sensitive issues/legality, negative campaigning. The latter refers to direct, personal attacks on competing leaders (Brooks & Geer, 2007) and was included among the divisive issues because of its divisiveness and ideological implications.

Once we classified the issues and surveyed occurrences of incivility, we could proceed with the analysis, aiming to identify connections between contents published by leaders and users' interactions. In particular, a series of multiple linear regressions were carried out to verify the possible connection between iconographic (videos, photos) and textual material (posts' contents, presence/absence of incivility), characterizing various posts and bottom-up responses, in terms of engagement (Likes, Comments, Shares), as assumed in H.1. It was deemed useful to include the presence of photos and videos among the independent variables, both on account of their extensive use by the competing leaders and since the literature attests to the viral nature of iconographic material on Facebook.

Hypotheses 2 and 3 were verified by examining the contents of the comments collected,² using a combination of automated and manual analysis in order to ensure that the former was performed correctly and in accordance with the researchers' intentions (Dang-Xuan, Stieglitz, Wladarsch, & Neuberger, 2013). For this stage, we used QDA Miner, a tool for qualitatively analyzing computer-assisted text. For the quantitative component, we used WordStat, a text-mining tool used to identify the recurring themes in a text. The collected texts for the study were coded using a dictionary of words and phrases with distinct and unequivocal uncivil features, compiled *ad hoc* by the researchers.³ In this process, we relied on all five types of incivility mentioned above.

²Because of social media platforms' restrictions, the researchers were granted only "partial access" to data (Veltri, 2019) and so this research project was unable to collect 100% of users' comments to Italian political leaders' posts. According to *Netvizz*, we have collected and analyzed 85.3% referring to comments on posts by Berlusconi (296,306), 78% on those by Salvini (913,903), 72.6% on those by Di Maio (760,159), 66.5% on those by Renzi (320,947) and 64.9% on those by Meloni (296,740). Comments on Grasso's posts were not analyzed, since the leader of LEU has not made wide use of incivility, showing little posting activity, as compared with other leaders considered.

³The WordStat program was used to develop a dictionary specifically for our study project. The authors analyzed the lists of the most recurring words and phrases in the dataset, extracted through WordStat, to select uncivil words and phrases. Examples: "back to the JUNGLE"; "Back to Africa right now!!!!"; "damn parasites!"; "YOU MUST DIE"; "red ticks". To be considered "uncivil" a word or phrase had to appear 8 times or more. When a word or phrase was unclear from the standpoint of how to classify it, the authors examined the "word in context" to determine its meaning and usage. Finally, two researchers not affiliated with the project examined the dictionary to ensure that the words and phrases were accurately classified as uncivil.

Table 2. Leaders' Facebook posts: civil vs uncivil; divisive vs non-divisive issues.

	Non-divisive			Divisive			Total		
	Uncivil	Civil	Total	Uncivil	Civil	Total	Uncivil	Civil	Total
Di Maio	13.6%	86.4%	100.0%	60.7%	39.3%	100.0%	36.1%	63.9%	100.0%
			52.3%			47.7%			100.0%
Salvini	28.4%	71.6%	100.0%	59.9%	40.1%	100.0%	52.0%	48.0%	100.0%
			25.1%			74.9%			100.0%
Grasso	2.9%	97.1%	100.0%	9.7%	90.3%	100.0%	6.1%	93.9%	100.0%
			53.0%			47.0%			100.0%
Meloni	17.6%	82.4%	100.0%	60.6%	39.4%	100.0%	45.5%	54.5%	100.0%
			35.1%			64.9%			100.0%
Berlusconi	16.3%	83.7%	100.0%	28.9%	71.1%	100.0%	22.2%	77.8%	100.0%
			53.1%			46.9%			100.0%
Renzi	6.9%	93.1%	100.0%	34.0%	66.0%	100.0%	19.8%	80.2%	100.0%
			52.3%			47.7%			100.0%
Total	15.6%	84.4%	100.0%	55.0%	45.0%	100.0%	39.0%	61.0%	100.0%
Total			40.7%			59.3%			100.0%

Findings

Before presenting the results of users' comments, we will take a look at the leaders' communication activities that provoked citizens' reactions on Facebook.

