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# Who is More Sensitive to Informational Incivility?

Incivility in Everyday Politics  
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## ABSTRACT

Political incivility is a multi-dimensional concept that varies over time and contexts. While scholars agree that «informational incivility» is one key dimension, citizens' perceptions are less clear. This study examines the degree to which citizens perceive incivility, and particularly informational incivility, comparing two periods: «election campaign» and «everyday-politics». We conducted two surveys (early 2022 and after the 2022 Italian Election campaign) on a representative sample of the Italian population. Results show the existence of a dual mechanism, sensitisation/desensitisation, and the almost antithetical roles played by news media consumption and social media engagement: while the former can be considered a resilience factor to incivility social media activism appears to be a factor of desensitisation to informational incivility, thus contributing to information pollution. Therefore, subjects consuming news attentively are better-equipped to recognize information distortion and more sensitive to its use, whereas among heavy social media users spreading misleading content has become normal practice.

**Keywords:** political incivility, informational incivility, citizens perceptions, sensitisation/desensitisation, news consumption.

## 1. Introduction

Political incivility has long been a matter of interest for scholars; it is now unanimously considered a multi-dimensional concept that varies over time and in different contexts (Strachan and Wolf, 2012). The numerous dimensions of political incivility identified in the literature include activities focused on spreading false/

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inaccurate information and participation in defamation campaigns against political opponents/parties (Muddiman, 2017; Stryker *et al.*, 2016). The violation of norms of information is in fact a form of incivility that casts doubt on deliberation, an activity that should by definition be based on the sharing of information that is useful, as neutral as possible, and not misleading, thus guaranteeing correct understanding of relevant issues and ensuring the possibility of informed consent.

While «informational incivility» is undoubtedly one of the dimensions of political incivility, with numerous studies testifying to its importance (Bormann *et al.*, 2022; Hopp, 2019; Stryker *et al.*, 2016), citizens' perceptions of it are less clear, particularly in the current climate of increasing disinformation caused by various actors with different aims and different consequences in terms of impact on general opinion.

Informational incivility and disinformation are two distinct concepts that differ significantly in their nature, intent, and impact. When we refer to disinformation, we are primarily referring to information disorder as conceptualized by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), who distinguish between disinformation (i.e., information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country); misinformation (i.e., information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm); and malinformation (i.e., information that is based on reality and used to inflict harm on a person, organization or country). The dimension of intentionality is the central one in characterizing the various forms of informational disorder. In the case of informational incivility, however, intentionality is not the central aspect of discourse. In this case we refer to the use of lies, slander and various forms of deception that can be used by different actors to achieve various goals (attacking a political opponent or promoting their own issues at the center of the media agenda in the case of political representatives, galvanizing partisan readers in the case of an informational news outlet, etc.). In other words, informational incivility represents a form of disrespect, not only to the target subject/group, but to the citizens themselves. The central aspect of the discourse in such a case is the questioning of democratic norms and values by the actors using informational incivility, since they deceive other actors for specific political advantages.

It can hardly be denied that lies, libel, and the use of hyperbole by political actors constitute expressions of incivility that jeopardize deliberation and democratic institutions in general. However, questions may well be raised concerning citizens' perception of the phenomenon after years of informational chaos, post-truths and alternative facts that have shaped recent political campaigns (e.g., the Brexit referendum, the 2016 US Presidential Election) and made it difficult to tell true from false and slander from fact. The extent to which informational incivility is perceived as a problem is not always clear and evident, as empirical research has shown. Certainly,

the use or threat of physical violence («Encourage harm» and «threaten harm», see Stryker *et al.*, 2016), from «attacks on individual and collective rights», «hate-speech» and «attacks on democratic principles»; see Bormann *et al.*, 2022), and name-calling and vulgarity (Kenski *et al.*, 2020) are much more clearly perceived as problematic.

In the wake of these studies, our focus is to examine the degree to which citizens perceive political incivility, in general and specifically with regard to informational incivility in Italy. We aimed to explore whether information pollution (Wardle and Derakshan, 2017) in contemporary public debate may have contributed to desensitising citizens to lies and slander from political actors owing to the disheartening realization that «everyone does it». In addition to looking for evidence of this hypothetical desensitisation, we also delved into possible variations in citizens' perceptions and sensitivity (i.e. the extent to which respondents recognize incivility as such) in two different periods, one during an electoral campaign and the other definable as one of «everyday politics».

Electoral campaigns tend to correspond to a clear increase in aggressiveness and conflict among candidates, ostensibly warranted in such a competition (Bennett, 2011). We wondered if the almost inevitable increase of political incivility during campaigns is perceived by citizens, whether there is greater awareness of political incivility in electoral periods, and what role information consumption and the use of social media (henceforth SM) related to politics play in this regard.

