Destructive or Deliberative?

An Investigation of the Evolution, Determinants, and Effects of the Quality of Political Debate

Ine GOOVAERTS

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Samenstelling van de examencommissie:

Prof. Dr. Trui Steen (voorzitter)
Prof. Dr. Sofie Marien (promotor)
Prof. Dr. Anna Kern [UGent, BE] (copromotor)
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Prof. Dr. Jonas Lefevere #4 [VUB, BE]
Prof. Dr. Rune Slothuus #5 [Aarhus University, DK]

Table of contents

List of tables

List of figures

Preface

This dissertation is based on a collection of the following five empirical articles:

1. Marien, S., Goovaerts, I., & Elstub, S. (2020). Deliberative Qualities in Televised Election Debates: The Influence of the Electoral System and Populism. *West European Politics, 43*(6), 1262-1284.

2. Turkenburg, E., & Goovaerts, I. (2021). Food for Thought: A Longitudinal Investigation of Reflection-Promoting Speech in Televised Election Debates (1985-2019). *Revise & Resubmit.*

3. Goovaerts, I., & Turkenburg, E. (2021). It's the Context, Stupid! Investigating Patterns and Determinants of Political Incivility in Televised Debates over Time. *Revise & Resubmit.*

4. Goovaerts, I., & Marien, S. (2020). Uncivil Communication and Simplistic Argumentation: Decreasing Political Trust, Increasing Persuasive Power? *Political Communication, 37*(6), 768-788.

5. Goovaerts, I. (2021). Highlighting Incivility: How the News Media's Focus on Incivility Affects Political Trust and News Credibility. *Revise & Resubmit.*

These articles form the empirical core of this dissertation. The empirical chapters are introduced by an overarching introduction, theoretical framework, and research design, and the findings from these empirical chapters are discussed in an overarching conclusion and discussion. Since each empirical chapter is based on an article, they can all be read as standalone pieces, which also means that some theoretical overlap across the chapters may occur.

Chapter 1 : Introduction

This chapter first introduces the key concepts, the three overarching research questions, and the approach to tackle them. Next, an overview and short summary of the empirical studies that address the three main research questions is given. The chapter concludes with an overview of the contributions made by this dissertation.

The world is changing, politics must also follow this path.
We are committed to a completely different politics.
A constructive politics, of trust and respect.

Because breaking someone down is easy.
It really does not take much effort.
But it has consequences.
In recent years we have seen how roughness and harshness
have also taken over the political debate.
But what has it taught us?
Except for more contradictions, more polarization
and more mutual misunderstanding.

- Alexander De Croo, government declaration, October 1, 2020[1]

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[1] https://www.premier.be/en/government-declaration (translated from Dutch)

On October 1, 2020, after 493 days of coalition negotiations, the new Prime Minister of Belgium, Alexander De Croo, addressed the nation with his government declaration. Worries about the quality of the political debate featured prominently in the declaration. More specifically, the Prime Minister urged politicians – and, more generally, all participants in the public sphere – to choose a different path by discussing politics in a constructive and respectful way. The reason, he argues, is that a destructive debate sphere would do more harm than good, leading to misunderstandings, polarization and distrust.

Concerns about the quality of political debate are not unique to the Belgian case. There is worldwide concern about the poor quality of political debate and its harmful, delegitimizing effects on politics and the public sphere more generally (e.g. Dryzek et al., 2019; Maisel, 2012; Milstein, 2020; Zarefsky, 1992). Recently, these worries have intensified further after the Capitol insurrection in the United States on the 6th of January 2021, which has been widely perceived to be fueled by the rhetoric of then-incumbent President Donald Trump (Goodman et al., 2021). The well-established saying that "words matter" has once again proven relevant. In response to this incident, and in line with the statement of the Belgian Prime Minister, the new American President-elect Joe Biden also voiced his concerns about the quality of today's political debate in his inaugural speech. Biden called for the end of the "uncivil war", characterized by the lack of reason and respect.[2] Following the Capitol insurrection, the idea that a poisonous political debate climate could endanger the legitimacy of the political and democratic system received even more attention by politicians, journalists, citizens, pundits and scholars alike on the world-wide scene.

The worries about the quality of the political debate and its harmful effects form the starting point of this dissertation. Much of the concern about today's political debate quality relates to *politicians'* use of *uncivil* (i.e. disrespectful) communication and *ill-justified* (i.e. poorly reasoned) argumentation (e.g. Dryzek et al., 2019). Yet despite severe concerns about this, surprisingly often statements such as "we are currently living in an era of incivility" or "soundbite culture" are based on anecdotes and assumptions that are easily taken for granted, rather than based on systematically driven research (Abdullah, 2012; el-Nawawy, 2012). The main objective of this dissertation is to contribute to filling this gap and to advance our knowledge of **the evolution, the determinants, and the effects** of politicians' use of **incivility and ill-justified arguments**. Accordingly, three broad research questions will guide this dissertation: (1) Did politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified arguments increase over time?; (2) Which determinants influence politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified

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arguments? For instance, how do populism, media characteristics and country-specific characteristics influence it?; and (3) How are citizens' trust attitudes (i.e. trust in politics and trust in the news media) influenced by incivility and ill-justified arguments?[3]

In this dissertation, I **bridge the literature on political communication with deliberative democratic theory** to address these three questions. In particular, I build on normative deliberative democratic theory and use it as a **yardstick or benchmark** to systematically analyze the evolution, determinants and effects of incivility and ill-justified arguments in political debates (Chambers, 2009). Within deliberative democratic theory, *civility and well-justified arguments* are two of the key elements that define a high-quality political debate (e.g. Bächtiger et al., 2018; Wessler, 2008a).[4] Since *incivility* and *ill-justified arguments* deviate from this deliberative ideal, we can use the deliberative ideal as a *systematic tool and empirical instrument* to investigate the causes and consequences of deviations from it (Steiner et al., 2004; Stryker & Danielson, 2013). To refer back to the research questions mentioned above, I use the deliberative benchmark as a systematic, empirical tool to investigate (1) to what degree politicians deviate from this benchmark over time (e.g. do they increasingly deviate from the deliberative ideal of debating in civil, well-justified ways as is generally assumed?); (2) which determinants influence deviations from this benchmark (e.g. do populists deviate more from it than mainstream politicians?); (3) how do deviations from this benchmark influence citizens' trust attitudes (e.g. do these deviations harm citizens' trust in politics?).

This research focuses on the quality of political debate in one particular venue, namely **debates between politicians in the media** (e.g. televised election debates). The media play a pivotal role in society. They are the main channel of communication between politicians and the citizenry, and citizens mainly receive their political information via the media (Habermas, 1996; Newman et al., 2019, 2020; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). Hence, it is the media that most frequently exposes citizens to debates between politicians (as compared to debates in parliament, for instance) and shapes their image of politics the most. Despite their importance, this focus on political debates in the media is novel to the field of deliberative democracy. So far, this field has mainly focused on debate between citizens in citizen initiatives (e.g. mini-publics) or on debate in political institutions such as parliament (Bächtiger & Beste, 2017; Maia, 2018). The few available studies that did study the quality of political debates in the media through the deliberative lens already provided some initial

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[3] More elaboration on the different determinants studied (RQ2) and the outcome of trust and its importance (RQ3) can be found on pp. 9-10, and in the theoretical framework of this dissertation (pp. 32-43, chapter 2).
[4] Deliberative democratic theory is a broader theory that includes other important elements as well. See more elaboration on deliberative democratic theory in chapter 2.

important insights, but they are more limited in scope in the sense that they focused mainly on the prevalence of or the degree to which the deliberative qualities of civility and well-justified arguments were present in these debates (Davidson et al., 2017; Schultz, 2006; Wessler & Schultz, 2007)[5]. This dissertation expands this scope by studying *the evolution, the determinants and the effects* of these deliberative qualities.

To gather these insights and to formulate my expectations, I also build on the field of political communication. Unlike in the field of deliberative democracy, mediated political debates are a key venue studied in the field of political communication. Studying politicians' (uncivil, ill-justified) communication is also core to this field. However, what is regularly lacking in many political communication studies is the identification and explication of the normative democratic framework on which the study is built (Althaus, 2012; Strömbäck, 2005). As a consequence, the implications of the communicative practices studied are not always clear. This dissertation responds to that by making its normative framework, i.e. deliberative democratic theory, explicit.

My research is focused on the **western European context**. Both in the field of deliberative democracy and in the field of political communication, insights have so far remained surprisingly limited with regards to the evolution, determinants and effects (on trust) of *politicians'* use of incivility and ill-justified arguments in *mediated debates*.[6] The few available studies in the field of political communication that did address similar questions conducted their research mostly in the United States (e.g. Mutz & Reeves, 2005). Gathering empirical evidence in the western European context adds to the literature because we cannot assume that results from the United States, with its specific political and media system (e.g. presidential system with a highly competitive media system), can automatically be generalized to other contexts, such as consensus democracies with a strong public broadcaster (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Studying politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified arguments in the more consensual and less media-competitive western European context can therefore provide new insights.

In sum, this dissertation builds on insights from both the field of deliberative democracy and the field of political communication and explicitly connects them by using deliberative democratic theory as a benchmark to study political communication phenomena, namely

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[5] Schultz (2006) also studied some first determinants in his work, like the role of the moderator, but he did not analyze evolutions or effects.

[6] Other venues and actors are increasingly studied in both fields. For instance, both fields are increasingly studying *citizens'* use of incivility and ill-justified arguments in *online platforms or discussions* (Coe et al., 2014; Kenski et al., 2020; Maia et al., 2021; Prochazka et al., 2018).

politicians' use of uncivil communication and ill-justified argumentation in mediated political debates. Studying the quality of political debate – and uncivil, ill-justified statements more specifically – is core to both fields, and both fields can build on each other to strengthen one another (e.g. Ettema, 2007; Gastil, 2008; Rinke, 2016; Wessler, 2008a; Wessler & Rinke, 2014). By connecting these fields, this dissertation can move both fields a step further at a theoretical, empirical and societal level. The contributions made by this dissertation will be discussed in more detail later on in this chapter. First, I elaborate more on the focus and approach of this dissertation, as well as the three main research questions and the studies conducted to address these questions.

Focus of the dissertation

The quality of political debates in the media through a deliberative lens
The reality of today's political debate environment seems to be in contrast with the deliberative ideals for high-quality political debate. In the strongly mediatized political environment, politicians are often stimulated to use short, simplistic one-liners and uncivil, harsh rhetoric because these are newsworthy communication styles that fit the logic by which the media operate extremely well (Altheide, 2004; Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Van Aelst, 2014). Politicians have learned that when they attack their opponents from time to time and express their views in short, appealing ways, rather than using long, "boring" explanations, they are more likely to be picked up by the media, gain visibility, and consequently reach the larger public (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). This is, evidently, important for politicians to get their message across. Yet, disrespectfully attacking one's political opponents, and reducing political ideas to simplistic messages that poorly justify or explain the reasons behind standpoints and decisions, raise concern. It stands in stark contrast to two key democratic virtues or qualities in political debate: showing respect towards political adversaries and their policy views, and reason-giving or justifying one's own political positions.

I refer to these two debate qualities as *civil communication and well-justified argumentation*, and contrast them to *uncivil communication and ill-justified argumentation*.[7] These debate qualities – being civil and providing well-justified arguments – are particularly core to deliberative democratic theory, which forms the normative backdrop of this dissertation. It is a talk-centric normative theory that puts political debate and discussion, and particularly civil, well-justified debate, at its heart (Bächtiger et al., 2018; Chambers, 2003; Strömbäck,

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[7] See more elaboration on the definitions of civility and incivility, and well-justified and ill-justified arguments in the theoretical framework (chapter 2).

2005). In short, according to this theory, the quality of a political debate "centers around argumentative exchange in a climate of mutual respect and civility" (Wessler, 2008b, p. 1199).

Deliberative scholars argue that deliberative debate (here: civil, well-justified debate) could serve several goals in a democracy (see e.g. Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019, pp. 27–36). First, when politicians publicly debate with each other in civil and well-justified ways, they could contribute to epistemic goals of deliberation. Showing respect and justifying their policy positions allows a variety of different and well-explained perspectives to be valued and included in the political realm. This heightens citizens' understanding of different societal issues, stimulates them to deliberate "from within" (Goodin, 2000), and therefore enables them to make well-informed decisions (Habermas, 1981). This, in turn, allows epistemically better outcomes to be achieved. Moreover, respectful and well-justified political debate could increase the (perceived) legitimacy of political decision-making and of the political and democratic system more broadly (Cohen, 1989; Habermas, 1981). This relates particularly to the argument that legitimacy increases when citizens are provided with the opportunity to evaluate and scrutinize the reasons politicians give for their decisions (Chambers, 2010). In short, when politicians are respectful and provide well-justified arguments, it can enhance the epistemic quality of the debate and citizens' opinions, and democratic legitimacy. Conversely, if the political debate happens in uncivil and ill-justified ways, the inclusion of different perspectives would be prevented and the quality of opinions and legitimacy (perceptions) would decrease. Empirical research also shows evidence for these relationships. Uncivil, ill-justified debate decreases citizens' political knowledge and lowers the perceived legitimacy of political opponents and political decisions (e.g. Esaiasson et al., 2017; Mutz, 2007; van der Wurff et al., 2018).

Importantly, it is unrealistic to expect that discussions between politicians are always, in all instances, well-justified and civil. Therefore, deliberative democratic theory puts forward deliberative *ideals* – ideals that will only very occasionally or maybe even never be reached in real-world politics (Bächtiger et al., 2018, p. 2; Dryzek, 1990). Yet, it is an ideal one *could* strive for.

Building on this view, I use the deliberative ideal of civil, well-justified debate as a benchmark in this dissertation, rather than seeing it as an ideal we can or should expect. I apply this benchmark conceptually and methodologically. Conceptually, this means that the concepts of incivility and ill-justified arguments are *defined* as deviations from the ideal of civility and well-justified arguments (see theoretical framework chapter 2). Methodologically, it means that incivility and ill-justified arguments are *operationalized* as deviations from the ideal of

civility and well-justified arguments (see research design chapter 3). As outlined above, this allows me to study how deviations from the deliberative ideals evolved over time (RQ1), are affected by contextual factors (RQ2), and influence citizens' attitudes (i.e. trust in politics and in the news media) (RQ3). Several (deliberative) scholars have proposed to use deliberative democratic theory as a benchmark to measure deviations from it and to see which causes and consequences such deviations have in the real world (e.g. Chambers, 2009; Steiner et al., 2004; Stryker & Danielson, 2013), but only few studies have explicitly and systematically applied the deliberative benchmark to study deliberative qualities in the media (e.g. Häussler, 2018). This dissertation contributes to filling this gap.

The focus of this dissertation is on *political debates in the media*.[8] This venue of political debate differs from other venues such as political decision-making behind closed doors or political debates in parliament. While these venues are, evidently, also important to study, they are not directly *aimed at the public*. If we want to know how often citizens are exposed to incivility and ill-justified arguments in political debates and how citizens' attitudes are affected by this, parliamentary debate or decision-making behind closed doors are less suitable cases to study. Therefore, my focus is on the media, which play a crucial role in society to connect politicians to the wider citizenry. Despite this crucial position, the media, and particularly mediated political debates, remain largely underexplored in the deliberative democracy field (Maia, 2018). Deliberative scholars have focused mostly on "ideal" or "likely" cases where deliberation is most likely to take place, such as small-scale participatory processes where small groups of randomly selected citizens discuss politics in a facilitated way to ensure a civil and well-justified discussion (Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019; Page, 1996).

Following the "deliberative systems" approach, I argue that we should study deliberation at many different venues, including the less ideal ones (Mansbridge, 1999; Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012). Given the mass media's prominent role in democracy, and given their market-driven logic that stimulates politicians to use an uncivil and ill-justified debate style, the media are the perfect example of an "unlikely case" that merits more scholarly attention (Maia, 2018; Mansbridge et al., 2012). Steady progress is being made in this regard with a small but increasing number of studies that examine the quality of *journalism or news coverage* from a deliberative democratic perspective (e.g. Ettema, 2007; Häussler, 2018; Rohlinger, 2007; Wessler & Rinke, 2014) or, more recently, the deliberative quality of *online political discussions among citizens* (e.g. Esau et al., 2020; Maia et al., 2021). So far, however, the focus on *mediated political debates* remains, as outlined above, limited.

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[8] Most chapters in this dissertation focus on televised election debates. See the research design chapter (chapter 3) for more elaboration on this case.

In sum, I recognize that the potential of deliberative debate is less likely to be realized in the media, but this does not mean that we cannot or should abstain entirely from studying deliberative debate qualities in the media, nor that civil, well-justified debate in the media is not possible at all (Wessler & Schultz, 2007). Using deliberative democratic theory as a benchmark aligns very well with this idea, because this approach allows to examine to what degree, and with what effects, politicians in the media deviate from deliberative ideals (Stryker & Danielson, 2013). Gathering these insights is important, because despite all the concerns and allegations regarding the low quality of today's political debate, and despite the normative assumptions about the promising effects of civil, well-justified debate, few attempts have been made to study this systematically, especially outside of the United States. The aim of this dissertation is to contribute to filling this gap, by addressing the three research questions outlined below.

Three research questions

The first question concerns the evolution of uncivil communication and simplistic argumentation over the past decades. The argument goes that both civil and well-justified political discourse are under pressure because of the media and political environment we live in today. In particular, several trends in western (European) societies, such as the increasing mediatization of politics, the rising importance of social media, and the growing success of populist parties and leaders led to repeatedly voiced concerns – in the public and academic debate – about the coarsening and simplification of political discourse to which citizens are exposed (e.g. Abdullah, 2012; Altheide, 2004; Bendadi, 2020; Dryzek et al., 2019; Mazzoleni, 2014; Ott, 2017; Shea & Fiorina, 2013; Zarefsky, 1992). Yet, despite these concerns and claims, there has been little systematic empirical research addressing this decline in debate quality. This dissertation contributes to filling this gap by studying politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified arguments over the past 35 years (1985-2019) in a western European country (Belgium). This period of time is well-suited to study this question because it is wide enough to cover the period before, during and after the emergence of the societal trends that are expected to heighten the use of uncivil, ill-justified statements (i.e. increasing mediatization, importance of social media, populist success). Accordingly, the first research question is formulated as follows:

RQ1: How did politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified arguments evolve between 1985 and 2019?

Some first attempts have been made to assess the quality of political discourse over time (e.g. Farnsworth & Lichter, 2007; Shea & Sproveri, 2012; Smith, 1989; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011; Uslaner, 1993; Wyss et al., 2015). However, these studies were mainly conducted in the United States (one notable exception is Wyss et al., 2015 who focused on Switzerland) or in other venues than political debate in the media (e.g. in parliament or in the news). Therefore, it is important to extend this research to other countries and venues. The few empirical studies that examined the evolution of debate quality over time generally show that it has indeed declined (e.g. Shea & Sproveri, 2012; Wyss et al., 2015). Overall, however, the decline does not happen steadily and linearly but with ups and downs over the years. The quality of political debate is therefore likely to be *context-dependent*. Building on that finding, this dissertation investigates a multi-layered set of determinants that might potentially influence politicians' use of more or less incivility and ill-justified arguments at certain points in time. The studied determinants are situated at the micro level, such as politicians' ideology or incumbency status; at the meso level, such as the topic under discussion; and at the macro level, such as the electoral system of a country. Depending on the element of debate quality under study (i.e. justification or incivility), different determinants are examined in this dissertation. A more detailed overview of the determinants per element can be found in the theoretical framework (chapter 2) on p. 34. Therefore, the second research question is formulated in the following general terms:

RQ2: Which determinants influence politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified arguments, and how?

Finally, the concerns about the quality of contemporary political debate relate mainly to its alleged damaging effects on the well-functioning of politics and democracy. While uncivil and ill-justified statements are likely to grasp attention and are potentially effective communication tools to persuade voters (Cobb & Kuklinski, 1997; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Scherer & Sagarin, 2006), they could also harm citizens' political and democratic legitimacy beliefs (de Fine Licht et al., 2014; Esaiasson et al., 2017; Mutz, 2007; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). This dissertation focuses particularly on citizens' levels of *trust* in the person (politician) and institution (political and media) distributing political information in uncivil and ill-justified ways. More specifically, it is studied how citizens' exposure to incivility and ill-justified arguments influences their perceptions of trustworthiness towards political candidates, their levels of trust in the political system more broadly, and their perceptions of news credibility. Political trust is important because it contributes to democratic stability and to the legitimacy and well-functioning of government (Citrin & Stoker, 2018). Citizens who have trust in politics are, for instance, more likely to support policies and abide by the law, even if they disagree with the policies or laws (e.g. Chanley et al., 2000; Marien & Hooghe, 2011). Trust

in the news media is important because citizens who trust the news media are more likely to follow the news, which in turn increases their political knowledge, civic engagement and political participation (e.g. Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2018; Hao et al., 2014; Verba et al., 1995). Nevertheless, insight into these effects is currently quite limited, especially outside of the United States. This leads to the third and last research question:

RQ3: How does citizens' exposure to incivility and ill-justified arguments influence their trust attitudes?

Overview of the dissertation

Figure 1.1 presents an overview of this dissertation. Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 9 are overarching chapters that present the introduction, theoretical framework, the research design, and the conclusion of this dissertation. Chapters 4 to 8 form the empirical core of this dissertation and empirically study the three main research questions. This empirical core is divided into two main parts. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 investigate the patterns (evolutions and determinants) of politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified statements. Chapters 7 and 8 investigate the effects of incivility and ill-justified arguments on citizens' trust attitudes. Each empirical chapter is based on an article and can therefore be read as a standalone piece.

In **chapter 2**, I first conceptualize the key concepts of justification and civility. Second, I situate these concepts in the broader normative framework of deliberative democratic theory and explicate in more detail how this theory is used as a benchmark to assess debate quality. Having clarified this framework, I theorize about the evolution, determinants and effects of uncivil, ill-justified statements in political debate.

In **chapter 3**, I elaborate on the research design used in this dissertation. To analyze patterns and determinants of incivility and ill-justified arguments, I conducted content analyses. To assess its effects on trust attitudes, I conducted survey experiments. Both methods will be presented in chapter 3. The empirical studies in this dissertation mainly focus on televised election debates and, except for one cross-national study, they are all based on Belgian data. The relevance and suitability of the countries under study and the focus on the case of televised election debates are discussed.

Figure 1.1: Overview of the dissertation

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│                        Ch1: Introduction                         │
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│                    Ch2: Theoretical framework                    │
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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                      Ch3: Research design                        │
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PART I: PATTERNS
Evolution (RQ1) &
Determinants (RQ2)

Ch4: Electoral systems, populism and debate quality

Ch5: Trends in debate quality: the evolution of justifications

Ch6: Trends in debate quality: the evolution and determinants of incivility

Method: content analysis

Quality of Political Debate

PART II: EFFECTS
Effects on citizens' trust attitudes (RQ3)

Ch7: Incivility and ill-justified arguments in political debates: decreasing political trust?

Ch8: Incivility in post-debate news coverage: decreasing political trust and news credibility?

Method: survey experiments

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│                  Ch9: Discussion & conclusion                    │
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In **chapter 4**, a cross-national study is conducted, together with Sofie Marien and Stephen Elstub, to investigate how the quality of political debate is affected by cross-national differences in (1) electoral rules and (2) presence of populist leaders. Both debate quality elements, i.e. justifications and civility, are studied.[9] An extension of the Discourse Quality Index (DQI; Steenbergen et al., 2003) is used to code 12 televised election debates, i.e. four in the United Kingdom, four in Germany, and four in the Netherlands. The results show that electoral rules have limited effect on the quality of political debate, but the presence of

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[9] The empirical part starts with this chapter because it provides a *general introduction* to *both* elements of debate quality in this dissertation, i.e. incivility and ill-justified arguments. The other chapters on patterns dive deeper and in more detail into *one* of these elements.

populist leaders does have a substantial effect. In particular, populists on both the left and right-wing end of the spectrum use more ill-justified arguments than mainstream politicians, and right-wing populist politicians use more incivility than mainstream and left-wing populists. Moreover, interestingly, mainstream politicians become more uncivil when interacting with right-wing populist politicians compared to when interacting with other politicians.

In **chapter 5**, a quantitative content analysis of 24 Belgian televised election debates over the past 35 years is conducted (1985-2019). This chapter analyzes the evolution of politicians' use of ill-justified arguments over time (amongst three other communicative components that are studied in this article).[10] Against expectations, we (Emma Turkenburg and I) do not observe a rise (nor decline) in politicians' use of ill-justified arguments. Rather, ups and downs over time are observed. To gather more detailed insights, the main analysis is split out further and different elements that define an ill-justified argument are studied. We analyzed the *mere presence* of justifications for a standpoint, the *number* of justifications for a standpoint, and the *relevance* of justifications for a standpoint (i.e. whether the justification provided clearly links to the standpoint). The results show no decline (nor rise) in the mere presence or relevance of the justifications provided. In 1995, a sudden decrease in the *number* of justifications occurs, as compared to the years before. The number of justifications provided after 1995 remains on a similar level and fluctuates around a lower baseline. The chapter also shows that there are no substantial differences in politicians' use of ill-justified arguments between the public and commercial broadcaster.

Next, in **chapter 6**, the incivility component is comprehensively studied. In particular, Emma Turkenburg and I studied incivility over time and analyzed several potential incivility-inducing determinants. These include (1) determinants that vary *between* debates, i.e. the type of broadcaster (public or commercial) on which the debate is aired, and the presence of populist actors in the debate; (2) determinants that vary *within* debates, i.e. the topic under discussion, the number of politicians debating, and what we call the "action-reaction" of incivility (whether one uncivil statement in the debate spurs following uncivil statements); (3) determinants that vary between politicians, i.e. politicians' incumbency status, gender, and ideology. A quantitative content analysis of 24 Belgian election debates (1985-2019) is conducted. Descriptive and bivariate analyses and results from a Bayesian multilevel analysis all show that incivility is not increasing but occurs in a volatile pattern with ups and downs

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[10] This chapter is based on an article that takes a broader perspective to investigate political debates over time and therefore studies other speech components as well, such as the accessibility of the language in the debate (i.e. is the debate comprehensible to everyone?) and the substantive information value of the utterances in the debate (i.e. is the audience exposed to falsifiable and politically relevant information?).

over the years, indicating that incivility is highly context-specific. In particular, the results reveal that incivility is mostly affected by individual-level characteristics of politicians and by within-debate determinants. On the individual level, it is shown that populist politicians, male politicians and politicians in opposition use more incivility than non-populist politicians, female politicians and politicians in government. On the within-debate level, it is shown that the discussion of moral topics tends to increase incivility more so than the discussion of non-moral topics, that incivility increases as more politicians simultaneously debate with each other, and that incivility spurs more incivility.

The effects part then starts with **chapter 7**, which introduces a puzzle to examine the impact of both incivility and ill-justified arguments in political debates. In particular, Sofie Marien and I expect to see a tension: on the one hand, incivility and ill-justified arguments are expected to lower citizens' political trust; on the other hand, they are expected to be effective persuasive communication strategies. Using two survey experiments – one text-based and one audio-based –, we studied the effects of politicians' use of uncivil, ill-justified statements on political trust and on persuasive power. The results demonstrate that (1) uncivil communication lowers political trust and is, contrary to expectations, slightly less convincing than civil communication; (2) ill-justified argumentation does not affect political trust and is not more persuasive than well-justified argumentation; and (3) a combined use of uncivil communication and ill-justified argumentation presents the strongest violation of social norms and decreases both trust in political candidates and persuasive power. Interestingly, the results also show that politically cynical citizens and citizens who do not value inclusionary debates react differently to uncivil, ill-justified statements: their level of trust does not decline and they are persuaded slightly more by ill-justified statements expressed in uncivil ways.

Chapter 8 builds on chapter 7 and studies the effect of post-debate news coverage of political incivility on citizens' trust attitudes. This is important because the news media are the key channel to politically inform citizens (Newman et al., 2020). I start from the premise that journalists are strongly inclined to focus on conflict and incivility when covering politics (Muddiman, 2018; Skytte, 2019). Chapter 7 revealed that exposure to politicians' use of incivility lowers political trust. The question therefore arises whether journalists' emphasis on politicians' use of incivility also lowers trust in politics. Moreover, such a reporting style could not only affect citizens' *political* trust, but also their trust towards the *news media* itself. Therefore, using two survey experiments, I studied how the news media's focus on incivility affects both political trust and news credibility. In the experiments, participants were exposed to a political debate and/or to post-debate news coverage. The results confirm the findings in chapter 7: the use of incivility by politicians decreases their trustworthiness

in the eyes of citizens. The effect of incivility-focused news coverage on trust in politicians is more mixed with one experiment revealing a negative effect but this was not replicated in the second experiment. However, there is clear evidence that incivility-focused news coverage decreases the news media's own credibility. Finally, there are indications that the effects of incivility-focused news coverage can depend on the level of incivility in the debate that is covered. The findings show that both the debates and their coverage influence citizens' trust attitudes, indicating that it is important to take the larger communication environment into account when analyzing political communication effects.

The final chapter, **chapter 9**, integrates all these findings into the main conclusions that can be drawn from this dissertation. In this chapter, I also discuss the limitations of this dissertation and the opportunities they offer for future research. Finally, this chapter makes a societal contribution. By connecting the normative deliberative ideals to the empirical findings of this dissertation, I discuss and present guidelines that can contribute to the creation of high-quality debates between politicians in the media.

Contributions of the dissertation

All in all, the approach taken (i.e. using the deliberative benchmark to study the evolution, determinants and effects of politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified arguments in the media) and the research conducted in this dissertation lead to five main contributions. In the following paragraphs, I will summarize these contributions.

First, this dissertation **contributes *empirically* to both the field of political communication and the field of deliberative democracy** by answering the three main research questions. As mentioned earlier, the concerns about contemporary debate quality are often based on untested claims that are easily taken for granted (e.g. "incivility is on the rise"). Answering the three main research questions by systematically and empirically analyzing them strengthens both the field of political communication and deliberative democracy. By using one overarching approach, I can also connect the findings about evolutions, determinants, and effects to each other. In addition, for the deliberative democracy field specifically, this empirical focus on political debates in the media is novel. Hence, this dissertation contributes empirically to this field by showing what deliberative communication does or does not look like in the media, and what effects it has on citizens' trust attitudes. In this regard, I respond to Maia's statement that in the field of deliberative democracy "[a]ccounts of the mass media's performance are more often based on idealizations or anecdotal illustrations, and scholars do not pursue implications of media-based communication

through systematic, well-grounded empirics" (Maia, 2018, p. 348). Furthermore, this dissertation extends our empirical knowledge about the quality of mediated political debates outside the United States, where most evidence, especially on incivility, has been gathered so far. Since the patterns and effects of mediated debate quality may be different in highly competitive media and political systems as compared to less competitive systems, it is important to study these other contexts as well and to see how patterns and effects play out there.

Second, this dissertation **contributes *theoretically* to the field of political communication** by using a clear benchmark borrowed from the normative theory of deliberative democracy. This way, this dissertation responds to calls in the political communication field to clearly explicate the normative framework used to study political communication and its potential (harmful) effects (Althaus, 2012; Strömbäck, 2005). This is often lacking in political communication research but helps to specify the democratic standard one is referring to, helps to systematically analyze political communication phenomena by linking it to that standard, and makes implications of the studied phenomena clear.

Third, this dissertation **contributes *theoretically* to the field of deliberative democracy** by studying political debates in the media. Following the deliberative systems approach, deliberation can be practiced at many different venues and by many different actors, for instance in citizen assemblies, in online discussions, in parliament, or in the media (Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012). As mentioned earlier, in the field of deliberative democracy, most attention goes to deliberation in ideal cases such as citizen initiatives. Yet, insights into the deliberative quality of debates in other, less ideal venues is important as well (Mansbridge, 1999). Political debate in the media is one of these areas, not in the least because these mediated venues are the ones where most citizens retrieve political information from. By theorizing about the relevance and realistic potential of justified and civil communication in mediated debates, I contribute to this theory. Moreover, by studying incivility and ill-justified arguments in the media empirically, I contribute to this field theoretically because through empirical study we can further advance (deliberative) theory (Thompson, 2008).

Fourth, this dissertation makes a ***societal* contribution**. One of the main points of criticism towards deliberative democratic theory is that it specifies unattainable, unrealistic ideals and goals to achieve (e.g. Walzer, 1999). In effect, different stakeholders, such as the media and politicians, have different goals and objectives, such as winning elections and grabbing the public's attention. These goals will frequently collide with the ideals of deliberation. For instance, uncivil attacks may attract attention but they are not deliberative. Taking this into account, this dissertation will, in chapter 9 (the overall discussion), attempt to strike a

balance between these normative ideals and what is realistic in practice. More specifically, building on this dissertation's theoretical and empirical insights, a societal contribution is made by specifying realistic guidelines for the creation of high-quality political debates in the media.

In addition to these four broad contributions, this dissertation also makes a more specific contribution that is related to the third research question about the effects of incivility and ill-justified arguments on citizens' trust attitudes. This fifth contribution is again a ***theoretical contribution***. A novelty of this dissertation is that it puts forward one *overarching mechanism* to explain the effects of citizens' exposure to incivility and ill-justified arguments on trust attitudes, i.e. trust in politics and trust in the news. Building on previous work (e.g. Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Prochazka et al., 2018), the role that citizens' *normative expectations* play is put forward as key in all the studied relationships. In particular, it is argued that when politicians use incivility and ill-justified arguments, or when the news media emphasize incivility in their news coverage, they violate normative expectations shared by the public which, in turn, may lower citizens' trust perceptions towards politics and towards the news media. More elaboration on this mechanism can be found in the theoretical framework, and in the empirical chapters 7 and 8.

Chapter 2 : Theoretical framework

This chapter first conceptualizes well-justified arguments and civility, i.e. the concepts that define quality of political debate in this dissertation, and contrasts them to ill-justified arguments and incivility. Second, these concepts are situated within the broader normative framework of deliberative democratic theory, and it is clarified how this theory is used as a benchmark to study the quality of political debate. Finally, this chapter theorizes about the evolution and determinants of ill-justified arguments and incivility, and about its effects on citizens' trust attitudes.

Defining and unravelling the quality of political debate

In this section, I conceptualize the elements that define the quality of political debate in this dissertation. First, I conceptualize well-justified argumentation, and will then conceptualize ill-justified argumentation as a deviation from it. I will also discuss the relevance of studying justifications. Second, I conceptualize civil communication, and then conceptualize uncivil communication as a deviation from it. I also again discuss the relevance to study (in)civility.

Well-justified versus ill-justified arguments
The first element that this dissertation identifies as key to the quality of political debate is politicians' use of justifications. In particular, in this dissertation, I contrast politicians' use of well-justified arguments to politicians' use of ill-justified arguments in mediated political debates. When politicians provide well-justified arguments, the claims they make are backed up by reasons, and the link between claims and reasons provided is moreover clear (Steenbergen et al., 2003). This means, first, that politicians' provision of well-justified arguments involves the provision of *reasons or rationales* to explain or justify their policy

standpoints and decisions (Chambers, 2010; White & Ypi, 2011). It is the act of "telling why" a certain standpoint or decision is good or desirable, and it tells citizens why they should or should not be in favor of it (Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019; de Fine Licht & Esaiasson, 2018, p. 2; Esaiasson et al., 2017; Steenbergen et al., 2003). Second, in order for politicians to justify their positions well, it is also important that the *link* between one's position and the reasons given for that position is clear (see also Steenbergen et al., 2003). Hence, besides clarity on the reasons or rationales, a well-justified argument *shows logically* why a certain position or decision is or is not desirable (Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019; Cobb & Kuklinski, 1997). In sum, in a well-justified argument, reasons are given for a certain standpoint or decision, and, together, they form one clear and logical whole.