We immediately notice that incivility has a significant role in political-electoral communication (39% of post is uncivil). Furthermore, when a discussion pertains to the most divisive issues, incivility was found to be present in 55% of the posts whereas only 15.6% with the non-divisive ones (Table 2). The importance of issues polarization during the election campaign also emerges distinctly: data show a prevalence of divisive issues (59.3%) over non-divisive ones (40.7%). However, there are significant differences among the six candidates that must be pointed out. Right-wing leaders, namely the federal secretary of Lega, Matteo Salvini, and the leader of Fratelli d'Italia, Giorgia Meloni, show a distinct preference for divisive issues (74.9% and 64.9% respectively). Moreover, their use of incivility is well above the average (Salvini 52% and Meloni 45.5%, compared to the average of 39%) and runs as high as 60% when they focus on divisive issues. Similarly, the level of incivility used by the M5S leader clearly increases when he deals with ideologically-charged issues (60.7% of cases are related to divisive issues) (Table 2).

To account for these differences, it is worth recalling that controversial matters played a key role in the election campaign through the thematic association of particular and very divisive matters with specific leaders. Firstly, we have the immigration issue, which is by definition controversial and susceptible to polarization along very distinct ideological lines. Salvini and

Meloni – the most right-leaning candidates – use their Facebook pages to spread the idea that immigration is a “safety issue” and a problem of public order, by making extensive use of various forms of incivility, including intolerant discourse. Secondly, issues involving corruption and shady dealings of the political class, political costs and political-judicial inquiries involving members of different parties proved to be equally divisive. In this case, the M5S leader played an outstanding role due to his intensive posting on such issues with strong ideological and moral implication. The extent of his uncivil language during the election campaign was directed toward the political class’s integrity; a theme traditionally associated with his party (i.e. anti-establishment and anti-political positions).

As for our main research questions, political actors’ decisions to adopt different forms of incivility in their posts or to focus on divisive issues had important implications for Facebook users. In order to verify what contents prompted greater bottom-up engagement, we performed multiple linear regression, taking the numbers of Likes, Comments and Shares as dependent variables. The values were transformed into logarithmic scales to minimize consequences arising from the presence of skewed values. Results show how the presence of incivility and video/photo material in posts, as well as the type of issue (divisive), affect liking, commenting and sharing practices (Table 3). The analysis confirms our assumptions about uncivil language and divisive issues’ role in influencing the level of engagement prompted by posts (H.1). Indeed, both variables predict increased engagement. In other words, leaders’ choices to resort to incivility or to deal with divisive issues has a positive effect in increasing bottom-up sharing, comments, and liking responses to posts. This is partly consistent with other studies (Back Vianna, 2018; Song & Wu, 2018), according to which uncivil messages prompt greater user engagement. Politicians’ use of uncivil rhetoric and divisive issues captures the attention of users, who foster an uncivil discussion environment by sharing politician’s posts.

Our essential task is to take a closer look at the tenor of those online discussions that gather momentum by following political representatives’ messages on social media. More specifically, the question is whether Facebook users’ exposure to leaders’ uncivil and divisive messages fosters imitative behaviors, resulting in an increase of bottom-up incivility in

Table 3. The influence of incivility and divisive issues on likes, comments and shares.

	Likes	Comments	Shares
Inclusion of video	0.278***	0.469***	0.371***
Inclusion of photo	*	0.090**	*
Divisive issue	0.085***	0.080***	0.135***
Presence of incivility	0.056**	0.069**	0.122***
R ² (adjusted R ²)	.104 (.103)	0.204 (0.202)	0.216 (0.215)

***p<0.001; **p<0.01

Table 4. Presence of incivility in comments responding to leaders' posts with various contents.