## 2. Political incivility: what is it and who is most sensitive to it?

The general understanding that incivility «is in the eye of the beholder» (Herbst, 2010: 3) and must be situated in a given time and space (Strachan and Wolf, 2012) has led scholars to focus on analysing citizens' perceptions of it on the one hand, and on different types of incivility on the other. Scholars propose various definitions of incivility: Coe *et al.* (2014) define it as «features of discussion that convey an unnecessarily disrespectful tone toward the discussion forum, its participants, or its topics» (600); Muddiman (2017) distinguishes between public-level incivility (lack of deliberativeness and reciprocity) and personal-level incivility; and Rossini (2019) differentiates incivility from intolerance. Here we consider incivility as «a lack of respect for the social and cultural norms that govern personal interactions and the functioning of democratic systems» (Bentivegna and Rega, 2022).

Scholars generally agree – with some nuances in interpretation – on the dimensions of incivility and the fact that disinformation is one of them. In Massaro and Stryker's (2012) structuring of the concept, the category of «lies and misrepre-

sentation» joins others more generally associated with impoliteness. In their study on incivility and outrage speech, Sobieraj and Berry (2011) include purposeful misrepresentation, introducing an explicit reference to intentionality. Similarly, Muddiman's (2017) categories referring to public-level norm violations include «misinformation», while those identified by Stryker *et al.* (2016) include «deception» (which recurs in their successive study) (Stryker *et al.*, 2022). Hopp (2019) brings in the dimension of «persuasive deception», i.e., «purposeful lying or weaponized use of ambiguity» (207). Finally, Kenski *et al.* (2020) refer to «lying accusation».

While there are differences between generic accusations of lying (Kenski *et al.*, 2020) and descriptions of situations in which someone is «intentionally making false or misleading statements in a political discussion» (Stryker *et al.*, 2016, 2022) or «actively participating in a defamatory campaign – by means of slander and unsubstantiated accusations – against a political opponent» (Bentivegna *et al.*, 2022), they are all cases of expressions that undermine deliberation. And although scholars are in general agreement in terms of their interpretations, this tells us nothing about citizens' perceptions of incivility – a significant knowledge gap considering that «in a democracy, regular citizens are crucial arbiters of what constitutes incivility and whether there is too much of it in public discourse» (Kenski *et al.*, 2020: 796). With a few inevitable divergences, the available data tend to confirm that name-calling and vulgarity are the dimensions citizens perceive as most problematic (Conway and Stryker, 2021; Muddiman, 2017; Kenski *et al.*, 2020; Stryker *et al.*, 2016, 2022). Distortion of information, defined as deception or misrepresentation, is also among the most problematic categories.

Regarding the characteristics of individuals who are more or less aware of political incivility, the standard demographic battery, as we will see below, plays an important role in influencing the degree to which people perceive incivility more or less clearly (Conway and Stryker, 2021; Kenski *et al.*, 2020; Stryker *et al.*, 2016, 2022). There are also clear data regarding political affiliation, media consumption and engagement with SM. For example, Republicans appear to be associated with less sensitivity to incivility (Berry and Sobieraj, 2014; Conway and Stryker, 2021; Fridkin and Kenney, 2019; Kenski *et al.*, 2020). As for media consumption, exposure to sources in which expressions of incivility are frequent (i.e. cable tv, radio and tv talk-shows) seems to be associated with less sensitivity, probably due to normalization (Gervais, 2014; Kenski *et al.*, 2020). This normalization is not limited to consumption of such episodes of incivility, but also extends to newspapers and print media that report them (Kenski *et al.*, 2020). Finally, individuals with a high level of engagement in social media for political activities tend not to clearly perceive incivility (Bentivegna *et al.*, 2022).

This data on who is more or less sensitive to political incivility is a good starting-point to discuss informational incivility, particularly with regard to media consumption, which may play an important role in contributing to «desensitisation» or «sensitisation». By sensitisation we mean a condition of increased sensitivity to incivility in which respondents perceive uncivil content in certain behaviours and/or statements more clearly. As we will see in the results section below, this may be due to these citizens' greater capacity to recognize it. By desensitisation we mean the opposite condition, i.e., a tendency not to perceive uncivil episodes and/or statements as such. This may be due to a sort of habituation to incivility, the presence of which (in SM, for example) is so frequent that people have become used to it.