This is opposed to what I define as an ill-justified argument. When politicians provide ill-justified arguments, they deviate from well-justified argumentation because something in their argument is missing. In particular, in an ill-justified argument, politicians do not provide any reasons to back up their policy stances or decisions, or they fail to provide a clear link between their claims and reasons, which means that their argument is incomplete and does not form one clear, logical whole (see also Steenbergen et al., 2003). When politicians do not provide any reasons for their standpoints, we can also speak of an *un*justified argument as a more specific form of an ill-justified argument, because in such an argument the reason-giving part is completely absent. In today's political communication environment, the use of ill-justified arguments is generally exemplified by politicians reducing their arguments to soundbites, one-liners and slogans that leave little to no room to clearly justify a certain policy position (Esser, 2008). In sum, when politicians do not provide reasons for their positions, or do not provide a logical link between the two, they do not debate in a well-justified manner anymore but rely on ill-justified arguments instead.[1]

There are several reasons why justifications are important to study, especially when they are directed at the wider public (Abulof & Kornprobst, 2017). Since this dissertation focuses on political debates organized in the media, I study politicians' *public* provision of justifications. First, the study of justifications is important from a normative democratic point of view. Overall, democratic theorists argue that the public use of well-justified arguments for political standpoints and decisions is desirable. One key reason is that because political authorities exercise power over their constituents, they are bound to the duty to explain on what grounds and for what reasons their decisions are, or will be, taken (Chambers, 2010; Cohen, 1989; Habermas, 1996; Pitkin, 1967; Rawls, 1997). This way, political representatives

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[1] This means that I do not study the substantive content of politicians' justifications or make value judgments about the epistemic quality of the justifications politicians provide.

offer an "identifiable rationale, one that can be scrutinized and evaluated by those whom decisions will affect" (White & Ypi, 2011, p. 381). This is important for responsiveness, legitimacy and accountability (Esaiasson et al., 2017; Mansbridge, 2003). In effect, "the clearer the rationale[s]" that politicians provide to citizens, "the sharper the line of accountability that can be drawn between promise and performance" (Davidson et al., 2017, p. 188). Moreover, justifying positions well increases citizens' understanding of the reasons behind politicians' positions which, in turn, allows citizens to form and make better-informed opinions and decisions, and increases the legitimacy of political decision-making (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Habermas, 1981). Previous empirical research showed that citizens generally share this normative ideal and expect the use of justifications for political standpoints and decisions (Jennstål et al., 2020; Seyd, 2015). Importantly, however, one should also be aware that *ill-justified* arguments, like slogans, one-liners and soundbites, make political debates and discussions "entertaining, amusing, fast and simple" (De Landtsheer et al., 2008, p. 228), which could also have some positive effects for democracy. These types of arguments are less complex and could therefore reach and engage people that are easily left out of the political debate, such as marginalized and less-educated groups in society (Sanders, 1997; Young, 2000). Rather than complex and boring, these types of arguments might be more "comprehensible (…) and, therefore, more inclusive" (Amsalem, 2019, p. 21 referring to Spirling, 2016).

Still, it are precisely these simplistic and ill-justified forms of communication that raise much of the concern about the quality of contemporary political debate (e.g. Milstein, 2020). While a large number of empirical gaps remain to be filled, the few empirical studies available that have focused on the effects of justifications already show that many of the concerns are warranted and that ill-justified arguments can harm politics and democracy. In particular, previous studies revealed that ill-justified arguments hamper citizens' information retention, decrease citizens' argument repertoire, decrease the reflectiveness of political opinions, and decrease the perceived legitimacy of political decisions (Amsalem, 2019; de Fine Licht et al., 2014; Esaiasson et al., 2017; Muradova, 2021; van der Wurff et al., 2018). For these reasons, normative and empirical, it is important to gain more insights into the evolution and determinants of ill-arguments in mediated political debates, and gain more insights into its effects (e.g. on citizens' trust attitudes).

Civility versus incivility
The second element that this dissertation identifies as key to the quality of political debate is civility. I first conceptualize civility in broad terms and then specify and apply the definition

of civility to the context of mediated political debates. I then contrast this to and conceptualize incivility.

Civility is generally seen as a shared social norm for engaging in political discussion and debate (Jamieson et al., 2017; Mutz, 2015). While defining civility in very specific terms can be rather complex, because what is perceived as civil will depend on one's situational context and culture, "most studies do share" that, in broad terms, "civility connotes a discourse that does not silence or derogate alternative views but instead evinces respect" (Jamieson et al., 2017, p. 206; Kenski et al., 2018). This means that when politicians communicate and discuss politics with each other in a civil way, they recognize the value of different perspectives and are willing to listen carefully to them. They show respect for all persons who are engaged in the debate as well as for their different views and arguments. Put differently, they are willing to take seriously their political opponents and their different perspectives, positions and decisions. In sum, when politicians debate in civil ways with each other, they express a relationship of mutual respect, whereby the equality of the opponent is recognized (Bohman & Richardson, 2009; Boyd, 2006; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Massaro & Stryker, 2012).

In line with most studies, I follow this general definition of civility and I start from this broader ideal of respectful exchanges between politicians to define civility in the context of mediated political debates more specifically. Civility can be expressed in several ways, going from very explicit to more implicit. When civility is expressed explicitly, it includes wordings that signal explicit respect, such as "That is a good point", "I support your view" or "You have been a good Prime Minister" (see e.g. Mutz & Reeves, 2005). More implicit forms of civility do not include this but rather refer to a "neutral" way of communicating that is not explicitly respectful, neither disrespectful. This means that politicians can criticize each other and challenge their opponents, but still do so respectfully (see e.g. Brooks & Geer, 2007). When politicians use such neutrally civil forms of communication, they do not silence or derogate alternative views but still take each other's views seriously (in line with the broader definition of civility; Jamieson et al., 2017; Black & Wiederhold, 2014). Studying the context of debate between politicians in the media, I argue that it is important to take this broad view and include both explicit and implicit forms in the definition of civility. Disagreement and conflict are core and essential to politics and democracy, and politicians should be able to criticize each other, especially in mediated debates where politicians confront each other to persuade and clarify their positions to the public. While politicians should also be able to show explicit respect towards opponents and their policies, expecting politicians only or mainly to express explicit respect would be normatively undesirable (and also unrealistic). It would blur the differences between political candidates, and clear differences are needed

for the formation of well-informed opinions among citizens. In sum, the definition of civility in this dissertation includes politicians' use of explicitly civil and more neutral forms of communication.

This is opposed to what is defined in this dissertation as incivility. Once politicians start criticizing each other in uncivil ways, they are derogating or silencing their opponents' views and/or character and are not being civil anymore. Hence, based on the definition of civility provided above, incivility deviates from the ideal of civility and signals a lack of mutual respect (Jamieson et al., 2017). As for civility, defining incivility in more specific terms is challenging due to the complex, situational and multidimensional nature of the concept (Herbst, 2010; Stryker et al., 2016). However, the political incivility literature – on which I build in this dissertation – has made substantial progress over the past years to do so.

Overall, there is substantial agreement among incivility scholars that incivility can be divided into two main categories, namely "personal-level incivility", which refers to uncivil messages that violate *interpersonal politeness norms*, and "public-level incivility", which refers to uncivil messages that violate *the political and democratic process* more broadly (Muddiman, 2017, p. 3183; see also Sydnor, 2018). In line with the largest share of incivility studies, I focus on the first, personal-level, category, which defines incivility as "discursive behaviors that represent the rejection of communication norms pertaining to considerate, courteous, and respectful discussion" (Hopp, 2019, p. 206; Mutz, 2015). This is characterized, more specifically, by elements such as name-calling, derision, insulting, mockery, and aspersion, and can be directed both at the *character* of one's opponents and at one's opponents' *standpoints, ideas, and policies* (Brooks & Geer, 2007; Coe et al., 2014; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Stryker et al., 2016). Again, it can include very explicit forms of uncivil language (e.g. "You moron!") but can also include somewhat more implicit forms, such as sarcastic comments to ridicule someone, or delegitimizing someone for instance by saying that the person is constantly telling lies. I argue that it is important to include both explicit and implicit forms when studying debates between politicians in the media. Implicit forms are less "in-your-face" forms of incivility but also derogate alternative views and do not signal respect towards opponents.

Scholars who follow the second "public-level" category generally argue that the personal-level definition is too narrow and that it describes impoliteness rather than incivility (Muddiman, 2017, p. 3183; Papacharissi, 2004). According to these scholars, a message is uncivil when it violates the political and democratic process and harms, for instance, the norms of a free and inclusive society. In this perspective, incivility indicates "disrespect for the collective traditions of democracy" and is expressed by uncivil messages that "threaten

democracy, deny people their personal freedoms, and stereotype social groups" (Papacharissi, 2004, p. 267). Studying public-level incivility is also important, but focusing on both types of incivility was outside of the scope of this dissertation. As the aim of this dissertation is to study different debate qualities, i.e. justification and civility, I decided to limit my focus to one form of incivility, i.e. the one where politicians violate interpersonal discussion norms and express incivility towards each other, rather than at democratic political processes and norms more broadly. This does not mean that the latter category is less important to study. Rather, clarifying and making the distinction between both categories is conceptually and empirically important because they could, for instance, be affected differently by different determinants (Rossini, 2020), and could influence citizens' political attitudes differently (Muddiman, 2013).

There are several reasons why studying (in)civility is important. First, from a normative democratic point of view, civility is an end in and of itself. As already stated above, being civil and showing respect in political debate implies that one recognizes the value of other and different perspectives, and that one is willing to take other perspectives seriously. This, in turn, signals that all debate participants are equal and enhances the inclusivity of political debate (Boyd, 2006). Moreover, showing respect towards each other and allowing different viewpoints to be represented enhances the cooperation among politicians from different sides (e.g. in later coalition formation or decision-making processes), and enhances the legitimacy of political decisions, decision-makers and the democratic process more broadly (e.g. Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). Conversely, being uncivil by derogating or demeaning alternative views would harm the presence and discussion of different perspectives, thereby harming inclusive and legitimate political debate. Empirical research has also shown that this normative ideal of discussing politics in civil ways is generally shared by the public (Jennstål et al., 2020; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). However, similar to the justifications element, one should again be aware that civility may also have harmful consequences for democracy, for instance when there is too much civilized elite talk that may perform worse at reaching certain groups in society, particularly minority groups, and could silence these groups (Massaro & Stryker, 2012; Sanders, 1997; Young, 2000). Moreover, some empirical studies find that civility mobilizes and engages people less with politics than incivility (Berry & Sobieraj, 2013; Brooks & Geer, 2007; but also see Otto et al., 2020).

Yet, again, it is precisely politicians' use of incivility that is responsible for a great deal of the concern about the quality of contemporary political debate. This is, for instance, exemplified by the emergence of research centers and organizations like the National Institute of Civil

Discourse and the Center for Civil Discourse[2], that study and advocate political civility. Moreover, and importantly, much of the empirical work on (personal-level) incivility revealed that many of the concerns are indeed warranted. For instance, it has been shown to decrease the perceived rationality and legitimacy of opposing perspectives and candidates, to induce feelings of anger and aversion, and to increase affective polarization (Druckman et al., 2019; Gervais, 2015; Mutz, 2007; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Popan et al., 2019; Skytte, 2020). Again, all these normative and empirical reasons indicate the importance to develop a deeper understanding of incivility in (mediated) political debate.

To conclude, this dissertation studies the evolution, determinants and effects of politicians' use of uncivil communication and ill-justified argumentation by defining and studying it as deviations from civil communication and well-justified argumentation. Following Althaus (2012), I argue that it is important to specify the normative framework on which one builds when studying such communicative practices. In this dissertation, I build on deliberative democratic theory that identifies civility and well-justified arguments as two normatively desirable debate qualities. I use this theory as an evaluative standard against which deviations from the (deliberative) ideal can be measured.

Deliberative democratic theory: a normative framework to assess debate quality

Deliberative democratic theory is a normative, talk-centric theory about how politics ought to be conducted. It puts *deliberation* and, more specifically, *deliberative* debate and discussion at its heart (Bächtiger et al., 2018; Chambers, 2003; Mansbridge et al., 2010; Strömbäck, 2005). Deliberation *(as a noun)* can be defined as "debate and discussion aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants" (Chambers, 2003, p. 309). To produce a "true" or "good" deliberation, the debate or discussion should be deliberative *(as an adjective; see also Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019 for a similar distinction).*[3] For a debate to be deliberative, it should meet certain communicative standards (Steenbergen et al., 2003). This is important for this dissertation because it are precisely the debate elements of justification or reason-giving and respect or civility that feature prominently in deliberative democratic theory as two key deliberative debate

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[2] https://nicd.arizona.edu/ and https://scholarworks.umb.edu/ccd/

[3] In this dissertation, I study deliberative communication in debates between politicians in the media. Yet deliberative democratic theory is a general theory that is more widely applicable. It can take place among many different actors and sites, for instance, citizens in mini-publics or politicians in parliament (Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012). I elaborate more on that point on pp. 26-29.

qualities (Chambers, 2018; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Wessler, 2008a).[4] This is largely based on Habermas' work (1981) who theorized about the *ideal speech situation* where high-quality deliberation requires the (potential) presence of all relevant arguments with the better argument prevailing. To this end, participants have to be allowed to make their argument, justify their arguments, and respect other participants and acknowledge the value of their opponents' arguments (Steiner et al., 2004). Consequently, disrespectfully attacking political adversaries and their views, and reducing political ideas to simplistic, poorly reasoned statements, i.e. incivility and ill-justified arguments in short, run counter to the deliberative ideals of civility and well-justified arguments. In sum, the quality of the political debate is key in deliberative democratic theory, and that quality "centers around argumentative exchange in a climate of mutual respect and civility" (Wessler, 2008b, p. 1199).

Deliberative democratic theorists generally argue that discussing politics in deliberative (here: civil and well-justified) ways would – as already touched upon earlier – increase the epistemic quality and legitimacy of political decision-making and democracy (see e.g. Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019, pp. 27–36). When a diverse set of political standpoints and justifications are welcomed and expressed in public political debate, rather than disrespectfully demeaned or dismissed, a variety of well-explained perspectives can be included in the debate. This would heighten citizens' understanding of different societal issues and stimulate them to reason or deliberate "from within" (Goodin, 2000). This, in turn, enables them to arrive at well-informed political opinions, and would also increase the legitimacy and quality of the decisions, decision-makers and decision-making process (Cohen, 1989; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Habermas, 1981; Rinke, 2016). Civility specifically could also serve ethical goals by generating mutual respect (Mansbridge et al., 2012). Moreover, discussing politics in civil, well-justified ways could reduce political polarization, a growing and pressing concern in many countries across the world (Dryzek et al., 2019).

Deliberative democratic theory has, however, been criticized for postulating ideals that are highly unrealistic and unattainable to achieve in real-world politics (e.g. Walzer, 1999). Important to note here is that deliberative democrats also generally recognize this point and do not expect to ever fully achieve the deliberative ideals:

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[4] Justification and civility are two core elements in deliberative theory that feature prominently in it. Important to note is that other elements can also contribute to deliberative debate, such as reference to the common good, equal participation in debates, or the arrival at consensus (for an overview of elements, see Bächtiger et al., 2018; Steenbergen et al., 2003). I elaborate more on that point on pp. 28-29.

"Like many human ideals and almost all democratic ideals, the ideals that animate deliberative democracy are aspirational - ideals that cannot be achieved fully in practice but that provide standards toward which to aim, all other things equal. Many common criticisms of deliberative democracy fail to recognize the aspirational quality of deliberative ideals. That deliberative democracy in its ideal form cannot be achieved perfectly in the world of practice does not undermine its use as a standard toward which to strive." (Bächtiger et al., 2018, p. 2)

Building on this view, I argue that the ideal of civil, well-justified discussion is an ideal that will only very occasionally or maybe even never reached in practice. In fact, it would not be realistic to expect well-justified, civil political discussion to be present all the time in each debate, yet it is an ideal one *could* strive for. Therefore, this dissertation uses deliberative democratic theory as a yardstick or benchmark rather than seeing it as an ideal we can or should expect to be fully realized in discussions among politicians (Althaus, 2012; Chambers, 2009; Steiner et al., 2004). By using deliberative democratic theory this way, "we can measure deviations from [it] and see which deviations, at what level of magnitude diminish or are fatal to the various potential benefits of deliberation at the individual and societal level" (Stryker & Danielson, 2013, p. 7). Referring back to the three main research questions that guide this dissertation, i.e. the evolution (RQ1), determinants (RQ2) and effects (RQ3) of incivility and ill-justified arguments in mediated debates, we can then specify how this benchmark can be used as a systematic, empirical tool to answer these questions. In particular, it allows us to systematically analyze (1) to what degree politicians deviate from this benchmark over time (e.g. do they increasingly deviate from the deliberative ideals?); (2) which determinants lead to deviations from that benchmark (e.g. do populist politicians deviate more from it than mainstream politicians?); and (3) how deviations from this benchmark influence citizens' attitudes (e.g. does it harm trust in politics?).

Finally, I want to note that deliberative democratic theory is one normative view regarding what characterizes *good* democracy, and is one among many theories or models of democracy. It is precisely its core focus on *debate and communicative practices* that sets it apart from other democratic models. Other often-discussed models are, for instance, competitive, agonistic, participatory or procedural democracy (see e.g. Mouffe, 2016; Strömbäck, 2005; Warren, 2017). Such other democratic models are not necessarily incompatible with deliberative democratic theory (Warren, 2017). Rather, they emphasize *other* virtues than *debate or communication* as important for a democracy to function well. For instance, elections are core in competitive democracy, electoral and non-electoral forms of participation are core in participatory democracy, and adversarial conflict is core in agonistic democracy. These virtues serve different functions and are valued at different

moments in the democratic process (Warren, 2017). For instance, the competitive or electoral model approaches democracy in an aggregative way that is largely based on the importance of elections and the counting of votes (Sartori, 1987; Strömbäck, 2005). "[B]oth deliberation (talking) and aggregation (voting) are usually important for democratic decision-making at different stages [...]. The role of the deliberation before the vote is to help the citizens to understand better the issues, their own interests, and the interests and perceptions of others" (Bächtiger et al., 2018, p. 2). In short, deliberative democratic theory puts communication and debate at its heart and is therefore well-suited to use as the evaluative standard in this dissertation that investigates politicians' communicative practices.

This does not mean, however, that deliberative democratic theory has not been met with criticism. Some democratic scholars that follow other models of democracy, particularly agonistic democrats (e.g. Mouffe, 1999) and difference democrats (e.g. Sanders, 1997; Young, 2000), argue that political debate that privileges civil and well-justified exchanges has undesirable consequences because it favors the more privileged groups in society and excludes groups that are already situated in more marginalized and minority positions. Important to note is that deliberative democrats generally recognize this point and affirm that we should not be blinded to this (I echo this too; see also discussion chapter 9) (Dryzek, 2002b).[5] Moreover, and importantly, following the argument that different virtues serve different functions at different moments in the democratic process (Warren, 2017), adhering to civility and justification ideals may be more or less important to fulfill some democratic functions than to fulfill others. For instance, these ideals are more important to follow in mediated political debates to explain and inform citizens about different perspectives that exist in the political realm, as compared to situations where silenced societal groups are trying to put certain marginalized or forgotten topics on the agenda (Wessler & Schultz, 2007).

Deliberative debate in a non-ideal context: political debates in the media
Overall, most attention in the deliberative democracy literature goes to "ideal" or "likely" cases where deliberative discussions are most likely to take place, such as mini-publics or citizen juries where small groups of randomly selected citizens discuss politics in a facilitated way to safeguard civil, well-justified discussion. Following the *deliberative systems approach*, I argue that we should study the deliberative quality of debate in a variety of venues, including the unlikely or less ideal ones (Mansbridge, 1999; Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012). A deliberative system consists of many different and intertwined components (e.g. venues,

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[5] Moreover, as a response, deliberative democrats also started to incorporate other communicative practices as deliberative forms of communication such as story-telling and humor (Black, 2008; Dryzek, 2002a).

institutions and persons) that together form the system as a whole. Hence, deliberative debate can be practiced and studied at many different sites and by many different actors. This is shown, for instance, by the expansion of studies that study deliberation at different sites and by different actors, such as politicians debating in parliament or citizens discussing politics online (e.g. Esau et al., 2020; Steiner et al., 2004).

The mass media remain, however, an underexplored venue in the field of deliberative democracy. This is surprising given the mass media's prominence and importance in society (Chambers & Costain, 2000; Habermas, 1996; Maia, 2018). They are the main channel of communication that connects politicians and citizens to each other, and they are the key player in informing citizens about politics and in organizing political debates that are widely accessible to the wider public (Newman et al., 2019; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). Hence, it are the media that shape citizens' image of politics the most. As citizens are mainly exposed to political debates via the mass media, it is precisely through the mass media that citizens' attitudes towards politics could be harmed. Therefore, it is important to gather insights into the communication of politicians in these mediated venues that are *directly aimed at the public*.

One explanation for the limited attention for political media content in the deliberative democracy literature is that critics argue that we should not expect any form of deliberation to take place in the media because both the media and politicians are driven by strategic, self-interested rather than deliberative goals. In effect, the media follow precepts of media logic, a logic that favors simplicity and incivility because it attracts the public's attention (Altheide, 2004; Parkinson, 2006). Politicians may follow suit as they learned that adapting their communication to media logic also benefits them: it attracts more media attention and consequently also voters' attention (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014). Moreover, politicians participate in mediated debates mainly with the objective of persuading citizens and "winning" the debate, which may lead them to strategically use different rhetorical tools like incivility and simplicity (Walzer, 1999; Zarefsky, 1992). Additionally, even if politicians use civil and well-justified communication, we may never be sure whether it is truly deliberative or part of strategic action and manipulation (Bächtiger & Beste, 2017; Mansbridge, 2003).

I recognize that these features of the media and political logic reduce the potential of deliberative debate in the media, and that political debates in the media are "by no means immune to severe shortcomings and pathologies" (Maia, 2018, p. 349). But alongside other scholars, I argue that this does not mean that we cannot or should abstain from studying deliberative qualities in the media entirely (e.g. Maia, 2018; Mansbridge et al., 2012). First, precisely because this dissertation uses deliberative democratic theory as a yardstick, I do

not expect the ideal of deliberative debate to be realized but I analyze when, to what degree, and with what effects politicians who participate in mediated debates deviate from it. Second, it is important to gather more insights in this mediated venue because "the mass media, despite several flaws and perils, do not necessarily undermine deliberation. Under certain conditions, the news media can also operate as a forum for civic debates" (Maia, 2018, p. 350). In effect, scholars that did study mediated deliberation generally argue and empirically show that the media can – up to a certain extent – adhere to deliberative norms (e.g. Gastil, 2008; Maia, 2012; Page, 1996). On a theoretical level, the argument is voiced that the entertainment and spectacle dimension of the media can co-exist with contributions to a deliberative sphere (e.g. Coleman, 2013, 2020; Turkenburg, in press; Weinmann & Vorderer, 2018). At the empirical level, studies have shown that, up to a certain extent, the media are deliberative and can contribute to the deliberative sphere by exposing citizens to civil political messages and well-justified arguments (see e.g. Davidson et al., 2017; Ettema, 2007; Maia, 2012; Rohlinger, 2007; Wessler & Schultz, 2007). In short, the media are a non-ideal context, but this does not mean that deliberative debate in the media is not possible at all. This makes it the more interesting to investigate when and to what degree politicians in the media deviate from the deliberative ideals, and with what effects.

Although some first insights have thus been gathered, most empirical studies that examined political media content through a deliberative lens focused on the deliberative quality of *political news coverage*, for instance in TV news or in print media (see e.g. Ettema, 2007; Ferree et al., 2002; Häussler, 2018; Rinke, 2016; Rohlinger, 2007; van der Wurff et al., 2018; Wessler, 2008a; Wessler & Rinke, 2014). Studies that focus on the specific venue of *mediated debates between politicians* remain very scarce (but do see Davidson et al., 2017; Schultz, 2006; Wessler & Schultz, 2007). Distinguishing between different media formats is important, because the evolution, determinants and effects of deliberative qualities may differ depending on the specific media venue under study (Page, 1996; Rinke, 2016). Moreover, insights into politicians' (non)deliberative communication in debates have been gathered more extensively outside the media venue, and particularly in the venue of parliament (e.g. Lord & Tamvaki, 2013; Steiner et al., 2004). Yet, for the reasons mentioned earlier, it is important to gain more insights into politicians' use of the (non)deliberative communication in front of the public.

In sum, there are several possible venues or sites of deliberation and different debate qualities that can contribute to deliberative debate. In this dissertation, I focus on mediated debates and on the qualities civility and justification. I do not study other qualities that can contribute to deliberative debate, such as references to the common good, equal participation and inclusion of different perspectives, or the arrival at a consensus (see e.g.

Steenbergen et al., 2003). I want to note here that we cannot and should not expect that all deliberative elements are always present at all venues or sites. In a deliberative system, different deliberative qualities could be expected or desirable and may be more or less prevalent depending on the actor and site of deliberation that we study (Bächtiger & Beste, 2017; Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012). For the venue of political debates in the media, we *can* expect from politicians that they are *civil towards their opponents* and *provide justifications for their standpoints* (Wessler, 2008a; Wessler & Schultz, 2007). We cannot expect, however, that politicians in these debates find common ground, search for mutual solutions or arrive at a consensus (Davidson et al., 2017; Wessler & Schultz, 2007). Such debates are competitive and adversarial in nature and politicians enter these debates with the aim of persuading citizens to support their policies. In a deliberative system, it is not necessarily a problem that different venues or actors do not score equally high on different deliberative qualities, because the deliberative capacity of such a system can particularly increase via the *cooperation of multiple components in a multitude of ways*. Put differently, it is the interplay of different venues, with some venues producing certain deliberative qualities more than other qualities, that together could produce the ideal of a deliberative democracy as a whole. Therefore, it is acceptable in a deliberative system when some of its components score high on the attainment of consensus to solve societal issues, others score high on the presence of justifications and/or civil discourse, and others score high on inclusiveness and equal participation of different participants (Bächtiger et al., 2018).

To conclude this section, applying the benchmark of civil, well-justified debate to study political debates in the media does not imply that politicians who do not communicate all the time in civil and well-justified ways are "bad" politicians. Conflict and disagreement are key in a democracy, and politicians and the media have other objectives, such as attracting the audience and winning elections, that conflate with those of deliberative democracy. Therefore, we cannot expect politicians to always debate in civil, well-justified ways. Yet this recognition does not take away all the concerns in the public and academic debate about the prevalence and harmful effects these non-deliberative forms of communication could have. Precisely by using the deliberative ideal in a real-world context, I can investigate empirically and systematically whether, and to what extent, these concerns are warranted.

Theorizing the evolution, determinants and effects of incivility and ill-justified arguments

In this section, I theorize about the evolution (RQ1), determinants (RQ2), and effects (RQ3) of the quality of political debate. I particularly focus on deviations from the deliberative ideal

and therefore mainly theorize about the evolution, determinants, and effects of incivility and ill-justified arguments (which is thus always contrasted to the ideals of civility and well-justified arguments; see above). First, I discuss three societal trends that I expect to have led to a rise in politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified arguments in mediated political debates. Second, I provide a framework to study determinants of politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified arguments in mediated debates, and specify and discuss the determinants studied in this dissertation. Third, I focus on the effects of *politicians' use* of incivility and ill-justified arguments on political trust, and on the effects of *journalists' focus* on incivility in post-debate news coverage on political trust and news credibility. I define the concepts of political trust and news credibility, their importance, and discuss the causal mechanisms.

The evolution of incivility and ill-justified arguments

The first research question investigates how politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified arguments in mediated debates evolved over the past decades (i.e. since 1985). Despite concerns and allegations about declining debate quality, few empirical attempts have been made to study this, especially when looking inside the media venue and outside the United States. The few available studies that did investigate debate quality longitudinally generally point towards a decline in the quality of political debate. For instance, there are indications from U.S.-based research hat incivility has increased in U.S. Congress (Ahuja, 2008; Uslaner, 1993; but see Jamieson & Falk, 1998), in U.S. political news (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011), and in U.S. politics more generally (Shea & Sproveri, 2012). In Swiss parliamentary (migration) debates, there is increasing simplicity and decreasing cognitive complexity, which strongly links to justifications (Wyss et al., 2015), and the average soundbite length that journalists report in political news coverage kept on decreasing over the past decades in the U.S. and in Europe (e.g. Farnsworth & Lichter, 2007; Ramsay, 2011; Reinemann & Wilke, 2007; Smith, 1989). This latter finding led Patterson (1993) to conclude that political candidates are increasingly voiceless in the media, limiting their chances to justify their positions well to the public. Yet, it is important to note that the latter studies that investigated politicians' soundbites focused on the news. Rather than studying *politicians' own use* of *justifications* in political debate, they focused on what journalists picked from the debates. As argued earlier, it is important to distinguish between these media venues. In sum, while we have some insight into politicians' use of uncivil communication over time (albeit not in the context of mediated political debate in western Europe), longitudinal studies about politicians' use of justifications are virtually absent.

Following the findings from previous studies, I do also expect that politicians' use of civil, well-justified statements is in decline in mediated political debates in the western European (Belgian) context that this dissertation studies. I theorize about three societal trends that

have taken place in western democracies since the 1980s. These trends serve as an explanation why the quality of the political debate is potentially in decline in mediated political debates. The three trends are: the increasing mediatization of politics, the growing importance of social media (also for political usage), and the rising success of populist parties and leaders.

First, from the nineties onwards, the media landscape has become increasingly fragmented, competitive, and commercialized. Hence, media consumers are increasingly overwhelmed by an overload of broadcasters, channels, programs, and outlets to choose from. As a consequence, the media have to fight intensely and increasingly to draw the audience's attention. This spurs the media to operate in accordance with the so-called *media logic* (Brants & Van Praag, 2006; Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Van Aelst, 2014), because adherence to this logic proves effective in the battle for the public's attention. Importantly, this logic strongly affects political communication in the media by putting emphasis and focusing on certain behaviors or characteristics of politicians, and by presenting political information in attractive ways (Altheide, 2004). Emphasizing and encouraging incivility and simplicity, and presenting political content in conflictual and short, appealing ways with one-liners and soundbites, fits this logic extremely well (Altheide, 2004; Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Muddiman, 2018). Moreover, over the years, politicians learned that they benefit from adapting their communication style to this logic and started to engage in the process of "self-mediatization": they align their communication with media logic because it increases their chances to be picked up by the news media and grab attention (Esser, 2013; Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Van Aelst, 2014). Evidently, this has many benefits for them as it allows them to spread their messages widely in the public sphere. Therefore, it should be no surprise that politicians have been stimulated increasingly to communicate and debate in uncivil, ill-justified ways.

Second, in recent years, the fight for attention has extended beyond the traditional media, with the emergence and rising importance of social media to spread political content (Brants & van Praag, 2017). Social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter operate via specific features that privilege - again - simplistic, short, and uncivil statements because they are easily picked up and shared (Ott, 2017). Today, the public conversation about political debates that are organized in the (traditional) media – such as election debates on which this dissertation mainly focuses (see chapter 3) – extends to the social media realm where the politicians' attacks, one-liners and performances are posted, shared, discussed and evaluated (Juárez-Gámiz et al., 2020; Trilling, 2015). This encourages politicians to align their communication with those features that prove successful to heighten their visibility on these social media platforms as well, both during and after the debate. Again, in short, the

growing importance of (political usage of) social media, also during political debates in the media, stimulates politicians to debate in uncivil, ill-justified ways.

Third, the success of populist parties and leaders has been rising from the nineties onwards throughout western Europe (Rooduijn et al., 2019). Consequently, they are increasingly present in political debates in the media. Populist politicians believe that society is divided "into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite'", and that there is one "general will" of the people (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). Therefore, populist politicians are inclined to attack the elite and to criticize the debating character that is inherent to politics (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Urbinati, 1998). As a consequence, they are more inclined than non-populist politicians to use an uncivil, ill-justified debate style (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Wyss et al., 2015). Or, as Bossetta (2017, p. 715) writes, "the new wave of populist challenges is a far cry from the deliberative, temperate, and polished politicians who have typically governed advanced liberal democracies". Appearing increasingly on the political stage, it is thus likely that they are heightening the prevalence of incivility and ill-justified arguments. Moreover, as these communication types fit media logic extremely well, populist politicians acquire wide media visibility (Mazzoleni, 2014). This does not go unnoticed by other non-populist politicians, who tend to copy populists' debate style in mediated political debates in order to compete with them more effectively (Bossetta, 2017; chapter 4). Therefore, the argument goes that we are currently living in a "populist zeitgeist" (Mudde, 2004), making political discourse more uncivil and ill-justified across the entire political spectrum.

All in all, these three societal evolutions have permeated the political and media landscape in many western democracies from the eighties onwards (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Juárez-Gámiz et al., 2020; Rooduijn et al., 2019). I expect that because of these increasing trends in society, politicians increasingly started to deviate from the deliberative ideal of discussing politics in civil, well-justified ways and increasingly started to use uncivil, ill-justified statements instead. These expectations are put to the test in chapter 5 (for justifications) and chapter 6 (for incivility).

The determinants of incivility and ill-justified arguments
As discussed in the previous section, the few available studies that investigated the quality of political debate over time generally show that it is in decline. However, importantly, the studies also show that the decline does not happen steadily, but with ups and downs over the years, which leads them to conclude that context plays a key role and that it is important to investigate these communicative practices in relation to their context (e.g. Shea &

Sproveri, 2012; Uslaner, 1993; Wyss et al., 2015). Following that conclusion, this dissertation develops a deeper understanding of different factors that potentially influence the prevalence of incivility and ill-justified arguments in mediated debates. Accordingly, RQ2 is formulated as follows: Which determinants influence politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified arguments, and how?

To answer this question, a multi-layered framework is proposed to study potential determinants. There are different studies available that already investigated different factors that influence politicians' use of deliberative qualities like civility and justifications, but they are largely focused on parliamentary debates (see e.g. Bächtiger & Hangartner, 2010; Lord & Tamvaki, 2013; Steiner et al., 2004), and many determinants are still unexplored.[6] Worth mentioning is also the growing literature on determinants of incivility and justifications in *citizens*' communication, as comparted to *politicians*' communication, particularly in *online* discussions (e.g. Coe et al., 2014; Maia et al., 2021; Oz et al., 2018; Rains et al., 2017; Theocharis et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2013). The goal of this section is to provide a framework to study determinants of uncivil, ill-justified statements used by politicians in the media, and to specify and discuss the determinants that are studied in this dissertation.

I specify and study three levels, i.e. macro, meso and micro, at which different determinants could potentially influence politicians' use of uncivil, ill-justified statements in mediated debates. In general terms, the macro level looks at the *country* context, the meso level investigates the *debate* and *media* context, and the micro level studies the politicians' *individual level* context. The different levels and determinants studied in this dissertation are presented in Figure 2.1, and I will discuss them in the following paragraphs. I will summarize the key findings from previous research and based on that formulate the expectations for each determinant. More information can be found in the corresponding chapters (see Figure 2.1). As Figure 2.1 shows, a larger number of determinants are studied for incivility than for justifications in this dissertation. Therefore, I will specify in the following paragraphs which determinant is expected to influence which debate quality element, and how.

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[6] I expect that several of the results on determinants gathered in parliamentary debate studies will be transferable to the mediated debate context, such as determinants on the politicians' individual level (e.g. incumbency status or populist ideology). Yet there are also other determinants that cannot be studied in the parliamentary debate context and therefore will bring novel insights (e.g. the type of broadcaster on which the debate is organized or the televised debate format).

Figure 2.1: Overview of studied determinants of incivility and ill-justified arguments

> **MACRO**
> CH4: Electoral system[i,j]

> **MESO**
> CH5 & CH6: Broadcaster[i,j]
> CH5 & CH6: Populist presence[i,j]
> CH6: Issue type[i]
> CH6: Format[i]
> CH6: Action-reaction[i]

> **MICRO**
> CH4 & CH6: Populist ideology[i,j]
> CH6: Incumbency[j]
> CH6: Gender[i]
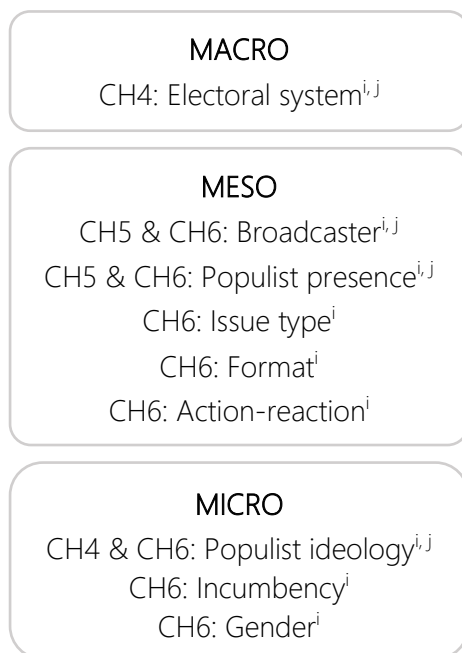
Note: The superscripts indicate the debate element that is studied: i = incivility; j = justifications.

