

Incivility in Presidential Campaigns, 1952-2000

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November 28, 2007

Most Americans consider “negative campaigning” distasteful, or at least say they do. Survey after survey has documented the breadth and depth of public disenchantment with modern election campaigns. Among political observers, the prevailing tendency is to decry such negativity as having “poisoned” American democracy (Kamber, 1997, xiii) by turning elections into “little more than shouting matches in which mud is slung, charges are traded and voters learn little of any real substance” (Freedman, Wood and Lawton, 1999, 20). To these critics, defenders of negative campaigning respond that campaigns are *supposed* to be adversarial proceedings and that robust criticism of the opposition is in the finest tradition of democratic politics (see e.g., Geer, 2006; Mayer, 1996); in the words of Lau and Pomper (2004, 93), elections “are about choices, not courtesy.”

Even if no consensus exists about whether negative campaigning is a blight on democracy, a simple fact of political life, or even a praiseworthy practice, there is a consensus that contemporary campaigns have become uncivil. Underlying this perspective is an objection less to negative campaigning per se (the practice of criticizing one’s opponents) than to the turn for the worse that such negativity is said to have taken in recent decades. This distinction between negativity, on the one hand, and shrillness, nastiness, or mudslinging, on the other, serves as the centerpiece of several recent studies (Brooks and Geer, 2007; Fridkin and Kenney, 2006; Kahn and Kenney, 1999; Mutz and Reeves, 2005), and constitutes the point of departure for the present study as well. The underlying idea, as Brooks and Geer (2007, 1) put it, is that:

It is hard to imagine an election that would be informative without some degree of both positive and negative campaigning . . . Yet a casual look at political discourse suggests that attacks today

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often go beyond ‘informative’ exchanges by crossing a proverbial line, and becoming excessively harsh. Once this line is crossed, we move beyond a discussion of just *negativity*. We are now talking about *incivility* . . .

Drawing on this distinction, [Brooks and Geer](#), [Fridkin and Kenney](#), and [Mutz and Reeves](#) have carried out innovative survey-based experiments probing the *effects* of uncivil campaign messages. By contrast, our interest lies in a previous question: Have American presidential campaigns actually become more uncivil? It is now taken virtually for granted that recent campaigns have descended to new depths of incivility. [Mutz and Reeves](#) (2005, 1), for example, speak of the widespread perception that political discourse in the U.S. has reached the level of a full-scale “incivility crisis” whose symptoms are aptly itemized by [Kamber](#) (1997, 3): “bizarre accusations, silly name-calling, ridiculous charges, even more ridiculous countercharges, scandal, sleaze, smears, and outright lies.”

Numerous explanations for this ostensible descent into incivility have been suggested — most notably, the advent of political television and the growing polarization of the parties and the electorate. Unfortunately, those who offer these explanations take as a given a trend whose very existence has yet to be solidly established, because they gloss over the distinction between negativity and incivility by measuring the former but interpreting it as though it were the latter.

1 Distinguishing Incivility from Negativity

Researchers trying to plot a trend line of the “tone” of presidential campaigns have employed a simple decision rule (see, e.g., [Lau et al.](#), 1999). A given campaign stimulus, say, a television ad, is considered negative if it focuses on the opposing candidate, positive if it focuses on the sponsoring candidate, or (in many studies) comparative if it does both. Once ads have been aggregated over an entire campaign, the campaign is said to have been negative to the extent that the competing sides relied on criticizing one another; thus, if 50% of the ads in a campaign were categorized as negative, the negativity score for that campaign would be .50. For example, [Geer](#) (2006, 37-38), having examined hundreds of ads, calculated negativity scores of .40 to .45 for the last few presidential campaigns, markedly higher than the .25 to .30 scores for the ads of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. In spite of numerous conceptual and methodological differences, other studies of campaign ads by [Benoit](#) (1999), [Jamieson, Waldman and Sheer](#) (2000), [Kaid and Johnston](#) (2001), and [West](#) (2001)

have converged on the same conclusion — that presidential campaigns have become markedly more negative since the 1950s and 1960s.¹ These studies leave little room for doubt that during an era when television advertising was emerging as “the candidates’ most visible and direct means of influencing voters” (Ballotti and Kaid, 2000, 258), ads were becoming more negative.