### 3. Informational incivility and the struggle of democracies

The breach of norms of information is a substantial (as opposed to simply formal) type of incivility in that it jeopardizes deliberation (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004), undermining democratic principles and structures. Gastil (2019) identifies elements of civility in the deliberative process, including argumentation that eschews manipulation, lies, and incomplete information. Information distortion is uncivil in that it impacts deliberation, eroding the conditions that make debate possible and putting democratic institutions at risk. Fruitful debate or negotiation is impossible between subjects who intentionally lie, slander and malign one another, and hide certain information that would contribute to an understanding of the situation under discussion. But from the point of view of purveyors of political disinformation, spreading misleading content or manipulating facts and information may be considered a strategy aimed at gaining an advantage over the opposition. In electoral campaigns, this type of communications strategy serves to: a) damage a political adversary's image; b) draw attention to one's position and message; and c) mobilize one's supporters against an out-group.

Damaging an adversary's image and reputation with slander, accusations and outright lies is part of the tradition of election campaigning, with the obvious aim of winning votes. The heedless use of information distortion as a weapon in election campaigns is increasing in established democracies from the US to Brazil, to Italy, leading to the delegitimization not only of political opponents, but of news publications as well, as it undermines citizens' trust in them (Freelon and Wells, 2020).

Informational incivility is also a means of increasing one's visibility, as hyperbole, exaggeration, and outright misinformation can prompt greater coverage in the media. Paradoxically, the more blatant misinformation is, the more attention

it garners. During the 2016 US Presidential campaign, for example, Donald Trump declared that he would build a wall along the border with Mexico and Mexico would pay for it, which was clearly a lie. But despite – or perhaps because of – the candidate's evident mendacity, all the media dedicated a great deal of time and space to the proposal, which continues to be evoked years later.

The third objective is to mobilize one's supporters against anyone not on their side, «others» who are often presented as enemies. Patently false declarations, like Trump's claims about the «theft» of the 2020 election, or Jair Bolsonaro's similar statements about the election he lost in 2023, are intended as catalysts to mobilize supporters, encouraging them to see themselves not as losers, but as patriots ready to fight anyone who fails to acknowledge the «steal».

In short, although the stakes may vary from the approval of proposed legislation to gaining a majority in a government body through a contested election, informational distortion is enormously significant both in politicians' communication strategies and in creating or undermining a climate of confidence. How citizens perceive false or manipulated declarations by political actors, however, has yet to be thoroughly explored and understood.

#### 4. Hypotheses and research questions

Drawing from an analysis of existing literature, this study identifies several key variables relevant to understanding the relationship between politics and incivility (Rains *et al.* 2017); Muddiman 2019; Bentivegna and Rega 2022, 2024). These variables include: perceptions of various types of political incivility; the impact of news media consumption in being more or less sensitive to incivility particularly with regard to informational incivility; the level of political engagement in social media in relation to the level of sensitivity to informational incivility; and finally the impact of socio-demographic variables in influencing the perception of political incivility. In light of this, we aim to investigate the following hypotheses and research questions.

- *The rise of «dirty campaigns» and citizens' sensitivity to political incivility.* The increasing negativity and hostility displayed by candidates and political parties in the past few years (Klinger *et al.*, 2022; Reiter and Matthes, 2022) has stimulated the development of strands of research on the negative campaign (Geer, 2012) and, most recently, the dirty campaign – focusing on methods of delegitimizing political adversaries through various types of incivility, such as inflammatory and su-

perfluous comments, discredit, derision, etc. (Reiter and Matthes, 2022). But beyond these distinctions, researchers generally maintain that politicians, especially those in opposition to incumbents, tend to intensify aggressiveness and practices of «nasty politics» (Shea and Sproveri, 2012) more readily in the runup to an election (Brooks and Geer, 2007; Gross and Johnson, 2016; Rega and Marchetti, 2021).

Based on these observations, we deduce that during electoral campaigns, when political figures use forms of hostility more frequently with an attendant impact on public debate, citizens are more likely to come across instances of incivility than during periods of everyday politics, and sensitivity to incivility consequently increases, with subjects tending to perceive and recognize its presence. Hence our first research hypothesis:

H1. Citizens' sensitivity to all forms of incivility is higher in election periods in comparison with periods of everyday politics.

This hypothesis is based on the idea of a heightening and worsening of incivility in recent election campaigns widely noted in the literature (Klinger *et al.*, 2022; Nai, 2020; Nai *et al.*, 2022), a worldwide trend in which candidates and parties increasingly employ divisive, aggressive, and negative campaign strategies (Nai, 2020). These studies, however, tell us nothing about how citizens perceive various forms of political hostility and whether the degree to which they consider it problematic changes. Thus, the research question linked to the first hypothesis is:

RQ1. How do citizens perceive various types of political incivility? And how does the perception differ between everyday politics and electoral periods?