First, I expect that country-level factors (macro) will influence the quality of political debates in the media. In this dissertation, I focus on one macro-level factor, namely a country's electoral system. Both the prevalence of ill-justified arguments and incivility are studied across electoral systems in this dissertation (chapter 4). It is expected that the quality of mediated debates will be higher in systems with electoral rules that foster power-sharing, such as the Netherlands, as compared to majoritarian systems that do not foster power-sharing, such as the United Kingdom. This expectation draws on previous cross-national research that investigated the deliberative quality of *parliamentary* debates, and finds that deliberative debate quality is higher in the parliaments of consensus democracies than in majoritarian democracies (e.g. Bächtiger & Hangartner, 2010; Lord & Tamvaki, 2013; Steiner et al., 2004). The reasoning is that when politicians have to work together in a power-sharing system, they have greater incentive to justify their positions well and to interact in a civil way with each other. Hence, electoral rules that foster power-sharing offer stronger incentives to politicians to communicate collaboratively and adhere to deliberative norms of civility and well-justified argumentation. So, the question that is addressed is: Does the pattern observed in parliamentary debates emerge in the less researched context of political debates in the media too? To this end, three countries are studied with different electoral rules: the Netherlands, Germany and the United Kingdom. The Netherlands is situated at the power-sharing end of the continuum; the United Kingdom is situated at the other end (majoritarian system); and Germany is situated in between. Accordingly, it is expected that

politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified arguments is highest in mediated debates in the United Kingdom, lowest in the Netherlands, and that Germany is situated in between.

Second, I expect that the media and debate context (meso) will influence politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified arguments. The broadcaster-determinant refers to the type of broadcaster, i.e. public or commercial, on which the debate is aired. Since the commercial broadcaster is driven stronger by media logic (see above for explanation) than the public broadcaster (Brants & Van Praag, 2006; Walter & Van Praag, 2014), and because the public broadcaster is driven stronger by the deontological code to inform the public well (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004), I expect that the debates on the commercial broadcaster will contain more uncivil and ill-justified statements. Debate moderators could, for instance, stimulate incivility and shorter or simplistic answers to make sure that the debates follow the precepts of media logic to grab attention (Walter & Van Praag, 2014). Previous research that studied television news already points in this direction, as deliberative qualities were found to be higher on the public than the commercial broadcaster across the U.S. and German case (Wessler & Rinke, 2014). In addition, I expect the presence of populist politicians in the debates to heighten levels of incivility and ill-justified arguments. In the previous section, it was discussed that uncivil, ill-justified statements may be on the rise because of the growing success of populism. To make that argument, I built on some first indications that populist politicians use these communication types more than non-populist politicians (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Wyss et al., 2015). This dissertation contributes to this line of research by digging further into this and gathering more evidence. Overall, it is expected that debates in which populists are present are more uncivil and ill-justified because populists themselves are more likely to use uncivil, ill-justified statements *and* because non-populist politicians seem to be inclined to copy populist politicians' debate style when interacting with them in these debates in order to compete with them more effectively (Bossetta, 2017; see above). For these reasons, the debates are expected to become more uncivil and ill-justified overall.

The next three meso-determinants are studied for incivility only. With regards to issue type, I expect that the discussion of moral issues, such as euthanasia, abortion or immigration (Colombo, 2021), will stimulate more incivility than non-moral issues. The reasoning is that moral issues tend to trigger more polarization and hostile reactions and less willingness to compromise (Garrett & Bankert, 2020; Ryan, 2017). With regards to format of the debate, I study the number of politicians that are debating politics with each other. I expect that the more politicians are *simultaneously* debating with each other, the higher the level of incivility will be. The reason is that political debates often attract additional news media attention (journalists cover the debates in their news articles, for instance) or lead to additional discussion online. Politicians generally crave for that attention, but the more politicians are

debating with each other, the harder it is to get that attention. As politicians learned that uncivil statements are likely to grab attention (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014), I expect that they will use it more when they have to fight for it more. Next, with regards to the "action-reaction" determinant, I expect that one uncivil statement will spur more incivility. I build on the literature of *work place* incivility for this argument, where it has been shown that incivility triggers more incivility (e.g. Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Relatedly, I build on Gervais' finding (2014, 2017) that incivility in politicians' expressions online stimulates incivility in citizens' reactions to it.

Third, I expect micro-level determinants to influence politicians' debate style. I study the impact of politicians' populist ideology on their use of incivility *and* ill-justified arguments, and the impact of their incumbency status and gender on their use of incivility. The difference between the meso and micro-level determinant for populism is that "populist presence" (meso) refers to the aggregate debate level and compares debates where populists are present with debates where they are absent. To gather more detailed insights at the lower individual level, "populist ideology" is included to compare debate quality between politicians who do and do not share the populist ideology, i.e. the idea that society is divided into two homogenous and antagonistic groups (the "pure people" versus "the corrupt elite") and that there is one "general will of the people" (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). As discussed earlier, politicians who share the populist ideology are expected to use uncivil, ill-justified statements more than politicians who do not share this ideology. A second individual-level characteristic that is expected to influence incivility is politicians' incumbency status. Whereas politicians in government are likely to defend current policies, politicians in opposition are likely to be more critical and attack incumbents and their policies (Ganghof & Bräuninger, 2006). This, in turn, may lead to higher incivility use among politicians in opposition (e.g. Bächtiger & Hangartner, 2010). Finally, politicians' gender could influence their incivility use. Women are more closely associated with communion traits (e.g. friendliness) than men, who are more closely associated with agentic traits (e.g. competitiveness, assertiveness) and generally enjoy argument and disagreement more than women do, which can be linked to higher incivility (Mölders et al., 2017; Williams & Best, 1982; Wolak, 2020). Moreover, women are more likely to perceive political speech as uncivil than men (Kenski et al., 2020). Hence, I expect female politicians to be more hesitant to use incivility than male politicians (but see also Bächtiger & Hangartner, 2010 who do not find a difference).

In sum, to address RQ2, a multi-layered framework is proposed in this dissertation to gather insights into the determinants that potentially heighten politicians' use of uncivil, ill-justified statements in mediated political debates. This contributes to the literature because many of

the determinants are, first, underexplored, or second, studied in other contexts such as in parliamentary debates or in online discussion among citizens. Gathering insights into the context-dependency of uncivil communication and ill-justified argumentation is important to understand where differences in prevalence come from.[7] The insights gathered could also serve as input to design mediated debates that stimulate more civil, well-justified discussion in practice (see chapter 9).

The effects of incivility and ill-justified arguments

As discussed earlier in this chapter, citizens' exposure to politicians' use of uncivil, ill-justified statements could influence their attitudes in a multitude of ways (e.g. Brooks & Geer, 2007; Popan et al., 2019; Skytte, 2020; van der Wurff et al., 2018). While it can have certain positive effects, for instance to reach citizens and engage them with politics, it mainly raises concern. One of the main concerns relates to the legitimacy problems that these communication forms could cause (de Fine Licht et al., 2014; Milstein, 2020; Mutz, 2007; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Patriotta et al., 2011). One such potential legitimacy issue relates to **citizens' trust attitudes**.[8] I study two *objects* of trust: trust in *politics* (i.e. trust in politicians and in political institutions), and trust in the *news media*. First, in chapter 7, I study whether political trust is harmed when politicians use incivility and ill-justified arguments in mediated debates. Second, in chapter 8, I study what happens when the news media highlight politicians' use of incivility in their post-debate news coverage. In particular, I investigate whether this journalistic practice decreases levels of trust in politics *and* trust in the news media.

One overarching causal mechanism is put forward to explain these relationships. In particular, building on previous research, I argue that these debate and reporting styles *violate normative expectations* that citizens generally share. These violations of normative expectations refer to what citizens generally perceive as *appropriate* communicative practices for politicians when they participate in (mediated) debates, and what they perceive as *appropriate* practices for journalists when they cover these debates (e.g. Ben-Porath, 2010; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). In the following paragraphs, I elaborate more on this. I first focus on political trust and conceptualize it, discuss its relevance, and explain the causal mechanisms. I then do the same for trust in the news media.

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[7] There are also other determinants that can be studied within this multi-layered framework, such as a country's cultural context (macro), the role of the moderator (meso), or politicians' level of political experience (micro).

[8] Other legitimacy issues could, for instance, relate to the perceived legitimacy of the positions or decisions that are communicated in uncivil, ill-justified ways (e.g. Esaiasson et al., 2017). These types of legitimacy perceptions do not relate to the *outlet* that communicates or distributes political information (i.e. political or news media) as studied in this dissertation, but to the *substance* of the communication (i.e. policy position or decision; see chapter 9).

Political trust

Political trust is defined in this dissertation as an evaluation "of whether or not political authorities and institutions are performing in accordance with normative expectations held by the public" (Miller & Listhaug, 1990, p. 358). Similarly, Mutz and Reeves, who studied the effects of incivility on political trust in a U.S.-context, define political trust as follows: "to trust is to assume that a person or institution will 'observe the rules of the game' (Citrin & Muste, 1999, p. 465) and to believe that those involved will act 'as they should' (Barber, 1983)" (Mutz & Reeves, 2005, p. 3). Thus, when politicians violate normative expectations held by the public, political trust is expected to go down (see more elaboration below).

Political trust is generally linked to the broader concept of system or political support, which is a multi-layered concept that can refer to different objects and levels of citizens' support (Easton, 1965; Norris, 2011). Political support involves *specific* and *diffuse* orientations that can be understood as a continuum (Easton, 1965; Norris, 2011, 2017). This continuum goes from very specific levels of support towards a certain component in the political system to very diffuse levels of support (e.g. support for party leaders versus support for the democratic regime and its principles). "The notion of political trust [...] comprises the two most specific levels of political support" (Norris, 2017, p. 24). These two specific levels refer to support for (1) political actors, such as party leaders or elected representatives, and (2) regime institutions, such as the parliament and the government (see Norris, 2017, p. 23 for an overview of all levels). Accordingly, I investigate, first, effects on citizens' level of trust in politicians who communicate in uncivil, ill-justified ways. Second, I study spill-over effects to evaluations of trust in the political system (institutions) more broadly (see also Forgette & Morris, 2006; Mutz & Reeves, 2005).

Political trust is important because it is generally believed to function "as the glue that keeps the system together and as the oil that lubricates the policy machine" (van der Meer & Zmerli, 2017, p. 1). Citizens who have trust in their representatives and political institutions are more likely to commit public resources to policy ends, to support governmental policies, and to abide by the law, also when disagreeing with them (Chanley et al., 2000; Marien & Hooghe, 2011; Rudolph & Evans, 2005; Tyler & Jackson, 2014). Therefore, political trust contributes to the well-functioning of government and to democratic stability (Citrin & Stoker, 2018).[9] Low levels of trust in political actors may be less problematic for democratic

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[9] The concept of political trust is often linked to the concepts of political *mistrust* and *distrust*. Some skepticism or mistrust towards politics may not be problematic for government effectiveness and democratic stability because it makes citizens vigilant towards the behavior of their representatives and can increase political

stability than low levels of trust in the political system (Norris, 2017). However, when politicians violate normative expectations frequently and as a class appear as untrustworthy, it could eventually spill-over, decreasing citizens' trust in the process of politics overall (Brooks & Geer, 2007). Moreover, trustworthiness is an important characteristic to possess for politicians because it can contribute to their electoral success (Levi & Stoker, 2000).

Why would citizens' exposure to politicians' use of uncivil, ill-justified statements decrease their level of trust in politics? Previous research has shown that civility and well-justified arguments are not only normative deliberative ideals, but also ideals that are generally shared by the public: citizens expect that politicians behave civilly in debates and that politicians justify their policy positions well to the public (Coleman & Moss, 2016; Hooghe et al., 2017; Jennstål et al., 2020; Muddiman, 2017; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Seyd, 2015). In line with the definition of political trust, violating this expectation would lower citizens' political trust levels. In the following paragraphs, I discuss this effect further, first, for *politicians'* use of *incivility*. Second, for *politicians'* use of *ill-justified arguments*. Third, for *journalists'* focus on political *incivility* in post-debate news coverage.

First, Mutz and Reeves (2005) build the argument that citizens share the norm of civility in political debate (see also Funk, 2001; Muddiman, 2017; Mutz, 2015), and they were the first to explicitly state that violations of this civility norm would decrease political trust. In three experimental studies conducted in the United States, they exposed participants to uncivil politicians discussing politics in televised debates, and do indeed find extensive support for their argument. Moreover, they found that it is not only trust in politicians that declines, but also trust in the political institutions more generally.[10] Similarly, building on the argument that incivility violates norms, Skytte (2020) conducted four studies among American citizens and also found that politicians' uncivil debate style decreases trust in politicians. Building on these arguments and findings, I test this relationship outside the U.S. context and expect similar effects to occur in a western European context where there is no evidence of this relationship so far. I expect, first, that politicians' use of incivility decreases citizens' level of

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engagement (Lenard, 2008). It is particularly when mistrust turns into widespread distrust that government effectiveness and democratic stability may be threatened (see Bertsou, 2019; Lenard, 2008 for discussion).

[10] One may argue that these effects could be weaker today because it has been argued that norms of conduct, and particularly civility norms, have slowly been eroding, and that citizens may be getting used to incivility in politics (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Uslaner, 1993). Despite norm erosion, it is found that even in the U.S. where political incivility is omnipresent and increasing, large majorities of the population worry about it. For instance, 93% of Americans identify incivility as a problem, with most Americans (68%) identifying it as a "major problem" (Weber Shandwick et al., 2019). Moreover, 91% states that civility among elected officials at all levels is important, and 73% believes that incivility leads to political gridlock (ibid).

trust in politicians, and second, that this adverse effect will spill over to trust in the political institutions more generally. The expectations are tested in chapters 7 and 8.

Second, citizens expect politicians to provide justifications in the public political sphere in general (Graham et al., 2003; Hooghe et al., 2017; Seyd, 2015), and in political debates in the media more specifically (Coleman & Moss, 2016). Violating this expectation could, again, decrease political trust. Previous work that studied the relationship between politicians' use of justifications and perceived legitimacy more broadly (trust is a specific legitimacy perception) has specified several mechanisms that could explain the relationship between justification and perceived legitimacy (de Fine Licht, 2014a, pp. 23–30; de Fine Licht et al., 2014; Esaiasson et al., 2017)[11]: justifying political positions, as compared to not justifying them, could increase the public's *understanding* behind the positions, be perceived as *fairer*, produce *better policies*, make people feel that they have greater ability to hold politicians *accountable*, and increase politicians' perceived *responsiveness*, which, in turn, would increase citizens' legitimacy beliefs towards politics. These elements all refer to things that the public generally expects from politics and can thus be summarized under the heading of "normative expectations" that citizens generally share (e.g. Graham et al., 2003).

The scholars that specified these mechanisms moreover conducted experimental work to study this relationship between justifications and perceived legitimacy and generally show that justifying policy positions and decisions indeed increases perceived legitimacy, such as procedure acceptance and decision acceptance (e.g. de Fine Licht, 2014b; de Fine Licht et al., 2014; Esaiasson et al., 2017). Yet, experimental studies that examine the link between justification and political trust more specifically are, to the best of my knowledge, still lacking. There are, however, some observational studies that provide first empirical indications that the negative relationship between ill-justified argumentation and political trust holds, and that this moreover runs via the mechanism of norm violations. Survey research by Seyd (2015) argued and found that trust declines when citizens perceive that politicians fail to live up to citizens' expectations about politics. Politicians' use of justifications was one such expectation that was included in the study. Moreover, survey research by Hooghe et al. (2017) finds that citizens with higher normative expectations about politics – with justifications again being one such expectation included in the study –, have lower trust in the political system. The reason is, they argue, that citizens with higher expectations are more likely to see violations of these expectations which, in turn, decreases political trust. By conducting an experimental test in this dissertation that focuses specifically and only on

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[11] Legitimacy perceptions can be defined by proxies such as decision acceptance, procedure acceptance (of the process of political decision-making) and trust (e.g. de Fine Licht, 2014).

the relationship between politicians' use of ill-justified arguments and political trust, stronger causal claims can be made that contribute further to the literature on this underexplored relationship. This relationship is tested in chapter 7.

Third, I study the news media's role in this because the news media are strongly inclined to emphasize and even overstate incivility when covering political debates (Muddiman, 2013, 2018; Skytte, 2019). Therefore, after the first step of analyzing the effects of *politicians' own use* of uncivil communication, this dissertation adds a second step by analyzing how *the news media's focus* on political incivility in post-debate news coverage influences political trust. By framing political debates as uncivil and drawing attention to politicians' use of incivility, the news media highlight and signal to the public that politicians violated civility norms in the debates. Therefore, the news media could harm citizens' political trust levels too. Even more, the news media could aggravate this adverse effect because of their tendency to *overstate* incivility (Benoit & Currie, 2001; Muddiman, 2018; Skytte, 2019).

There are some first indications that news coverage that emphasizes incivility (which I conceptualize as *incivility-focused news coverage*) could harm political trust. Most studies have focused on *negative* news coverage, and showed that negative news about politics increases political cynicism and lowers political trust (Cappella, 2002; de Vreese & Semetko, 2002; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2006; Patterson, 1993). While negative news is a broader concept and covers more than incivility-focused news[12], these studies give some initial indications that similar effects may appear for incivility-focused news coverage. To the best of my knowledge, there is only one study that investigated the effect of incivility in the news on political trust more specifically (Forgette & Morris, 2006). In their study, Forgette and Morris analyzed the effects of two different news formats covering the U.S. State of the Union. While one news format strongly focused on incivility, the other format did not. The authors find that trust in politicians and in political institutions decreased substantially among those citizens that watched the incivility-focused news format. Building on these initial findings, I expect that post-debate news coverage that highlights politicians' uncivil debate style will harm trust in politicians and in the political system more broadly. These expectations are tested in chapter 8.

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[12] Negative news is news coverage that criticizes a politician or party (and is generally contrasted to positive news that supports a politician or party; see e.g. Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2006). Negative news is thus broader than incivility-focused news, because negativity can be civil (criticizing without being disrespectful; Fridkin & Kenney, 2011).

News media trust

The second trust attitude that is studied is trust in the news media, also referred to as news credibility in this dissertation. These concepts are often used interchangeably (Kohring & Matthes, 2007), and news credibility is the concept that is mainly used in incivility research that studies relationships between incivility and news media trust (e.g. Thorson et al., 2010; Wu & Thorson, 2017). The reason why I study news media trust is because the journalistic practice of emphasizing incivility may not only spur and aggravate distrust towards politics but also towards the press itself (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996, 1997; Cho et al., 2009).

News credibility is, again, an evaluation that depends on normative expectations held by the public. It refers to normative expectations the public shares about appropriate journalistic practices (Ben-Porath, 2010) and, more specifically, normative expectations regarding journalists' reporting style (Fico et al., 2004; Henke et al., 2020). Moreover, news credibility entails several dimensions that scholars put forward and citizens also use in their evaluation of news credibility, such as the accuracy, fairness, completeness, trustworthiness, and neutrality of news reporting (e.g. Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Meyer, 1988; Tsfati et al., 2006). All these dimensions are linked to "idealized journalistic norms of objectivity, fairness, and balance" (Thorson et al., 2010, p. 292). When journalists violate these journalistic norms and "do not live by their professional standards", news credibility is expected to decline (Maier, 2005; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003, p. 506). A focus on political incivility is one of the journalistic practices that could decrease news credibility (Ng & Detenber, 2005; Prochazka et al., 2018). It is moreover a journalistic practice that violates deliberative norms (e.g. Rohlinger, 2007; Wessler, 2008a; Wessler & Rinke, 2014).

While news literacy and therefore a certain degree of skepticism towards the news media is good or desirable because it allows a critical glance at news reporting, low credibility levels harm the well-functioning of the news industry and the democratic process more generally (Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). First, news credibility is important for journalists and news institutions because "audiences are more likely to read, watch, or listen to news content provided by sources they trust" (Thorson et al., 2010, p. 292; Wanta & Hu, 1994). Citizens are thus more likely to turn away from the news media when trust levels are low. This, in turn, has implications for democracy. It prevents the news media from fulfilling its societal role to inform the public, and could therefore lead to less-informed opinions in society. Relatedly, citizens who have little faith in the (traditional) news media may seek out other information sources, such as alternative news sites where the presence of fake news and alternative facts is likely to be larger (Henke et al., 2020; Zuckerman, 2017). In contrast, when credibility levels are higher, citizens are more likely to regularly consume news which, in

turn, increases their political knowledge, civic engagement and political participation (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2018; Hao et al., 2014; Livingstone & Markham, 2008; Verba et al., 1995).

Why would incivility-focused coverage decrease news credibility? Citizens' expectations about news reporting generally reflect the normative indicators of journalistic quality such as fairness, balance and accuracy that were highlighted earlier when defining news credibility (Tsfati et al., 2006; van der Wurff & Schoenbach, 2014). The focus on incivility in news reporting could serve as a heuristic cue that signals low journalistic quality and could consequently lower news credibility (Muddiman, 2013; Prochazka et al., 2018). This effect has previously been studied in the context of user comments online, where it has been shown that incivility in user comments lowers the perceived credibility of the news media (Borah, 2013; Naab et al., 2020; Prochazka et al., 2018; but see Thorson et al., 2010). I extend this argument to the context of journalists' focus on incivility in their news reporting. To my knowledge, there are no studies examining this specific relationship so far, but other studies did find that journalists' use of opinionated and intense language, and a strong focus on the form instead of the substance of politics violates journalistic norms and lowers news credibility (Hamilton & Hunter, 1998; Mukherjee & Weikum, 2015). As journalists' focus on political incivility is a specific type of opinionated and intense language, and reflects a focus on the form instead of the substance of the debate, similar negative effects on news credibility are expected. This expectation is tested in chapter 8.

In summary, when politicians and news media deviate from the deliberative ideals of civility and well-justified argumentation, political trust and news credibility are expected to erode because incivility and ill-justified argumentation violate normative expectations citizens generally share. Before putting all the formulated expectations to the test, I will discuss the research design and the operationalization of all the key concepts in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 : Research design

This chapter first introduces the case of televised election debates that is mainly used to answer the three main research questions. Second, this chapter discusses the suitability and generalizability of the countries under study to answer these questions. Third, the two methods used in this dissertation to answer the research questions are presented, i.e. quantitative content analysis and experimental research. The operationalization of the key variables is also clarified when discussing each method.

Case: televised election debates

The evolution, determinants and effects (on trust) of incivility and ill-justified arguments are studied in this dissertation in the venue of *political debates in the media*. As outlined earlier, this venue is important to study because it is directed at the wider public, plays a pivotal role in connecting politicians to the wider public, and received little attention in the field of deliberative democracy. In each empirical chapter, I use the case of *televised election debates* that serves as a key example and important type of political debate that is organized in the media. The evolution (RQ1) and determinants (RQ2) of politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified arguments are analyzed with quantitative content analyses (see below), and these content analyses are conducted with datasets that consist of collections of televised election debates. The effects on citizens' trust attitudes (RQ3) are studied with survey experiments (see below). Participants in the experiments are told that they will read or listen to a short election debate fragment to give the participant contextual information about the debate fragment they are exposed to. Election debates have been organized for many decades in many countries around the world (Coleman, 2000; Juárez-Gámiz et al., 2020) and they are an ideal-typical and important case to study in this dissertation for the following reasons.

First, televised election debates are an ideal-typical case of political debates organized in the media. They are a key example of a mediated debate where two or more political leaders from different political parties directly confront and interact with each other to debate and discuss politics. They do that in front of the wider public (as compared to parliamentary debates for instance), which is an important element in this dissertation. They discuss the same political issues, at the same time, in the same setting, which provides the opportunity to study politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified arguments in comparable settings and therefore limits the influence of other potentially confounding factors. It is also precisely this setting that makes election debates so unique as compared to other communication channels or formats. Whereas most types of political or electoral campaign communication are one-sided (such as political speeches, interviews, social media posts or political advertisements), election debates allow voters to directly compare political candidates side by side and do not selectively expose viewers to only one candidate or party (Jamieson & Adasiewicz, 2000; Lang & Lang, 1961).

Second, these debates serve an important information and accountability function in democracy. By watching these debates, citizens are exposed to political information. Previous research has already shown that after watching election debates, citizens are better informed about the different policy positions of different parties and politicians (Benoit et al., 2002; Holbert et al., 2002; Holbrook, 1999; van der Meer et al., 2016). Citizens are also better aware which topics are high on the agenda and they are more inclined to discuss politics with others (Aalberg & Jenssen, 2007; Benoit et al., 2003; Cho & Choy, 2011). As a result, citizens may voice better-informed decisions at the voting booth. This is important because in order to represent popular will in government policy, citizens must be aware of the different positions in the political arena and make informed choices to ensure that the electoral outcome can be interpreted as a policy mandate (Goodin, 2008; Thomassen, 1994). The debates thus have the potential to contribute to this goal. Moreover, as politicians discuss their vision and plans for the future right before the election takes place, these debates serve an important accountability function at a key moment in time. The promises politicians make to constituents are discussed in these debates. Hence, the representatives are "responsible to" citizens who, after watching these debates, may be better able to keep politicians accountable and see if representatives did or did not keep their promises made (Mansbridge, 2003, p. 516; Pitkin, 1967). The importance of these debates is further strengthened by the fact that these debates generally succeed to reach wide audiences, which is not only indicated by the generally high viewership numbers but also by the large amounts of media attention they attract (Juárez-Gámiz et al., 2020).

For all these reasons, I follow normative deliberative accounts that argue that televised election debates *could* play an important role in a deliberative democracy (see Coleman, 2020; Turkenburg, in press). Election debates could increase democratic quality and have the *potential* to contribute to a deliberative democracy. However, in order to live up to that potential, it is important that these debates have certain deliberative qualities, such as the civil provision of well-justified arguments (Davidson et al., 2017). Let that be the exact spot where the shoe pinches. The presence of these qualities in election debates is debated. The concerns mentioned at the start of this dissertation also apply to the case of election debates: worries are repeatedly voiced about the strong (and increasing) presence of uncivil and ill-justified statements in these debates (Annenberg Debate Reform Working Group, 2015; Hopmann et al., 2018; Jamieson & Birdsell, 1988; Walzer, 2007; Zarefsky, 1992). As outlined earlier, uncivil, ill-justified debate could harm the well-functioning of politics and democracy, for instance by decreasing citizens' argument repertoire and learning effects, decreasing the legitimacy of one's opponents, harming its accountability function, and increasing political cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Davidson et al., 2017; Mutz, 2007; van der Wurff et al., 2018). As a consequence, the beneficial effects of exposure to televised debates depend on its deliberative qualities such as the presence of justifications for policy positions and civility towards other politicians in the debate. Therefore, these debates merit scholarly attention.

This focus on televised election debates evidently means that politicians' communication in other mediated outlets where politicians discuss politics with each other, such as political talk shows or other political discussion programs, is not studied in this dissertation. Therefore, in the first place, I recommend future research to study the evolution, determinants and effects of uncivil, ill-justified statements in these other debate venues too. Yet despite being careful here it is important to note that the theoretical arguments in this dissertation do not only or specifically apply to the case of election debates and there is no immediate reason to assume that this dissertation's findings could not be extrapolated to other political discussion programs in the media. Therefore, I expect that the findings of this dissertation are generalizable to other political discussion or debate programs organized in the media.

Case: countries under study

The empirical evidence gathered in this dissertation is collected in four western European countries. Belgium serves as a case in four chapters that analyze the evolution, determinants and effects of debate quality, and there is one cross-national study involving Germany, the

Netherlands and the UK to study two of the determinants (i.e. electoral system and populism). This European focus contributes to the literature and brings novel insights because most research that has been done so far on the quality of mediated political debates, particularly for incivility, is conducted in the United States. I will discuss the suitability of these cases to answer this dissertation's research questions and their generalizability to other western democracies.

First, the Belgian case is well-suited to test **RQ1** (evolution). The societal trends that are expected to influence the evolution of politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified arguments in mediated political debates are present in Belgium: increasing mediatization of politics, growing importance of social media, and rising success of populism (Rooduijn et al., 2019; Tankovska, 2021; Van Aelst, 2014). The 1985-2019 time period that is analyzed is also wide enough to cover the period before, during, and after the emergence of these trends in Belgium. Moreover, the findings are expected to be generalizable to many other western democracies that also experience the increasing mediatization of politics (Brants & Van Praag, 2006; Esser & Strömbäck, 2014), increasing importance of social media, and more specifically increasing dual-screening during election debates (Juárez-Gámiz et al., 2020; Trilling, 2015), and the rising success of populist parties (Rooduijn et al., 2019). Therefore, Belgium forms a typical case to study the evolution of uncivil, ill-justified statements in televised debates.

By answering RQ1 and analyzing evolutions, this dissertation will automatically also gather some insights into the *prevalence* or *degree* of incivility and ill-justified arguments in the debates (today and before) in Belgium. Therefore, I also want to note something about the generalizability of the prevalence of incivility and ill-justified arguments in the Belgian debates to other countries. Hallin & Mancini (2004) classify Belgium as a democratic corporatist country, characterized by consensus politics, a strong public broadcaster and a generally impartial and objective media culture. These characteristics are likely to influence the prevalence of uncivil, ill-justified communication in a country and, therefore, the generalizability of these findings is likely to be higher to countries with similar political and media system characteristics (e.g. the Netherlands, Norway). Generalizability about levels of uncivil, ill-justified statements may be lower, however, to countries with more competitive political systems (e.g. majoritarian countries) and more competitive media systems (e.g. highly fragmented and commercialized), such as the United States or the United Kingdom. In such countries, the communication between politicians in mediated debates is likely to be more clash-oriented and to be driven more by the precepts of media logic. Politicians' use of one-liners and uncivil claims is therefore less likely in countries like Belgium as compared to countries with more competitive political and media system characteristics.

Second, four countries serve as cases to analyze **RQ2** about the determinants of politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified arguments. Almost all determinants under study are examined with Belgian data (see chapter 5 and 6), with the exception of one cross-national study to investigate the influence of a country's electoral system (see chapter 4). I do not expect the influence of the different determinants to play out differently in different countries or contexts. For instance, the expectation (and finding) that populist politicians use more incivility and ill-justified arguments than non-populist politicians is not specific to the cases studied in this dissertation, but is likely to be generalizable to populist politicians in other countries. The same reasoning holds for the other determinants such as the type of broadcaster on which the debate is aired, the topic under discussion, or the incumbency status or gender of the politician that is debating. To study the influence of the electoral system, the Netherlands, Germany and the United Kingdom are selected as country cases. The Netherlands is selected as a typical case of a consensus democracy, the United Kingdom as a typical case of a majoritarian democracy, and Germany as a typical case that is situated in between (Lijphart, 2008). Hence, these cases are well-suited to study the influence of different electoral rules and, again, I expect the results to be generalizable to other countries that are categorized along these electoral system characteristics.

Third, the effects of citizens' exposure to incivility and ill-justified arguments on political trust and news credibility (**RQ3**) are also studied with Belgian data and are also considered to be generalizable and go in the same direction across cases. In particular, across all countries and contexts, I expect that politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified arguments will lower political trust, and that the news media's focus on political incivility will lower political trust and news credibility. The effects may, however, be somewhat weaker or stronger depending on the country one studies. This relates to the specific mechanism – the violation of normative expectations – behind the expected effects. In those countries where the prevalence of uncivil, ill-justified communication is likely to be higher, such as the United States, citizens may be more used to it and therefore they may have lowered their expectations somewhat about civil, well-justified communication in mediated debates. Therefore, Belgian citizens may adhere stronger to these normative expectations and react stronger to norm violations as compared to U.S. citizens, for instance (Ben-Porath, 2010; Mutz, 2015). In sum, overall, Belgium forms again a typical case to study effects of incivility and ill-justified arguments. With regards to the strength of the effects more specifically, the results from the Belgian case will be most generalizable to countries that are characterized by similar media and political system characteristics and by similar levels of incivility and ill-justified arguments in political debates (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

Research methods

While RQ1 (evolution) and RQ2 (determinants) study *patterns* in politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified arguments, RQ3 investigates *effects* of citizens' exposure to incivility and ill-justified arguments. Therefore, two different research methods are required. In particular, quantitative content analyses are conducted to answer RQ1 and RQ2, and experimental research is conducted to answer RQ3.

Quantitative content analysis

Quantitative content analysis is widely used both in the field of political communication and in the field of deliberative democracy to analyze, for instance, political speeches, political debates, and political content on social media or in the news media (Neuendorf & Kumar, 2016; Riffe et al., 2014; Steiner et al., 2004). It is defined as the systematic, objective and quantitative analysis of written text or transcribed speech (Neuendorf, 2017; Neuendorf & Kumar, 2016). In a quantitative content analysis, numerical codes are assigned to (the units of analysis of) the text under study. For instance, if a politician makes an uncivil statement in a political debate, code '0' could be assigned to that statement; if a politician makes a civil statement, code '1' could be assigned. These codes can then in a later stage be used for statistical analysis. Quantitative content analysis is perfectly suited to address questions that address "how much" there is of something.[1] Hence, this method suits the questions asked in this dissertation well. For instance, did the amount of incivility used by politicians increase over time? Or, do populist politicians use more ill-justified arguments than non-populist politicians?

How is this method applied in this dissertation? First, in line with the research questions and the theory presented earlier, the analyzed texts in this dissertation are political debates in the media. In particular, together with colleagues with whom I have written the empirical chapters on the evolution (RQ1) and determinants (RQ2), I collected and composed **two original and extensive datasets of televised election debates**. The first dataset includes 24 televised election debates that were aired in Belgium between 1985 and 2019. This dataset is used to answer RQ1 about the evolution of incivility and ill-justified arguments, and to answer RQ2 about its different determinants (see chapter 5 and 6). The second dataset

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[1] This is different from *qualitative* content analysis, which relies on the interactive process of inductively and deductively identifying, interpreting and analyzing thematic patterns in texts (Schreier, 2012). Qualitative content analysis is particularly used "to interpret symbolic construction of social and cultural meanings and emphasis in political messages in documents/texts" (Neuendorf & Kumar, 2016, p. 4). This is different from quantitative content analysis, that assigns predefined numerical codes used for statistical analysis to the texts under study.

includes 12 televised election debates that were aired between 2009 and 2015 in three different countries which vary with regard to their electoral system and populist presence: four debates in the Netherlands, four in Germany, and four in the United Kingdom (see chapter 4 that studies the populism and electoral system determinants). An overview of the datasets for each chapter is presented in Table 3.1.[2]

Table 3.1: Overview of data, variables and analysis techniques per chapter using quantitative content analysis

Chapter	Dataset	# Turns	Dependent variable(s)	Independent variable(s)	Analysis technique
Chapter 4: Electoral systems, populism and debate quality	12 election debates: 4 in NL, 4 in DE, 4 in UK	Ca. 1100	(1) Ill-justified arguments (2) Incivility	(1) Electoral system (2) Populism	Descriptive analyses; Chi²-analyses
Chapter 5: The evolution of justifications	24 Belgian election debates	Ca. 4100	Ill-justified arguments	(1) Time (2) Broadcaster	Descriptive analyses; Linear regression; Logistic regression
Chapter 6: The evolution and determinants of incivility	24 Belgian election debates	Ca. 4100	Incivility	(1) Time (2) Broadcaster (3) Populism (4) Topic (5) Number of debate participants (6) Action-reaction (7) Incumbency status (8) Gender	Descriptive analyses; Chi²-analyses; Multilevel Bayesian logistic regression

After collecting and transcribing the debates[3], the **units of analysis** were identified in the transcripts. This is important in a quantitative content analysis, because the units of analysis will then be coded in the following stage. In election debates, the conversation goes back and forth and politicians *take turns* to reply to the other politicians in the debate or to the questions asked by the moderator. Accordingly, in each debate, "turns" or "speech acts" were identified as the unit of analysis (see also Sobieraj & Berry, 2011; Steenbergen et al., 2003 for a similar approach). When a politician is interrupted, the interruption is a new turn

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[2] All further details about each dataset can be found in the empirical chapters 4, 5 and 6.
[3] I want to thank all the research assistants for their help with transcribing the debates.

on its own. When the interrupted politician prolongs his or her turn and talks over the interruption, the text before and after the interruption belong to the same turn since the politician did not yet finish his/her turn. After identifying the turns, each turn was assigned numerical codes, both for the dependent and the independent variables.

This brings me to the **operationalization of the dependent variables**, i.e. ill-justified arguments and incivility. Ill-justified arguments are analyzed in chapters 4 and 5, incivility in chapters 4 and 6. First, following the definitions of *ill-justified* and *well-justified* arguments (see chapter 2), codes are assigned to distinguish between these two argument types. A well-justified argument was defined as an argument where the politician clarifies the reasons for a certain political standpoint, and shows logically how these reasons are connected to the standpoint. Accordingly, it is coded, first, whether at least one "reason Y is given as to why X should or should not be done", and second, whether a clear "linkage is made as to why one should expect that X contributes to or detracts from Y" (see Discourse Quality Index (DQI) developed by Steenbergen et al., 2003, p. 28; Steiner et al., 2004). The latter can be done, for instance, by using linking words such as "since" or "therefore". Following this dissertation's overarching approach, where deviations from the deliberative ideal are measured, once the politician deviates from the deliberative ideal of a well-justified argument, other codes are assigned to identify ill-justified arguments. An example to make this more concrete: in chapter 4, code '2' is assigned to turns that include a well-justified argument, i.e. when the politician's standpoint X is justified with reason(s) Y, and where the linkage between X and Y is clear. Code '1' and code '0' are assigned to ill-justified arguments: code '1' is assigned when standpoint X is justified with reason(s) Y, but a linkage between the two is missing or unclear; code '0' is assigned when no reason(s) are given for the political standpoint (Steenbergen et al., 2003). In other words, the lower the score, the further it deviates from the deliberative ideal. Chapter 5 used a similar coding strategy.