In principle, it seems reasonable to characterize an ad as “positive” or “negative” depending on whether it focuses on the sponsor or the opponent. “However, in practice this approach tends to lump together a wide array of criticisms, ranging from attacks on a candidate’s voting record to attacks on the candidate’s driving record. Common sense alone suggests that voters might perceive a difference in such attacks and evaluate differently charges they see as relevant and fair, and charges they consider to be illegitimate” (Lawton and Freedman, 2001, 4). What common sense suggests is borne out in fact; for example, only one American in five would classify as negative a candidate’s criticism of “an opponent’s stands on issues like education or military spending” (Brooks, 2000). Even so, many researchers and commentators routinely leap from evidence of growing negativity in modern campaign discourse to conclusions about the growing incivility of modern campaigns. That is, measurements of a phenomenon that may or may not be consequential, negativity, have served as the empirical base for considerations of a phenomenon, incivility, that is widely regarded as problematic.²

In sum, negative ads need not be uncivil, and many of them presumably are not. It follows that trend analyses of negativity in campaign ads, interesting as they may be, tell us little about whether the trend has been toward greater incivility. The perception that presidential campaigns have become more uncivil rests upon broad impressions, not systematic evidence — impressions that could reflect nothing more than the greater likelihood of remembering recent outbreaks of incivility while older outbreaks have faded from memory. Accordingly, our task is to bring evidence to bear on the question of whether presidential campaigns have actually become more uncivil.

¹Geer reports extremely strong correlations between the negativity trendlines established in these studies, rising all the way to .97.

²“A number of major academic research projects . . . have been designed to investigate the effects of negative campaigning. Without exception, these studies have defined negative campaigning to include all advertising that is critical of one’s opponent and have operated from the assumption (usually implicit) that such campaigning has no redeeming value . . . If the problem really is with campaign ads that are misleading or irrelevant or nasty, why not . . . abandon the attack on negative campaigning and go after misleading campaigning or trivial campaigning instead?” (Mayer, 1996, 443)

2 Data and Measurement

Despite the attention that has recently been showered on incivility in political campaigns, few attempts have been made to define it explicitly or to measure it systematically. In the leading effort to date, [Brooks and Geer](#) define uncivil campaign statements as claims that are “inflammatory and superfluous” — a definition that, in turn, raises the question of how to determine whether a claim is inflammatory and superfluous. As an example of how they applied their “inflammatory and superfluous” standard, [Brooks and Geer](#) offer the following: Saying “My opponent has not told the truth to the American people” would not qualify as uncivil. However, if the candidate had instead said “My unethical and deceitful opponent has not told the truth to the American people,” that statement would be deemed uncivil. The difference between saying that one’s opponent does not tell the truth and saying that the opponent is unethical and deceitful for not telling the truth may strike some as the difference between civility and incivility, but others might well disagree — and that is exactly our point. Irrespective of whether one concurs with [Brooks and Geer](#)’s coding of this particular pair of claims, their approach leaves considerable room for subjectivity in categorization and measurement. In the absence of explicit criteria, such determinations must rest on judgments by those categorizing the statements. This subjective element underlies [Fridkin and Kenney](#)’s (2006) pessimism about the utility of any content-analytic approach to measuring incivility.

Notwithstanding such doubts, our approach, like that of [Brooks and Geer](#), is content-analytic, but whereas they relied on a coder’s judgment of whether a particular statement stepped over the line, we draw on an established protocol for the automatic scoring of texts, described below, that leaves no room for subjectivity on our part. This is not to claim that our approach is problem-free; it is not, and we point out some of its limitations below.

The raw data for our analysis consist of the transcripts of Democratic and Republican candidate- or party-sponsored ads in the general election phase of the 1952 through 2000 presidential campaigns. Although no definitive repository of presidential campaign ads exists, large numbers of these ads have been electronically archived and made publicly available. For each campaign except that of 2000, we drew the texts of the pertinent ads from a CD-ROM prepared and distributed

by the *Annenberg/Pew Archive of Presidential Campaign Discourse* (2000).³ Because the Archive does not contain ads for the 1964 Republican candidate, Barry Goldwater, we dropped the 1964 campaign from consideration. For the 2000 campaign, which postdated the Annenberg/Pew collection, we transcribed the ad texts from the story boards in “Political Advertising in 2000: A Dataset Compiled by the Wisconsin Advertising Project” (Goldstein, Franz and Ridout (2002); see also Franz et al. (2007)).⁴ We considered only national ads sponsored by the Bush or Gore presidential campaign or the national party organizations on their behalf — 954 ads in all.