- *Who is most sensitive to political incivility?* Getting down to the details of our analysis, we looked at variables that might influence citizens' sensitivity to political incivility, specifically whether, and how, significant information consumption rates and use of SM concerning political topics influence that sensitivity. In this regard, York (2013) showed that exposure to cable TV is a significant predictor of the evaluation of incivility in politics, while Gervais (2014) showed that uncivil news media consumers tend to express themselves in less civil ways (imitation effect). Research on SM with regard to comments on or discussions of news similarly demonstrates that exposure to uncivil behaviours can lead the subjects who see them to consider them normal and even adopt them (Song and Wu, 2018). Thus, continual use of SM for information and discussion on political themes may have an anesthetizing effect (Hmielowski *et al.*, 2014) that impedes the perception of expressions of incivility, which leads us to our second hypothesis:



**H2.** Higher levels of consumption of mass media information and use of SM in relation to political topics increase desensitisation to political incivility.

The desensitisation hypothesis stems from consideration of a context in which episodes of political incivility occur so frequently in traditional media and SM alike that those who view them see them as normal. Hence our research question:

**RQ2.** What individual levels of news media consumption and SM engagement are associated with the perception of incivility?

- *Informational incivility: who is most sensitive to it?* The third level of our analysis deals more specifically with citizens' perception of informational incivility and the role of information consumption and political SM in this perception. The matter of perception of informational incivility is more complex than that of incivility in general, as it is possible that by consistently consuming news and information that report and emphasize political incivility, including attempts to discredit the opposition and misrepresent actual events, individuals may find opportunities to cultivate a higher level of «competence». In other words, regular or mindful consumers of news are more likely to possess the ability to identify various forms of information distortion compared to those who only occasionally consume or completely avoid news, and may thus have increased sensitivity to and decreased tolerance for their use. Hence our third hypothesis:

**H3.** High news media consumption corresponds to increased sensitisation to informational incivility.

Like the second hypothesis, this gives rise to a research question:

**RQ3.** What individual level of news media consumption is associated with perception of informational incivility?

The variable of engagement with SM for pursuits linked to the political sphere has a more ambiguous role regarding informational incivility. Actions on SM in support of certain positions and opposition to others in all spheres, including news, can create a climate in which expressions of incivility are a strategic resource available to politicians and ordinary users managing their own network of contacts and relationships and their public image (Bentivegna and Rega, 2024). There are also disinformation campaigns created expressly by parties and organizations for consensus-building purposes (Ott, 2017). In this context, users may consider lies and/

or slander entirely normal, brushing them aside or even agreeing with them. But the literature highlights the fact that problematic information has become particularly widespread on SM (Valenzuela *et al.*, 2019; Van der Linden 2022), making it difficult for assiduous users to distinguish between content based on verified facts and content based on conjecture or exaggeration (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). This evidence led us to the following hypothesis:

H4. Continuous use of SM on political topics increases desensitisation to informational incivility.

And the following research question:

RQ4. What individual level of SM engagement is associated with perception of informational incivility?

- *Impact of socio-demographic variables and political polarisation in influencing the perception of political incivility.* Finally, we studied the socio-demographic variables that may influence the perception of incivility. A number of such variables may act as moderators of the effects of incivility, acting either directly or indirectly, although the literature on this subject, which is almost exclusively from the U.S., offers mixed results.

Education is often seen to have a significant impact in surveys investigating citizens' political attitudes and must be considered in order to identify the contribution of cultural level to the perception of political incivility. Regarding gender, women seem to be more sensitive than men to incivility. This is especially so when it comes to rudeness (Kenski *et al.*, 2020), while the difference is less strong in the case of manipulation of information (Conway and Stryker, 2021). Previous studies have also shown that age is inversely correlated with tolerance toward incivility. Thus, older adults, who grew up in an environment where uncivil content was less prevalent, perceive incivility as more problematic, while those who are younger, being accustomed to the presence of digital platforms from an early age, show greater tolerance toward it (Fridkin and Kenney, 2019).

In relation to socio-demographic characteristics, we therefore hypothesised:

H5a. People with a higher level of education, women and the elderly perceive incivility in a more pronounced way.

The final investigated area concerns variables related to politics. The literature shows that the perception of incivility varies in relation to the partisanship of subjects. Not only has it been seen that people tend to be less sensitive to displays

of incivility that come from co-partisan subjects (Muddiman, 2017), but more generally, some studies have shown differences in perceptions between people aligned on conservative and right-wing positions compared to more progressive and left-wing subjects. In particular, Kenski and colleagues (2020) showed that conservatives perceive incivility less than liberals and Krzyżanowski and colleagues (2021) show that populism and the extreme right in Europe have normalized the discourse on incivility for several reasons, which are intertwined with the way these political movements operate and present themselves to the public. As a result, it is conceivable that those close to this type of politics are more desensitized to uncivil discourse.

In Italy, where there is a high level of media-politics parallelism (van Kempen, 2007) and a level of partisanship of the information environment and audiences (Forgacs, 2000) and where the presence in the public discourse of populist (such as the 5 Star Movement) and far-right parties (such as Fratelli d'Italia and Lega) has normalized incivility (Bentivegna and Rega, 2022) we can assume that:

**H5b.** People with a greater interest in politics and those positioning themselves on the left perceive political incivility in a more pronounced way.