Second, codes are assigned to distinguish between politicians' use of *civil* and *uncivil* communication. Following the definitions in chapter 2, civility is not limited to explicitly civil language (e.g. "that is a good point") but also includes neutral forms of communication. This way, the operationalization remains realistic (we cannot expect politicians to be explicitly civil all the time in a democracy where disagreement is key). Again, once the politician deviates from the deliberative ideal of civility and is being uncivil, a different code is assigned. In this dissertation, politicians' use of incivility refers to personal-level incivility, i.e. incivility directed at the character and/or the standpoints of one's political opponents (Muddiman, 2017). This refers to the violation of interpersonal politeness norms and includes, for instance, politicians' use of name-calling, insulting or derision to humiliate or ridicule one's opponent's character and policies (see e.g. Coe et al., 2014; Muddiman, 2017;

Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). To make this more concrete: civil turns are coded as '1', and once a politician deviates from that ideal and expresses incivility, code '0' is assigned.[4]

Next, different independent variables or predictors are studied (see Table 3.1 for an overview of predictors studied in each chapter). The predictors are also assigned codes. For instance, one of the predictors is populism. It is expected that politicians from populist parties (see e.g. Rooduijn et al., 2019) use more incivility and ill-justified arguments than non-populist politicians. Therefore, turns expressed by a populist politician receive a different code (e.g. code '1') than turns expressed by non-populist politicians (e.g. code '0'). A similar coding strategy is applied for all the other predictors in this dissertation. To save space, I will limit further discussion here but I would like to refer the reader to the separate chapters where the operationalization of each predictor is discussed in more detail.

Furthermore, different analysis strategies are used in the different chapters (see Table 3.1). The choice for the analysis strategy depends on the specific questions posed in each chapter, and on the coding of each variable (e.g. a binary outcome requires a logistic rather than a linear regression). More details can be found in each chapter.

Last, quantitative content analysis can be done by humans, i.e. human or manual coding, or by computers, i.e. computer-aided text analysis (CATA) (Gottschalk & Bechtel, 2008). In this dissertation, incivility and ill-justified arguments are **coded manually**. While coding manually is a time-intensive undertaking, it also increases chances to catch subtle differences or characteristics in communication, such as sarcastic comments, which is more difficult for computers to detect and can therefore harm validity (Riffe et al., 2014). Yet, since human coding is trickier to ensure reliability than computer-aided coding, it is important to assess the reliability of the coding with the use of inter-coder reliability measures (Lombard et al., 2002). Accordingly, in each chapter at least 20% of the turns in the datasets is coded by two coders. Percentage agreement scores and Cohen's kappa scores, which control for inter-coder agreement by chance, are calculated in each chapter and both measures were always well-above the common thresholds for satisfactory reliability (all %-agreement scores ≥ 73%; all Cohen's kappa scores ≥ 0.60; see each chapter for more information).

Experimental research
To answer RQ3 about the effects of incivility and ill-justified arguments on citizens' trust in politics and in the news media, experimental research is used. Experiments are also

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[4] The coding is reversed in chapter 4 and chapter 6. In chapter 4 civil statements are coded '1' and uncivil statements are coded '0'; in chapter 6 civil statements are coded '0' and uncivil statements are coded '1'.

increasingly and widely used in political and communication studies, and have several advantages to study research questions that are *causal* in nature, like RQ3 (Druckman et al., 2006; Morton & Williams, 2010). Experiments allow to isolate and disentangle the effects of (subtle) variations in the independent variable – in this case the specific debate or reporting style – while holding all other potentially confounding variables or elements constant, such as the questions asked by the debate moderator or the lay-out of the newspaper article. This is very difficult or even impossible to reach in the real world or with non-experimental cross-sectional survey data. Importantly, participants in experiments are *randomly* assigned to the treatment groups.[5] This means, for instance, that some participants are exposed to a debate in which politicians use ill-justified arguments while others are exposed a debate where politicians use well-justified arguments. After participants' exposure to the treatment, the dependent variables are measured. The causal effect of the treatment (e.g. ill- versus well-justified arguments) on the dependent variable (e.g. political trust) is estimated by comparing the mean outcome scores of the different groups to each other. If the mean scores systematically differ from each other, it can be concluded that an effect of the treatment occurred. To estimate these effects, analysis of variance (ANOVA) is used in this dissertation (see Table 3.2). Precisely because variations between the groups are limited to the manipulations of the independent variables of interest only, **internal validity** in experimental research is strong.

This often leads to trade-offs with the **external validity** of experimental research. Experiments are often criticized for creating unrealistic settings because they are manipulated rather than actual settings from the real world. This refers, more specifically, to ecological validity issues (Bracht & Glass, 1968). Moreover, concerns are also often raised about another type of external validity, namely population validity, which refers to the generalizability of the sample to the wider population (ibid.). By using one specific type of experiments[6], namely survey experiments, where the experiment is embedded in a survey, this dissertation tackles these issues in the following ways. First, survey experiments usually involve the manipulation of a written text, an audio or video fragment, or an image. In this dissertation, written texts and audio fragments are used. For instance, in the experiments conducted in chapter 8, participants were exposed to an audio fragment of a civil versus uncivil debate, and received a written newspaper article that did or did not emphasize

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[5] Between-subjects factorial designs are developed in this dissertation where participants are randomly assigned to only one treatment group and are compared to other participants that are randomly assigned to another treatment group (or control group). This is different from within-subject designs where one participant can be exposed to several treatments.
[6] See e.g. Morton & Williams (2010) and Wimmer & Dominick (2013) for an overview of different types of experiments in political sciences and media studies.

incivility in the debate. To strengthen the ecological validity of the treatments, the design and content of the debate fragments and newspaper articles were based on input from the content analyses and fragments from real-world debates and post-debate newspaper articles.[7] Second, *online* survey experiments were developed, which can be distributed among large-scale and diverse or heterogeneous (or even nationally representative) samples. As Table 3.2 shows, each survey experiment in this dissertation was distributed to a large-scale sample of Belgian (Flemish) citizens, and both experiments in chapter 7 and the second experiment in chapter 8 were also distributed to diverse samples that were representative on gender and age. If survey experiments rely on such heterogeneous, large-scale samples, they can also enjoy higher population validity as compared to convenience samples for instance (Gaines et al., 2007; Mutz, 2011).

Table 3.2: Overview of data, variables and analysis techniques per chapter using survey experiments

Chapter	Independent variable(s)	Dependent variable(s)	Treatment groups	Sample	Analysis technique
Chapter 7: Incivility and ill-justified arguments in political debates: decreasing political trust?	(1) Ill-justified arguments (2) Incivility	Political trust	(1) Civil, well-justified debate (2) Uncivil, well-justified debate (3) Civil, ill-justified debate (4) Uncivil, ill-justified debate	Experiment 1: Belgian sample; *N* = 548; representative on gender and age Experiment 2: Belgian sample; *N* = 1100; representative on gender and age	ANOVA
Chapter 8: Incivility in post-debate news coverage: decreasing political trust and news credibility?	Incivility	(1) Political trust (2) News credibility	(1) Civil debate, civil article (2) Uncivil debate, civil article (3) Civil debate, uncivil article (4) Uncivil debate, uncivil article	Experiment 1: Belgian sample; *N* = 637; not representative Experiment 2: Belgian sample; *N* = 768; representative on gender and age	t-tests, ANOVA

Note: Chapter 7 also studies the effect of incivility and ill-justified arguments on the perceived persuasive power of politicians' standpoints.

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[7] See e.g. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JY5XlDR9r70; a fragment from the Dutch 2017 election debate where several uncivil and ill-justified statements were expressed and that was used as input for the design.

Having clarified the experimental approach, I will now turn to the **specifics of the experimental designs** that were developed in this dissertation. First, chapter 7 studies the effect of politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified arguments on citizens' level of political trust. To measure this, participants in the survey experiments were exposed to one of four versions of an election debate fragment: (1) a civil, well-justified one; (2) an uncivil, well-justified one; (3) a civil, ill-justified one; and (4) an uncivil, ill-justified one (see Table 3.2). In the first experiment of chapter 7, participants were exposed to a written excerpt from an election debate. In the second experiment, participants were exposed to an audio fragment of an election debate. In all versions, there are always two male (fictional[8]) politicians debating with each other, and the debate style of one of the politicians is manipulated.

Chapter 8 builds on the design and findings of chapter 7, and focuses on incivility. It is examined whether journalists' focus on political incivility in post-debate news coverage also decreases or even aggravates the negative effects on political trust found in chapter 7, and it is examined whether this journalistic practice also undermines the credibility of the news media itself. Therefore, in chapter 8, participants were exposed to a civil or uncivil debate fragment (audio) and/or to a newspaper article that does or does not emphasize incivility (see Table 3.2).

How are the **independent variables** operationalized? First, for the justification variable, two experimental conditions are developed. In the *well-justified* condition, participants read or listened to a debate fragment where the politician provides extensive reasons for his standpoints, and makes a clear link between his standpoint and the reason(s) given for that standpoint (e.g. by explicitly connecting the two with the use of linking words). This condition represents the deliberative ideal of politicians' use of well-justified arguments. The *ill-justified* condition deviates from that ideal. In this condition, the politician does not justify his positions well. He does not provide reasons for his policy positions or, if he does, the link between reasons and positions is implicit or missing (e.g. by using simplistic one-liners or not connecting standpoints and reasons).

Second, civility is manipulated in politicians' debate style (chapter 7 and 8) and in journalists' reporting style (chapter 8). In the *civil debate* condition, the politician listens carefully to his opponent and makes clear that he does not agree with him, but he does so in a civil (neutral) way (in line with definition, see chapter 2). The *uncivil debate* condition deviates from that

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[8] Two fictional politicians are used in the debates (names: Erik Verlaken and Wim Denouw) because real politicians can generate many other thoughts respondents might have that could influence the results. This enhances internal validity.

ideal. Here, the politician is uncivil by interrupting his opponent and by humiliating his opponent's character and policy views.[9] He does that by stating, for instance, that his opponent's proposals are ridiculous and that he lacks any capacity to govern. Next, to study incivility in the news media (chapter 8), I distinguish between an incivility-free and an incivility-focused reporting style. I do not label the reporting style as "civil" or "uncivil" because it is not the reporting style itself that is (un)civil. Rather, I study the effects of journalists' *emphasis* on political incivility. In the *incivility-free* condition, the journalist only covers the substantive content of the debate. The journalist explains that the two politicians who participated in the debate differed in opinion, and clarifies the positions of both politicians. In the *incivility-focused* condition, the journalist presents the same information, but adds an incivility focus by framing the debate as an uncivil clash. This is operationalized by changing or adding short sentences or words such as "The politicians debated the safety of our country" to "The politicians engaged in a nasty debate about the safety of our country", or "the politician responded that…" to "the politician rudely responded that…".

Last, the **dependent variables** are measured as follows. To measure political trust, trust in the politician whose debate style was manipulated (i.e. fictional politician Erik Verlaken) is measured as well as trust in the political system more broadly. Participants were asked to rate the statement "Erik Verlaken is a politician I can trust" (e.g. Schwarz & Bless, 1992) in the two experiments of chapter 7 and in the first experiment of chapter 8. This measurement was expanded in the second experiment of chapter 8 by adding two items that are also often used to measure the trustworthiness of political candidates (e.g. Koch & Peter, 2017): "Erik Verlaken is a credible politician" and "Erik Verlaken is an honest politician". The items were rated on a 5-point scale in the chapter 7 experiments and on a 7-point scale in the chapter 8 experiments (1 = "completely disagree" to 5 / 7 = "completely agree"). Trust in the political system, i.e. trust in the federal parliament, in politicians in general, and in political parties in general, was measured by asking participants: "Could you indicate on a scale ranging from 0 to 10 how much trust you personally have in the following institutions in general? 0 means that you do not have any trust at all in an institution, and 10 means that you have complete trust" (ESS, 2016). To measure news credibility, the news credibility scale developed by Meyer (1988) was used. This scale consists of five items, i.e.

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[9] Interruptions were not included in the measurement of incivility in the content analyses of this dissertation. While interruptions are also a form of personal-level incivility and thus fit the definition used in this dissertation well (Muddiman, 2017), *interruptions* and *incivility in the language* of politicians are generally distinguished, both conceptually and methodologically, in content analyses (see Steenbergen et al., 2003; Steiner et al., 2004). This is different in experimental studies on incivility, where they are more frequently used together in the experimental design (see Mutz & Reeves, 2005). I do recommend future research to dig deeper into the evolution and determinants of interruptions in political debates and to also distinguish the effects of interruptions and incivility in politicians' language in experiments.

trustworthiness, accuracy, fairness, completeness and bias. The participants were asked: "To what degree do you agree with the following statements? The newspaper article I just read 1) is trustworthy, 2) is accurate, 3) is fair, 4) tells the whole story, 5) is unbiased" (7-point scale; 1 = "completely disagree" to 7 = "completely agree").

To conclude, a general overview was provided in this section to clarify the methods and operationalizations used in the different empirical chapters. The overarching approach that was specified in the introduction and in the theoretical framework of this dissertation – where the deliberative ideal of civil, well-justified debate is used as a benchmark – also recurs in the research design. In particular, in the content analyses, there are codes for civil and well-justified statements, and codes for statements that deviate from that ideal. This allows me to systematically analyze to what degree politicians deviate from this benchmark over time (RQ1), and how different determinants lead to deviations from that benchmark (RQ2). In the experiments, conditions were designed that represent the ideal of civil, well-justified debate, and conditions that deviate from that ideal. This allows me to study how deviations from this benchmark influence citizens' trust in politics and in the news media (RQ3). In sum, because of the similar conceptualizations and operationalizations across the chapters, there is a strong connection between all the chapters, which allows me to connect the results of the content analyses to those of the experiments.

Having clarified the theoretical framework and research design of this dissertation, it is time to turn to the empirical chapters to answer RQ1, RQ2 and RQ3. Each chapter will start with a brief summary of the article on which the chapter is based, and then presents the article.

Chapter 4 : Electoral systems, populism and debate quality

Research question: How is debate quality influenced by a country's electoral system and by populism?

Data & method: An extended version of the Discourse Quality Index (DQI; Steenbergen et al., 2003) is used to analyze 12 televised election debates: four debates in the United Kingdom (majoritarian system), four in the Netherlands (proportional system), and four in Germany (mixed system). Descriptive and bivariate Chi²-analyses are used to analyze the results.

Main findings: Against expectations, results show that politicians in multiparty systems do not justify their policy positions more and are not more respectful in the televised debates. Rather, this study uncovers a clear populist challenge to key deliberative debate qualities across party systems. Left- and right-wing populist politicians use more ill-justified arguments, and the presence of right-wing populists in the televised debates increases the number of disrespectful interactions, lowering the deliberative quality of televised debates in different electoral contexts.

Chapter based on: Marien, S., Goovaerts, I., Elstub, S. (2020). Deliberative qualities in televised election debates: The influence of the electoral system and populism. *West European Politics*, *43*(6), pp. 1262-1284.

Introduction[1]

Televised debates enable politicians to communicate their policy positions on different issues to the electorate, which in turn allows voters to make informed choices and to hold politicians accountable (Aalberg & Jenssen, 2007; Holbrook, 1999; van der Meer et al., 2016). Democracy requires one to decide what to do, but also why to do it, which means a "ratio" is needed or grounds for political decisions (Goodin, 2008). Televised debates could offer a particularly good platform within election campaigns to communicate policy positions and their underlying ratio. However, this requires specific deliberative qualities such as the provision of justifications for the proposed policy positions, respect towards other policy positions, and civil exchanges with other politicians (Steenbergen et al., 2003).

Despite the popularity and proliferation of televised debates across Western Europe, we know relatively little about the deliberative qualities of these debates and how contextual factors influence these qualities. To better understand which factors shape different aspects of political information environments, cross-national research is needed (Anstead, 2016; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Kriesi, 2004; Nir, 2012; The Racine Group, 2002; Van Aelst et al., 2017, p. 20). Cross-national research has documented higher levels of deliberative qualities of parliamentary debates in multiparty systems (e.g. Bächtiger & Hangartner, 2010; Lord & Tamvaki, 2013; Steiner et al., 2004). However, does the same pattern emerge in other less researched arenas such as mediated communication?

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[1] This article investigates two deliberative qualities that are central in the DQI (i.e. the standard measurement tool of deliberative quality), namely level of justifications for demands (i.e. policy ideas/proposals/decisions) and (dis)respect towards demands (see Steenbergen et al., 2003). This article was a first step in my PhD process and this article as such represents a first step in my work on incivility. This article follows the standard approach of the DQI by coding "explicitly negative statements" connected to a demand someone makes as *disrespect towards demands* (see Steenbergen et al., 2003, p. 29, and p. 35 for examples). Further, I extended the DQI by adding *incivility towards persons* as an additional variable. (In)civility towards *persons* is not clearly distinguished in the DQI from disrespect towards *demands*. As a result, this article includes a broad measurement of disrespect including the DQI measurement of disrespect towards demands and an addition, i.e. incivility towards persons. This distinction is also important because the incivility variable is more narrow than the disrespect variable as coded in the DQI. Important to know is that while all uncivil statements can be seen as "explicitly negative statements", not all explicitly negative statements are uncivil (Fridkin & Kenney, 2008). While negativity refers to explicitly expressed criticism towards opponents, incivility refers to the rude or disrespectful *way* or *tone* in which such a negative statement or criticism is expressed. The added incivility variable in this article fits the conceptualization and operationalization of incivility in this dissertation well. From the next chapter onwards, I decided to focus on *incivility*, both towards persons and towards policies, and decided to deviate from the DQI by considering "explicitly negative statements" not as disrespectful or uncivil. As disagreement and conflict are core and essential to politics and democracy, I argue that, particularly in mediated debates where politicians confront each other to persuade and clarify their positions to the public, politicians should be able to express explicit negative statements and criticize each other, and that particularly incivility is harmful (see also chapter 2, pp. 20-21).

In this study, we investigate the deliberative qualities of televised debates cross-nationally. We reason that electoral rules fostering multiparty systems offer stronger incentives to communicate collaboratively in parliamentary but also in mediated communication arenas. If politicians anticipate that they may have to work together after the elections, they will have a greater incentive to follow deliberative norms such as justifying their positions and interacting in a respectful way with each other in parliament but also in the television studio. We do not expect that these systemic incentives affect all debate participants to the same extent. The ideology and communication style of populist politicians run counter to several deliberative qualities (Wyss et al., 2015, p. 14; see also Abts & Rummens, 2007; Moffitt, 2016). Therefore, we do not expect the debate interventions of populist politicians to be more deliberative in multiparty systems. In all countries, we expect that the presence of populist politicians in televised debates lowers its deliberative qualities. In sum, we expect that differences in electoral contexts and the presence of populist politicians in the televised debates influence deliberative debate qualities such as providing justifications and showing respect.

We investigate the deliberative qualities of the main televised debates between political leaders that are held prior to general elections. We rely on deliberative democratic theory to conceptualize and operationalize three important deliberative debate qualities: the justification of policy positions, showing respect towards the other's positions and civil interactions between debaters (Steenbergen et al., 2003). We selected three countries with differences in electoral rules and populist presence (Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom). In each country we study four debates, i.e. two debates in two electoral campaigns between 2009 and 2015.

In what follows, we first provide an overview of the literature on the importance of televised election debates and its deliberative qualities, as well as the expected cross-national differences. Subsequently, we describe the data and method, followed by the presentation of the results and the conclusion.

The importance of deliberative qualities in televised election debates

Whereas most types of electoral campaign discourse are one-sided, a key advantage of televised debates is the possibility to compare political candidates side by side (Jamieson & Adasiewicz, 2000). Viewers are not selectively exposed to the political information of only one political candidate or party (Lang & Lang, 1961), which can enable voters to make more

informed decisions (Benoit et al., 2003; Jamieson & Birdsell, 1988). Indeed, research shows that after watching televised debates voters are better informed about the policy positions and the personality of politicians (Benoit et al., 2002; Holbert et al., 2002; Holbrook, 1999; van der Meer et al., 2016). They are more aware which topics are currently being discussed, have increased issue knowledge, are better able to formulate their opinion, and are more inclined to discuss politics with others (Aalberg & Jenssen, 2007; Benoit et al., 2003; Cho & Choy, 2011). Consequently, there is little doubt about the potential and importance of televised debates in informing the electorate.

In order to facilitate learning effects, it is important that televised debates have certain deliberative qualities such as the respectful provision of arguments. This becomes clear when looking at the assumptions of commonly used normative models of political representation, such as the responsible party model. This model stipulates that if popular will is to be reflected in government policy then political parties should have different policy positions and voters must know what these differences are, so that the electoral outcome can be interpreted as a policy mandate (Goodin, 2008, p. 227; Thomassen, 1994, pp. 251–252): "What sort of a mandate a government can claim – what a government is entitled to do in office – depends heavily upon how the campaign messages are conveyed" (Goodin, 2008, p. 224). Such televised debates could significantly increase democratic quality. However, the presence of these prerequisites is debated.

There is extensive concern about politicians' lack of clear argumentation and the use of one-liners (Annenberg Debate Reform Working Group, 2015; Zarefsky, 1992). Mediatisation in general, and the format of televised debates in particular, encourage politicians to provide short answers and express their views in soundbites to attract the attention of citizens and media outlets. As interest in political programs on television is generally low, in part because of the increased media choice (Prior, 2005), politicians and media outlets try to find successful ways to spread their message and attract the attention of voters. Extensively explaining policy positions and long, "boring" debates do not fit this "media logic" (Brants & Van Praag, 2006). However, using simplified statements hinders voters from getting a substantive understanding of the policy positions of politicians.

Another concern focuses on the predominance of negative campaigning in elections, i.e. a strategy used to win votes by criticizing one's opponent (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Geer, 2006; Lau et al., 2007). Critiquing other candidates is a key part of democracy and a core element of any political debate (Geer, 2006) and is prevalent in televised debates (Airne & Benoit, 2005; Benoit, 2001, 2007, 2013). Yet uncivil interactions such as interrupting others, personal attacks, or humiliating others and their viewpoints violates social norms, hindering

the information function of debates. Moreover, incivility in political discourse is found to lower the perceived legitimacy of oppositional views (Mutz, 2007), political trust (Mutz & Reeves, 2005), and to increase political cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997).

In sum, the beneficial effects of exposure to televised debates depend on its deliberative qualities such as the presence of justifications for policy positions, respect towards other positions and civility.[2] Accordingly, the quality of these televised debates merits more scholarly attention. In this study, we aim to gain insight into the deliberative qualities of televised debates across Western Europe. Recent studies have started to assess the deliberative quality of different types of political discourse (Davidson et al., 2017; Lord & Tamvaki, 2013; Pedrini, 2014) and media content (van der Wurff et al., 2018; Wessler & Rinke, 2014). This study builds on this recent scholarship and broadens the scope by studying the deliberative qualities of televised debates and contextual factors that facilitate or hinder these.[3]

Deliberative debate qualities from a comparative perspective

Comparing the deliberative qualities of parliamentary debates, power-sharing systems, such as Switzerland, perform better than majoritarian systems, such as the United Kingdom (Bächtiger & Hangartner, 2010; Steiner et al., 2004). The discourse of MEPs from consensus democracies is also found to be more deliberative compared to the discourse of MEPs from majoritarian democracies (Lord & Tamvaki, 2013). Does a similar cross-national pattern emerge when comparing televised debates? While in many countries televised debates have become an important part of the electoral campaign, comparative research into the deliberative qualities of these debates is lacking. Drawing on the rich cross-national insights into the deliberative qualities of parliamentary debates, we expect that a system that encourages power-sharing increases the deliberative qualities of televised debates.

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[2] We distinguish and focus on two types of disrespect, i.e. towards a policy and a person (Brooks & Geer, 2007). The term (dis)respect is used to refer to (dis)respectful statements expressed towards the policy positions of another politician. The term (in)civility is used to refer to (dis)respectful statements towards another politician as a person, e.g. personal attacks.

[3] We focus on the provision of justification for policy positions, respect towards other politicians' positions and civility, as key deliberative qualities that are beneficial to democratic performance and that have caused concern recently. There are other deliberative qualities that merit study as well. Yet we do not expect that all ideal-type elements of deliberation will be present during a televised debate in which politicians strive to make their positions on different issues clear. Party leaders will generally try to convince the electorate to vote for them by distancing themselves from the issue positions of the other politicians in the debate. Constructive politics or opinion change amongst the party leaders themselves, for example, is something we do not expect to occur in these debates (Davidson et al., 2017).

In particular, expectations about the nature of future government formation can incentivise more or less deliberative communication in the pre-electoral debates. Proportional representation systems generally result in multiparty systems (stimulating the emergence and existence of many parties). Many political parties gain seats in parliament, generally leading to large, often unpredictable, coalition formations. Politicians will anticipate that they may have to work together after the elections, increasing the incentives to follow deliberative norms such as respectfully justifying one's positions. On the other hand, plurality systems generally result in two-party systems (marginalising the smaller parties), and are designed to decrease the need for coalition partners. As such, plurality and proportional systems offer different incentives for deliberative communication. In sum, we expect the more deliberative discourse observed in parliaments in proportional systems to spill over to other arenas such as more deliberative discourse in debates during electoral periods.

Accordingly, we study three West European parliamentary democracies with varying electoral rules and ensuing party systems and government formations: the Netherlands, UK and Germany. The electoral rules used in the Netherlands result in a large number of parties obtaining seats in parliament (e.g. 11 parties in 2012) and a very fragmented party system (e.g. because of the low 0.67% electoral threshold). Before the elections it is not clear which specific coalition government is likely to be formed and many possible combinations are probable (Jacobs, 2018). We expect this to create a high incentive to communicate collaboratively (see Appendix 4.1).

At the other end of the continuum, we selected the United Kingdom. The electoral rules used in the UK facilitate the possibility that one political party can govern alone, i.e. the Conservative or Labour party. More recently we can observe deviations from the long-term history of single-party governments with the 2010 Cameron-Clegg coalition government. Despite these recent changes, the plurality rule system favors established major parties with safe seats, making gaining significant parliamentary representation still extremely challenging for new parties (Democratic Audit UK, 2016, p. 4). The 2015 election for instance resulted in more than 85% of the seats being divided between the two main political parties which have dominated the political scene for the last 70 years (Powell et al., 2015). While the UK system is becoming increasingly multiparty, the simple plurality electoral system clearly insulates the Conservatives and Labour from the smaller parties, making coalitions unusual. This offers little incentive for collaborative communication, as generally collaboration is not anticipated after the elections, especially in comparison to the Netherlands and Germany.

The electoral rules used in Germany result in a party system that is less fragmented than in the Netherlands (e.g. because of the higher 5% electoral threshold) but more than in the UK. For instance, after the 2013 election, five political parties obtained seats in parliament. As such the German system is classified as "moderate PR" (Lijphart, 2008, p. 162). Importantly, it is more predictable in Germany compared to the Netherlands which parties will form a coalition (Zittel, 2018; see Appendix 4.1).

Overall, the anticipation of coalition formation and the uncertainty surrounding it is highest in the proportional representation system in the Netherlands, lowest in the plurality system in the UK, with the mixed member proportional system in Germany falling in between the two. We expect these different contexts to influence the communication of parties along the same lines as comparative research studying the deliberative qualities of parliamentary debates. In particular, we will study three specific expectations:

> **Hypothesis 1**: The deliberative qualities of televised election debates are highest in the Netherlands, followed by Germany, and finally the UK.

>> **Hypothesis 1.1**: Policy positions in televised election debates are justified more in more fragmented party systems.

>> **Hypothesis 1.2**: Political leaders are more respectful towards each other's positions in televised election debates in more fragmented party systems.

>> **Hypothesis 1.3**: Political leaders are more civil towards each other in televised election debates in more fragmented party systems.

We do not expect all politicians to be affected as strongly by this electoral context. In particular, populist politicians generally share "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite'" (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). This thin ideology "argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). According to these populist politicians, this will of "the people" can hardly be disputed. As a consequence, populist politicians criticize the debating character inherent to political decision making and leave "no room for disagreement and compromise" (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Urbinati, 1998, p. 117). This is expected to lead to the use of simplified, more direct and anti-establishment language (Bos et al., 2013; Canovan, 1999; Moffitt, 2016) that focuses on "conflict and crises at the expense of consensus and substantive facts"

(Bossetta, 2017, p. 730). In this context, Bossetta (2017, p. 715) notes that "the new wave of populist challenges is a far cry from the deliberative, temperate, and polished politicians".

Evidence from parliamentary debates in Switzerland (Wyss et al., 2015, p. 14) and tweets in Italy (Bracciale & Martella, 2017, p. 2017) indeed indicate that populists are less likely than other, non-populist politicians, to justify their positions well and behave respectfully in political debates. While other, non-populist, candidates also use less deliberative elements in their political discourse, this non-deliberative communication style is argued to be more pronounced in the discourse of populists. Interestingly, most concerns today are about the communication of right-wing populists. As the vast majority of studies on populist communication investigate right-wing populists only, we know little about left-wing populist communication (Aalberg & de Vreese, 2017). Therefore, we include both in this study. As they share the populist ideology,[4] we expect both to show less justification and be less respectful than non-populist politicians. This leads to the following hypotheses:

> **Hypothesis 2**: Deliberative debate qualities are lower in the discourse of right-wing and left-wing populist candidates than in the discourse of other non-populist political candidates in televised election debates.
>
>> **Hypothesis 2.1**: Policy positions taken by populist candidates are justified less than positions taken by other non-populist candidates.
>>
>> **Hypothesis 2.2**: Populist candidates are less respectful towards other candidates' positions than other non-populist candidates.
>>
>> **Hypothesis 2.3**: Populist candidates are less civil towards other candidates than other non-populist candidates.

There are indications that televised debates including populist candidates could have a lower level of deliberative intervention from all participants compared to those debates where populists are absent. Bossetta's (2017) research on the 2014 European Union debates between Nick Clegg and Nigel Farage – the latter generally identified as a populist politician – found that Clegg used more personalized attacks in the second debate to try to compete with Farage more effectively. Therefore, to gain more insight into the potential populist

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[4] The populist ideology is mostly viewed as a *thin* ideology that needs to be combined with other *thick* ideologies to be a full ideology, e.g. nationalism for right-wing populists and socialism for left-wing populists. Left- and right-wing populists thus share the same populist ideology, but differ because there is another thick ideology attached to it (Mudde, 2004).

challenge, we explore whether non-populist politicians adopt a disrespectful communication style more often when interacting with populist politicians than when they interact with other politicians.

In sum, by testing these expectations this study allows light to be shed on the influence of differences in electoral contexts and the presence of populist politicians on the deliberative quality of the political information environments.

Data and methods

Four debates per country were selected, transcribed and coded, i.e. two TV election debates in every country from two recent national election periods (2009–2015). This makes the sample and selection of cases across each country comparable (i.e. the same number of televised election debates within same time frame). The selection of debates aims to offer a good representation of the recent televised election debates in a country but also of the country's party system and populist presence (for an overview of the debates and case selection, see Appendix 4.2). In election debates, the conversation goes back and forth with politicians taking turns to reply to the moderator and to other debate participants. The units of analyses are speech acts i.e. parts or turns in the debate in which a demand is issued (N = 1097). This demand includes a policy position or proposal on what decisions should or should not be made (see also Steiner et al., 2004). Incivility towards persons can also occur when politicians are not talking about specific proposals that should (not) be made (i.e. no demand is issued). Therefore, additional debate interventions (N = 169) were identified when coding incivility. In these interventions, politicians react towards another politician or talk about another politician without talking about specific proposals (N = 1266; see also Sobieraj & Berry, 2011).

Explanatory variables

We study three countries with differences in electoral rules and presence of populists in the debates. As a result of the different electoral rules, the anticipation of coalition formation and the uncertainty surrounding it is highest in the Netherlands, lowest in the UK, with Germany falling in between the two. In line with Mudde's (2004) definition and recent studies on populism in Europe (Mudde, 2004; Rooduijn et al., 2019; Vossen, 2009), the debate participants Geert Wilders (Dutch *Partij Voor de Vrijheid*), Rita Verdonk (Dutch *Trots op Nederland*) and Nigel Farage (*UK Independence Party*) were identified as right-wing populist candidates. Debate participants Emile Roemer (Dutch *Socialistische Partij*), Gregor

Gysi and Oskar Lafontaine (German *Die Linke*) were identified as left-wing populists. All other political candidates were identified as non-populist candidates.

Deliberative qualities measurements

In order to investigate the deliberative qualities of the televised election debates, we rely on the Discourse Quality Index (DQI) (Steenbergen et al., 2003; Steiner et al., 2004). The DQI is a theoretically grounded measurement that allows researchers to operationalize and quantify the deliberative qualities of political discourse. Based on Habermas' discourse ethics, the authors identified several coding categories that reflect idealizations of deliberative qualities (Thompson, 2008). This article focuses on two coding categories developed in the DQI, namely the level of justification for policy positions and respect. The DQI coding category includes both respect towards politicians and their positions. Since these are two different types of disrespect, i.e. towards a person vs. a policy (Brooks & Geer, 2007), we decided to divide the variable into two different parts: respect towards other positions and respect towards other politicians in the debate, i.e. civility. The operationalization of the three dependent variables is as follows:

Level of justification for positions

In a high-quality deliberative discourse, political leaders provide a justification for their positions (Steenbergen et al., 2003). We distinguished between three levels of justification, depending on its presence and sophistication. Code 0 is assigned when no justification is given, code 1 for an inferior justification (a reason Y is given why X should or should not be done, but a linkage between the two is missing) and code 2 for a qualified justification, in which a linkage is made between X and Y (Steenbergen et al., 2003; Steiner et al., 2004). The following example provides a typical illustration of a qualified justification for a position. In this example, Mark Rutte – political leader of the Dutch party VVD – responds to a statement voiced by another participant in the debate who states that Rutte does not consider the elderly in his austerity policy.

> Mark Rutte (translated from *Lijsttrekkersdebat 2012*): "I'll tell you two things why your story is not correct. First, the VVD raises the elderly discount because we believe it is important to sustain the purchasing power of the elderly in the Netherlands. That will be a whole fuss to get done. And second, one thousand euro net is a relatively large proportion of one's income for someone with a low income compared to someone with a high income. But we believe that when you have a system such as in the Netherlands in which higher incomes also pay higher taxes, it makes sense

that when you give a <u>tax reduction</u>, it will be <u>the same for everyone, because</u> lower incomes are <u>also affected</u> in a much more positive sense." [Coded as '2']

A typical instance of a proposal that is not clearly connected to a justification explaining why something should (not) be done is described below.

> Nigel Farage (*ITV Leaders' Debate 2015*): "We have doubled the national debt in the course of the last five years. Our debt repayment is bigger than our annual defence budget, and that's with interest rates close to zero. We have a massive problem here. And it seems to me that nobody's prepared to admit that what we've done is we've maxed out the credit cards. Yes, there's growth in the economy, <u>but actually at some point we've got a dreadful debt repayment problem. We've got to get real. And we can cut budgets like foreign aid with, I think, popular public support</u>." [Coded as '1']

Respect towards positions
This indicator assesses whether politicians show (a lack of) respect when responding to each other's positions and arguments. A code 0 is given as a sign of no respect when the viewpoints of political adversaries are degraded and negative statements are explicitly uttered towards the positions of others. This code is given for instance when a politician states that the position of another debate participant is ridiculous. For speech acts in which there is a neutral way of interaction or in which respect is shown towards each other's positions, code 1 is assigned.

Civility
This indicator assesses respect towards other participants in the debate. Code 0 is assigned to interventions that are characterized by incivility, i.e. in which debate participants personally attack each other, utter uncivil or rude statements towards each other and ridicule each other. Code 1 is assigned for a normal or civil way of debating with each other. The following quote illustrates an intervention in which a politician is ridiculed by Geert Wilders (translated from Dutch *Premiersdebat 2012*):

> "Look, it is crystal clear, Mr. Rutte will continue to pay [the Greeks]. The US president once had the slogan 'Yes, we can!'. Your slogan seems to be 'Yes, we pay!' You probably still believe the Tooth fairy exists, but I'll tell you Mr. Rutte: The Tooth fairy doesn't exist and we will never see the money again!" [Coded as '0']

Reliability tests

In each country, two coders coded at least 20% of the speech acts. Inter-coder reliability scores, i.e. percentage agreement and Cohen's kappa, that controls for inter-coder agreement by chance, are calculated and displayed in Appendix 4.3. All scores are above the common thresholds for satisfactory reliability.