We tapped into incivility with measures based on a dimensional scoring system whose validity and reliability have been established in numerous prior studies (e.g, Sweeney and Whissell, 1984; Whissell and Charuk, 1985; Whissell and Dewson, 1986); this system has been used to gauge the emotional tone of a vast array of textual materials, including biblical passages, pop-music lyrics, romance novels, the Declaration of Independence, and 30-second television advertisements (Rovinelli and Whissell, 1998; Whissell and Dewson, 1986; Whissell, 1994, 1996). More specifically, for each of the transcribed ads, we used Whissell’s Dictionary of Affect in Language computer program to calculate two separate scores — one of *unpleasantness*, defined as the number of “very unpleasant” words in an ad divided by the total number of words in the ad, and the other of *nastiness*, defined as the percentage of words in an ad that were simultaneously unpleasant and active.⁵ To create these and various other measures, Whissell began by compiling a list of approximately 8,700 words that accounted for 90% of the entries in a 350,000-word text corpus that she had assembled from a wide variety of sources. She then had approximately 200 trained raters score these 8,700 words on the key dimensions of pleasantness-unpleasantness and activity-passivity. Anchoring the “very pleasant” end of the assigned scores on the first scale were words like “glory,” “good,” “hero,” “hope,” and “successful”; at the “very unpleasant” extreme were words like “crisis,” “failure,” “misleading,” “stupid,” “terrible,” and (interestingly) “politics”; naturally, words like “a” and “the” fell at or very close to the neutral point. Based on these ratings, Whissell classified as “very unpleasant” any word

³The Annenberg/Pew Archive was based on campaign materials gathered from the Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Ford, Carter, Reagan, and Bush presidential libraries, the Minnesota Historical Society (for the Humphrey and Mondale materials), the Snell Library Archives (for Dukakis materials), the Richard Nixon Library and Birthplace Foundation, and the Seely G. Mudd Manuscript Library (for Stevenson and McGovern materials).

⁴These materials were based on work supported by the Pew Charitable Trusts under a grant to the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University and a subsequent subcontract to the Department of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

⁵For a similar but less comprehensive scoring approach, see Heise (1965).

whose mean score placed it in the bottom decile on this dimension. For a given text, the Dictionary of Affect in Language program calculates the percentage of words that meet the specified criteria — in this case, the percentage of words in an ad that were included on the “very pleasant” list.

The second dimension, activation, was anchored by passive words like “paralyzes,” “timidity,” “drab,” and “considers,” at one extreme and “threatens,” “offends,” “thrill,” and “orgy,” at the other. Whissell classified as “cheerful” any word that scored in the top quartile on both pleasantness and activation, as “nice” any word in the top quartile for pleasantness but the bottom quartile for activation, and as “sad” any word in the bottom quartile for both pleasantness and activation. For us, though, the key combined category was the one intersecting low pleasantness and high activation. These words, e.g., “threaten,” “crisis” (a repeat from the unpleasant list), “fear,” and “wrong,” express what Whissell called the “nasty” emotional state. In the 954 ads analyzed here, unpleasantness and nastiness were positively correlated ($r=.46$), which is unsurprising given the overlap in their measurement; even so, the two scores were not strongly enough interrelated to make it difficult to distinguish one from the another empirically.

Despite the strengths of these measures, we should acknowledge their limitations. Most obviously, they ignore the ads’ nonverbal features, including pictures, background music, camera angles, and special effects (Johnston and Kaid, 2002; Thorson, Christ and Caywood, 1991). Although we would have preferred to take such features into account, the available materials did not permit us to do so; and in any case, as Geer (2006, 32-33) has argued, the nonverbal features of campaign ads largely reinforce the spoken words. Nor do our measures, which treat each word in a text separately, take contextual negations into account; for example, if one candidate characterized the other’s policy proposals as “terrible,” that utterance would receive the same unpleasantness and nastiness scores as one referring to them as “not terrible.” Fortunately, such constructions were rare in the ads analyzed here, and we feel safe in treating them as random measurement error.

The fact that our unit of analysis was the ad, unweighted by the number of times it aired during a campaign, may raise methodological concerns; in our analysis, an ad that ran only once would have counted just as much as one that ran thousands of times. This can be problematic (see, e.g., Prior, 2001), but information about ad airings in presidential campaigns is available only for 2000 (Goldstein, Franz and Ridout, 2002). Fortunately, the availability of the 2000 data on airings enabled us to explore the impact of treating ads rather than airings as our unit of analysis. Overall,

the 121 ads from the 2000 campaign that we analyze in the main part of this study aired a total of 192,601 times in the various media markets encompassed by the Wisconsin data. Reassuringly, weighting these ads according to the frequency with which each was shown had no impact on their overall level of unpleasantness and only a modest impact on their overall level of nastiness. More specifically, irrespective of whether the units of analysis were defined as the 121 ads or the 192,601 airings of these ads, the mean unpleasantness score was 4.3; by comparison, the respective means for nastiness were 3.3 and 4.0 — hardly a difference that calls into serious question our reliance on ads rather than airings as the units of analysis. Of course, there is no guarantee that the same patterns would hold if we could repeat these analyses for the other presidential years, but we interpret these results as providing empirical warrant for proceeding with the main analysis.