**RQ5.** What are the predictors of the perception of informational incivility in particular as opposed to those of political incivility in general? How are they different in election campaigns compared to periods of everyday politics?

## 5. Data and methods

To test our hypotheses, we conducted two surveys<sup>1</sup> with a representative sample of the Italian adult population (1000 respondents), stratified according to the criteria of gender, age groups and geographic distribution. The first was carried out in January 2022, a period of everyday politics, and the second in late September 2022, at the end of an election campaign.

Based on the literature, the socio-demographic variables used as predictors of perception of political incivility were sex, age, and education. Interest in politics was categorized as low, medium or high, and respondents were asked to categorize their political affinity as center, left, right or none. These variables were later made into dummy-coded variables.

<sup>1</sup> The surveys were conducted through self-completed interviews administered through CAWI (Computer Aided Web Interviews) methodology by IPSOS Institute, that is member of ESOMAR <https://esomar.org/>. As part of its social responsibility, Ipsos is committed to international compliance with data protection laws, regulation, and rules.

**Table 1.** Items used to evaluate the different types of incivility

How do you judge the behaviour of political actors described below?	Incivility types
Intentionally spreads false or inaccurate news to reinforce their political positions (e.g. «all cancelled ballots were in our favour»).	Informational
Actively participates in a defamatory campaign - by means of slander and unsubstantiated accusations - against a political opponent («I'm telling you, that guy has weird sexual preferences»).	Informational
During a confrontation between members of different parties, he/she repeatedly interrupts, shouts and/or speaks over others, preventing the debate from taking place.	Discursive
Publicly describes a political opponent as a «traitor to the homeland», «Taliban», «Nazi», etc.	Discursive
During a parliamentary debate in the Chamber, he/she ostentatiously shows the middle finger or uses bad language referring to the opposition forces («those sons of ****»).	Vulgar
Publicly uses vulgar and insulting language against another politician («that ass**** is still talking»).	Vulgar
During a particularly heated debate in Parliament, he/she puts his/her hands on other politicians.	Violent
Physically threatening an interlocutor with whom he/she disagrees during a public debate	Violent
He/she refers to another politician with racist, sexist, religious, etc. epithets.	Discriminatory
He/she publicly denies the right to speak to minorities/groups, such as immigrants, LGBT, Muslims, etc.	Discriminatory
Seeks an agreement in Parliament with other political forces for the swift approval of a bill.	Not uncivil
Publicly disagrees with what was claimed by a member of another party.	Not uncivil

Respondents were also asked to indicate their information sources and frequency of use, and SM usage practices in relation to political topics. Respondents were then given descriptions of statements by and behaviour of politicians in news, TV programs or online posts. The statements presented were based on the concept of political incivility and a reworking of the list drawn up from previous studies (Bentivegna *et al.*, 2022). Respondents were asked to rate each statement's<sup>2</sup> degree of civility/incivility on a scale of 1 to 5. Beside the ten statements that displayed elements of incivility, two statements were included as control items, which were free from any elements of incivility.

To assess the congruence within each pair of items, Cronbach's alpha was calculated (Tab. 2).

<sup>2</sup> The statements were rotated to avoid the response-set phenomenon.

**Table 2.** Mean ratings for different types of incivility

Type of incivility	$\alpha$	January (M)	September (M)
Informational incivility	.77	4.17	4.28
Discursive incivility	.74	4.10	4.17
Vulgar incivility	.84	4.26	4.33
Violent incivility	.86	4.36	4.43
Discriminatory incivility	.86	4.22	4.29
General incivility	.96	4.23	4.30

Cluster analysis of individuals' information consumption identified three groups of news consumers:

- news-seekers: regularly consume news from all sources, including TV, press, online news, talk-shows, blogs, social media, and search engines. They are more prevalent in everyday politics but decrease during campaign periods due to potential overload;
- occasional news consumers: primarily rely on TV news and talk-shows, with occasional use of other sources. Their numbers also drop during campaign periods, likely due to saturation with political coverage;
- news avoiders: avoid news from all sources as much as possible. They are less present during everyday politics but become the largest group during campaign periods.

Finally, respondents' SM experience was analysed through 5 items that recorded how often in the past week (from «never» to «whenever I log on») they had participated in online discussions, posted political content, or sent comments or reactions to political posts. We created three categories for this variable: «low SM engagement for politics», «medium level SM engagement» and «high SM engagement for politics». Comparing the everyday politics and campaign periods, we find an interesting shrinkage of the low engagement group, countering increases in the medium engagement and high engagement groups. In contrast to the data concerning information consumption, SM engagement with political topics increased across all groups. However, we do not know whether this is an indication of greater involvement in the political sphere or simply more opportunities to come across (and engage with) such content in the campaign period. For our purposes, what is important is that this does not alter the activation of mechanisms underlying the perception of incivility.