Analysis

First, we present the percentages of the deliberative qualities of the debates across countries. In the subsequent analysis, a Pearson's Chi²-test is performed to test whether the deliberative debate qualities are significantly different between the countries. Second, we explore variations between debate participants to gain more insight into the influence of the presence of populist politicians in the debates.

Results

Cross-national investigation

Level of justification for positions

Figure 4.1 visualizes the percentages of different types of justification cross-nationally. If we look at qualified justifications – which are closest to the deliberative ideal – we observe that politicians justify their proposals to a similar extent across countries. In each country, politicians use a qualified justification for circa 50% of the positions they take. Looking at inferior or no justification, there are small differences between the countries. Contrary to the expectations, in the country with a plurality system and the least fragmented party system, the UK, the number of instances in which a position is taken without any justification is the lowest, followed by the Netherlands and Germany. A Pearson's Chi²-test reveals that the association between the level of justification and the country under investigation is significant (X^2 = 16.31, p = 0.003; see Table 4.1). This difference is driven by the cross-national differences in the two weakest levels of justification. In sum, hypothesis 1.1 – which stated that positions in televised election debates are justified more in countries with more fragmented party systems – does not receive support. The level of qualified justification is remarkably similar across countries and the UK has even fewer instances where positions are taken without any justification than the other countries.

Figure 4.1: Results for level of justification for positions
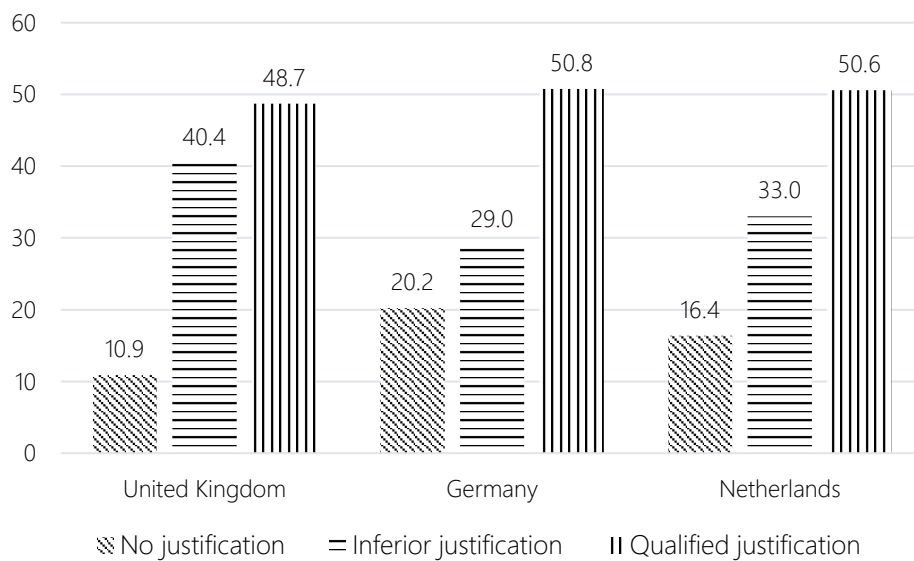
Table 4.1: Overview of deliberative qualities according to party system (X^2-test)

	UK (%)	Germany (%)	NL (%)	Significance	Best performance	Strength
Level of justification for positions				X^2 = 16.31 p = 0.003	No clear winner	Weak (Cramer's v = 0.086)
None	10.9	20.2	16.4			
Inferior	40.4	29.0	33.0			
Qualified	48.7	50.8	50.6			
Respect towards other positions				X^2 = 12.45 p = 0.002	G > NL > UK	Weak (Cramer's v = 0.109)
No respect	49.1	35.3	42.4			
Respect	50.9	64.7	57.6			
Civility				X^2 = 84.88 p < 0.001	G > NL ~ UK	Moderate (Cramer's v = 0.259)
Uncivil	29.5	5.8	29.3			
Civil	70.5	94.2	70.7			

Note: N_{LJD} = 1097, N_{RTD} = 1055, $N_{Civility}$ = 1266

Respect towards the positions of other participants

Figure 4.2 reveals that in each country at least half of the reactions to other politicians' positions are respectful. Contestation, a central element of any (good) debate, seems to occur in a rather respectful manner in televised debates. In line with the expectations, there

are more instances of disrespect towards positions expressed by politicians in the UK (49.1%) than in the more fragmented party systems of the Netherlands (42.4%) and Germany (35.3%). Contrary to what we expected, most instances of respect happen in Germany instead of the Netherlands. The Pearson's Chi²-test shows that politicians' respect towards positions of others is significantly different across countries (X^2 = 12.45, p = 0.002; see Table 4.1). In sum, hypothesis 1.2 does not receive full support.

Figure 4.2: Results for respect towards other positions
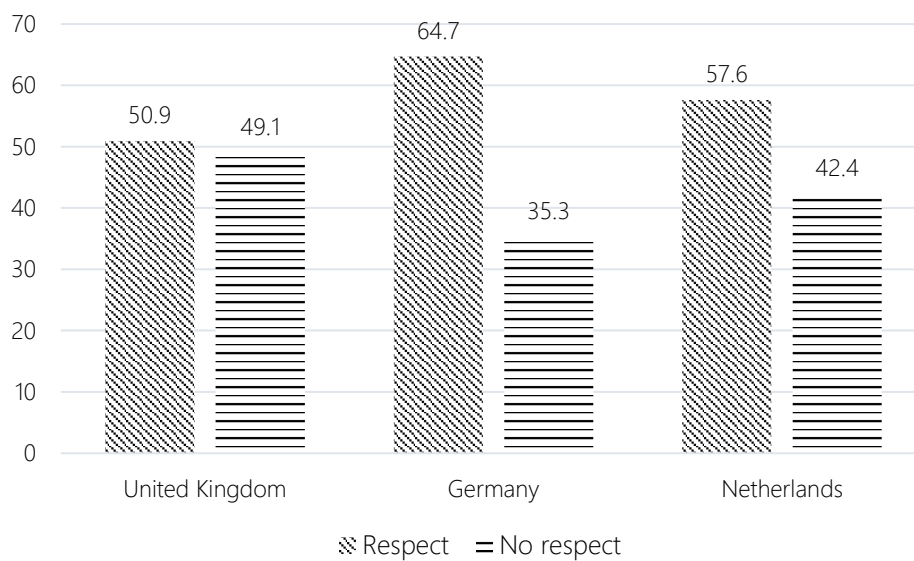
Civility

Figure 4.3 shows that the uncivil debate interventions, in which a politician ridicules or attacks other politicians, are in the minority. Across all countries, 77.6% of interventions were civil, 22.4% were uncivil. Similar to the measurement of respect towards positions, Germany has the highest level with 94.2% of interventions being civil towards other politicians. Politicians in the UK and the Netherlands have similar scores when looking at their level of incivility. With 29.5% of uncivil utterances towards politicians in the UK and 29.3% in the Netherlands, the difference in systems does not seem to matter. The Pearson's Chi²-test (see Table 4.1) shows that the level of incivility is significantly associated with the countries (X^2 = 84.88, p < 0.001). In sum, this contradicts hypothesis 1.3 which stated that political leaders are more civil towards each other in televised election debates in more fragmented party systems such as the Netherlands.

Figure 4.3: Results for civility
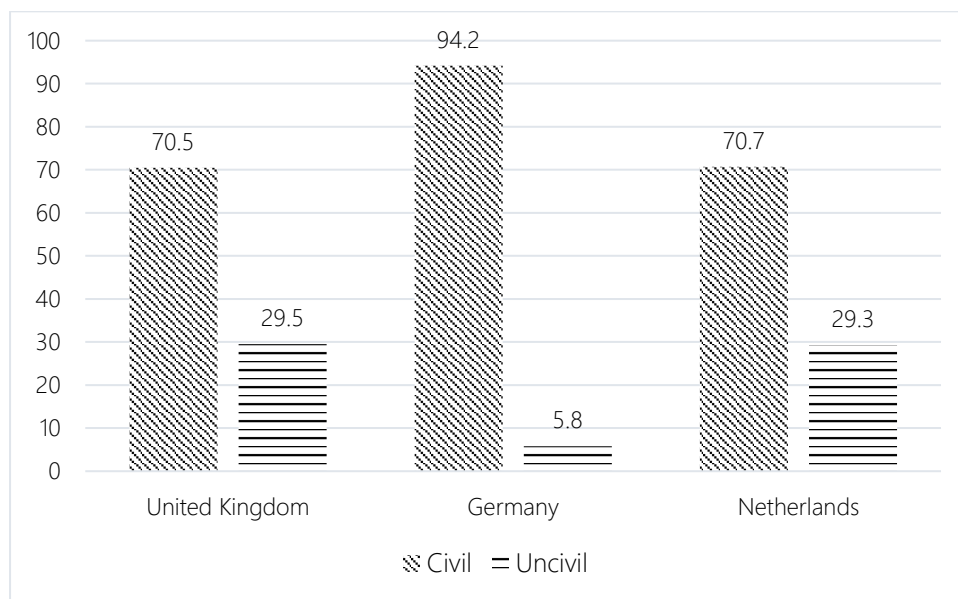
To conclude, the results reveal cross-national differences in the deliberative qualities of the studied televised debates. However, the results are not in line with our expectations derived from comparative studies on parliamentary debates. Germany scores best with regard to both respect variables. For levels of justification, differences are small between the three countries. Politicians in more fragmented party systems do not justify their policy proposals more.

The populist influence

A potential reason for the cross-national pattern we observe is the cross-national differences in populist participation in the televised debates. Not only are populist candidates expected to decrease the deliberative qualities of televised debates by their use of simplified and disrespectful messages, but there are indications that non-populist politicians behave more disrespectfully towards populists. Table 4.2 shows that when comparing debates with and without the participation of populist politicians, debates with populists are indeed (slightly) less justified and less respectful towards positions of other debate participants. Civility towards the debate participants themselves is clearly lower in the debates with populist politicians. To arrive at a more fine-grained analysis, we compare the deliberative qualities of the interventions of populist candidates with the interventions of the other candidates.

Table 4.2: Comparing debates with and without populist politicians

	Debate without populists (%)	Debate with populists (%)
Level of justification for positions		
None	18.7	14.3
Inferior	28.6	37.0
Qualified	52.7	48.7
Respect towards other positions		
No respect	40.1	43.4
Respect	59.9	56.6
Civility		
Uncivil	13.7	26.1
Civil	86.3	73.9

Note: N_{LJD} = 1097, N_{RTD} = 1055, $N_{Civility}$ = 1266; 8 debates with populist candidates (4 debates in NL, 2 debates in DE, 2 debates in UK) and 4 without (2 debates in UK, 2 debates in Germany).

Level of justification for positions

The results presented in Table 4.3 are in line with the expectations: while 52.7% of non-populist candidates use qualified justifications to argue their positions, only 37.5% and 39.6% of the positions taken by right-wing and left-wing populist politicians respectively are justified that way. Populist candidates use more inferior justifications (41.7% and 37.8%) than non-populist candidates (32.9%), and justifications are also more often lacking for positions taken by populist candidates (20.8% and 22.5%) compared to other candidates (14.4%). The Pearson's Chi²-test shows a significant association between populism and the level of justification for positions: populist candidates justify their positions less than non-populist candidates (X^2 = 14.95; p = 0.005, see Table 4.3), supporting hypothesis 2.1.

Respect towards the positions of other debate participants

For respect shown by debate participants towards each other's positions, results are partially in line with the expectations. Right-wing populist debate participants express more disrespectful claims towards the positions of others (52.2%) than non-populist participants (42.0%). This is however not the case for left-wing populists, who are disrespectful towards other politicians' positions in 36.1% of the cases, meaning they are slightly more respectful than non-populist politicians in the debates. The Pearson's Chi²-test shows a significant association at the 0.10 level, which is largely driven by right-wing populists communicating most disrespectfully (X^2 = 5.36, p = 0.069; see Table 4.3). Moreover, the disrespectful

interventions of non-populists are disproportionally targeted at the positions of right-wing populist politicians compared to the positions of the other non-populist politicians. In particular, in the debates where populist politicians were present, 67.2% of the messages by non-populists targeted at the populists are disrespectful towards their policy positions. This type of disrespect was less prominent when non-populists directed their messages at the positions of the other non-populist politicians (47.6%). Non-populist politicians were slightly more disrespectful to the positions of left-wing populists (55.4%).

Table 4.3: Overview of deliberative qualities according to populism (X^2-test)

	Non-populists (%)	Right-wing populists (%)	Left-wing populists (%)	Significance	Best Performance	Strength
Level of justification for positions				X^2 = 14.95 p = 0.005	Non-populist	Weak (Cramer's v = 0.083)
None	14.4	20.8	22.5			
Inferior	32.9	41.7	37.8			
Qualified	52.7	37.5	39.6			
Respect towards other positions				X^2 = 5.36 p = 0.069	Left-wing populist & non-populist	Weak (Cramer's v = 0.071)
No respect	42.0	52.2	36.1			
Respect	58.0	47.8	63.9			
Civility				X^2 = 81.59 p < 0.001	Left-wing populist	Moderate
Uncivil	20.4	53.8	9.4			(Cramer's v = 0.254)
Civil	79.6	46.2	90.6			

Note: N_{LJD} = 1097 (right-wing populist: N = 96; left-wing populist: N = 111, non-populist: N = 890); N_{RTD} = 1055 (right-wing populist: N = 90; left-wing populist: N = 108, non-populist: N = 857); $N_{Civility}$ = 1266 (right-wing populist: N = 117; left-wing populist: N = 128, non-populist: N = 1021).

Civility

For civility towards other debate participants, results are again partially in line with the expectations formulated in hypothesis 2.3: right-wing populist debate participants are more often uncivil towards other participants (53.8%) than non-populist participants (20.4%), but left-wing populists are less uncivil (9.4%) than non-populist participants (X^2 = 81.59, p < 0.001; see Table 4.3). Especially for this third quality criterion, the differences are substantial. Moreover, non-populist participants are also more uncivil when they target their messages at right-wing populist politicians (48.8%) compared to when they target their messages at other politicians (33.3%). Consequently, not only are right-wing populist participants more

uncivil, but non-populist participants are too when they direct their messages at them.[5] The incivility from both groups combined has a large overall influence on the deliberative qualities of the debates.[6] In sum, we can observe a populist challenge. In particular, right-wing populist candidates' interventions in televised debates and the reactions to these interventions lower the deliberative quality of the televised debates.[7]

Conclusion and discussion

Televised political debates are an important source of information for the electorate because viewers can learn more about different political issues and policy positions. Learning is especially enhanced when politicians in these debates respectfully justify their policy positions. In this study, we assess the deliberative qualities of televised election debates in three West European parliamentary democracies. This allows us to better understand the cross-national factors that shape the quality of political information environments.

First, a systematic assessment of the deliberative qualities of 12 election debates reveals that debate participants most frequently offer justifications for their positions and behave overall in a relatively respectful manner. In sum, this systematic analysis qualifies to some extent the concerns about poor televised debate quality. Second, we show that the more deliberative communication style of politicians observed in parliamentary debates in multiparty systems does not extend to televised debates. Electoral rules that foster power-sharing do not seem to enhance the deliberative qualities of televised debates. Compared to parliamentary debates, communicative practices in televised debates seem to be more transferable across different electoral systems. Campaigning might encourage a different mind-set among politicians than governing, i.e. a mind-set that is focused on winning office. This mind-set could make politicians less willing to compromise regardless of the specific electoral system (Gutmann & Thompson, 2014). Another explanation for the absence of large cross-national differences could be the eroding differences between electoral systems. For example, bipolar competition is increasingly prevalent in multiparty systems, and

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[5] This is not the case when non-populist politicians react to left-wing populist politicians: they are uncivil towards them in 25.4% of the cases.

[6] To investigate this, we only included those debates in which populist politicians participated, and those speech acts that were directly targeted at another politician; 653 speech acts of non-populist politicians were directed at another politician of which 502 were directed at another non-populist politician, 80 at a right-wing populist politician, and 71 at a left-wing populist politician.

[7] While there are differences between populist right-wing and populist left-wing parties, there are no differences between the non-populist parties according to left–right ideology regarding the three quality criteria.

coalitions were formed in traditional two-party systems (Mair, 2008, p. 226). In turn, we see greater similarities in electoral campaigns in different party systems including the communicative practices in televised debates.

The cross-national differences in the presence of populists in the televised debates further explain the documented cross-national pattern. The deliberative qualities of especially right-wing populist politicians' interventions – who were present in the UK and Dutch debates, but absent in the German debates at the time – were found to be lower than the deliberative qualities of other politicians' interventions. Both right-wing and left-wing populist candidates perform worse at justifying their positions, and right-wing populists show less respect towards the other participants and their positions. This is in line with the expectations in the literature stating that the political discourse of populist candidates is more simplistic, direct and uncivil than the discourse of non-populist politicians (Bos et al., 2013; Canovan, 1999; Moffitt, 2016).

Interestingly, the presence of right-wing populists in televised debates affects the deliberative quality of respect more than the provision of justifications. The average number of disrespectful interactions in a debate is higher because of their more frequent use by right-wing populist participants. Yet we can also observe non-populist politicians behaving more disrespectfully towards right-wing populist candidates compared to their interventions towards other debate participants. Hence, right-wing populist interventions are more disrespectful but also non-populists are prone to behave more disrespectfully towards right-wing populist debaters. As a result, the influence of populist politicians on the deliberative qualities of televised debates is strongest when looking at more relational qualities such as respect.

Reflecting on these findings, we see some important areas for future research. First, a majority of the statements in the televised election debates were well-justified and respectful. Nevertheless, debate viewers might especially remember discourse elements that reflect poor deliberative debate qualities. One reason might be that disrespectful behavior violates the social norms people share for a debate. The role of the media in covering these debates might be another reason. One-liners and disrespectful statements might be the parts of the debate that are more likely to be picked up in the post-debate media coverage. Therefore, it would be fruitful, for instance, to study whether one-liners and disrespectful behavior are more influential than higher quality interventions in remembering and covering the televised debates. Second, we studied the presence and formal quality of justifications as a first step to deliberation and learning. We also limited ourselves to an assessment of the verbal content. It would be interesting to study the

epistemic quality of these justifications and non-verbal behavior as well. Third, we recommend future studies to consider other factors that could influence deliberative quality in debates such as the communication culture of a country (Sass & Dryzek, 2014) or the gender of the participants (Maier & Renner, 2018). It would also be interesting to explore why left-wing and right-wing populists behave differently. Lastly, while these results shed light on the deliberative qualities of televised election debates and factors that might influence them, future research should also deepen our understanding of the effects of poor or high debate quality. Some studies have already investigated the effects of incivility and transparency on different political attitudes (de Fine Licht et al., 2014; Mutz & Reeves, 2005), but more research is needed that focuses on the effects of different quality criteria on what and how people learn from these debates and how it influences their image of politics.

This study reveals interesting differences in the communicative practices of right-wing and left-wing populists and non-populists and the communicative reactions of non-populists to populists. There are indications also that the effects of these communicative practices differ depending on the characteristics of the politicians using them and the characteristics of the audience, e.g. education level of citizens (Bos et al., 2013). Do right-wing populists use more disrespectful communication because it is more effective for them, compared to left-wing populists and other parties? Given the rise of populist politicians who are clearly less deliberative in some aspects of their communication, it is important to gain more insight into the effect of this on the functioning of democracies.

Chapter 5 : Trends in debate quality: the evolution of justifications

Research question: How did politicians' use of ill-justified arguments evolve over time?

Data & method: A quantitative content analysis of 24 Belgian televised election debates, aired over the past 35 years (1985-2019), is conducted. Descriptive analyses, linear regression and logistic regression analyses are used to analyze the results.

Main findings: Against expectations, results show no rise (nor decline) in politicians' use of ill-justified arguments. Rather, a fluctuating pattern with ups and downs is observed. To gather more detailed insights, the main analysis is split out further and different elements that define an ill-justified argument are investigated. The *mere presence* of a justification for a standpoint, the *number* of justifications for a standpoint, and the *relevance* of justifications for a standpoint (i.e. its link) are analyzed. The results show no decline (nor rise) in the mere presence or relevance of the justifications provided. In 1995, a sudden decrease in the *number* of justifications occurs, as compared to the years before. The amount of justifications provided after 1995 remains on a similar level and fluctuates around a lower baseline. The type of broadcaster on which the debates are aired (i.e. public or commercial) does not substantially impact the presence of ill-justified arguments.

Chapter based on[1]: Turkenburg, E., & Goovaerts, I. (2021). Food for Thought: A Longitudinal Investigation of Reflection-Promoting Speech in Televised Election Debates (1985-2019). *Under Review*.

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[1] This chapter is based on an article that studies the evolution of four, what we call, *reflection-promoting speech components*. Politicians' use of justifications is one of the four key components.

Introduction

Televised election debates are an important platform to inform and engage the public during election times (Benoit et al., 2003). In this mediated venue, politicians directly confront each other in front of the public and discuss their vision on politics side-by-side. As a result, televised election debates have the potential to promote more *reflective* reasoning in citizens (Coleman, 2020; Davidson et al., 2017). Stimulating citizens to weigh and integrate different political arguments and perspectives (i.e. reflective reasoning) can make them more immune to elite and media manipulation, heightens the epistemic value of political opinions, and increases the legitimacy of political decisions (Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019, pp. 27–36; Colombo, 2018). It is, however, unclear whether televised debates live up to this reflection-promoting potential.

Despite their promising format, there is widespread concern about the quality of today's election debates (Annenberg Debate Reform Working Group, 2015; Coleman, 2020; Hughes, 2019). In particular, election debates have been dismissed as entertaining media spectacles that put form above substance and expose citizens to rhetorical manipulation through the use of one-liners, slogans, empty statements, simplistic argumentation, and false information (Coleman, 2020; Lengle & Lambert, 1994; Zarefsky, 1992). Exposure to this type of speech can *prevent* reflection, since it decreases citizens' argument repertoire to reason with and reflect upon, as well as the accuracy and sophistication of their attitudes (Amsalem, 2019; Luskin et al., 2002; Valentino et al., 2001; van der Wurff et al., 2018). It discourages active critical thinking and stimulates a passive citizenry, which makes unreflective decisions based on limited and even false information (Coleman, 2020).

Not only the alleged *lack* of reflection-promoting speech causes concerns, but also its potential *decrease* (Coleman, 2000; McIntyre, 2018; Slayden & Whillock, 1998; Wyss et al., 2015). This is connected to several trends in western democracies, particularly the mediatization of politics, the increasing (political) importance of social media, and the rising success of populism (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Mazzoleni, 2014; Ott, 2017). Despite worries and allegations, there is little empirical evidence that *systematically* assesses the *evolution* of communication in televised election debates, and particularly the evolution of reflection-promoting speech. Therefore, we lack insights into the actual validity of the concerns surrounding these debates.

In this study, we analyze a variety of reflection-promoting speech components in a dataset of 4,146 speech acts in 24 election debates aired in Belgium between 1985 and 2019. This extensive 35-year time period covers the period of increased mediatization, social media

use, and populist success that is typical for western democracies. Therefore, we expect the results of this study to be generalizable to countries that experienced similar societal trends (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Rooduijn et al., 2019).

We identify and study four reflection-promoting speech components, all linked to the normative theory of deliberative democracy. Three components tap into classic "first-generation" or rationality-focused deliberative ideals that can encourage more reflective reasoning in citizens: (i) politicians' use of justifications for the standpoints they assert; (ii) their engagement with others' perspectives; and (iii) the substantive information value of their claims (Bächtiger et al., 2018). "Second-generation" forms of deliberative speech move beyond purely rational ideals and emphasize the importance of elements like emotions and story-telling to ensure the accessibility of political speech to include all groups in society (Bächtiger et al., 2018, pp. 3–4; Maia et al., 2020; Mansbridge, 1999). The fourth component taps into this and refers to (iv) the accessibility of politicians' language for the larger public. To be accessible, we argue, political language needs to be engaging and understandable, which can be advanced through the use of concrete, comprehensible, and vivid language. Over time, we expect the rational speech components to have declined and politicians' use of accessible language to have risen. Yet, contrary to expectations, we do not find a substantial decline (nor increase) in any of the reflection-promoting speech components over the past 35 years.

Our contribution is threefold. First, we approach election debates in a novel way by studying them through the lens of their reflection-promoting potential, and by looking beyond the reasoned and the rational and also including elements such as language comprehensibility. Second, we advance the literature by conducting a systematic empirical analysis on data that covers more than three decades of debates to test if the widespread concerns about decreasing quality of political debate are warranted. Third, we conduct this analysis in Belgium, which further strengthens and broadens our knowledge about election debates across contexts. Most studies on election debates are performed in the United States, yet televised debates also play a key role during the electoral campaign in many other countries (Juárez-Gámiz et al., 2020).

Theoretical background

The reflection-promoting potential of televised election debates

Normative (deliberative) accounts on the role of election debates in democracy have argued that these debates *could* play an important role in activating the public and

prompting reflective reasoning among citizens (Coleman, 2020; Turkenburg, in press). In line with Muradova (2021, p. 28), reflective reasoning is defined as a thinking process in which citizens contemplate, ponder and weigh different perspectives and arguments to determine what they want and why they want it. In such a thinking process, citizens consider and integrate a diversity of viewpoints, including those that they do not agree with, thereby arriving at more reflective political judgments (Dewey, 1933; Goodin, 2000).

A reflective citizenry is less likely to take shortcuts while reasoning and is less easily manipulated, which leads to epistemically better and more legitimate political opinions and decisions (Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019; Colombo, 2018). When citizens' opinions are reflective, they move away from "echo chamber" thinking and partisan motivated reasoning. This, in turn, could reduce political polarization (Arceneaux & Vander Wielen, 2017; Brader & Tucker, 2018). Moreover, reflective, as opposed to unreflective, opinions and decisions are more in line with one's interests and therefore a better reflection of citizens' true attitudes (Luskin et al., 2002). This way, citizens' representatives can pursue policies that correspond better with citizens' true preferences (Dahl, 1956; Muradova, 2020).

A reflective citizenry at large is, however, not a given. Most citizens do not automatically weigh pros, cons and opposite opinions in their head when making political decisions, since it is often easier to go with an already-existing opinion (Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010), or a choice inspired by heuristics, shortcuts and biases (Colombo, 2018; Kahneman, 2011). Despite these challenges, reflective reasoning is widely considered as an ideal to aspire to (Bächtiger et al., 2018; Dewey, 1933; Dryzek, 2010; Goodin, 2003).

Televised election debates could play a role in spurring reflective reasoning in citizens. They are a key event during elections, indicated by the generally high viewership numbers (Juárez-Gámiz et al., 2020). Two or more political leaders confront each other to explain their policy stances to the electorate and to convince as many voters as possible that those ideas are worth voting for. Whereas most types of campaign communication are one-sided, election debates allow voters to directly compare political candidates side by side (Jamieson & Adasiewicz, 2000). Since politicians in these debates discuss the same topics at the same time, viewers are not selectively exposed to the viewpoints of only one candidate or party. This enables the formation of well-informed opinions and decisions. Previous research shows that after watching debates, viewers have increased issue knowledge and are better-informed about the different candidates' positions and personalities (Benoit et al., 2003; van der Meer et al., 2016).

Providing information is one step towards a more reflective citizenry. To arrive at reflective judgments, voters ideally do more than passively take in information but actively get to work with the information they receive from the debates. Coleman (2020) has argued that it is precisely the confronting and entertaining format of election debates that entices voters to be engaged and reflect: "[w]hen people watch political leaders debating, they do not simply gape gormlessly, but agree, disagree, argue, post messages, read comments, make voting decisions and sometimes even change their mind" (Coleman, 2020, p. 9). Moreover, it is shown that after watching debates, citizens are better able to formulate their opinion (Benoit et al., 2003). In sum, televised election debates have the potential to promote reflective reasoning.

Despite this potential, there is also much criticism and concern about televised debates. They have been criticized to be merely for show and to only consist of politicians trying to "score points" with hollow phrases, and for being reduced to empty discussions characterized by one-liners, slogans and misleading statements (e.g. Annenberg Debate Reform Working Group, 2015; Coleman, 2000; Jamieson & Birdsell, 1988; Walzer, 2007; Zarefsky, 1992). It is specifically this type of speech that could prevent reflective reasoning since it reduces the potential for citizens to weigh and judge different standpoints and arguments (Goodin, 2000). When citizens are exposed to empty and misleading statements, they do not get full, balanced information on political issues, which decreases the availability of arguments and perspectives to reflect upon, and reduces the accuracy and sophistication of their attitudes (Amsalem, 2019; Luskin et al., 2002; Valentino et al., 2001; van der Wurff et al., 2018). Therefore, election debates do not only have the potential to promote reflective reasoning, but also to discourage it. More specifically, the *way politicians communicate* in these debates is key to promote or prevent reflection among citizens.

Hence, it is important to identify reflection-promoting communication or speech components and, accordingly, gather *empirical* evidence on these components in televised election debates. We build on *theoretical* accounts that argue that election debates could stimulate reflective reasoning among citizens (Coleman, 2020; Turkenburg, in press). Empirical research studying election debates through this lens remains very scarce (but see Cho & Choy, 2011; Davidson et al., 2017; Marien et al., 2020). Noteworthy is the content analysis of election debates conducted by Davidson et al. (2017), who explicitly link their findings to the debates' reflection-promoting potential. They show that in the 2010 UK election debates politicians often used justifications (i.e., provided reasons) for their standpoints (see also Marien et al., 2020) and, based on that finding, they conclude that election debates can promote reflection among citizens. Yet, they also conclude that there

are underexplored speech components that could induce more reflection, especially more emotionality-based components.

We contribute to the existing literature by studying three decades of debates in Belgium through the lens of their reflection-promoting potential. We build on previous work to identify four speech components that can contribute to a more reflection-promoting debate. These components are all linked to deliberative democratic theory, which forms the normative backdrop of our study. In what follows, we conceptualize these four speech components. In the subsequent section, we formulate the theoretical expectations behind this study's core research question: did the reflection-promoting potential of election debates decline over time?

Reflection-promoting speech components in televised election debates

Justification component

Political debates are characterized by an exchange of policy standpoints. When politicians *justify* those standpoints, they provide a reason, a ground or a rationale to explain their position to the citizenry (Chambers, 2010). In particular, a justification entails logically "telling *why*" a certain standpoint or decision is good or desirable and tells citizens why they should or should not be in favor of it (de Fine Licht & Esaiasson, 2018, p. 2; Steenbergen et al., 2003). As such, when presented with well-justified standpoints in televised election debates, the audience does not only learn what a politician stands for, but also *for what reasons*. This plays a vital role in helping citizens to arrive at more reflective judgments. In effect, justifications serve as central pieces of information that promote the weighing of and reflecting on different reasons for a certain standpoint (Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019; Muradova, 2021). Citizens' exposure to politicians' reasons and rationales extends their argument repertoire, which they can then use and weigh to form their own opinion (Cappella et al., 2002; van der Wurff et al., 2018).

Perspectives component

The reflection-promoting potential of a debate increases if politicians do not only present their own (party's) perspectives but also engage with the perspectives of their opponents. This means that the political parties in the debate do not only "publiciz[e] the reasons that ground the parties' positions, but also [get] the parties to engage with the positions and the reasons of their adversaries in a way that informs citizens about the facts, the issues, and the options on hand." (Leydet, 2015, p. 236). In effect, politicians can both present their own views, and explain how they are (in)compatible with the views of others. When presented with multiple different perspectives, people get more contrasting information

and ammunition to form their opinion. They are prompted to challenge their own existing ideas, learn about new viewpoints, and put themselves in someone else's shoes, which increases reflective reasoning (Druckman & Nelson, 2003; Muradova, 2020; Mutz, 2006). In sum, when politicians engage with multiple perspectives, viewers' ability to weigh all their alternatives properly increases, which enables them to arrive at reflective judgments.

Information component

The provision of *relevant* and *falsifiable* information in debates fosters reflective reasoning in citizens. *Relevant information* entails the provision of *political* (e.g. policy-related) information because it is relevant for voters to form their *political* opinions. *Falsifiable information* entails politicians' expression of contestable validity claims which people can check and refute if necessary, rather than unsubstantiated, shallow statements that lack in content and truth (Esterling, 2011; Habermas, 1981). Citizens' exposure to relevant and falsifiable information encourages them to consider different arguments and reflect upon their previously held views (Muradova, 2021). Conversely, when politicians engage in empty chit-chat and produce irrelevant blurbs and shallow statements, citizens may tune-out, or base their political opinions on speculations and heuristics (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001). This would, in turn, lead to the formation of unreflective opinions (Brader & Tucker, 2018; Goodin & Niemeyer, 2003).

Accessibility component

Accessibility concerns politicians' use of concrete, comprehensible, and vivid language. In other words, it relates to *how* information is conveyed. This is an important addition to the previous components, which are mainly rooted in *rational* deliberative accounts of political discourse (Bächtiger et al., 2018). Importantly, the communication in the debates also needs to be *accessible* to ensure that citizens can actively reflect upon it (Muradova et al., 2020). Put differently, a debate that spurs reflection does not consist solely of extensive reason-giving and substantive information, but is also comprehensible, compelling and tangible for all groups in society. This relates to the argument that high rational-discourse standards and formal ways of arguing disadvantage marginalized groups in society, such as the less-educated, because they have fewer resources to engage in complex political talk (Sanders, 1997; Young, 2000). More personal or emotional communication, like storytelling, can engage voters, especially those who are less used to formal discussions (Dryzek et al., 2019).

In this study, the accessibility component is divided into two sub-components. The first is *language comprehensibility*, which refers both to politicians' use of understandable language (Schoonvelde et al., 2019) and to concrete language. Concreteness refers to the

imaginability of concepts and makes concepts and communication more tangible, memorable and comprehensible (Kearney, 1994; Sadoski et al., 2000). The second sub-component is *language vividness*: emotionally interesting, imagery provoking, and proximate in a literal or figurative way. Vivid language is more likely to grab viewers' attention and to excite and speak to their imagination (Nisbett & Ross, 1980, p. 45). In the context of election debates, we understand this in terms of vivid presentation of information by use of illustrations, anecdotes and figurative language. Previous research has found that such "accessible formats and styles of presentation" can stimulate reflection because they "can help to engage people in political debates, especially those who are politically unengaged and unresponsive to more conventional coverage of political and social issues" (Maia, 2018, p. 353; building on Baum & Jamison, 2006; Dahlgren, 2009; Norris, 2000)

In sum, these four speech components contribute to the potential of debates to promote reflective reasoning among citizens watching the debates at home. They add to citizens' argument repertoire, present different ways to think about issues, offer relevant and falsifiable information and make the language understandable and engaging for everyone. Importantly, the components are not mutually exclusive: a politician's statement can be both a justification and include substantive information. Furthermore, the debates cannot be interpreted as either "good" or "bad" for promoting reflection. Rather, the reflection-promoting potential of election debates can be seen as a continuum where each component can contribute to more reflection.

A decline in reflection-promoting speech in televised election debates?

Despite televised election debates' reflection-promoting potential, prevailing criticism and concern suggests that debates do not live up to this potential and that reflection-promoting speech is even in decline. Yet, little systematic empirical evidence has been gathered about the actual state of the debates and whether and how they have changed over time. Longitudinal studies about trends in the quality of political debate are limited, especially in connection to reflection. There are some exceptions, but these studies mainly look at different contexts (e.g. inside the U.S., outside of election debate context), and study a limited number of components that could induce reflection among citizens. For instance, there is evidence that the cognitive complexity of Swiss *parliamentary debates*, which links to politicians' use of justifications and engagement with others' perspectives, is in decline (Wyss et al., 2015); that in *campaign reporting*, politicians' statements are increasingly shortened, indicating that politicians are increasingly becoming voiceless, leading to less reflection-promoting potential (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2007; Patterson, 1993; Reinemann &

Wilke, 2007); that, connected to concerns of manipulation and strategy in debates, the use of strategic frames in debates is increasing (Bastien, 2020); and that the use of scientific language in U.S. Presidential debates, which links to falsifiability and language complexity, is not declining overall but is in decline for economic discourse (Gorton & Diels, 2011). The present study adds to this research by analyzing four different reflection-promoting speech components in the western European context where little longitudinal research on election debates has been conducted so far.