Characteristics of the post	Post uncivil: type of incivility	N.	Incivility in users' comments (category percentage)
Civil/Divisive		470.747	25.2%
Civil/Non-divisive		1,083,310	20.4%
Total Civil		1.55406	21.80%
Uncivil/Divisive		851.241	30.0%
Uncivil/Non-divisive		182.757	21.2%
	Mockery/Sarcasm	158.286	26.7%
	Misrepresentative exaggeration	269.448	31.3%
	Insulting language	210.434	29.3%
	Defamation/Mudslinging	229.515	19.5%
	Intolerant speech	166.315	36.8%
Total Uncivil		1,033,998	28.5%
Total		2,588,055	24.5%

N. = number of observed comments

comments. [Table 4](#) shows that incivility occurs in 24.5% of the total 2,588,055 comments analyzed. Consistent with our hypothesis (H.2), this value is found to increase in relation to uncivil and divisive posts (+5.5%). On the other hand, when issues are divisive but no incivility is expressed, the increase is less marked (+0.7%). These findings highlight that when individuals are exposed to uncivil language and behavior, they are likely to react rudely while participating in the ongoing discourse. Furthermore, emotionally charged issues combined with uncivil expressions could have a contagion effect among users, a sort of “spiral of incivility as has already been found in other studies (i.e. San Pascual, 2019).

Examining the types of incivility in leaders' posts helps to explain the degeneration of online discussion among users. First of all, intolerant speech – i.e. leaders' posts characterized by racial, sexist, ethnic, or religious slurs and other forms of discrimination – leads to an evident increase in incivility in users' comments (+12.3%). Being less dependent on contextual factors and is characterized as a violation of public norms and fundamental principles of civil society (Massaro & Stryker, 2012; Papacharissi, 2004), intolerant speech is confirmed to be – among the most serious forms of uncivil language – more readily associated with users' uncivil reactions (confirming H.3). This is followed by posts characterized by misrepresentative exaggeration. Although these types of incivility are mostly deemed to be violations of interpersonal norms, compared to other forms of incivility, their consequences for the quality of online discussion are also harmful, revealing an increase of incivility (+6.8%) in users' comments. While significant increases are also found in other interpersonal-level forms of incivility (such as derision), in cases of defamation (public-level incivility), bottom-up incivility is below the average value. Here, we are dealing with posts that aim at attacking the integrity of political opponents, who are accused, for instance, of lying or engaging in illicit activities or collusion. As highlighted by other studies (Kalch & Naab,

2017), these forms of incivility are probably less readily detected by users than exaggerations or insults and, therefore, are less likely to arouse uncivil bottom-up reactions.

On the whole, these findings show that the leaders' posts on divisive issues with intolerant and antidemocratic statements (public-level incivility) and those full of insults, aggressiveness or sarcasm (interpersonal-level incivility) can both intensify the amount of incivility in users' discussion leading to a more aggressive and rude discussion. In all of these cases, political talk and informed exchanges of points of view give way to vulgar comments that are characterized by rage, insults and denial of others people's opinions.

Discussion and conclusions

By analyzing citizens' reactions to leaders' Facebook posts, we uncovered the controversial and ideologically charged nature of political debate and the major role of incivility during the 2018 Italian election campaign. The research showed, firstly, that over and above the differences between leaders, most of their posting activities focused on divisive issues (issue polarization). Above all, more uncivil comments from users emerged in these cases than in response to leaders' posts on non-divisive issues. By implying an ideological demarcation between opposites (fascism/antifascism, pro-immigration/anti-immigration, politics/anti-politics) or by affecting ethical-moral matters, it emerged that divisive issues can exacerbate discussions in terms of both tone and positions, clearly resulting in incivility.