Finally, standard socio-demographic variables, interest in politics, political identification, news consumption and SM engagement were used to construct four regression models, two for general incivility (everyday politics and electoral campaign) and two for informational incivility (everyday politics and electoral campaign).

## 6. Findings

The comparison between the two surveys clearly shows increased sensitivity to incivility during the campaign period, indeed the number of people who believe that «Italian politics has become more uncivil» – answering a question on the surveys – increased from 75.8% in the everyday politics period to 80.7% in the campaign period. Furthermore, there was an evident increase in the extent to which all categories of incivility were perceived as problematic (+0.8). The findings support the first hypothesis, with a particular emphasis on the substantial rise in informational incivility (+0.11). This means that citizens are more likely to perceive and react to uncivil behaviour, especially during heated election seasons where winning is prioritized over fair play.

Based on the hypothesis that citizens' sensitivity to all forms of incivility is higher during election periods than during everyday politics (H1), we sought to explore the dynamics of this phenomenon by investigating how citizens perceive various types of political incivility and how this perception varies between everyday politics and election periods (RQ1). Responding to RQ1, our study is in line with the literature (Kenski *et al.*, 2020; Stryker *et al.*, 2016), showing that the most clearly perceived types of incivility are violent and vulgar incivility, which top the list in both periods. However, there seems to be a more pronounced sensitivity in the election period, as all forms of incivility are rated as more severe, especially informational incivility.

While the increase in sensitivity is generalized, the second part of the study looks at how citizens' news consumption and SM use on political topics may influence their level of tolerance for forms of incivility. Building on the hypothesis that higher levels of mass media consumption and social media (SM) use related to political topics increase desensitisation to political incivility (H2), we examined the extent to which individuals' media consumption and SM engagement are associated with their perception of incivility (RQ2).

Considering that media coverage of politics tends to focus on anything that flouts established norms (Sobieraj and Berry, 2011; York, 2013), and that this sort of

**Table 3.** Mean ratings for different types of incivility: comparison of the perception of incivility in everyday politics and electoral campaign

	Discursive	Informational	Vulgar	Violent	Discriminatory	General incivility
Everyday politics	4.10	4.17	4.26	4.35	4.22	4.22
Electoral campaign	4.17	4.28	4.33	4.43	4.29	4.30
Variations	+0.7	+0.11	+0.7	+0.8	+0.7	+0.8

content is also widespread on SM, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that news-seekers and highly engaged users of SM on political topics may become inured to such forms of incivility. Citizens experience the political sphere almost exclusively through the media and/or comments and discussions on SM regarding such episodes. But the data paint a slightly different picture than we hypothesized: both variables considerably influence the perception of incivility, but in opposite directions. While news-seekers show greater sensitivity to forms of incivility, highly engaged SM users tend not to recognize it (Tab. 4). Thus, it seems that frequent viewing of episodes of incivility or stories about them in the news does not lead to their normalization so much as to dismiss them within the normal political dialectic and lead to desensitisation on the part of the subjects (in fact, the exact opposite occurs). Regarding SM engagement on the other hand, the data indicate that low-SM-engagement subjects show the most perception of incivility, having the highest rating values, while high-SM-engagement respondents show the lowest levels of perception (Tab. 4), confirming that the digital environment plays an important role in citizens' desensitisation to various forms of incivility.

We can thus answer RQ2 by stating that intensive or occasional news media consumption is associated with greater perception of incivility in general, especially during election campaigns, confirming the idea that news media consumption triggers a sensitisation mechanism. At the same time, SM engagement is a predictor of lower sensitivity, regardless of the context (campaign or everyday).

Our analysis delves deeper into citizens' perception of informational incivility and the role of information consumption and political SM. Starting with the

**Table 4.** News consumption, engagement in SM and perception of General incivility and Informational incivility

	General incivility		Informational incivility	
	Everyday politics	Electoral period	Everyday politics	Electoral period
<i>News consumption</i>				
News-seekers	4.08	4.37	4.03	4.34
Occasional News Consumers	4.23	4.22	4.18	4.21
News Avoiders	4.41	4.32	4.36	4.31
<i>Engagement in SM</i>				
Low	4.48	4.53	4.46	4.52
Medium	4.37	4.29	4.30	4.28
High	3.65	4.00	3.58	3.97
Average Value	4.22	4.30	4.17	4.28

assumption that high news media consumption corresponds to increased sensitisation to informational incivility (H3) we examined the extent to which individuals' levels of news media consumption are associated with perceptions of informational incivility (RQ3). The data fully confirm H3: respondents with a high level of news media consumption were shown to demonstrate increased sensitivity to informational incivility. However, it is important to acknowledge that without any available data on the media's coverage of the campaign, we are unable to determine whether there has been an increase in media attention towards acts of incivility, which usually attract media coverage (Geer, 2012; Goovaerts, 2022), or whether citizens have become more aware and sensitive to the campaign because of their own attention. In any case, the data seem to suggest, perhaps indirectly, that news consumption can help individuals better recognize problematic content and perceive the use of misinformation as a major issue.