In all, we recorded five pieces of information for each ad. The first two were its unpleasantness and nastiness scores, as just described. The third and fourth were the year in which it aired and whether it was sponsored by the Republicans or the Democrats. Prior studies have uncovered a gap between the two parties in the tendency to “go negative” in presidential campaigns, with the Democrats displaying a greater propensity to attack the Republicans than vice-versa (see, e.g., [Geer \(2006\)](#)). This partisan gap in negativity alerted us to the possibility of interparty differences in incivility. The same studies also revealed that the negativity gap between the parties sometimes widened from one presidential campaign to the next, sometimes narrowed, and occasionally inverted. The clear implication was that interparty differences in incivility could not safely be assumed to have followed a linear path over time. Thus, we treated campaign years as a series of indicator variables rather than as a single time counter. Finally, we recorded the competitive position of the sponsor of each ad, a central consideration in theories of campaign strategy (e.g., [Skaperdas and Grofman, 1995](#)). Whereas candidates who enjoy a clear-cut lead or who are locked in a tight race have sound strategic reasons to keep their campaign on a reasonably positive track, those who are trailing badly have little to lose and potentially much to gain from going on the attack. To account for this strategic factor, we included in our models a binary variable identifying laggards, i.e., candidates who trailed throughout the general election campaign and were widely regarded as hopeless causes from the outset; drawing on Sigelman and Buell’s (2003) analysis of the 1960 through 2000 presidential races, we identified McGovern in 1972, Mondale in 1984, Dukakis in 1988, Bush in 1992, and Dole in 1996 as laggards.

3 Model

To analyze trends in incivility (unpleasantness and nastiness) in presidential campaign ads, 1960-2000, we fit separate multilevel regression models of unpleasantness and nastiness in which the predictors were the the identity of the sponsoring candidate or party, the election year, and the candidate’s position in the race (i.e., the distinction between “laggards” and other candidates):

$$y_i = \alpha_{t[i]} + \beta_{t[i]}x_i + \epsilon_i \text{ for } i = 1, \dots, n, \quad (1)$$

where $t[i]$ indexes the presidential election year t in which ad i aired, x_i is a dichotomous indicator identifying the party that sponsored the ad, and n is the number of ads. This varying-intercept, varying-slopes multilevel model allows us to understand the presidential election year variation (varying intercepts, $\alpha_{t[i]}$) while permitting the relationship between party and incivility to vary from year to year (varying intercepts, $\beta_{t[i]}$). The year-level intercepts and slopes are themselves modeled given the dichotomous indicator for laggards, u_t .

$$\alpha_t = a^\alpha + b^\alpha u_t + \epsilon_t^\alpha, \text{ for } t = 1, \dots, T$$

$$\beta_t = a^\beta + b^\beta u_t + \epsilon_t^\beta, \text{ for } t = 1, \dots, T$$

with ϵ_t^α and ϵ_t^β having mean 0 and variances σ_α^2 , σ_β^2 all estimated from the data. By including the sponsoring candidate’s position in the race (i.e., the indicator variable identifying laggards) as an election-year level predictor, we are not requiring the intercepts and slopes to vary linearly with party — the error terms ϵ_t allow for deviation from the model; rather, we are allowing the model to find such linear relations to the extent that they are supported by the data.

4 Results

As an initial point of interest, we compared the unpleasantness and nastiness scores for ads from the 2000 campaign coded by the Wisconsin Advertising Project as “attacking” (i.e., negative), “comparing,” or “promoting” (i.e., positive). Although we anticipated that attack ads would be more

unpleasant and nastier overall than promotional ones, with comparative ads occupying the middle ground, we also expected such differences to be modest, because negative ads are not necessarily uncivil, because positive ads may themselves feature scare tactics, and because comparative ads, by drawing sharp contrasts between the sponsor and the opponent, may be more uncivil than many negative ads. For the 121 national candidate- or party-sponsored ads in 2000, averages of 5.2% and 3.5% of the words in negative ads appeared in Whissell’s “very unpleasant” and “nasty” lists, respectively; for comparative ads, the counterpart figures were 4.4% and 3.9%; and for promotional ads, 3.5% and 2.7%. Thus, there were declines in unpleasantness from negative to comparative to promotional ads and in nastiness from negative and comparative ads to promotional ads. However, there was no dropoff in nastiness from negative to comparative ads; many comparative ads were as nasty as, or even nastier than, many negative ones. Thus, the incivility of an ad did vary to some extent according to the function it was supposed to perform, but incivility and negativity are empirically separate and distinct phenomena.