Since the 1980s, several societal trends have taken place in western democracies that can be connected to a decrease in reflection-promoting speech in election debates, namely the increasing mediatization of politics, the growing importance of social media, and the rising success of populism.[2] First, the increasing mediatization of politics can lead to a decrease in reflection-promoting speech in televised debates. From the nineties onwards, the media landscape has become more and more fragmented, commercialized and competitive. This provides media consumers with an increasing number of channels and programs to choose from, which spurs media to operate in accordance with so-called *media logic* because it proves effective in the battle for viewers' attention (Brants & Van Praag, 2006). In this logic, entertainment is paramount. This strongly affects the way in which political content is presented, leaving little room for elaborate discussions and more for elements that discourage reflective reasoning, such as appealing one-liners, soundbites and conspicuous messages (Altheide, 2004). Moreover, politicians subsequently learned that adapting their communication to media logic benefits them. It attracts media attention and consequently also voters' attention, leading to "self-mediatization" among politicians themselves (Esser, 2013; Esser & Strömbäck, 2014).

Second, since the beginning of the 21st century, the fight for attention has extended beyond the television screen, with the emergence and rising importance of social media to spread political content (Brants & van Praag, 2017). Channels such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter operate via specific features that privilege - again - simplistic, short, and misleading statements because they are easily picked up and shared (McIntyre, 2018; Ott, 2017). Today, the public conversation about election debates extends to the social media realm (Juárez-Gámiz et al., 2020; Trilling, 2015). Consequently, politicians are triggered even more to use such statements to heighten their visibility on these platforms as well. They are encouraged to behave in such a way that they will be a hot topic on social media, both during and after the debate.

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[2] These evolutions apply to televised election debates in particular, but also to other types of (mediated) political discourse more generally.

Third, since the nineties, populist politicians' success has been rising throughout western democracies (Rooduijn et al., 2019). Consequently, they have been increasingly present in televised election debates. Populists generally believe that there is one homogenous will of the people, and therefore criticize the debating character inherent to political decision-making (Mudde, 2004, p. 543; Urbinati, 1998). As a result, populists tend to use a communication style that is characterized by simplistic reasoning and language, and little engagement with opinions that are not their own (Marien et al., 2020; Wyss et al., 2015). The success of populists and their communication style does not seem to go unnoticed by mainstream politicians, who are inclined to copy populists' communication style in election debates in order to compete more effectively with them, at the cost of substance, truth and textual sophistication (Benoit et al., 2019; Bossetta, 2017; Marien et al., 2020).

All in all, these trends can stimulate politicians to increasingly go for short, snappy messages and therefore lower the reflection-promoting potential of election debates over time. This leads to the formulation of the first general hypothesis:

> **H1**: Politicians' use of reflection-promoting speech has declined in televised election debates between 1985 and 2019.

When zooming in on the different components, we expect a different evolution for the three rational-discourse components versus the accessibility component. First, based on concerns about short, snappy messages instead of in-depth, elaborate justifications in (mediated) political communication (Coleman, 2000), a decline of the justification component is expected. Second, we also expect that over time, politicians started to pay less attention to the standpoints of others. Since there is less time for in-depth talk about policy and more urge to produce quick statements, little room is left for engaging with the standpoints of opponents. The success of populist politicians, who are not inclined to engage much with other perspectives, could stimulate this further. Third, the need to be entertaining and make an impression with one-liners and soundbites could increase politically irrelevant statements and decrease the provision of falsifiable information and technical details about policy. Combined with general concerns about the spread of misinformation, we expect the information component to have deteriorated over time. In sum, the following hypotheses are formulated for the first three components:

> **H2a:** Politicians' use of justifications in televised election debates has declined between 1985 and 2019.

H2b: Politicians' engagement with different perspectives in televised election debates has declined between 1985 and 2019.

H2c: Politicians' provision of relevant and falsifiable information in televised election debates has declined between 1985 and 2019.

Last, more mediatization, social media and populism are precisely the developments that are expected to lead to more accessible language in election debates. The strong focus on entertainment due to media logic and the features of social media that discourage complex and lengthy talk are expected to have inspired politicians to use more appealing, vivid language to engage and attract the attention of the public (Barnett, 1998; Ott, 2017). Moreover, populists use a less complex and sophisticated communication style, which makes politics more accessible and understandable for everyone (Aalberg et al., 2017). Therefore, the success of populists and the popularity of their communication style are expected to have increased language accessibility in the debates, leading to the last hypothesis:

H2d: Politicians' use of accessible language in televised election debates has increased between 1985 and 2019.

Method

Data and case

We collected an original dataset of televised election debates that were broadcast in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium (Flanders)[3], based on the following criteria:

- Aired by one of the two main broadcasters: public broadcaster VRT[4] or commercial broadcaster VTM;

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[3] The Belgian media system is divided by region, generally defined by the language spoken in that region, with each region having its own public and commercial broadcaster(s). Approximately 60% of Belgians are Dutch-speaking (Flemish), 40% speak French (Walloon). The German-speaking community makes up 0.68% of the population. Because of the extensive time period and manual coding, we focus on the largest region (Flanders). https://statbel.fgov.be/en/themes/population/structure-population.

[4] Specifically the channel "Één" is selected, which is the main channel of the public broadcaster. The channels Één (VRT) and VTM are also the two channels that organize the election debates and are moreover the two mostly watched channels in Flanders. Over the past 10 years (2011-2020) their market shares have fluctuated around 30% for Één, and around 19-20% for VTM (see https://www.cim.be/nl/televisie/openbare-resultaten).

- Broadcasted in the week before the national and/or regional election(s)[5];
- Included at least two political leaders who discuss politics and interact with each other;
- Moderated by at least one moderator.

We collected all debates that met these criteria and were accessible in the archives of the two broadcasters, or online, resulting in a dataset of 24 televised election debates broadcast from 1985 to 2019. This sample is close to a perfect representation of the population of televised election debates broadcast in Flanders over the past 35 years. For an overview and more details on each debate, see Appendix 5.1.

The Belgian case and the 1985-2019 time period are well-suited to test the hypotheses. First, the societal trends (i.e. increasing mediatization, social media importance, populist success) that are expected to influence the evolution of the reflection-promoting components are present in Belgium (Rooduijn et al., 2019; Tankovska, 2021; Van Aelst, 2014). Second, this period is wide enough to cover the period before, during, and after the emergence of these trends. In particular, mediatization started in the nineties after the emergence of the commercial broadcaster VTM in 1989 and increased during the following decades (Van Aelst, 2014); Belgians' usage of social media, also for getting politically informed and engaged, has been rising over the past decade (Tankovska, 2021); and the success of the main radical right-wing populist party Vlaams Belang started and kept increasing during the nineties and 2000s. Its success showed a decline between 2009 and 2014 but has been largely increasing again since then (Goovaerts et al., 2020; Pauwels, 2011).

Belgium can be considered a typical case to study the evolution of reflection-promoting speech in televised debates. Therefore, we expect that the findings are generalizable to many other Western democracies that also experienced increases in the mediatization of politics (Brants & Van Praag, 2006; Esser & Strömbäck, 2014); the importance of social media and dual-screening during election debates (Juárez-Gámiz et al., 2020; Trilling, 2015); and the success of populist parties (Rooduijn et al., 2019).

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[5] For regional and federal elections, the political parties and party leaders are the same. Therefore, the same politicians are generally invited to election debates at both levels. There are also no substantial differences between the debate formats for national versus regional elections, and both are considered first-order elections (Deschouwer, 2012). Furthermore, in 1999, 2014 and 2019 the national and regional elections coincided.

Operationalization

In election debates, politicians *take turns* by responding to each other or the moderator. 4,146 turns were identified (i.e. units of analysis; see also Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). The reflection-promoting speech components were quantitatively coded in each turn. Each reflection-promoting speech *component* consists of several *indicators* that were coded (see Figure 5.1). In Appendix 5.2, examples taken from the debates can be found for each coded indicator. Principal component analyses were conducted for each component and these analyses confirm that the different indicators of each component tap into one underlying concept (see Appendix 5.3).

Figure 5.1: Operationalization of the reflection-promoting speech components

Reflection-promoting Speech Components

Justification	Presence of justification(s) Amount of justifications Relevance of justification(s)	
Perspectives	Engagement with different perspectives Type of engagement	
Information	Falsifiable information Source of information Politics/Policy-related information Numerical information	
Accessibility	*Understandability*	Flesch-Douma score Concreteness
	Vividness	Illustrations Anecdotes Figurative language

The **justification component** includes the *presence of justifications* with code '1' if at least one justification is provided for a political standpoint and code '0' if a justification is missing (or if there is no standpoint at all). The *number of justifications* given was coded with '0' for no or one justification and '1' for more than one justification. The *relevance of the justification* was coded with '1' for justifications that are logical, relevant and clear. These justifications are clearly linked to and relevant for the standpoint they are attached to (see also Steenbergen et al., 2003). This allows the debate audience to logically follow the reasoning

for or against a standpoint. Code '0' is assigned to justifications that do not meet these criteria. Here, the justification is illogical or inapplicable in relation to its standpoint.

The **perspectives component** is assessed by coding whether the speaker explicitly incorporates a perspective different from their own in their turn (with '0' no; '1' yes). When a different perspective is included, a second indicator is coded to assess *how* the politician engages with it. When the perspective is included in a neutral manner, i.e. without clearly indicating whether the speaker agrees or disagrees with it, it is coded '0'. When it is included in a dismissive or appreciative way, it is coded '1' because, compared to the neutral one, it gives more information about the speaker's own standpoint and its relation to the other perspective(s).

The **information component** measures, first, whether the provided information is *politically relevant*. Turns that relate to policy or political matters are coded '1'. This can be interpreted broadly: it concerns the mentioning of policy plans, ideas, or proposals, as well as reflections on past policy ideas or decisions and statements about government formation. When politicians do not talk about politics but engage in empty talk, '0' is coded. Second, *falsifiability* of the information is assessed with three codes. We build on Esterling's concept of "falsifiable claims" (2011) and assess whether the audience *can* check and falsify the statement; we are not assessing whether statements are true.[6] '0' is coded if a turn contains no falsifiable information, '1' if a turn contains at least one falsifiable statement. Moreover, '1' is coded when a politician's falsifiable claim explicitly refers to the information source, so the audience knows where the information can be checked (e.g., report, news article, law); '0' is coded when this is absent (Esterling, 2011). Last, '1' is coded when politicians use numerical information such as statistics to support their claims because this gives additional falsifiable information ('0' if absent).

The **accessibility component** measures the *comprehensibility* and *vividness* of the speech. Two automated measures were employed to assess *language comprehensibility*. First, we employ a Dutch adaptation of the Flesch-Formula measurement, i.e. Flesch-Douma (Douma, 1960; Kincaid et al., 1975). This measurement has been extensively used to measure the comprehensibility of political texts such as political speeches (Kleijn, 2018; Schoonvelde et al., 2019). The Flesch-formula is a formula-based measurement that weighs average sentence and average word length in a text. The higher the score, the more comprehensible

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[6] Ideally, a measurement of the truthfulness of the claims is also included, such as fact-checking. However, there are practical difficulties to include this, particularly with data that go back to 1985. It would be virtually impossible to assess the truthfulness of all statements made several years or decades ago.

the text (see Appendix 5.4 for score interpretation). Second, language concreteness also enhances language comprehensibility (Sadoski et al., 2000) and is coded with CESAR[7] (Hoek et al., in press). CESAR automatically analyzes Dutch texts and attributes a concreteness score to each turn in the text, ranging from 1 (i.e. not concrete at all) to 5 (i.e. very concrete). Last, three indicators are used to measure *vividness*: the presence of illustrations, such as examples or illustrative clarifications; the presence of anecdotes, including personal stories; and the presence of figurative language, which mainly refers to the use of metaphors or analogies. Accordingly, three codes are manually assigned ('0' if absent, '1' if present).

To assess inter-coder reliability, a random sample of 6 debates (20% of turns) was coded by a second coder. The scores for all manually coded indicators are well above the common thresholds for satisfactory reliability. All percentage agreements vary between 88% and 99.5%, indicating substantial to almost perfect agreement. All Cohen's Kappa's, which corrects for similar coding by chance, vary between 0.673 and 0.881, indicating moderate to substantial agreement (see Appendix 5.5).

Analysis

To test the hypotheses, indexes are created for the separate components, as well as a general index that comprises the four speech components. Each component has an equal weight in the general index[8] (see Appendix 5.6 for the construction of the indexes). A principal component analysis shows that the four components form one coherent set (see Appendix 5.3). To analyze the results, trend lines are presented for the general index (H1) and the separate component indexes H2(a-d). Trend lines are also presented for the different indicators, to present an even more detailed picture. Regression analyses are conducted to include information about the effect sizes. Because the sample of this study is a close-to-perfect representation of the population of election debates in Belgium, we focus particularly on the explained variance and interpret (significant) p-values with caution as they might overestimate the effect, especially when the explained variance is small.

Results

Figure 5.2 displays the trend line of the general index for the combined mean scores of the reflection-promoting speech components over the past 35 years. There is a difference of 0.20 points on a 0-4 scale between the first and last measuring point, with a mean score of

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[7] CESAR is a web-based interface for quantitative corpus analysis, see https://cesar.science.ru.nl.
[8] There is no theoretical reason to argue that one component should weigh more heavily in the final index than another component.

1.41 in 1985 and 1.21 in 2019. The overall mean over the 35-year period is 1.29 (*SD*=0.118). There are some small ups and downs in between these two time points but overall there is no systematic increase or decrease to detect over time, which is confirmed by an OLS regression analysis (*B*=-0.001; *p*=0.348; R^2=0.000; see Table 5.1). Based on this, H1 is not supported: politicians' use of reflection-promoting speech has not declined in televised election debates between 1985 and 2019.

Notwithstanding the absence of a downward or upward trend, the data do show small ups and downs around the mean of 1.29, with the largest difference in scores between two subsequent election years: a maximum mean score of 1.63 in 1991 and a minimum score of 1.09 in 1995 (for an overview of descriptive statistics per election year, see Appendix 5.7). Interestingly, this indicates that it is particularly contextual factors that influence the use of reflection-promoting speech at certain points in time and that it does not take decades to see gradual changes. The leap in 1995 may particularly be explained by the fact that, for the first time, populist politicians participated in the debates. Moreover, in 1995, commercial broadcaster VTM organized its first election debate, which could have stimulated the public broadcaster VRT to compete with commercial broadcaster VTM in the newly emerged battle for viewers (Brants & Van Praag, 2006).[9]

Figure 5.2: General index of reflection-promoting speech

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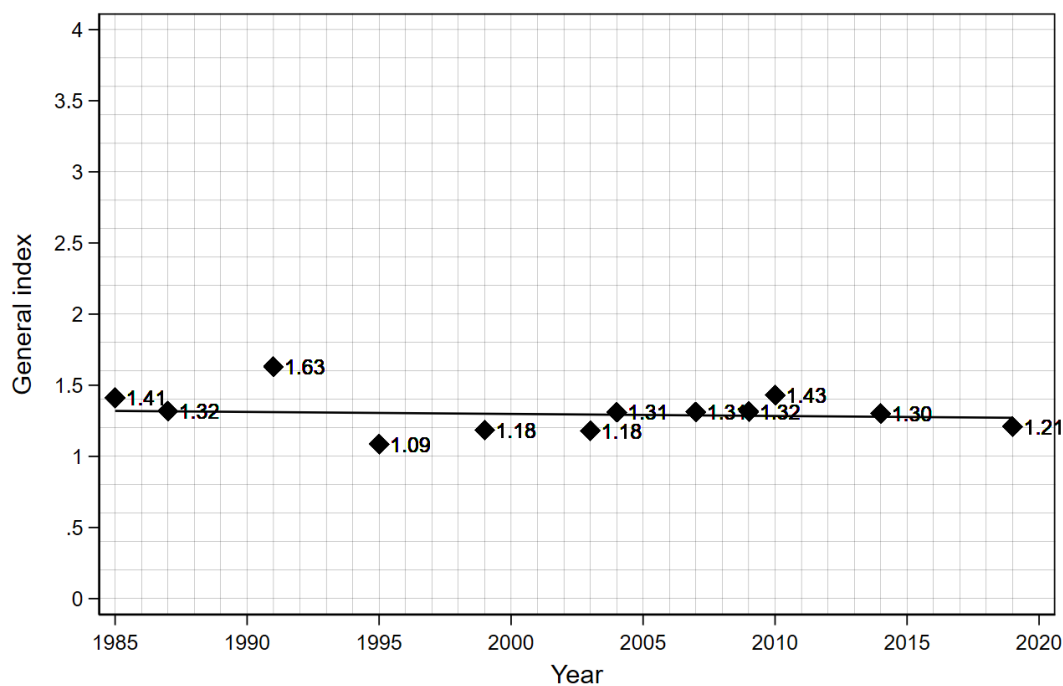
[9] VTM debates score slightly higher than VRT debates for reflection-promoting speech but the difference is extremely small (*B*=0.072; *p*=0.020; R^2=0.002). Also for the separate speech components differences are non-existent or very small (see Appendix 5.8).

Table 5.1: Results for general index and separate reflection-promoting components

	General Index B(SE)	Justification B(SE)	Perspectives B(SE)	Information B(SE)	Accessibility B(SE)
Time	-0.001(0.002)	-0.001(0.001)	-0.002(0.001)**	0.001(0.000)	0.000(0.000)
(Intercept)	1.321(0.033)***	0.398(0.016)***	0.180(0.014)***	0.354(0.009)***	0.388(0.005)
R^2	0.000	0.000	0.002	0.001	0.001
N (turns)	4146	4146	4146	4146	4146

Notes. Estimates are the result of OLS linear regressions. Entries are unstandardized coefficients and standard errors (in parentheses). *$p<.05$, **$p<.01$, ***$p<.001$

Next, Figure 5.3 presents the evolution for each reflection-promoting speech component separately. Looking at Figures 5.3a and 5.3b, we observe a slight downward trend for the justifications and the perspectives component. Yet, the regression analysis for the relationship between time and the justification component shows that the model explains virtually no variance and that the relationship is insignificant ($B=-0.001$; $p=0.221$; $R^2=0.000$).[10] For the perspectives component as well, the model explains only an extremely small amount of variance, even though the relationship is significant ($B=-0.002$; $p=0.01$; $R^2=0.002$). Because of this low explained variance, H2a and H2b are not supported. For the information component, a small increasing trend is observed (Figure 5.3c). This contradicts the expectations for this component (H2c), but a regression analysis again shows that the effect is very small and only marginally significant ($B=0.001$; $p=0.093$; $R^2=0.001$). In sum, H2c is not supported. For the accessibility component, we expected an increasing trend (H2d) but, again, this is not supported ($B=0.000$; $p=0.092$; $R^2=0.001$; see Figure 5.3d).

Since all trend lines display only limited changes over time and effect sizes are small, we do not find empirical evidence for the often assumed and expected decreases in reflection-promoting speech over the past 35 years. While there is no clear decrease (nor increase), the separate time points of the perspectives, and particularly the justifications and information components, show ups and downs over the years. This indicates that rather than an overall decline, these components are influenced more by contextual factors explaining their descend and surge at particular points in time. We do not observe this fluctuating pattern for the accessibility component.

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[10] The perspectives, justifications and information components have 3, 4 and 5 unique values respectively (the accessibility component is continuous). Because rescaling to 0 and 1 to conduct logistic regressions would mean a great loss of information, linear regression analyses were conducted. Ordered logit regressions were conducted as robustness check. These analyses arrive at the same conclusions as the linear regression analyses and can be found in Appendix 5.10.

Figure 5.3: Mean scores for separate reflection-promoting speech components

Figure 5.3a: Justification component
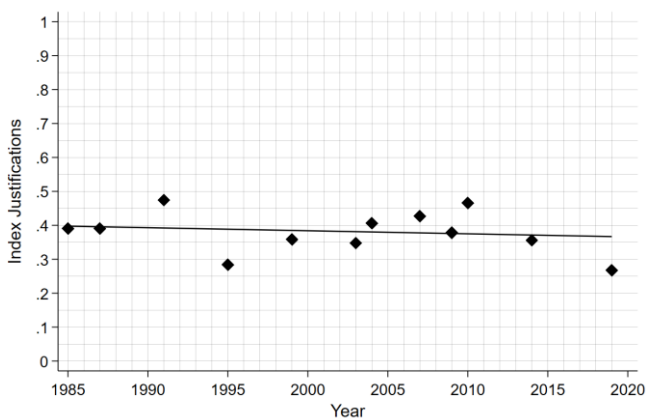
Figure 5.3b: Perspectives component
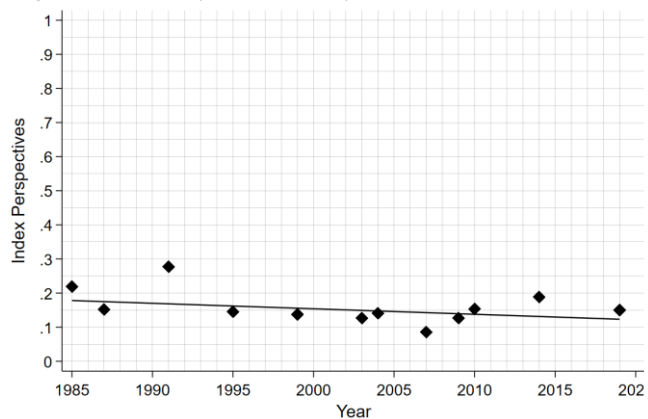
Figure 5.3c: Information component
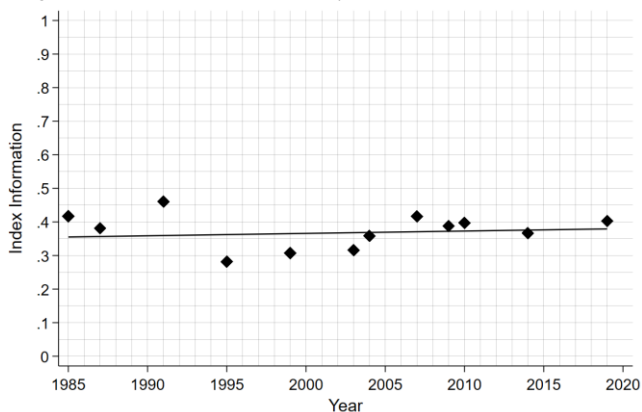
Figure 5.3d: Accessibility component

Furthermore, the trend lines provide interesting insights regarding the prevalence of the different components in the debates. We observe that the justification component ($M=0.381$; $SD=0.412$), information component ($M=0.359$; $SD=0.237$) and accessibility component ($M=0.396$; $SD=0.126$) all hover around similar mean values of 0.36-0.40 on the 0-1 scales. For the perspectives component, the mean score is considerably lower ($M=0.148$; $SD=0.351$). An explanation for this finding may be that different perspectives are already presented by the different politicians in the debate, so explicit mention of one's opponent's viewpoints is likely to be lower on the debating politician's priority list, as compared to the provision of justifications, information and accessible language to inform and persuade potential voters. Furthermore, talking about one's own points and views is likely to persuade citizens more than engaging with other participants' talking points. For a detailed overview of descriptive statistics of each component, see Appendix 5.7.

As a final step, time trends of each component's indicators are presented in Figure 5.4 to offer even more in-depth insights (see Appendix 5.7 and 5.9 for descriptive statistics and regression analyses). Regarding the justification component, no decrease over time is observed for the *presence* and *relevance* of justifications (see Figure 5.4a). This is confirmed by logistic regression analyses ($OR_{presence}$=1.001; p=0.811; $OR_{relevance}$=0.999; p=0.801). Figure 5.4a does show a downward trend in the *number* of justifications over time. This is confirmed by a logistic regression (OR=0.984; p=0.000), indicating that with every unit increase in time, the odds of more than one justification being provided decrease by a factor of 0.016 (or 1.6%, a small effect). Figure 5.4a shows that the decline can particularly be attributed to a sudden decrease in justifications after 1995: the number of justifications drops in 1995, as compared to the years before. After 1995, the quantity of justifications remains at a similar level and fluctuates around a lower baseline, showing no further decline.

Figure 5.4b presents a small downward trend for both indicators of the perspectives component. This is confirmed by logistic regression analysis: both indicators decrease slightly over time ($OR_{presence}$=0.984; p=0.001; $OR_{non\text{-}neutral}$=0.991; p=0.069). Again, odds ratios indicate that the effects are very small. Figure 5.4c, presenting the information indicators, shows that the trend lines for relevant and falsifiable information do not show a downward or upward trend, which is also confirmed by the logistic regression analyses ($OR_{relevant}$=1.002; p=0.727; $OR_{falsifiable}$=1.003; p=0.338). When analyzing politicians' references to the source where information can be checked, the trend line decreases slightly and again the effect is very small (OR=0.977; p=0.009). Last, the upward trend detected in politicians' use of numerical information is small as well (OR=1.024; p=0.000).

Figure 5.4d displays the indicators of the accessibility component. The first indicator of language comprehensibility (i.e. the Flesch-Douma measurement) shows a fairly stable pattern over time. While a regression analysis shows a significant positive effect, it is extremely small (B=0.001 p=0.044; R^2=0.001). Language concreteness, the second indicator of language comprehensibility, shows a stable pattern over time (B=-0.000; p=0.962; R^2=0.000; Figure 5.4d). Next, for language vividness, politicians' use of illustrations and anecdotes is also stable over time, which is observed both in Figure 5.4d and confirmed by the logistic regression analyses ($OR_{illustrations}$=0.997; p=0.394; $OR_{anecdotes}$=1.018; p=0.302). Finally, a small rise is detected in politicians' use of figurative language, indicating more use of tools like metaphors and analogies, but the effect is again small (OR=1.014; p=0.005).

Figure 5.4: Mean scores for separate reflection-promoting speech indicators over time

Figure 5.4a: Justification indicators
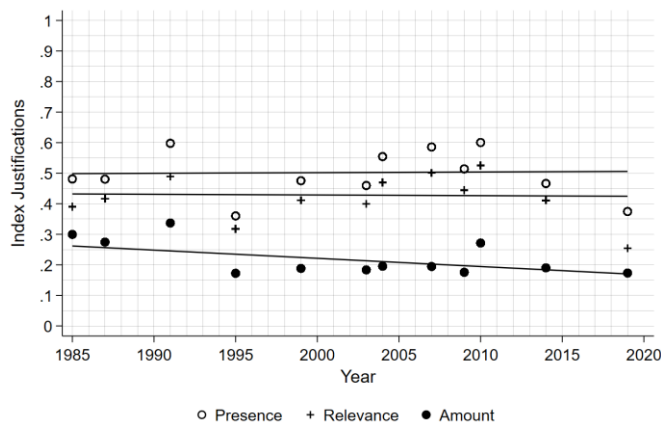
Figure 5.4b: Perspective indicators
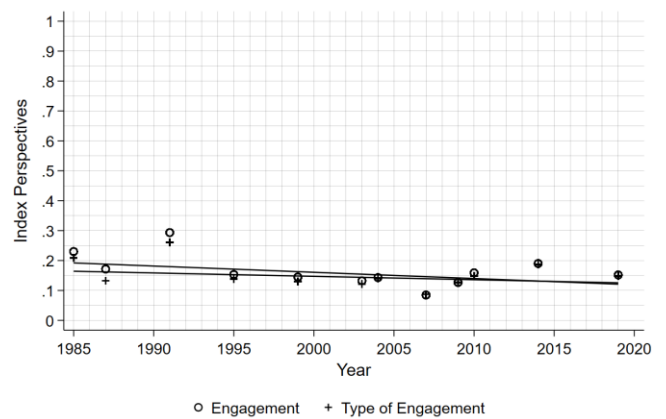
Figure 5.4c: Information indicators
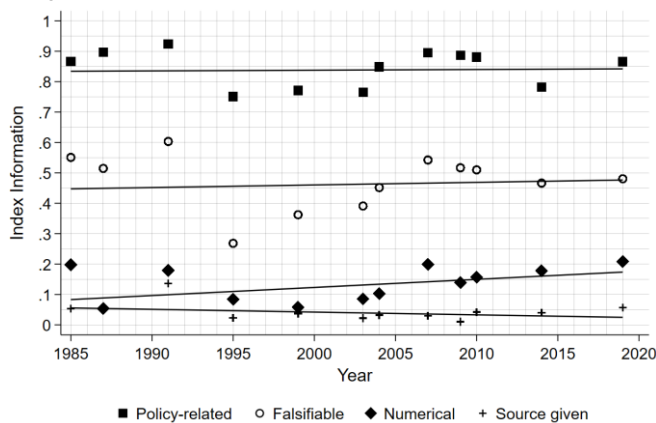
Figure 5.4d: Accessibility indicators
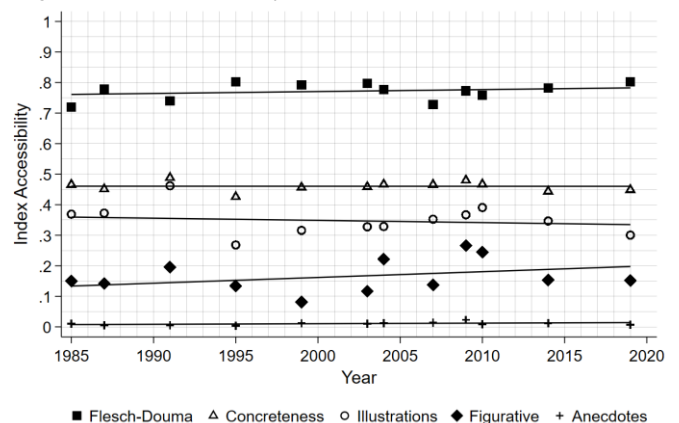
With regards to the prevalence of the different indicators, we find strong differences depending on the indicator under study. There are some interesting findings to emphasize. First, Figure 5.4b shows that the indicators of the perspectives component follow similar time patterns. While the perspectives component scores are low, this indicates that when a politician *does* engage with a different perspective, they generally attach a positive or negative judgment to it which increases the information value of the politician's statement. Second, some of the indicators are highly prevalent in the debates. For instance, the information politicians provide in the debates is mostly policy-related. Moreover, language comprehensibility is high: politicians' language is 'fairly easy' to understand (see Appendix 5.3). Anecdotes are, in contrast, almost completely absent. Last, most indicators show noteworthy ups and downs over time, indicating that contextual variables play an important role and influence short-term changes in the reflection-promoting speech components in election debates.

Conclusion and discussion

When citizens form their opinions and make political decisions, they ideally do so in a reflective way: by considering and integrating a diversity of viewpoints, including those that they do not agree with (Dewey, 1933; Mutz, 2006). Because of their format, televised election debates have the potential to promote such reflective reasoning among citizens (Coleman, 2020). Concerns are raised repeatedly, however, about the low and declining quality of these debates, thereby preventing citizens to arrive at reflective judgments (Dryzek et al., 2019). Longitudinal research on the actual content of election debates is, however, scarce, especially outside of the U.S.-context. In this study, we conducted a systematic analysis to put these allegations to an empirical test. After identifying four reflection-promoting speech components (a justification, perspectives, information and accessibility component), we assessed their evolution in televised election debates over time in the western European context of Belgium (1985-2019).

Over time, we expected a decline in the prevalence of three rational-speech components (justifications, perspectives and information). Contrary to concerns and theoretical arguments, we did not find empirical evidence for this. Therefore, allegations about the deteriorating quality of election debates should be asserted with caution. Moreover, we looked beyond the reasoned and the rational and expected politicians' language accessibility in the debates to be on the rise. We argued that language accessibility stimulates reflective reasoning among citizens because it ensures that everyone can comprehend and engage with what is being said and therefore reflect upon what they hear (Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019; Maia, 2018). Contrary to expectations, language accessibility did not increase over time.

Notwithstanding the absence of strong declining or rising trends, we do observe ups and downs over the years. This fluctuating pattern indicates that the prevalence of reflection-promoting speech at a certain point in time is context-dependent. We therefore encourage future research to study the influence of contextual factors, such as the topic under discussion (e.g. do more polarizing issues lead to less reflection-promoting speech?), or the format of the debate (e.g. is there less room for reflection-promoting speech the more politicians are simultaneously debating with each other?). Moreover, the findings show that the more specific the level of analysis, the less stable the trend lines, and the stronger the ups and downs. This indicates the importance of conducting not just aggregate, but also detailed analyses and study different and specific elements when assessing political debates.

The absence of a strong downward trend in the use of reflection-promoting speech in election debates does not necessarily mean that the often-heard concerns about political discourse are unwarranted. It is important to perpetuate scholarly efforts that investigate where these worries derive from. In effect, there may be other contexts where reflection-promoting speech is declining, such as political news coverage or parliamentary debate (e.g. Farnsworth & Lichter, 2007; Wyss et al., 2015). Moreover, regardless of a rise or decline over time, politicians do not always use reflection-promoting speech. There is a certain degree of reflection-preventing speech in debates and this could lower citizens' argument repertoire and trust in politics (Goovaerts & Marien, 2020; van der Wurff et al., 2018). Yet, debates should not all too swiftly be disregarded as *non*deliberative events that harm democracy. This study supports the claim that election debates have reflection-promoting potential. The vast majority of utterances in the debates is policy-related and the language in the debates is generally accessible and understandable. Nearly half of the turns also included at least one justification and falsifiable statement. Although mediated debates are not the most likely place to find high instances of reflection-promoting speech (certainly not on all components), we follow previous research that studied other mediated venues, such as TV news or political talk shows, and conclude that, despite all criticism, such venues can contribute to a more deliberative and reflection-promoting public sphere (Page, 1996; Wessler & Schultz, 2007).

This study is not without limitations, leaving some fruitful paths for future research. First, one particular political discourse type was studied: televised election debates. To make more general claims about the broader political communication environment, future studies could investigate the evolution of reflection-promoting speech in other discourse types, such as online political discussions, political speeches, or talk shows. Second, criticism is also regularly voiced in the academic and public debate about politicians' disrespectful statements in televised debates (e.g. Mutz & Reeves, 2005). Although we included engagement with other perspectives, which can be connected to respect (Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996), we did not study more language-style respect forms, generally referred to as (in)civility. High prevalence of uncivil or personal attacks could distract the public from the substantive content of the debate and may therefore also decrease the reflection-promoting potential of debates, which is something future research could look into. Third, the trends of reflection-promoting speech observed in Belgium are likely to be similar in countries with similar party and media system characteristics (e.g. the Netherlands, Germany; Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Still, conducting comparative longitudinal research in these systems as well as in more competitive political and media systems (e.g. the United States or the United Kingdom) would be worthwhile to gain a deeper understanding of country- and system-specific similarities and differences.

To conclude, this study builds on previous work to theorize about and empirically study reflection-promoting speech in election debates. We encourage future work to expand this research agenda and further examine and map reflection-promoting speech, its effects, and the intricacies of the different components, both in isolation and in interplay, in other contexts and different countries. That way, we can move beyond assumptions of low debate quality and gather more systematic and empirical evidence about political communication that promotes or prevents reflection among citizens.

Chapter 6 : Trends in debate quality: the evolution and determinants of incivility

Research questions: 1) How did politicians' use of incivility evolve over time?; 2) Which determinants influence politicians' use of incivility?

Data & method: A quantitative content analysis of 24 Belgian televised election debates (1985-2019) is conducted. Descriptive analyses, bivariate Chi²-analyses and Bayesian multilevel logistic regression analyses are used to analyze incivility over time and assess determinants that vary *between debates*, *within debates*, and *between politicians*.

Main findings: Against expectations, results show that incivility is not increasing but occurs in a volatile pattern with pronounced ups and downs over the years, indicating that incivility is highly context-specific. In particular, the results reveal that incivility is mostly affected by characteristics of politicians, such as their populist ideology, incumbency status, and gender, and by within-debate determinants, such as the topic under discussion, the number of politicians simultaneously debating, and previous incivility levels in the debate.

Chapter based on: Goovaerts, I., & Turkenburg, E. (2021). It's the Context, Stupid! Investigating Patterns and Determinants of Political Incivility in Televised Debates over Time. *Under Review*.

Introduction

Incivility in politics, and particularly its alleged increase over time, raises a lot of concern and is an important point of discussion in the scholarly and public debate (Abdullah, 2012; Bendadi, 2020; Dryzek et al., 2019; Shea & Fiorina, 2013; Stone & Green, 2017; Vandervelden, 2019). One of the main reasons for concern relates to the adverse effects of incivility on citizens' political attitudes, such as political trust, political cynicism, legitimacy perceptions, and affective polarization (Druckman et al., 2019; Goovaerts & Marien, 2020; Mutz, 2007; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). Despite the growing body of research on the effects of political incivility, our knowledge is still limited about (1) the prevalence of politicians' use of incivility over time (i.e. is incivility increasing as is generally assumed?), and (2) the factors that influence its prevalence, particularly outside the U.S. context. This study furthers our understanding of political incivility by analyzing (1) the evolution and (2) the determinants of incivility in 35 years of televised election debates in a western European context (Belgium, 1985-2019).