Continuing our examination, we turn our focus to the impact of SM usage on citizens' perception of informational incivility assuming that continuous engagement with SM on political topics leads to increased desensitisation to informational incivility (H4) and by investigating what individual level of SM engagement is associated with perceptions of informational incivility. The H4, suggesting a correlation between high SM engagement and increased desensitisation, is confirmed for both the everyday politics and election campaign periods. The result seems to confirm the idea that SM engagement often goes along with spreading misleading, false or distorted content, which becomes a normal practice among users and contributes to a general erosion of emphasis on the principle of truth.

Regarding RQ3 and RQ4, the analysis indicates that a high level of news media consumption is associated with a higher perception of informational incivility. In contrast, a high level of involvement in SM is associated with high desensitisation to informational incivility.

Finally, to identify predictors of political incivility (RQ5), we constructed four regression models, two for each survey period. Looking at Table 5, the analysis of socio-demographic variables clearly shows that sex, age, and education are irrelevant in determining perceptions of general incivility during the everyday politics period. However, these variables come into play during the campaign period regarding informational incivility: female and older respondents show greater sensitivity, while a low level of education emerges as a predictor of lower sensitivity to incivility. These data are in line with those found in other studies (Kenski *et al.*, 2020), particularly about gender. Overall H5a is thus partially confirmed.

Our last hypothesis is fully supported regarding interest in politics, in fact those with high interest are always associated with a clear perception of incivility regardless of the context examined. The results regarding political self-positioning,



**Table 5.** Regression model predicting perceptions of General incivility and Informational incivility

	Measure of perceived General incivility		Measure of perceived Informational incivility	
	Everyday politics $\beta$	Electoral campaign $\beta$	Everyday politics $\beta$	Electoral campaign $\beta$
Sex: female	.	.076*	-	.073*
Age > 65	.	.126****	.105****	.150****
Education: low	-	-.086*	-.085**	-.079**
Political collocation: left	.109***	.064	.097**	-
Political collocation: right	-	-.74	-	-
High interest for politics	.085**	.203****	.076****	.177****
News-seekers	-	.168****	-	.160****
Occasional news consumers	-	.111***	-	.098***
High engagement on SM	-.455****	-.425****	-.463****	-.405****
Medium engagement on SM	-.079**	-.197****	-.116****	-

\*  $p < 0,10$ ; \*\*  $p < 0,05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0,01$ ; \*\*\*\*  $p < 0,001$ .

General incivility – Everyday politics:

R .428 R-squared .183 R-squared corrected .180 Std error of estimate .8116

General incivility – Electoral campaign:

R .434 R-squared .188 R-squared corrected .181 Std error of estimate .7360

Informational incivility – Everyday politics:

R .429 R-squared .184 R-squared corrected .176 Std error of estimate .8744

Informational incivility – Electoral campaign:

R .439 R-square .189 R-square corrected .181 Std error of estimate .8160

however, are more complex: identification with the left is a predictor of greater sensitivity to political incivility both for general and informational incivility but limited to everyday politics.

## 7. Discussion and conclusions

There has been a rise in concerns regarding incivility in the political sphere over the past few decades. Not one Western democracy is immune to the phenomenon and the ensuing mistrust in the political elite and loss of faith in de-

mocracy itself. But despite increasing worry, the concept of political incivility remains vague and has not been thoroughly explored. This research seeks to shed light on how citizens perceive incivility, focusing on the use of falsehoods, defamation, and misinformation. Since political incivility varies greatly depending on the circumstances, we conducted a study comparing perceptions during two different time periods (elections and everyday politics).

The findings from our investigation offer further insights into the understanding of the phenomenon of incivility. Most notably, the comparison between the two periods showed that during the election campaign people become more sensitised to political incivility. Although the underlying causes are uncertain, it appears probable that with the impending election motivating candidates and parties to employ aggressive tactics (Nai *et al.*, 2022), citizens are becoming increasingly aware of the tendency to reduce political discourse to a confrontation. This trend not only fails to facilitate comprehension of diverging political stances but also hampers the ability to make well-informed voting choices. The finding that left-wing identification is a predictor of sensitivity to incivility only during the period of everyday politics may depend on both specific campaign characteristics (e.g., heated campaign tones) and a tendency to mainstream incivility even on the left during this period. This finding encourages us to seek confirmation in other election campaigns through a longitudinal study.