Overall, across the 954 ads, an average of 4.0% of the words were from Whissell’s “very unpleasant” list and 3.3% from her “nasty” list. These percentages fell very close to the counterpart figures for her 350,000-word benchmarking corpus (3.8% and 3.2%, respectively). These overall figures, however, conceal great variability among the ads. In the most unpleasant ad, 18.6% of the words were on Whissell’s list, a sharp contrast from the least unpleasant ad (0.0%); on the nastiness scale, the counterpart percentages varied almost as widely, from from 0.0 to 16.7. There was little overall difference between the Democrats and Republicans in the use of either unpleasant (4.1% versus 3.9%) or nasty (3.5% versus 3.0%) language. Candidates who trailed by a wide margin (4.3%) were slightly more likely to use unpleasant language than other candidates (3.9%) and were much more likely to use nasty language (4.1% versus 3.1%).

Bearing more directly on the question of whether presidential campaigns have become more uncivil is the campaign-to-campaign variability in these scores. The most civil campaign, as measured here, was the Kennedy-Nixon race of 1960, for which the mean unpleasantness and nastiness scores were just 2.5% and 2.2%, respectively. By contrast, the least civil campaign was the 1996 Clinton-Dole clash, with scores of 6.8% and 4.9%, respectively. Figure 1 fills in the blanks before and after those two campaigns by arraying the mean unpleasantness and nastiness scores on a year-by-year basis. If we disregard the abnormally high unpleasantness score for 1952, which is

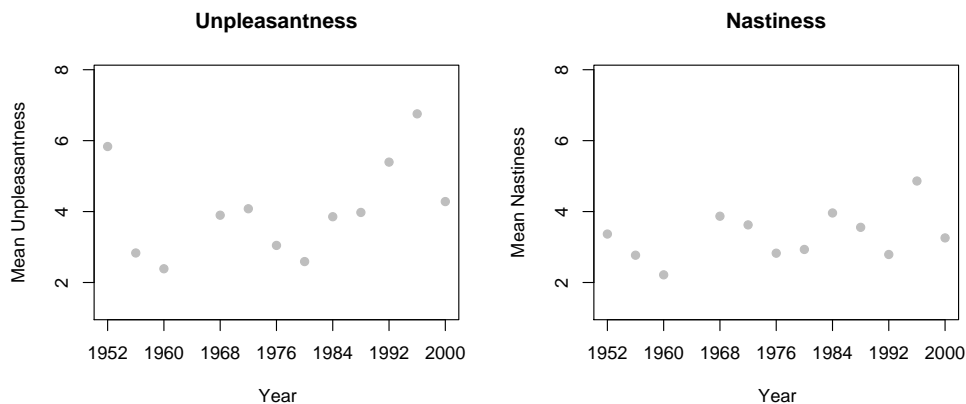


Figure 1: The left graph displays the overall mean unpleasantness percentages and the right graph the overall mean nastiness percentages by party

based on an extremely small number of ads, the upward thrust of unpleasant language in these ads is unmistakable. For nastiness, though, no major movement in the annual scores is evident.

The trends depicted in Figure 1 provide some preliminary evidence about whether presidential campaigns have become more uncivil. To gain a more refined perspective on this issue, we fit the two multilevel models described above, with an ad’s unpleasantness and nastiness scores as the outcome variables.⁶

4.1 Unpleasantness

We first fit the varying-intercept, varying-slopes model for unpleasantness. Figure 2 displays two plots: one for the estimated presidential-year intercepts, α_t , and the other for the estimated slopes, β_t , each arrayed by presidential election year. The estimated year intercepts start at a high level, 6.1 (with the 95% posterior interval ranging from 5.2 to 7.0) for 1952, considerably above Whissell’s estimated mean for standard American English usage (3.8). They then begin to decline, ultimately bottoming out at 3.0 and 2.6 (with 95% posterior intervals from 2.4 to 3.6 and from 1.5 to 3.7, respectively) in 1976 and 1980. At that point they turn upwards, topping out in 1996 at 5.2 (with a 95% posterior interval from 4.3 to 6.1). Because we coded the party indicator as 0 for

⁶We fit the models using the Bayesian software WinBUGS (Spiegelhalter, Thomas and Best, 1999) as called from R (R, 2006; Gelman, 2003). a^α , b^α , a^β and b^β were given noninformative normal prior distributions, $N(0, 100)$ and σ_y , σ_α , and σ_β were given noninformative uniform prior distributions, $U(0, 100)$. Three parallel chains reached convergence ($\hat{R} < 1.1$) after 2,000 iterations for the models.