The second finding can be summed up as the *dark* attraction exerted by divisive issues and incivility for users. Leaders' posts about divisive and sensitive issues trigger a larger number of user reactions (more comments, shares and likes). Likewise, users' reactions to uncivil leaders' messages are numerous, although not as many as in the former case. Thus, similar to other studies conducted on the hold of political incivility on television viewers (Mutz & Reeves, 2005), the presence of incivility in leaders' posts may increase the level of engagement prompted by each post, resulting in its intensifying online propagation. This result can also be understood in the light of more recent studies carried out in online setting, showing that incivility may prompt people to participate because it triggers an emotional response which pushes them to take action (Chen, 2017).

However, if political incivility does effectively draw users' attention and involvement, its wide-reaching consequences will likely jeopardize the quality of online discussion, based on contents posted by politicians. The examination of over two and a half million comments, following uncivil and partisan messages posted by leaders, confirms (third finding) the relationship between communication by political elites and users' response. In other words, leaders' uncivil messages on divisive issues trigger bottom-up incivility. Hence,

exposure to uncivil public discourse might be a predictor of uncivil posting behavior (San Pascual, 2019). Furthermore, these forms of emulative behavior, practiced by the candidates' followers, are found both in relation to leaders' messages with antidemocratic contents (public-level incivility) and to posts breaching interpersonal norms. In both cases, the tenor of the discussions starting from uncivil political Facebook messages means a shift toward even cruder language, acrimony and aggravation in discussion among users. Shouting, insults and vulgarities alternate with racist and homophobic utterances and contempt toward targeted groups. The online talk originating from politicians' uncivil messages results in a deterioration of discussion quality with growing polarization and intolerance among users, thus questioning the capacity for listening, dialogue and mutual understanding (Mutz, 2007).

Overall, these results offer useful insights to our approach aimed at analyzing the strategies of political incivility rather than assessing whether incivility is more or less pronounced compared to previous ages. As suggested by Herbst (2010), incivility can be thought of as a tool of communication used strategically by politicians to motivate and mobilize voters, to strengthen their political affiliation and to increase the visibility of their agenda. However, as a result of politicians' uncivil and polemical language associated to divisive issues, bottom-up incivility grows, thus calling into question the value of online political discussion. It is worth noting that the 2018 Italian election also saw different forms of polarization (issue and affective polarization) come into play. This was seen throughout the electoral campaign, which was marked by political clashes between traditional parties and anti-establishment forces such as Lega and M5S. Both were able to tap into new polarizing issues, deep social grievances and a growing democratic malaise (Bordignon, 2020), building their identity as representatives of the people, unlike the traditional parties (referred to as elite or "the caste"). They have, therefore, used aggressive and hostile communication toward establishment parties, trying to channel the anger of voters who have been excluded from privilege for many years. From this perspective, the use of social media, which permits immediate and uncensored communication and the adoption of uncivil forms of communication, have worked together as a communicative strategy to get voters' attention, for voicing their dissatisfaction with politics and mobilizing them.

Future studies might examine these matters in greater depth, avoiding the limitations of automated text analysis. By combining quantitative methods and digital ethnography techniques, it would be possible to chronologically reconstruct discussions, stressing individual users' role in them, and above all, their political preferences and attitudes.

Despite these limitations, the uncivil trend in online discussions that results from the various types of incivility considered in this study (sarcasm, misrepresentative-exaggeration, insults, defamation, intolerant statements) confirms the need to keep investigating political incivility by taking into account

both its interpersonal and its public-level. Lastly, the adoption of a dual-level analysis (top-down – bottom-up), needs to be further addressed in future studies in order to better understand how elite incivility and polarization primes citizens for partisan combat, thus increasing the degree of uncivil behavior by users involved in political debate. The advantage of this approach would be that it clearly takes into account the nature of the current media ecosystem, as well as its heterogeneous actors (elites and common users) in their mutual interchanges.

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