The evolving media and political context in which politicians operate has likely influenced, and particularly heightened, politicians' use of incivility over the past decades. It has been argued that trends such as the increasing mediatization of politics, the rising success of populist parties and leaders, and the increasing importance of social media in many western democracies have led to a rise in political incivility, and pushes politicians across the entire political spectrum to act more uncivilly (e.g. Eberwein & Porlezza, 2016; Marien et al., 2020; Ott, 2017; Uslaner, 1993). Analyzing incivility over time allows us to provide an empirical test for the allegation that incivility is on the rise. Only in the U.S. some first insights have been gathered, generally pointing towards increasing levels of incivility (e.g. Shea & Sproveri, 2012; Uslaner, 1993). Yet these studies also show that the increase does not happen steadily and linearly, but in a volatile pattern with ups and downs over the years. Hence, these studies argue that it is important to study incivility in relation to its context.

In line with that conclusion, we also introduce a multi-layered framework of theoretically-driven determinants that are expected to influence politicians' use of incivility in mediated political debates. First, factors that vary *between* debates are included, i.e. the type of broadcaster (public or commercial) on which the debate is aired and the presence of populist actors in the debates. Second, factors that vary *within* debates are taken into account. This includes the type of topics discussed throughout a debate, the number of politicians debating with each other, and what we call the "action-reaction" of incivility: whether one uncivil statement spurs following uncivil statements. Last, we expect some politicians to have certain characteristics that make them use more or less incivility than

others. More specifically, we look at incumbency, gender, and populist ideology. The proposed framework is particularly applicable to communication formats such as mediated political debates where politicians directly interact with each other. Still, several of the determinants in our framework can also be studied in other types of political discourse, such as parliamentary debates, political speeches, or politicians' social media posts.

Two important contributions are made to the literature. First, overall, insights into the *evolution* and *determinants* of political incivility are still surprisingly limited and gathering these will add to the incivility literature that already brought increasing clarity to the conceptualization of incivility (Muddiman, 2017; Papacharissi, 2004; Stryker et al., 2016), and its effects (e.g. Brooks & Geer, 2007; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Skytte, 2020). Second, especially outside of the United States claims about rising levels of incivility are generally assumed rather than demonstrated. Hence, we lack insights into the evolution of incivility in other contexts. By conducting an empirical and systematic test of politicians' use of incivility over time in a western European context (Belgium), this study will contribute to filling this gap. This is important because Belgium is, like many other western democracies, a consensus democracy with a strong public broadcaster and limited degrees of negative campaigning. These characteristics make Belgium very different from the U.S., which may lead to different patterns in politicians' use of incivility (e.g. Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

Incivility in politics

Defining political incivility is challenging due to the complex and multidimensional nature of the concept (Herbst, 2010; Stryker et al., 2016). Overall, incivility is the opposite of civil or respectful communication. The latter can be situated within the broader normative deliberative ideal of respectful interactions between politicians (Steiner et al., 2004; Strömbäck, 2005). From a deliberative perspective, the quality of political debate ideally "centers around argumentative exchange in a climate of mutual respect and civility" (Wessler, 2008b, p. 1199). When politicians communicate civilly with each other, they express a relationship of mutual respect and show that they are willing to carefully listen to their political opponents' standpoints and arguments and take them seriously (Jamieson et al., 2017). The main reason to argue for civility in (mediated) political debate are the alleged beneficial consequences for the well-functioning of politics and democracy. When politicians are respectful towards their opponents in public political debate, they indicate to the public that other perspectives are legitimate and should be valued, and facilitate the inclusion of a variety of perspectives (Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019). This, in turn, would increase citizens' understanding of different perspectives, the perceived legitimacy of

different perspectives, and the quality and legitimacy political opinion formation (Cohen, 1989; Habermas, 1981; Mutz, 2007).

Political *in*civility, in contrast, indicates a lack of mutual respect. Political incivility is defined in this study as politicians' use of impolite, rude or disrespectful communication. It relates to "personal-level" forms of incivility, which is the form of incivility that *violates interpersonal politeness norms* (Muddiman, 2017, p. 3183), and is studied in most political incivility studies (e.g. Brooks & Geer, 2007; Gervais, 2017; Mutz & Reeves, 2005).[1] More specifically, incivility is defined in this study as "discursive behaviors that represent the rejection of communication norms pertaining to considerate, courteous, and respectful discussion" (Hopp, 2019, p. 206) and is "a characteristic of the style of interaction rather than of any given individual's opinions per se" (Mutz, 2015, p. 7). Such uncivil communication is particularly characterized by elements such as name-calling, derision, insulting, mockery, and aspersion, and can be directed both at the character of one's opponents and at one's opponents' standpoints (e.g. Brooks & Geer, 2007; Coe et al., 2014; Stryker et al., 2016). This can include very explicit forms of rude language (e.g. "You moron!") but can also be somewhat more implicit, such sarcastic comments to ridicule someone (e.g. Stryker et al., 2016). Citizens generally share the personal-level norm for civility in political discussion, and thus generally expect that politicians do not insult or ridicule each other when discussing politics (e.g. Mutz & Reeves, 2005).

It has already been shown that (personal-level) incivility negatively affects the perceived legitimacy of oppositional perspectives, decreases political trust, and increases affective polarization (Druckman et al., 2019; Mutz, 2007; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Skytte, 2020). Furthermore, incivility in political exchanges decreases the perceived rationality of political arguments and of the political outgroup (Popan et al., 2019). Since voters ideally make their political decisions based on the thoughtful consideration of rational arguments and multiple perspectives (Leeper & Slothuus, 2018), incivility may also get in the way of citizens making reasoned decisions because "incivility may distract [them] from the rational content of the discussion" (Popan et al., 2019, p. 129).

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[1] Overall, incivility can be divided into two main categories, i.e. "personal-level incivility" and "public-level incivility" (Muddiman, 2017). Some scholars argue that the personal-level definition is too narrow and that it describes impoliteness rather than incivility (Muddiman, 2017, p. 3183; Papacharissi, 2004). According to these scholars, a message is uncivil when it *violates the political and democratic process*. It are messages that "threaten democracy, deny people their personal freedoms, and stereotype social groups" (Papacharissi, 2004, p. 267).

These findings signal the importance of getting a deeper understanding of the prevalence of incivility in political discourse and the factors that affect it. Yet, such insights are still surprisingly limited. Most of the content analyses of incivility have focused on *citizens*, rather than *politicians*, by analyzing citizens' uncivil language use in online political discussions, comment sections on social media or news outlets, or messages directed towards politicians (e.g. Coe et al., 2014; Oz et al., 2018; Popan et al., 2019; Southern & Harmer, 2019; Theocharis et al., 2020). As Sobieraj and Berry state (2011, p. 19), there is "remarkably little data on the extent to which political discourse is actually uncivil" and "[t]hose studies that do examine content focus on negative campaign advertisements, overlooking more egregious forms of political incivility that penetrate the broader media landscape". Moreover, the studies that do analyze incivility in elite communication are mainly focused on the United States. Some first insights in the U.S. have been gathered on the evolution of incivility, generally indicating that incivility has been increasing over time, for instance in U.S. Congress (Ahuja, 2008; Uslaner, 1993; but see Jamieson & Falk, 1998), in U.S. political news (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011), and in U.S. politics more generally (Shea & Sproveri, 2012). For the western European context, longitudinal studies of incivility are virtually absent. Moreover, importantly, studies reporting an increase in incivility show that the increase does not happen steadily and linearly but in a volatile pattern with ups and downs over the years. Therefore, the studies generally conclude that we should study incivility in its context and examine which factors influence incivility at certain points in time (e.g. Shea & Sproveri, 2012). Although providing noteworthy and important insights, those studies that already analyzed incivility in relation to its context have generally focused on a limited number of determinants (see e.g. Kenski et al., 2018 on party affiliation; York, 2013 on cable versus network news).

The present study takes a more comprehensive approach by analyzing the evolution and several theoretically-driven determinants of incivility in the western European context. We investigate incivility in the case of televised election debates. These debates have been organized for decades in many countries around the world (Juárez-Gámiz et al., 2020). They are one of the constant features and big look-forward-to moments for voters during the electoral campaign, indicated by the generally high viewership numbers (ibid.), and serve an important role in democracy (Coleman, 2020). Precisely because they are directed at the wider public (in contrast to parliamentary debates for instance) and reach wide audiences, it is important to gather insights into the prevalence of incivility there since they could strongly shape citizens' attitudes and image of politics. Previous research has indeed shown that these debates substantially influence the public. While citizens generally learn from watching these debates (for a meta-analysis, see Benoit et al., 2003), politicians' use of incivility in these debates decreases, for instance, their own favorability and decreases

citizens' levels of political trust (Goovaerts & Marien, 2020; Hopmann et al., 2018). Election debates provide an ideal case to analyze politicians' incivility use, because political leaders of the different parties directly interact and discuss politics side-by-side. They talk about the same topics with each other at the same time in one setting, which provides the opportunity to study them in comparable settings.

In what follows, we first explain the reasoning behind the expected increase in incivility over time. Second, we develop a multi-layered framework of incivility-inducing determinants and formulate our expectations for each determinant. The reason to treat these two parts separately is that time as such cannot be seen as a "determinant" in the sense that it is not the passing of time by and of itself that would heighten incivility levels. In Figure 6.1, an overview is presented to already structure the different expectations that will be subsequently formulated.

Figure 6.1: Overview of hypotheses and determinants

Time (H1)		
Variance *between* debates Broadcaster (H2) Populist presence (H3)	**Variance *within* debates** Issue type (H4) Format (H5) Action-reaction (H6)	**Variance between politicians** Populist ideology (H7) Incumbency (H8) Gender (H9)
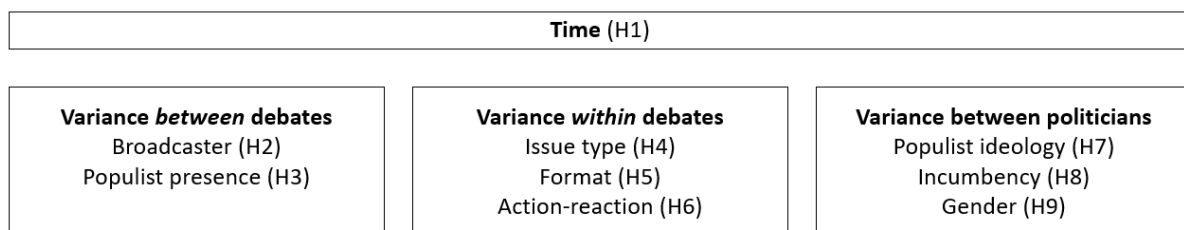
Incivility over time

There are a number of societal trends which have taken place in western (European) democracies since the 1980s that can be connected to an increase of incivility in election debates: increasing mediatization of politics, growing importance of social media, and rising success of populism.[2]

First, from the nineties onwards, the (traditional) media increasingly started to operate via a certain logic, called *media logic* (Brants & Van Praag, 2006; Esser & Strömbäck, 2014). The reason behind this is the growing fragmentation, competitiveness, and commercialization of the media landscape: audiences are overwhelmed by an overload of broadcasters, channels, programs, and new communication outlets, and the traditional media have to fight intensely and increasingly to get the audience's attention. Adherence to media logic helps them to attract that attention. Importantly, this logic strongly affects political

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[2] These evolutions are applicable to televised election debates in particular, but also to other types of (mediated) political discourse more generally.

communication in the media by emphasizing and focusing on certain behaviors or characteristics of politicians, and by presenting political information in attractive ways (Altheide, 2004). Emphasizing and encouraging conflict and incivility fits this logic well (Muddiman, 2018). Moreover, over the years, politicians learned that they themselves also benefit from adapting their communication style to this logic because it increases their chances to be picked up by the news media and grasp attention (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Van Aelst, 2014). Evidently, this has many benefits for them and may have therefore increasingly stimulated them to act uncivilly.

Second, media logic is particularly attached to the traditional media, i.e. newspapers and television. In recent years, we are moving beyond traditional media logic with the emergence and rising importance of new avenues to spread political content, particularly social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter (Brants & van Praag, 2017). These channels operate via specific features that "privilege discourse that is simple, impulsive, and uncivil" because it is easily picked up and shared (Ott, 2017, p. 59). Politicians are thus triggered even more today to use incivility to heighten their visibility on these platforms as well. This also relates to election debates. The conversation about the debates does not stop once the debate is finished but extends to the social media realm during and after the debate (Juárez-Gámiz et al., 2020; Trilling, 2015). This encourages politicians to align their communication with those features, such as incivility, that prove successful in getting attention on social media.

Third, the success of populist politicians has been increasing from the nineties onwards throughout Western Europe (Rooduijn et al., 2019). Consequently, populist politicians are increasingly present in mediated political debates. These politicians are generally known for their "bad manners" and uncivil communication style (e.g. Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). Appearing increasingly on the political stage, it is likely that they are heightening the prevalence of incivility. Moreover, their (uncivil) communication style fits media logic extremely well, guaranteeing them wide visibility (Mazzoleni, 2014). This does not go unnoticed by other non-populist politicians, who tend to copy populists' debate style in order to compete with them more effectively (Bossetta, 2017; Marien et al., 2020). Therefore, the argument goes that we are currently living in a "populist zeitgeist", where "populist discourse has gone mainstream in the politics of contemporary western democracies" (Mudde, 2004, p. 562). This would make political discourse more uncivil across the entire political spectrum.

Based on all of this, **Hypothesis 1** is formulated as follows: *Politicians' use of incivility in election debates increased over time (1985-2019).*

A multi-layered framework of incivility-inducing determinants

In what follows, a multi-layered framework is proposed of determinants that could potentially influence the level of incivility in election debates at certain points in time. The framework consists of three categories or layers. The first category constitutes determinants that vary *between* debates, i.e. determinants that remain stable during a debate but can vary between the individual debates. The second category includes determinants that vary *within* (or during) the debate; they can change throughout an individual debate. The third category consists of determinants that vary *between politicians* and looks at individual-level characteristics of politicians that could influence their incivility use.

Variance between debates

For the between-debate determinants, we expect the type of broadcaster, i.e. public or commercial, and the presence of populist politicians in the debate to influence incivility levels. The first expectation about type of broadcaster relates to media logic. The public broadcaster has to compete with the commercial broadcaster for the audience's attention and market share, but the commercial broadcaster is driven even stronger by this "consumerist idea of giving the public what it wants", and is consequently even more likely to follow media logic and thus to push politicians to act uncivilly (Brants & Van Praag, 2006, p. 30; Wessler & Rinke, 2014). Debate moderators could, for instance, stimulate incivility to ensure that the debate follows media logic (Walter & Van Praag, 2014). Moreover, the public broadcaster is driven stronger by the deontological code to inform the public well (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004), which may also lower moderators' encouragement to express uncivil attacks. In sum, we expect the *level of incivility to be higher in election debates aired on the commercial broadcaster, compared to the public broadcaster* (**Hypothesis 2**).

Second, building on our populism argument explicated earlier, the mere presence of a populist politician(s) in the debate could heighten incivility levels. This is not only because they themselves are more likely to be uncivil (Wyss et al., 2015), but also because they tend to incite more uncivil replies by non-populist politicians. Mainstream politicians are inclined to engage in more uncivil interaction when debating with populist politicians to try to compete more effectively, which could make the debate more uncivil overall (Bossetta, 2017; Marien et al., 2020). The mere presence of populists in debates might cause other politicians and debate moderators to (unconsciously) anticipate a more uncivil debate and act accordingly. Therefore, we expect that *incivility is higher in election debates where populist politicians participate, compared to election debates where populist politicians do not participate* (**Hypothesis 3**).

Variance within debates

The next layer includes determinants that vary *within* the debate. First, election debates are generally divided into several parts, each part consisting of a certain policy issue that is discussed. We expect the level of incivility to depend on the issue, and particularly the morality of an issue. Moral issues generate conflict about basic moral values and are "related to fundamental questions, such as death, reproduction, and marriage" (Engeli et al., 2012). Typical examples are euthanasia, abortion, immigration, and the rights of sexual and gender minorities (Colombo, 2021). When moral thoughts are triggered, more polarization and stronger emotional, hostile reactions tend to be provoked, and there is less willingness to compromise (Garrett & Bankert, 2020; Ryan, 2017). Therefore, we expect that *discussing moral issues leads to more incivility than discussing non-moral issues* (**Hypothesis 4**).

Second, previous research has already pointed out that debate formats affect politicians' use of more clashing or non-clashing strategies (Carlin et al., 2001). One element of debate format that is particularly expected to influence incivility, and varies *within* election debates, is the number of politicians that directly interact or debate with each other. Even though there is a fixed number of politicians taking part in the entire debate-broadcast, the amount of politicians debating with each other often varies throughout the different sections of a debate. The reasoning behind its expected effect is as follows: election debates generally attract large audiences, but even more people will hear about the debates – intentionally or accidentally – via the news or on social media afterwards. Politicians know this and will aim for that attention. The more politicians are simultaneously debating, the more difficult it is to get that attention and the harder they might have to fight for it. As uncivil statements are likely to be picked up by the media, we expect that *the higher the number of politicians simultaneously debating with each other, the more they use incivility* (**Hypothesis 5**).

Last, there are indications from previous studies in other contexts that incivility may spur more incivility. This effect has been shown in workplace contexts (Andersson & Pearson, 1999) and in online political discussion contexts among citizens (Gervais, 2017). Once a politician attacks, the tone of the debate might have been set. The attacked politician may, as a response, get into "attack-mode" and reply to the incivility with an uncivil statement themselves. This is what we call the "action-reaction" of incivility. We expect that *one uncivil statement in the debate spurs following uncivil statements* (**Hypothesis 6**).

Variance between politicians

Some politicians are expected to use more incivility than other politicians. First, we study populism at the individual level here rather than at the aggregate debate level (see above). As stated already, it is argued in the literature that populist politicians are more uncivil than non-populist politicians (e.g. Moffitt & Tormey, 2014), yet, empirical studies systematically investigating these claims are still limited (but see e.g. Bracciale & Martella, 2017; Marien et al., 2020). Populist politicians are expected to behave more uncivilly because of their anti-elitist perspectives: criticisms and attacks towards the political elite are core to their ideology. Moreover, populists share the believe that there is one "general will of the people" that can hardly be disputed (Mudde, 2004, p. 543) and, therefore, populist politicians attack the elite and leave "no room for disagreement and compromise" (Urbinati, 1998, p. 117). All of this leads to **Hypothesis 7**: *Populist politicians use more incivility than non-populist politicians*.

Second, incumbents, i.e. politicians in government parties, are likely to defend the policy decisions made in the previous legislature and to pursue their current policies in the next one. Challengers, i.e. politicians in opposition parties, on the other hand, are likely to be more critical and attack the incumbents and their policy proposals and decisions to convince voters to choose a different path (Ganghof & Bräuninger, 2006). This in turn may affect the level of incivility in political debate (see e.g. Bächtiger & Hangartner, 2010). Maier & Jansen (2017), who studied politicians' use of negative messages in German election debates, also find that negative messages are expressed more often by challengers than incumbents. While negativity, i.e. criticizing one's opponent, is broader than incivility (negativity can be perfectly civil; Fridkin & Kenney, 2008), this gives further indications into this direction. Accordingly, **Hypothesis 8** is formulated: *Challengers use more incivility than incumbents*.

Last, politicians' gender could influence their language use. Men are more closely associated with agentic traits such as competitiveness and assertiveness, and women with communion traits such as friendliness and helpfulness (Williams & Best, 1982). As uncivil language rather signals the possession of agentic traits (Mölders et al., 2017), male politicians may be more likely to use incivility than female politicians. Moreover, as men seem to hold higher levels of enjoyment with regards to arguments and disagreement than women (Wolak, 2020), they may be less hesitant to employ uncivil language. Additionally, it has been shown that women are more likely to perceive political speech as uncivil than men do (Kenski et al., 2020). In sum, female politicians might be more hesitant to use incivility, leading to **Hypothesis 9**: *Male politicians use more incivility than female politicians*.

Data and method

Case: Televised election debates in Belgium

An original dataset of televised election debates in Belgium (Flanders) was collected, based on the following five criteria: The debates 1) featured at least two political leaders; 2) were held in the context of and in the week before the election(s); 3) were broadcast on the public broadcaster (VRT) or main commercial broadcaster (VTM)[3]; 4) were moderated by at least one moderator; 5) were organized for the national and/or regional election(s)[4]. We collected all debates that met these criteria and were accessible in the archives of VRT, VTM, or online, resulting in a dataset of 24 televised election debates broadcasted from 1985 to 2019. This sample is close to a perfect representation of the population of televised election debates that were broadcast in Flanders over the past 35 years. A full overview including details on year, broadcaster, and participants can be found in Appendix 6.1.

Belgium is a country in western Europe that provides a good case to test the hypotheses. First, the trends that relate to Hypothesis 1 are all present in Belgium, and the 1985-2019 time period is wide enough to cover the period before, during, and after the emergence of these trends in Belgium: mediatization of politics, importance of social media, and populist success (e.g. Rooduijn et al., 2019; Tankovska, 2021; Van Aelst, 2014). Moreover, we expect that this study's findings are generalizable to other western democracies that also experience the increasing mediatization of politics, increasing importance of social media (and more specifically increasing dual-screening during election debates), and rising success of populist parties (e.g. Juárez-Gámiz et al., 2020; Mazzoleni, 2014; Rooduijn et al., 2019). Therefore, Belgium is a *typical case to study the evolution of incivility* in televised debates.

Moreover, Belgium is also an interesting case to study because it is a *less typical case to find high levels or prevalence of incivility* in mediated debates. Belgium is a democratic corporatist system, characterized as a consensus democracy with a strong public broadcaster, and with limited presence of negative campaigning (European Elections

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[3] Specifically the channel "Één" is studied, which is the main channel of the public broadcaster. The channels Één (VRT) and VTM are moreover the two channels that organize the election debates and are the two mostly watched channels in Flanders. Over the past 10 years (2011-2020) their market shares have fluctuated around 30% for Één, and around 19-20% for VTM (see https://www.cim.be/nl/televisie/openbare-resultaten).

[4] We selected debates for both the regional and federal elections, because the parties and party leaders are the same at both levels. There are also no substantial differences between the debate formats for national versus regional elections, and both the regional and federal elections are considered first-order elections (Deschouwer, 2012). Furthermore, regional and federal elections coincided in 1999, 2014, and 2019.

Monitoring Center, 2019; Hallin & Mancini, 2004). This makes high prevalence of incivility more unlikely in comparison with more competitive systems such as the United States (majoritarian system, plethora of commercial broadcasters, high levels of negative campaigning). On the one hand, as most research on incivility and election debates has been conducted in the U.S., this allows to gather novel insights and investigate patterns and determinants in other contexts and see how they play out there. On the other hand, Belgium also serves as a representative case for other regions or countries with similar characteristics (e.g. the Netherlands or Norway; Hallin & Mancini, 2004), which allows us to make predictions and generalizations to such similar cases as well.

Content analysis and measurements

The 24 debates were transcribed and coded for incivility. Before starting the coding phase, *turns* were denoted in all debate transcripts as the units of analysis (see e.g. Sobieraj & Berry, 2011 for a similar approach). Every time a politician speaks, their speech act is considered a turn. In other words, the conversation goes back and forth in a debate, and politicians take turns by responding to each other or to the moderator. When a politician is interrupted, the interruption is a new turn on its own. When the interrupted politician is able to prolong his or her turn despite the interruption, the text before and after the interruption belong to the same turn since the politician did not yet finish his/her turn. In total, the dataset consists of 4102 turns.

After identification of the turns, a manual quantitative content analysis of incivility was conducted. Each turn was assigned a code: code '0' when incivility was absent, code '1' when incivility was present. In line with our definition, personal-level forms of incivility directed at the character and/or standpoints of political opponents were coded, e.g. when they used name-calling, insulting, aspersion, derision, belittling, obscenities, or slurs in their speech (see e.g. Coe et al., 2014; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). The normative deliberative ideal of a civil communication style was taken as the starting point to code this and used as a yardstick or baseline, against which deviations from it are measured (Chambers, 2009; Stryker & Danielson, 2013). This allows for a systematic empirical analysis and limits the influence of personal and subjective ideas of what is normal or "not done" in a debate, thereby increasing the validity of the coding scheme (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). Once a politician's turn deviated from that normative deliberative ideal of civility, code '1' was assigned.

One coder coded all 24 debates. To assess inter-coder reliability, a second coder coded 8 of the 24 debates independently from the first coder (i.e. 1232 turns accounting for 30% of all turns). Inter-coder reliability scores across the 8 debates were well-above the common

thresholds for satisfactory reliability: there was 93.66 percentage agreement, and Cohen's kappa resulted in a value of 0.752.

Predictors

Several predictor variables were coded to test our hypotheses. First, the time variable was defined by the year in which the election debate took place. Second, for predictors that vary *between* debates, code '0' was assigned for debates aired on the public broadcaster VRT, and code '1' for debates on the commercial broadcaster VTM. Code '0' was assigned to indicate that there were no populist politicians present in the debate, and code '1' when at least one populist politician was present. Third, for predictors that vary *within* debates, code '1' was assigned when politicians were discussing a moral topic and code '0' when they were not (see Appendix 6.2). To indicate the number of politicians that were simultaneously debating with each other, corresponding codes were assigned: when two politicians were debating with each other, code '2' was assigned; when 3 politicians were debating with each other, code '3', etc. When the politician expressed their opening or closing statement, or when the moderator started a conversation with one politician, code '1' was assigned. To measure the "action-reaction" component, it was studied whether uncivil statements (that received code '1') were followed by uncivil statements. In other words, the action-reaction variable received code '1' if an uncivil statement was preceded by another uncivil statement and code '0' if not. Finally, for the predictors that vary *between politicians*, it was coded whether the politician speaking was a populist (code '1') or not (code '0'). Politicians from Vlaams Belang, Lijst De Decker, and PVDA were considered populist (Rooduijn et al., 2019; Wauters & Pittoors, 2019). Next, politicians who belonged to an incumbent political party, i.e. a party that was in government during the legislature right before the elections, received code '0'; politicians who belonged to an opposition party received code '1'. A male politician was assigned code '0' and a female politician was assigned code '1' (see Appendix 6.2 for descriptives of each predictor).

Analyses

The analyses proceed as follows. First, trends of incivility over time are descriptively analyzed to see if incivility in the debates increased. Second, descriptive and bivariate Chi²-tests for the determinants of incivility on each level are conducted. These analyses give first insights into how the different factors influence incivility. Finally, a Bayesian multilevel logistic regression is conducted. In this model, we include the time variable and all the determinants to test which variables explain incivility when all variables are included and controlled for.

Our data has a three-level data structure: 4102 turns or speech acts (level 1) are expressed by 48 politicians (level 2), which are nested in 24 debates (level 3). There are several reasons

to opt for a Bayesian approach to conduct the multilevel analysis and we build on previous studies that worked with similar data and data structures to analyze time trends and determinants of discourse quality in parliamentary debates and that recommend the Bayesian approach for the following reasons (see e.g. Bächtiger & Hangartner, 2010, pp. 620–621; Hangartner et al., 2007; Wyss et al., 2015, p. 645). First, our data have a very high degree of cross-classification: several politicians participate in different debates, and several politicians speak up more than others in the debates. While a frequentist approach can also address and cope with cross-classification, this becomes increasingly difficult in frequentist analyses the more cross-classification there is because it strongly increases the computational burden for parameter estimation (Rasbash & Browne, 2007). These issues are minimized with the Markov Chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) algorithm in Bayesian analysis (this study uses the Metropolis-Hastings algorithm) that recognizes the correlation patterns across speakers, and performs better than the quasi-maximum likelihood algorithm that performs badly with regard to bias and coverage of point estimates for models with three or more variance terms (Browne & Draper, 2006; Wyss et al., 2015, p. 645). As a result, the MCMC algorithm for cross-classified models is not more complex than for nested models (Hangartner et al., 2007, p. 623). Second, we have a limited number of debates at the highest level which were selected purposively, not randomly. This may pose convergence issues in a frequentist approach that makes inferences to a hypothetical super-population. Bayesian analysis, in contrast, makes inferences conditional on the sample at hand, which is more appropriate for non-random selection processes and fits well with our data (given our well-represented sample of nearly all election debates aired in Belgium between 1985 and 2019).

Bayesian analysis allows the incorporation of substantive prior knowledge, but we refrain from doing so because there is little knowledge from prior studies available on the topic under study and therefore there is no strong guidance on the construction of the prior distributions. Therefore, we only use weakly informative priors on the unknown parameters of the model (see also e.g. Wyss et al., 2015). More specifically, we use inverse gamma (0.01; 0.01) prior distributions for the varying intercepts of our random intercept multilevel model because such priors draw parameter values that are always positive (Arreola & Wilson, 2020). All other parameters have a normal distribution with a mean of 0 and variance of 10,000. We used an MCMC sample size of 90,000, burn-in of 50,000, and thinning interval 10, resulting in 949,991 iterations. Inspecting the convergence diagnostic graphs shows no convergence issues to estimate the parameters (see Appendix 6.4). As a robustness check, we also conducted the frequentist multilevel logistic regression, and we observe that all the results are similar to those of the Bayesian analysis (see Appendix 6.5).

Finally, we control for the government level of the elections because election debates for both regional and federal elections are included in our dataset.

Results

Incivility over time

Figure 6.3 visualizes the degree of incivility in the debates over time. Overall, it is observed that the linear trend line rises, but the increase is very small, namely less than 1%. What strikes most attention are the pronounced peaks and valleys over time, particularly during the 2000s. Before that, there is a clear increase in incivility in the debates from 1985 to 1999. The first, and largest, drop in incivility appears during the next election year in 2003. It rises again in 2004, but then strongly diminishes again in 2007. A new trend of rising incivility appears from 2007 onwards, yet without exceeding the incivility levels of the (late) nineties. In sum, based on these first descriptive insights, Hypothesis 1 is not supported. An interesting finding to note is that incivility follows an almost identical pattern for the debates that were broadcast on the public broadcaster VRT and commercial broadcaster VTM until 2007, but from 2009 (i.e. the following election year) to 2019, an increasing trend in incivility is observed on the commercial broadcaster (see Appendix 6.3). This is not the case on the public broadcaster, where incivility does not rise nor decline substantially. Hence, the rising trend in the past decade can be explained by an increase in incivility on the commercial broadcaster. Notwithstanding this interesting finding of a rise in incivility between 2009 and 2019 on the commercial broadcaster, looking at the overall 35-year time pattern, it can be concluded that incivility did not increase.

Figure 6.2: Incivility over time (% per election year)
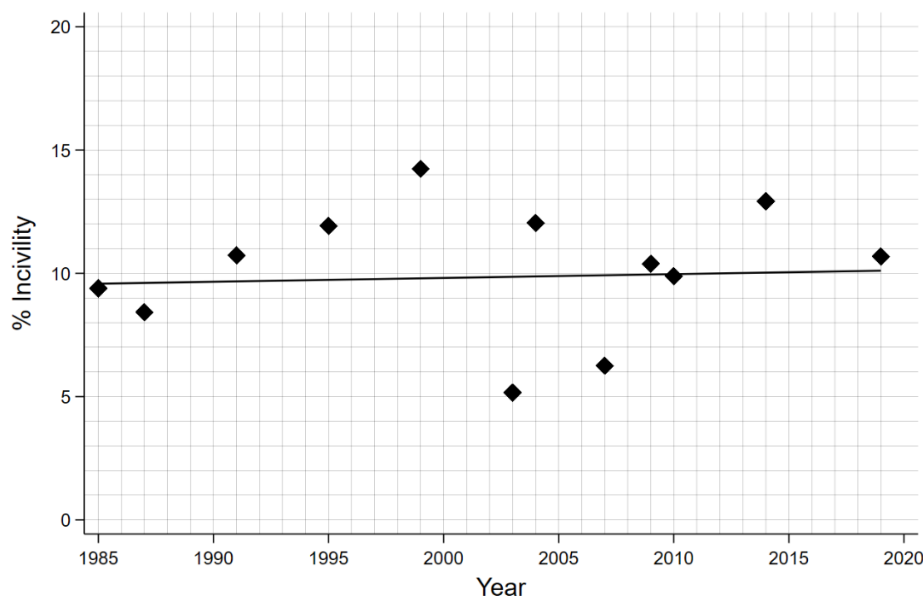
Multi-layered framework of incivility-inducing determinants

Descriptive results

There are several possible explanations for the ups and downs observed in Figure 6.3, which may be largely related to the determinants in the proposed framework. First, regarding the determinants that vary *between* debates, results show that debates aired on the commercial broadcaster VTM include more incivility than debates aired on the public broadcaster VRT, supporting H2. 13.1% of the turns in VTM debates include incivility, compared to 8.8% in the VRT debates (χ^2 (1, N = 4102) = 16.15, p < .001, Cramer's V = .063). In addition, a debate is more uncivil when at least one populist politician participates (10.9%), compared to those debates were populists are absent (7.8%; χ^2 (1, N = 4102) = 9.53, p = .002, Cramer's V = .048), supporting H3.

Regarding determinants that vary *within* debates, results show that the level of incivility when discussing moral topics (11.6%) is slightly higher than, but does not differ significantly from, the level of incivility when discussing other topics (9.6%; χ^2 (1, N = 4102) = 2.506, p = 0.113; Cramer's V = .025). Therefore, H4 cannot be supported. In line with H5, the number of debaters has an effect: the more politicians are debating with each other simultaneously, the more incivility is present (χ^2 (7, N = 4102) = 56.235, p < .001, Cramer's V = .117). When politicians are answering questions individually or when they are debating politics with one or two other politicians, the degree of incivility falls between 5.8% and 8.5%. Once four or more politicians are debating, it surpasses 10% with particularly high levels of incivility when seven or eight politicians are debating (15.5% and 20.7% respectively). There is also an action-reaction effect, supporting H6: an uncivil statement is more often preceded by another uncivil statement (15.1%) as compared to a civil statement (9.3%; χ^2 (1, N = 4102) = 13.913, p < .001, Cramer's V = .058).

Finally, for determinants varying between politicians, results show that populist politicians use more incivility than non-populist politicians, supporting H7. In particular, 18.2% of populists' turns contain incivility, compared to 8.8% of turns from non-populist politicians (χ^2 (1, N = 4102) = 42.17, p < .001, Cramer's V = .101). Next, in line with H8, results show that politicians in opposition are twice as likely to be uncivil (12.9%) compared to incumbent politicians (6.4%; χ^2 (1, N = 4102) = 48.81, p < .001, Cramer's V = .109). In line with H9, male politicians use more incivility (10.5%) than female politicians (6.3%; χ^2 (1, N = 4102) = 9.82, p = .002, Cramer's V = .049). An overview of all descriptive results can be found in Appendix 6.3.

Bayesian multilevel analysis

The results in Table 6.1 present the posterior distributions for the estimated coefficients for each covariate. The second column of Table 6.1 displays the logit coefficients (and standard deviations in parentheses). The third column presents the 95% credible intervals of the logit coefficients. Credible intervals are the Bayesian equivalent of confidence intervals in frequentist statistics and have a simple and straightforward interpretation: they indicate that we can be 95% certain that the posterior mean lies within the interval. If the interval contains 0, we can conclude that the result is not significant. The fourth column adds the odds ratios (OR) to ease the interpretation of the effects and their magnitude. The Bayesian analysis (and also the equivalent frequentist analysis, see Appendix 6.5) largely confirms what was already observed in the descriptive patterns, but there are also some differences.

Table 6.1: Bayesian multilevel results

Variables	Posterior mean logit coefficients (SD)	95% Credible interval	Odds ratios
Intercept	46.648 (8.198)	30.621, 62.960	$e^{46.648}$
Time	-0.025 (0.004)	-0.033, -0.017	0.975
Broadcaster type	0.266 (0.148)	-0.030, 0.556	1.305
Populist presence	0.047 (0.144)	-0.236, 0.333	1.048
Issue morality	0.396 (0.140)	0.117, 0.668	1.486
Format	0.175 (0.025)	0.126, 0.225	1.191
Action-reaction	0.215 (0.076)	0.067, 0.364	1.240
Populist ideology	0.461 (0.170)	0.133, 0.801	1.586
Incumbency	0.770 (0.166)	0.447, 1.101	2.160
Gender	-0.725 (0.196)	-1.113, -0.345	0.484
Government level (ref: federal)			
Regional	0.298 (0.248)	-0.184, 0.799	1.347
Both	0.578 (0.241)	0.105, 1.055	1.782
Variance			
$\sigma^2_{speaker}$	0.399 (0.130)	0.185, 0.689	
σ^2_{debate}	0.104 (0.093)	0.007, 0.346	

Notes: Entries in the second column are logit coefficients and standard deviations (in parentheses). Entries in the third column are logit coefficients of the 95% credible interval. Entries in the fourth column are the odds ratios, calculated by taking the exponential of the logit coefficients.
The Deviance Information Criterium of this model has value 2440.83.