Republicans and 1 for Democrats, the intercepts in effect give the estimated mean unpleasantness level of Republican ads in a given election year. Plotted over time, these estimates reveal some fairly substantial year-to-year fluctuations around the smoothed loess predicted estimate line.⁷ The main deviations from the overall trend occurred at the beginning of the half-century, when the few Republican ads that were aired were unusually unpleasant, and also at the end, when the Republican ads were considerably less unpleasant than they had been in the immediately preceding campaigns. More generally, though, the unpleasantness of the Republican ads followed a fairly clear path over time. The shallow V-shaped curve of the presidential-year intercepts indicates a gradual decline in Republican unpleasantness through 1980, followed by a gradual reversion toward unpleasantness.

As for the estimated slopes in Figure 2, the pattern is so clear that it requires little explanation. Starting at -2.2 (with a 95% posterior interval ranging from -4.1 to -0.4) in 1952, the slopes steadily — albeit with a marked downward spike in 1988 — rose to 2.2 (with a 95% posterior interval of 1.1 to 3.3) in 1996 and held at almost that level in 2000. Given our 0,1 coding of the party indicator, the slope coefficient for a given election year conveys the estimated marginal effect on the unpleasantness of Democratic-sponsored ads. According to these estimates, the average marginal effect of having been sponsored by the Democrats rather than by the Republicans was to increase an ad’s unpleasantness in a quasi-linear fashion, by approximately four points, from 1952 through 2000.

We can clarify the trend in these interparty differences by combining the intercept and slope estimates into predicted unpleasantness scores for Republican- and Democratic-sponsored ads. Rather than crowding all 12 comparisons into a single figure, in Figure 3 we show the estimated mean unpleasantness of the two parties’ ads for 1952, 1976, and 2000 — the campaigns at the beginning, middle, and end of the five-decade period encompassed by this study. In 1952, the Republicans’ ads were much more unpleasant than the Democrats’. By 1976, both parties’ ads (and especially the Republicans’) had become less unpleasant, and the interparty difference that was so pronounced in 1952 had vanished altogether. That proved to be the tipping point. Thereafter Democratic ads took a definite turn in the direction of unpleasantness, so that the earlier interparty difference vanished and then reversed. Whereas the unpleasantness of the Republican ads was ultimately almost

⁷We used the loess smoother option in R (2006). The default has a smoother span of 2/3 (larger values give more smoothness) and 3 iterations (the number of robustifying iterations).

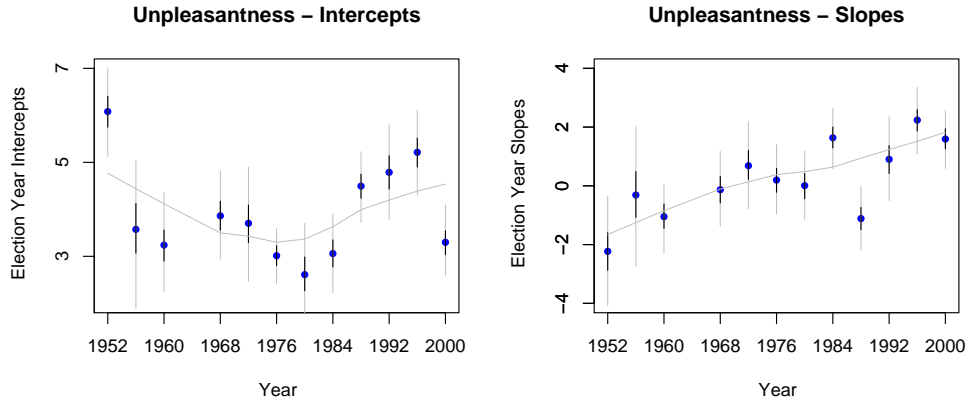


Figure 2: The estimated coefficient (with 95% (thin lines) and 50% (thick lines) posterior intervals) for presidential election year (left plot) and party within presidential election year (right plot), for the varying-intercept, varying-slope multilevel model of unpleasantness. The solid line shows a smoothed loess estimate of the coefficients.

the same as it had been in the 1970s, by the last few campaigns of the century the Democrats had emerged as the party airing the more unpleasant ads — a sharp contrast, indeed, to the pattern of earlier decades.