Furthermore, increased sensitivity was noted regarding informational incivility, which involves candidates' dissemination of false, misleading or distorted content to gain an advantage over opponents. This finding is quite noteworthy, considering that manipulation of public discourse has been a major concern of scholars, as it poses a threat to the integrity of democracy (Humprecht *et al.*, 2020). The perception of politicians' misleading speech and actions as clear forms of incivility had already been shown to be on the increase by Stryker *et al.* (2022), following up on a previous study (Stryker *et al.*, 2016) to measure variations in perceptions. But while evidence seems to indicate a new sensitivity to the problem of forms of disinformation in general, individual variables (news media consumption, SM engagement) contribute in some cases to accentuate sensitivity, and in others to lessen it. Furthermore, socio-demographic variables act as predictors of perceived incivility although some of them become more important only during the campaign period. This may depend on the fact that campaign periods involve extensive media coverage and different demographic groups consume media differently, which can heighten their perceptions of incivility.

The third element of interest in this study is the link between news media consumption and sensitivity to all forms of general political incivility. We hypothesized that sensitivity would decrease in tandem with increasing news media consumption and high SM engagement on political topics: consumption of news media,

with its sensationalism, scandal-mongering, horse-race journalism and lack of respect for adversaries, generates mistrust and cynicism with regard to politics and leads to a sort of normalization of such behaviour. Similarly, heavy use of SM concerning political topics has been associated with desensitisation in a more recent line of research highlighting how hostility in political discussions on SM has not only become «normalized» but is actually socially rewarded (Hmielowski *et al.*, 2014). However, this has only been confirmed in cases of high SM engagement, which seems to inure subjects to incivility to the point that they no longer perceive it. A high level of news media consumption, on the other hand, was a predictor of greater sensitisation, indirectly suggesting that high-news-media-consumption diets may be a factor in the development of resilience to the spread of political incivility.

In relation to informational incivility, this sensitisation/desensitisation duality and the almost antithetical roles played by news media consumption and SM engagement, are even more clearly demonstrated. Sensitisation is stimulated by a high level of consumption of news, and this may result from both the experience and competence gained in recognizing the accuracy of news content and the means of generating such content: tv news, print or digital newspapers, online news, talk shows, search engine results and, in some cases, blog posts are generally produced by professional journalists and their interactions with political actors. Abundant literature indicates that systematic use of information sources (press, tv newscasts, news and information sites, etc.) is associated with high levels of awareness and understanding of politics (Wolfsfeld *et al.*, 2016). This confirms the fact that professional news organizations contribute to providing citizens with tools for a greater understanding of what is happening in politics and society (Bentivegna and Rega, 2023), as well as the above-mentioned role of news media consumption as an element of resilience to the spread of general incivility and informational incivility. We must also consider the specific traits of Italian journalism: evident political biases, dramatization of events, and an alarmist tone (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). In this context, any given episode of political informational incivility rebounds from one television program or newspaper article or post to another, spectacularizing politics and turning it into something for spectators, audiences watching a show. This could lead to more attention being focused on expressions of incivility, including disinformation. In the SM context, however, users are part of the action, often generating the sort of mimicry Gervais (2017) describes. Users experience (and normalize) the spreading of distorted and misleading content on SM platforms regardless of whether or not its accuracy is known. Aside from users who recognize disinformation and spread it for political reasons, many are unaware of the inaccuracy of content they disseminate, and do so simply to reinforce identity affiliations, to promote sharing behaviours (Van

der Linden 2022) and increase their visibility. So, it seems clear that frequent use of and participation in SM on political topics may activate desensitisation mechanisms.

The description of this dual or two-way sensitisation/desensitisation mechanism is the most important finding of our study; however, we must acknowledge some limitations. Firstly, the study lacks information about the specificities of news consumption; distinguishing between sources respondents used may have increased understanding of the role of news media consumption in perceptions of incivility. Second, we lack data on media coverage that would have helped to clarify whether sensitisation in the election period is also linked to increased media attention to political incivility. Third, the study does not differentiate between media spheres in which episodes of incivility occur (a Facebook post, or a talk-show, or print media), but others have observed that the media channel, structure and platform (Sydnor, 2018) as well as the roles of actors involved influence respondents' perceptions (Bormann *et al.*, 2022). Finally, the sensitisation/desensitisation process observed here may be the result of the specific political, social, and cultural context in which the study was conducted. To confirm its existence and strengthen the literature on perception of incivility will require a comparative analysis looking at different countries and contexts (election campaigns and ordinary politics). This study is an initial step in that direction.

#### Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [R.R.], upon reasonable request.

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