4.2 Nastiness

The estimated intercept and slope coefficients for the nastiness of campaign ads are arrayed in Figure 4 by presidential election year and the party of the sponsor. The part of estimates for the varying intercepts, α_t , is virtually flat, with only a slight tilt upwards in the last two decades. More specifically, the posterior means for the varying intercepts range only from 2.5 in 1960 to 3.5 in 1996. Given our coding of the 0,1 party indicator, the implication is that Republican-sponsored ads displayed only the faintest tendency toward greater nastiness over the years. In the 1952 campaign, an average of approximately 3% of the words in Republican ads qualified as nasty according to Whissell’s criteria. By the end of the century, that percentage was virtually unchanged, as it had been during the preceding five decades.

The estimates for the varying slopes, β_t , were also relatively flat, with two exceptions (1984 and 1996). The posterior means of 2.3 for 1984 (with a 95% posterior interval ranging from 1.4 to 3.2) and 1.9 for 1996 (with a 95% posterior interval ranging from 0.48 to 2.8) were well above

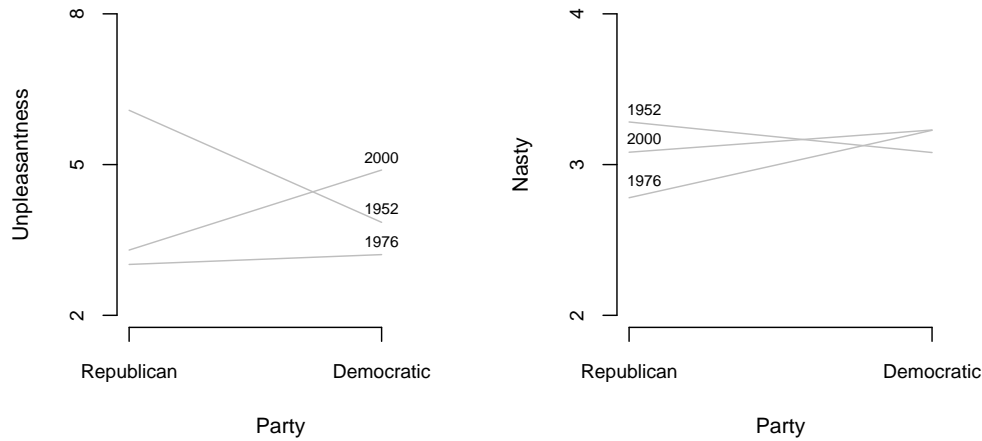


Figure 3: Predicted “unpleasantness” and “nastiness” scores for Republican and Democratic presidential ads for 1952, 1976, and 2000.

those for the rest of the election years, for which the posterior means ranged only from -0.2 to 0.7. Again, as in Figure 2, the plot shows the marginal effect of Democratic sponsorship on nastiness. The flatness of the loess curve, combined with the close clustering of coefficients around 0, indicates that the nastiness of Democratic-sponsored ads closely tracked that of Republican sponsored-ads. Over the course of half a century, then, neither party displayed any notable tendency to air nastier ads, and the two parties proved to be about equal overall in terms of the nastiness of the ads that they sponsored; the fact that interparty differences were much more muted over time for nastiness than for unpleasantness comes through clearly in the right-hand panel of Figure 3, where the close clustering and the approximate parallelism of the three lines stands out.⁸

5 Discussion

Have presidential campaigns grown more uncivil? Virtually everyone “knows” that the answer to this question is “Yes.” However, that answer is based on anecdotes and fresh memories of recent campaigns-turned-toxic rather than on a longer view of the history of presidential campaigns or an

⁸The remaining variable in the analysis, which indicated whether the sponsoring candidate was lagging badly in the race, proved to be unrelated to either unpleasantness or nastiness once the effects of campaign year and sponsoring party had been taken into consideration. A detailed accounting of these non-effects would be pointless.

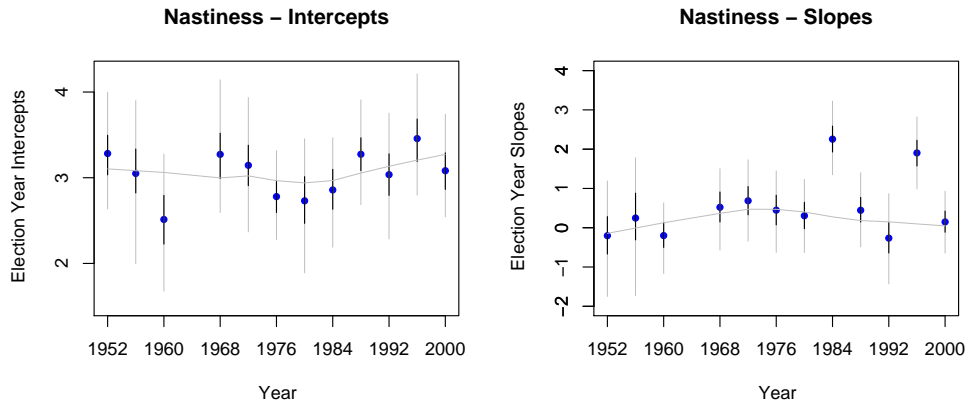


Figure 4: The estimated coefficient (with 95% (light lines) and 50% (dark lines) posterior intervals) for presidential election year (left plot) and party within presidential election year (right plot), for the varying-intercept, varying-slope multilevel model of nastiness. The solid line shows a smoothed loess estimate of the coefficients.

appreciation of the distinction between negativity and incivility. Those who long for a return to the “good old days” of genteel campaigning, when the competing sides concentrated on articulating their positions on the issues of the day, would do well to acquaint themselves with the actual historical record, which teems with invective so foul that the language of recent campaigns seems mild by comparison. Moreover, even though a trend toward greater negativity in presidential campaigns in recent presidential campaigns has been amply documented, the ostensible rise of incivility since midcentury has been taken for granted rather than convincingly established. Once we distinguish incivility from negativity, what remains is a research literature that literally has nothing to say about whether presidential campaigns have become more uncivil. That question seems not to have occurred to anyone to ask, let alone to try to answer.

Based on our application of the Dictionary of Affect in Language measurement scales to presidential campaign discourse dating back to 1952, our answer to this question is a highly contingent one. It depends, in the first place, on exactly what is meant by incivility. According to a fairly minimal understanding, incivility is manifested in unpleasant utterances, such as sharp or even coarse statements about one’s opponents and/or their positions on issues. By that standard, presidential campaigns do appear to have become more uncivil over the last five decades, as we established in the left-hand portion of Figure 1. However, if we raise the incivility bar from simple unpleasantness

to outright nastiness, then an answer based on the trend in unpleasantness comes unraveled. That is, the results shown in the right-hand portion of Figure 1 provide no indication that presidential campaigns have grown nastier since midcentury.

The other reason why our answer must be highly contingent is that the overall trends shown in Figure 1 masked substantial differences in the tone of the two major political parties' ads. The unpleasantness of Republican-sponsored ads does appear to have been on the rise since the early 1980s, but that increase has been modest and its impact has simply been to cancel out an earlier (and equally modest) trend in the opposite direction. Because many of the most notorious attack ads in recent campaigns (such as the "Willie Horton" and "tank commander" ads of 1988 and the "Swift Boat" broadsides in 2004) have been aimed at the Democratic standard-bearers, the tendency among political commentators has been to blame the Republicans in particular for the degradation of discourse. Over the last five decades, though, Republican ads have not grown more unpleasant. To the contrary, the overall increase in the unpleasantness of presidential campaigns has come as a result of a steady campaign-to-campaign change in the tone of Democratic-sponsored ads.

All in all, then, according to one — the less demanding — of the two measures we have used to track incivility, one of the two major parties has aired increasingly uncivil ads. Thus, an idea that many political observers and commentators have taken as a given has passed only one of the four tests posed here — hardly a compelling performance. This is not to say that the tone of the party- or candidate-sponsored ads that have aired in most recent presidential campaigns has contributed in a positive way to an informed public consideration of policy issues or has helped voters make reasoned choices between opposing candidates; those are other issues altogether, which continue to be addressed in a large, growing, and often contradictory research literature. However, we see no reason to single out political campaigns in particular for their less than elevated tone. As we noted earlier, our estimates of the unpleasantness and incivility of presidential campaigns closely match Whissell's estimate of the unpleasantness and incivility of spoken and written American English in general. That being the case, it seems odd to indict the parties and their candidates for using language that falls well within the normal bounds of public discourse in the U.S. And we are hard-put to characterize as a "crisis" what, according to the evidence introduced here, appears to be a chronic feature of presidential campaigns rather than a sudden recent departure from earlier norms and practices.

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