First, the results in Table 6.1 indicate that incivility is slightly less likely to occur as time increases. In other words, when adding and controlling for all the other determinants, the effect of time becomes negative, yet the effect is extremely small (OR = 0.975). When we run a model where we only include time and not the other determinants (see Appendix

6.4), there is no significant relationship between time and incivility. All of this again refutes support for H1: there is no increase of incivility over time.

When we turn to the determinants that vary *between* debates, results show that they do not significantly influence incivility when all the other variables are controlled for. While the coefficients are positive, the credible intervals contain zero. In other words, incivility is not significantly more likely to occur on the commercial broadcaster VTM compared to the public broadcaster VRT, and neither in debates where populist politicians are present compared to debates where they are absent. Therefore, these results do not support H2 and H3. The fact that we descriptively observe more incivility on VTM compared to VRT is therefore not an inherent feature of the commercial broadcaster and is rather more likely to be explained by the other variables in our model.

Effectively, the results indicate that all determinants that vary *within* the debates and all variables that vary between politicians significantly influence incivility, and the effects are moreover in line with expectations. For the within-debate determinants, the results show that incivility is more likely to occur when moral issues are discussed (H4), when the number of politicians simultaneously debating with each other is higher (H5), and when a statement is preceded by an uncivil statement (H6: incivility spurs more incivility). For the politician-determinants, it is shown that populist politicians, challengers, and male politicians are more likely to use incivility than non-populist politicians, incumbents, and female politicians, supporting H7, H8 and H9. Interpreting the odds ratios shows, for instance for populist ideology, that the odds of incivility increase by a factor of 1.586, or by 58.6%, when a populist speaks as compared to a non-populist politician. All other odds ratios higher than 1 can be interpreted similarly. The odds ratio of gender is lower than 1 and indicates that the odds of incivility decrease with 51.6% when a female politician speaks as compared to a male politician.

Last, regarding the control variable, it is observed that the debates aired for both the regional and general elections were more likely to include incivility. One of the reasons may be that the stakes are perceived to be even higher in these debates. Therefore, politicians may want to be in the spotlight even more, leading to a stronger coarsening of the debate.

Translation to time pattern

How can the results be translated to the pattern observed in Figure 6.3? First, incivility increased from 1985 to 1999. During these years, and specifically in 1995, populist politicians started to participate in the debates, and public broadcaster VRT had to compete

increasingly with commercial broadcaster VTM that also started to air election debates from then onwards. Populist success and media logic were both new elements that permeated the (political and media) landscape, which may have stimulated increasing uncivil interactions. Incivility rises, but also reaches its highest peak in 1999, after which there is a sudden drop. In the following election year 2003, three election debates were broadcasted and all three were characterized by low incivility levels (see Appendix 6.1), leading to the largest drop in incivility over the studied time period. Particularly the limited presence of populist politicians and the debate format could be important here. Only one debate included a populist politician, accounting for only 2.8% of the speech acts in 2003 (i.e. 16 turns out of 581 were expressed by a populist politician). Moreover, the debate format included a maximum of only three politicians simultaneously discussing politics with each other. Additionally, in two 2003 debates only the political leaders of the three biggest mainstream parties were invited, and two of these parties were incumbent. Also half of the third debate consisted of a debate between these three politicians. Together these factors could explain the low incivility levels in 2003. In the debates for the next elections of 2004, more politicians from different parties were debating each other again, and populist politicians were included in all three debates, which could explain the rise in incivility as compared to 2003. In 2007, the next election year, the second substantial drop is observed. This drop is largely driven by one of the three debates broadcasted in 2007 (see Appendix 6.1), i.e. the only other debate over the whole time period that only invited the three leaders of the biggest mainstream parties, offering the same rationale behind the low incivility levels as observed in 2003. From 2009 onwards, incivility was at higher levels again, with some smaller peaks and valleys over the past decade. As outlined earlier, this rise from 2009 onwards is due to higher incivility levels in the debates aired on the commercial broadcaster than on the public broadcaster.

Conclusion and discussion

Civility is generally seen as an important virtue in political discussions and debates. However, there are severe concerns about rising incivility in society in general, and in political debates in particular. The first aim of this paper was to validate the legitimacy of these concerns, and also to validate them outside the U.S. context where most incivility research is conducted. The second aim was to shed light on the role of potential factors influencing the prevalence of incivility. To this end, we conducted a quantitative content analysis of televised election debates that were aired over the past 35 years in Flanders, Belgium. The nine hypotheses and their results are summarized in Table 6.2.

Table 6.2: Overview of hypotheses and results

Predictors		Hypotheses	Descriptives/ Chi²	BML
Time	H1	Incivility in election debates increases over time.	-	-
Between debates	H2	The level of incivility is higher in election debates aired on the commercial broadcaster, compared to the public broadcaster.	+	-
	H3	The level of incivility is higher in election debates where populist politicians participate, compared to election debates where populist politicians do not participate.	+	-
Within debates	H4	The level of incivility is higher when politicians discuss moral issues, compared to non-moral issues.	-	+
	H5	The higher the number of politicians debating each other, the more they use incivility.	+	+
	H6	One uncivil statement in the debate spurs following uncivil statements.	+	+
Between politicians	H7	Populist politicians use more incivility than other, non-populist politicians.	+	+
	H8	Challengers use more incivility than incumbents.	+	+
	H9	Male politicians use more incivility than female politicians	+	+

Note: '+' means that the hypothesis is confirmed, '-' means that the hypothesis is not confirmed. BML stands for Bayesian multilevel analysis.

Interestingly, and contrary to expectations, we did not find evidence for politicians' increasing use of incivility over time. Rising trends in incivility that are observed in the U.S. can therefore not be automatically generalized to other contexts or countries (e.g. Shea & Sproveri, 2012). One explanation may be that different characteristics of the U.S. political and media system such as the stronger (increase in) partisan media and polarization of the media and political system account for the increasing incivility there (Levendusky, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2014). What stands out most in this study's observed time pattern are the ups and downs, showing more of a volatile pattern of uncivil instances over the years. This can be traced back to contextual factors inspiring the surge or descend of incivility at certain moments in time. The findings therefore debunk the idea of a clear-cut rise of incivility and show us how important it is to investigate communicative patterns in relation to their context. Even though the list of determinants is not exhaustive, we can clearly see their influence on politicians' use of an uncivil debate style through the years. Incivility does not rise over time in isolation, but is characterized by a pattern of peaks and falls due to different causes on different levels.

With regards to the determinants, the largest influences observed in this study relate to the determinants varying *within* debates and determinants varying at the politicians' individual level. More specifically, it is found that discussing moral topics and discussing politics with a larger number of politicians leads to more incivility. For the morality of topics, a higher percentage of incivility is observed for moral topics but the bivariate result was not statistically significant. When controlling for other variables, the multilevel model does confirm higher incivility levels for moral topics. This study also shows that incivility spurs incivility, and it is shown that being a populist politician, being a challenger, and being a male politician leads politicians to display more incivility than being a non-populist, incumbent or female politician.

At the more aggregate debate level, i.e. determinants that vary *between* debates, influences on incivility are more limited. While percentage-wise incivility levels are higher when at least one populist politician is present in the debate (compared to their absence), the effect is insignificant when all the determinants are included in one model. The same is observed for the influence of broadcaster type: percentage-wise, incivility levels are higher on the commercial broadcaster but there is no significant effect when all other determinants are included. This means that the observed descriptive differences are explained by the other determinants in the framework. The broadcaster difference could for instance be explained by the fact that VTM debates include more (utterances by) populist, challenger and male politicians, include more discussions on moral issues, and include more discussions with more politicians at the same time.

These results were obtained by analyzing televised election debates in Belgium. We expect that the findings observed in the Belgian case would be similar in countries with similar party and media system characteristics such as the Netherlands or Norway (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Still, conducting comparative, cross-national longitudinal research in these systems as well as in more competitive political and media systems would be worthwhile to gain a deeper understanding of country- and system-specific similarities and differences (see e.g. Marien et al., 2020). Next, it would also be fruitful to gather more insights in other political communication forms and forums, such as parliamentary debates, speeches, campaign ads, or on social media, to see how patterns of incivility play out there. Yet, incivility in election debates also still has much uncovered ground. Future research could dig deeper into other forms of incivility, such as interruptions, and into other factors affecting incivility, such as the role of the moderator.

To conclude, the finding that incivility in politicians' speech has not risen over time (at least in Belgian election debates) may lead one to wonder what then causes this general feeling

and assumption of politics becoming harsher and nastier. There are two evolutions that may serve as an explanation. First, the news media may play a role in this. It has previously been shown that post-debate news coverage substantially changed over the years (Reinemann & Wilke, 2007). When covering politics, journalists are inclined to focus on negativity, conflict, and incivility to attract citizens in an ever-increasing competitive media system (Muddiman, 2018; Skytte, 2019). Tabloidization and news-sensationalization are not only encountered in print but are also present and encountered in online news, spread via news websites and social media. Hence, it may *not be the politicians* themselves, but the *news media* that increasingly started to focus on incivility in politics and distribute more uncivil political messages into the wider public sphere. Second, the rise of social media made political discussions more anonymous and simplistic leading to more incivility online (Ott, 2017). Again, rather than politicians behaving more uncivilly over the years, the media environment surrounding them may emphasize political incivility more. We encourage future research to dig deeper into this and to study how the (news) media environment surrounding politics affects the perception that politics is becoming more uncivil.

Chapter 7 : Incivility and ill-justified arguments in political debates: decreasing political trust?

Research question(s): This article addresses the research question whether politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified arguments decreases political trust. Moreover, this article expects a tension to occur, where politicians' use of uncivil, ill-justified statements are expected to decrease political trust on the one hand, but increase the persuasive power of politicians' standpoints on the other hand. Therefore, this article also studies whether incivility and ill-justified arguments in debates increase persuasive power.

Data & method: Two survey experiments – one text-based and one audio-based – are conducted. ANOVAs are used to analyze the results.

Main findings: The results show that (1) incivility lowers political trust and is, contrary to expectations, slightly less convincing than civility; (2) ill-justified arguments do not influence political trust and are not more persuasive than well-justified arguments; and (3) the combined use of uncivil, ill-justified statements presents the strongest violation of social norms and decreases both trust in the political candidate and persuasive power. Interestingly, politically cynical citizens and citizens who do not value inclusive debates react differently to uncivil, ill-justified statements: their level of trust does not decline and they are persuaded slightly more by ill-justified arguments expressed in uncivil ways.

Chapter based on[1]: Goovaerts, I., & Marien, S. (2020). Uncivil Communication and Simplistic Argumentation: Decreasing Political Trust, Increasing Persuasive Power? *Political Communication, 37*(6), pp. 768-788.

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[1] This chapter is based on an article that uses the term "simplistic arguments". Simplistic arguments and ill-justified arguments can be used interchangeably. Both conceptually and methodologically they are the same and fit the conceptualization and operationalization provided in chapter 2 (theoretical framework) and chapter 3 (research design) perfectly.

Introduction

"*Build that wall*", "*Crooked Hillary*", or "*Mexicans are rapists*" are some examples of the uncivil and simplistic statements people all over the world will not easily forget from Donald Trump's 2016 electoral campaign. Although Donald Trump is today one of the most visible politicians communicating in extremely uncivil and simplistic ways, he is neither unique in this communication style, nor is it a style that has only recently been used by politicians. The use of uncivil, simplistic statements travels across the political spectrum and across contexts. Nigel Farage in the UK, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, or Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil are only a few other examples. This study focuses on politicians' use of uncivil communication and simplistic argumentation in political debate and investigates their effects on political trust and on the persuasive power of political standpoints.

Uncivil communication, or incivility, is defined as politicians' use of impolite, rude or disrespectful language toward other debate participants. This includes elements such as insults and name-calling, and can be directed both toward the character of other politicians and their policies (Brooks & Geer, 2007). Simplistic argumentation is defined as politicians' use of simplistic arguments, i.e. arguments presented in ill- or non-justified ways. This means that the reasons to back up their policy stances are poor, only made implicit, or left behind entirely. In today's political communication environment this is often exemplified by politicians reducing their arguments to soundbites, one-liners and slogans (see e.g. Cobb & Kuklinski, 1997; De Landtsheer et al., 2008). The normative framework of this study is deliberative democratic theory. Incivility and simplistic argumentation run counter to two key deliberative democratic virtues, i.e. civility and well-justified argumentation, and increasingly raise concerns about the quality of contemporary political discourse (Dryzek et al., 2019).

By communicating in uncivil, simplistic ways, politicians violate social norms people generally share for civil and well-reasoned debate (Jamieson & Hardy, 2012; Muddiman, 2017). This violation undermines the perceived legitimacy of the political system, yet at the same time this communication style is widely perceived as being effective in attracting attention and votes. Mutz and Reeves (2005) already pointed to this interesting paradox: they documented that uncivil political debates lead to lower levels of political trust than civil debates, but the uncivil ones were seen by citizens as more attractive to watch. In effect, uncivil, simplistic political debate can be harmful for democratic attitudes, yet politicians attack their opponents and rely on simplistic arguments because it is generally assumed that "it works" (Bump, 2018; Heath & Heath, 2007). For instance, today's rising success of populist politicians is increasingly attributed to their communication style, i.e. a style

characterized by incivility and simplistic arguments (Marien et al., 2020; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). This study sheds light on the paradox that a political communication style that is beneficial to democratic societies might be incongruent with a communication style that successfully persuades voters. Two experimental designs – a text and an audio fragment of an election debate – are developed to compare the effects of an uncivil, simplistic debating style to a civil, well-justified debating style on 1) political trust and 2) the persuasive power of politicians' positions. We expect to find tensions as a debating style that is effective in persuading voters might not be beneficial to evaluations of trust in the politician and political system.

The contribution of this study to the literature is threefold. First, the debate about the influence of uncivil communication and simplistic argumentation largely remains on a normative and theoretical level, and little empirical evidence substantiates the claims made in the literature. This study contributes to that by empirically testing several key claims. Second, the few studies that do focus on their effects generally focus on only one element, i.e. incivility or simplistic argumentation, or one effect, like political trust or persuasion. In one comprehensive study we investigate several possible effects of an uncivil debating style, a simplistic one, and combinations of the two. We also investigate how different people, i.e. politically cynical citizens and citizens who do not value different perspectives in political debate, react to these debating styles. This allows us to draw conclusions that go one step further and see how different elements might interact and affect multiple outcomes differently for different people. Finally, studies on incivility and simplistic argumentation are predominantly focused on the specific U.S. context. By setting up two experiments in Belgium we are able to conduct these causal tests in a western European context.

Uncivil communication and simplistic argumentation effects

Showing respect toward political adversaries and their positions, and explaining or justifying one's own positions are two key virtues in political discourse and debate. These desirability criteria are prescribed by deliberative democratic theory, the normative backdrop of this study.[2] This theory puts civility and justification at its core as they are argued to be conducive for democracy. For instance, when politicians discuss politics in civil and well-justified ways, a variety of different and well-explained perspectives are included, which heightens citizens'

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[2] Deliberative democracy is one normative view regarding what characterizes good democracy. Other often-discussed models of democracy are agonistic democracy (Mouffe, 2016), competitive, participatory, and procedural democracy (see e.g. Strömbäck, 2005). This is important as different theories of democracy propose different sets of criteria to specify which communicative acts count as "good" (Freelon, 2015). Other theories than deliberative theory might value civility and justification less.

understanding of different societal issues, enables them to make well-informed decisions and increases the legitimacy of the decision-making process (Cohen, 1989; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Habermas, 1981). However, the use of both civil and well-justified arguments is under pressure because of the contemporary media and political environment. Trends like the mediatization of politics, the rise of new (social) media channels, and the rise of populist leaders with their own particular communication style have led to repeatedly voiced concerns about the coarsening and simplification of political discourse to which citizens are exposed (Dryzek et al., 2019; Mazzoleni, 2014; Ott, 2017; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014).

One such concern relates to the harmful effects incivility and simplistic argumentation might have for political trust. To trust is to assume that a person or institution will "perform in accordance with normative expectations" (Miller & Listhaug, 1990, p. 358) or will "act as they should" (Barber, 1983; see Mutz & Reeves, 2005, p. 3). Political trust is necessary for the effectiveness of government and for democratic stability, as trusting citizens are more willing to participate in politics, to commit public resources to policy ends, and to accept political decisions (Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Marien & Hooghe, 2011). When politicians behave disrespectfully and fail to provide reasons for their positions, they violate people's shared normative expectations (Coleman & Moss, 2016; Muddiman, 2017). This in turn decreases citizens' trust in politicians and in the political system more generally (Mutz & Reeves, 2005). This study investigates trust evaluations of both the politician communicating in uncivil, simplistic ways, and of the political system. We expect trust in the politician to be affected most strongly, yet spill-over effects are expected to occur as well, meaning that the evaluation of a single politician spills over to more general evaluations of the political system.

Despite these possible drawbacks, politicians attack their opponents and use simplistic arguments because it attracts the media and citizens' attention. Negative and conflictual messages, but also one-liners and slogans, are newsworthy in today's era of media logic. Politicians are aware of this media logic and adapt their communication to it because it increases their chances for visibility (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014; Van Aelst, 2014). Citizens' exposure to, attention for, and interest in a message are prerequisites for persuasion, yet these first steps do not always automatically lead to the latter (McGuire, 1989). Therefore, studies are needed to investigate the persuasive effect of standpoints expressed in uncivil, simplistic ways. There are first indications that incivility and simplistic arguments can be effective for politicians as it can – under certain conditions – improve politicians' trait evaluations (e.g. competence), positively affect voting intention, and increase opinion

change (Cobb & Kuklinski, 1997; Fridkin & Kenney, 2011; Mölders & Van Quaquebeke, 2017). Yet we need additional research that specifically studies their persuasive power.

In sum, a communication style that is beneficial to democratic attitudes such as political trust could be incongruent with a communication style that is successful in persuading voters. This tension is explored by comparing politicians' use of uncivil communication and simplistic arguments to civil communication and well-justified arguments in an electoral context, i.e. in (televised) election debates. In such debates, politicians directly interact in an attempt to persuade citizens to vote for them. Election debates generally attract large audiences and have been shown to impact voters' subsequent political evaluations and opinions (Benoit et al., 2003). In what follows, we explain in greater detail how the expected tension might operate for uncivil communication, simplistic argumentation, and when both are combined.

Uncivil communication

Uncivil political communication, or political incivility, is one specific dimension of negative campaigning, i.e. a strategy used to win votes by criticizing one's opponent (Geer, 2006). The use of negative messages has been argued to be harmful for democracy as it would reduce voter turnout, increase political disillusionment and decrease political trust (Lau et al., 2007). However, evidence on these effects is mixed and research shows that it is important to distinguish between different types of negative messages; especially uncivil messages are expected to have these harmful consequences (Stryker et al., 2011).

In recent years, the political incivility literature has demonstrated substantial progress in defining incivility. Two conceptual categories can be distinguished: one of incivility as a function of tone, and one as a function of substance (Sydnor, 2018; also see Muddiman, 2017 on personal and public-level incivility). This study defines incivility as a function of tone (in line with others e.g. Brooks & Geer, 2007; Gervais, 2017; Rains et al., 2017; but also see e.g., Papacharissi, 2004[3]). It is "a characteristic of the style of interaction rather than of any given individual's opinions per se" (Mutz, 2015, p. 7). In particular, incivility is defined as politicians' use of impolite, rude or disrespectful language. This includes elements such as insults, name-calling, obscenity or mockery, and can be directed both toward the character of other politicians and toward their policies (Brooks & Geer, 2007; Stryker et al., 2016). This violates interpersonal politeness norms (Muddiman, 2017), and has been shown to lower

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[3] For incivility defined as a function of substance, see e.g., Papacharissi (2004), who defines incivility as those messages that "threaten democracy, deny people their personal freedoms, and stereotype social groups" (p. 267).

trust in politicians and in the political system in the U.S. context (Mutz & Reeves, 2005). We expect the same norms to apply and to find similar effects in a western European context.

Yet negative campaigning strategies are often used by politicians, and both politicians and their advisors generally believe that they are effective in attracting support for them and their policies, and in degrading support for their opponents. Again, empirical findings are mixed and the effects seem to depend upon specific types of negative messages (Lau et al., 2007). Uncivil messages are generally viewed as attention-grasping and shocking, "thereby facilitating message comprehension and enhancing message retention" (Fridkin & Kenney, 2011, p. 669). As outlined above, these are the first steps that might lead to more persuasion (McGuire, 1989). Moreover, Mutz and Reeves (2005) show that incivility, besides lowering political trust, attracts attention and is perceived as more entertaining.

Building on that finding, Mölders and Van Quaquebeke (2017, p. 61) argue that "beyond all norms and credibility, this could be a very simple reason behind voters' approval of disrespect [incivility] in the political context". Precisely in such a political context, and especially in an electoral context, "voters may be cognizant of the fact that the rationale of the 'political game' is to stand apart and outrival the opponent" and see the use of uncivil messages as the politician's effort to meet expectations to win a political argument (p. 61). Additionally, incivility increases language intensity, thereby emphasizing speakers' feelings when making their argument which is in turn argued to increase persuasion (Scherer & Sagarin, 2006). Scherer & Sagarin confirm this, showing that people are persuaded more when a speech contains obscenity, i.e. one specific form of incivility. This leads to the first set of hypotheses:

> **H1a**: Exposure to politicians' use of uncivil communication leads to lower levels of political trust compared to civil communication.

> **H1b**: Exposure to politicians' use of uncivil communication is more effective in persuading citizens compared to civil communication.

Simplistic argumentation

Unlike the emerging literature on incivility, little is known about the effects of simplistic argumentation. From a deliberative point of view, politicians that participate in debates ideally engage in well-justified discussion, meaning that they reasonably justify their policy positions. This is reflected in the structure or form of the political argument: in a well-justified argument, politicians' claims are backed up by reasons, and the link between claims and reasons is clear (Steenbergen et al., 2003). In this study, we contrast well-justified arguments

to simplistic arguments (see also Cobb & Kuklinski, 1997 on "hard" and "easy" arguments). Today's political communication environment stimulates politicians to present their arguments in a simplistic way, i.e. in ill- or non-justified ways. This means that the reasons to back up their stances are poor, only made implicit (e.g. by failing to provide a clear link between claim and reasons), or left behind entirely. Today this is often exemplified by politicians reducing their arguments to soundbites, one-liners and slogans, making political debates and discussions "entertaining, amusing, fast and simple" (De Landtsheer et al., 2008, p. 228).

By providing well-justified arguments to back up positions, politicians act in line with how they are expected to communicate (Coleman & Moss, 2016; Seyd, 2015). Citizens might in turn perceive politicians and the political system to be more accountable and fairer and to have more expertise (Davidson et al., 2017; Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). Providing simplistic arguments, on the other hand, violates norms (Jamieson & Hardy, 2012; Jennstål et al., 2020), signals less expertise and might reduce source credibility (Hamilton, 1998). An experiment conducted in Sweden reveals that the nature of justifications matters for the perceived legitimacy of the political process. When politicians provide extensive justifications for their political decisions, citizens' satisfaction with decision-making increases (de Fine Licht et al., 2014). Consequently, we expect that when politicians explain their policies in simplistic ways instead of using well-justified arguments, citizens' political trust levels will decrease.

Yet a simplistic way of arguing attracts citizens' attention, is remembered better and may consequently increase persuasiveness (De Landtsheer et al., 2008; McGuire, 1989). "It takes little mental effort to absorb an easy [simplistic] argument: hear it, take it at face value, and incorporate it into your previous beliefs" (Cobb & Kuklinski, 1997, p. 93). Politicians also use simplistic argumentation, for instance, slogans, to shy away from "lengthy explanations and justifications" which is generally disliked by the public (Denton, 1980, p. 13). A handful of studies in the U.S. already revealed that different types of arguments affect persuasiveness, perceived debate effectiveness of politicians, candidate evaluations and opinion change (Amsalem, 2019; Cobb & Kuklinski, 1997; Levasseur & Dean, 1996; McGraw et al., 1993). Yet, we lack insight into the persuasive effects of simplistic arguments outside a U.S. context. This leads to a second set of hypotheses:

> H2a: Exposure to politicians' use of simplistic arguments leads to lower levels of political trust compared to well-justified arguments.

H2b: Exposure to politicians' use of simplistic arguments is more effective in persuading citizens compared to well-justified arguments.

Uncivil communication and simplistic argumentation combined

When politicians are uncivil *and* use simplistic arguments, they violate social norms twice. In the populist communication literature Reinemann et al. (2017, p. 15) note that "the *combination* of certain communicative elements may largely account for the specific attraction of and effects of populist communication" (original emphasis). We expect this to be the case for political communication more generally. The tension we expect to observe might be stronger when both elements are present. In other words, we explore if standpoints voiced in uncivil and simplistic ways have stronger effects on political trust and persuasive power than standpoints that are voiced in uncivil or simplistic ways only. We formulate a third set of hypotheses:

H3a: Exposure to politicians' combined use of uncivil communication and simplistic arguments leads to lower levels of political trust compared to civil communication and well-justified arguments.

H3b: Exposure to politicians' combined use of uncivil communication and simplistic arguments is more effective in persuading citizens compared to civil communication and well-justified arguments.

Moderating influences

Previous studies indicate that the effects of different communication styles on political trust and persuasiveness are conditional (e.g. Amsalem, 2019; Bos et al., 2013; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). This study investigates conditional effects at the individual level because we expect that some people will react stronger to incivility and simplistic argumentation than others. For some people it will lead to more (or less) trust and will be more (or less) persuasive than for others. A first characteristic that is expected to make people more accepting of uncivil communication and simplistic argumentation is political cynicism. Bos et al. (2013) showed that politically cynical citizens are more susceptible to persuasion by the dramatizing communication style of populist politicians and they perceive these politicians to be more legitimate afterward. We aim to test this expectation more generally and hypothesize that:

H4a: The effect of exposure to uncivil communication and simplistic arguments on political trust is weaker among citizens with high levels of political cynicism than among citizens with low levels of political cynicism.

H4b: The effect of exposure to uncivil communication and simplistic arguments on persuasiveness is stronger among citizens with high levels of political cynicism than among citizens with low levels of political cynicism.

By hearing all perspectives in political debate, better-informed political decisions can be made and the legitimacy of subsequent political decision-making increases (Cohen, 1989). In line with the deliberative approach to democracy, it is consequently important that different perspectives are included and that citizens consider them when making political decisions (Gastil, 2008). We expect that citizens differ in the degree to which they value the inclusion and discussion of different perspectives in political debate, and that those who highly value this will be less accepting of positions expressed in uncivil, simplistic ways. The reason is that these debating styles hinder inclusive political debate and thorough discussions taking place. Based on this, we hypothesize:

H5a: The effect of exposure to uncivil communication and simplistic arguments on political trust is stronger among citizens who highly value the inclusion and discussion of different perspectives in political debate than among citizens who do not value this.

H5b: The effect of exposure to uncivil communication and simplistic arguments on persuasiveness is weaker among citizens who highly value the inclusion and discussion of different perspectives in political debate than among citizens who do not value this.

Data and method

Two online survey experiments were designed to investigate the effects of uncivil communication and simplistic argumentation on political trust and persuasive power. In the first experiment, participants read a short political debate; in the second experiment they listened to a political debate. The experimental method provides the best means to test our hypotheses because it allows us to test the impact of subtle variations in the debating style of politicians while the substantive content of their discourse remains the same. Because variations between groups are limited to the manipulations of the variables of interest, internal validity is strong. To enhance the external validity of our experiments, we used actual televised election debates to design the treatments and rely on a diverse sample from the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium (Flanders). Both survey experiments were

conducted among a sample of Flemish citizens representative for gender and age (N_1 = 548, 49.4% male, mean age = 44.3, conducted in January 2018 with Survey Sampling International (SSI); N_2 = 1100, 48.7% male, mean age = 42.3, conducted in February 2019 with Dynata (former SSI)).[4]

Experimental design

Experiment 1: Text-based

We conducted a 2 (civil vs. uncivil) x 2 (well-justified vs. simplistic) between subjects online survey experiment. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. In each condition participants read one scenario: a fictional fragment from an election debate in which two politicians take opposite stances on a policy proposal about safety.[5] First, the moderator of the debate asks Politician A (fictional name[6]: Wim Denouw) what he thinks about investing in more policemen on the streets. The politician replies in a neutral and concise way that he is against this proposal because it will not increase safety levels. Then Politician B (fictional name: Erik Verlaken) replies and gives his opinion. Politician B is in favor of more policemen on the streets. We manipulate the argument of Politician B. The first condition (civil and well-justified) is compared to the second condition (uncivil and well-justified) to test hypotheses 1a and 1b about uncivil communication. In a third condition, the politician is civil but uses simplistic arguments. To test hypotheses 2a and 2b about simplistic arguments, this third condition is compared to the first civil, well-justified condition. In the fourth condition, the politician uses simplistic and uncivil communication. Hypothesis 3a and 3b are tested by comparing this condition to the first civil, well-justified one (see Table 7.1 for an overview, and Appendix 7.1 for the four scenarios). After reading one of the scenarios, participants are asked to respond to a set of questions to measure the effect on the different outcome variables.

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[4] Ethical approval was obtained for this study from the Social and Societal Ethics Committee of the University of Leuven (approval number G-201708879).

[5] In both experiments, politicians debate how to increase safety levels. This issue was chosen because it is not too polarizing yet it is an issue on which opinions can differ. Moreover, people generally find the issue important yet it was not too salient during data collection that it could interfere with the experiment. Overall, there is no reason to assume that the effects will specifically apply to the safety issue or that opposing effects will occur for another issue. There might be one exception, however, when politicians discuss strongly polarizing issues such as immigration on which people already have strong opinions (Amsalem, 2019). We recommend future research to study whether, and if so how, effects remain/change depending on the type of issue being debated.

[6] Fictional stimulus material is used because it enables manipulation of the debating style only, and because real politicians can generate many other thoughts respondents might have that could influence the results. This enhances the internal validity of our study.

Table 7.1: Overview of experimental design

Hypotheses	Compare condition 1 (civil & well-justified) to...
H1a & H1b: Uncivil communication	Condition 2 (uncivil & well-justified)
H2a & H2b: Simplistic argumentation	Condition 3 (civil & simplistic)
H3a & H3b: Combination	Condition 4 (uncivil & simplistic)

Experiment 2: Audio-based

A second audio-based experiment[7] was developed to gain further insights into the effects we are interested in and to further increase external validity as people are more likely to be exposed to audio(visual) material of political debates on television, the internet or radio compared to textual material (which is, however, also possible via press coverage of debates, for example). Moreover, Sydnor (2018) shows that uncivil audio fragments lead to more overall uncivil assessments of political messages than text-based transcripts. By being exposed to audio material participants might be more involved in the debate and be affected more or differently by incivility or simplistic arguments. We opted for audio instead of video material because it is more difficult to keep everything – except for the manipulations – constant in videos. For instance, non-verbal communication such as facial expressions and gestures become harder to control across conditions, and might consequently affect the outcome variables.

The experimental set-up is similar to the text-based experiment: participants are exposed to one of four scenarios in which two politicians discuss safety policy in a debate moderated by one moderator. Three voice actors were hired to record these debates (see transcripts in Appendix 7.2). The main differences are the length of the debate and its specific content. First, the debates are longer, i.e. on average the debates last 4.30 minutes.[8] Second, safety policy is discussed in broader terms. It is not specifically about investing in more policemen on the streets, but about the broader debate on giving more power to the security services (e.g. police, intelligence services). While Politician A is against more power and tasks for these services, Politician B – the one whose debating style is manipulated – is in favor. The hypotheses and design of this experiment were preregistered (see https://osf.io/cd34q/).

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[7] Design and content were based on a fragment from a real-world election debate broadcast in the Netherlands during the 2017 elections (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= JY5XlDR9r70) about safety policy. Several uncivil and simplistic statements were expressed which we used as input for the design, increasing the external validity of the treatments.

[8] The uncivil, well-justified debates are slightly longer because of the uncivil statements and justifications added in these debates. Drop-out was not related to length of the conditions: Condition 1: 4.45 min., *N* = 273; Condition 2: 5.12 min., *N* = 261; Condition 3: 3.42 min., *N* = 290; Condition 4: 4.09 min., *N* = 276.

Stimulus material

Uncivil communication

Incivility was operationalized by politicians' use of insulting language, name-calling and interruptions. These are prominent forms of incivility in politics and are also perceived by citizens as uncivil (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011; Stryker et al., 2016). In the uncivil conditions, Politician B interrupts Politician A, uses insulting language and personally attacks Politician A to ridicule him and his policy views. He does that by stating, for instance, that Politician A's proposals are ridiculous and that he lacks any capacity to govern. In the civil conditions, Politician B listens carefully to Politician A and only starts talking after Politician A finishes speaking. When he replies he makes clear that he does not agree with Politician A, but he does so in a civil way. This means that the politician refrains from using any form of uncivil language. It does not mean that the politician uses wordings that signal explicit respect (e.g. "That's a good point"). The politician is thus civil, although not in explicit ways. In sum, Politician B can criticize Politician A and his policies, but he does so respectfully, i.e. without using uncivil language.

Simplistic argumentation

We distinguish between a well-justified argument and a simplistic one. In the well-justified conditions, Politician B reasonably justifies his positions. This means that extensive reasoning is provided: the claims made are backed up by reasons, and the link between claims and reasons is clear (e.g. by use of linking words such as "therefore" or "because") (see Steenbergen et al., 2003). Politician B's policy position is thus clearly explained to the audience by providing elaborated reasoning to substantiate the policy stance he takes. In the simplistic conditions, Politician B uses an inferior way of arguing by providing simplistic arguments, i.e. arguments that are ill- or non-justified. This means that he does not justify his policy positions well. Rather, the reasons Politician B provides to back up his policy positions are poor, only made implicit (e.g. by failing to provide a clear link between claims and reasons), or he does not give any reasons at all.

Manipulation checks for uncivil communication and simplistic argumentation proved successful (see Appendix 7.3).

Dependent variables

Political trust

First, participants rated Politician B on the statement: "Erik Verlaken is a politician I can trust" (e.g. Schwarz & Bless, 1992) (1 = completely disagree to 5 = completely agree; $M_{Experiment1}$ = 3.05; SD_1 = 0.86; $M_{Experiment2}$ = 2.97; SD_2 = 0.89). Second, trust in the political system, i.e. trust

in federal parliament and trust in politicians in general, was measured: "Could you indicate on a scale ranging from 0 to 10 how much trust you personally have in the following institutions in general? 0 means that you do not have any trust at all in an institution, and 10 means that you have complete trust" (ESS, 2016). Internal consistency scores are good: Pearson's r = 0.842 and Cronbach's α = 0.914 in Experiment 1; Pearson's r = 0.796, Cronbach's α = 0.887 in Experiment 2. An index was created by adding both scores and dividing them by two (0 = low trust to 10 = high trust; M_1 = 4.52; SD_1 = 2.21; M_2 = 4.61; SD_2 = 2.08).

Persuasive power

Respondents were asked three questions: "To what extent do you agree with the argument that politician Erik Verlaken made in the debate?", "To what extent would you defend the policy position of Erik Verlaken in a discussion with friends?", and "To what extent are you convinced by the argument of Erik Verlaken?" (e.g. Amsalem, 2019; Weber et al., 2012). Exploratory factor analysis showed the three items load on the same factor[9], and Cronbach's α = 0.919 in Experiment 1 and 0.934 in Experiment 2. An index was created by adding the scores and dividing them by three (1 = not convincing to 5 = very convincing; M_1 = 3.30; SD_1 = 0.99; M_2 = 3.26; SD_2 = 0.93).[10]

Moderating variables

Moderating variables were only included in Experiment 2.

Political cynicism

Respondents were asked to rate three items: "Politicians do not understand what matters to citizens and society", "Politicians primarily act in a self-interested way", and "Politicians consciously promise more than what they can deliver" (e.g. Bos et al., 2013) (1 = completely disagree to 5 = completely agree). The three items load on the same factor[11], and Cronbach's α = 0.784. A sum index was created by adding the scores on the three items (M = 12.09; SD = 2.27).

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[9] Factor loadings are 0.918, 0.931 and 0.935 (Experiment 1), and 0.935, 0.938 and 0.946 (Experiment 2).
[10] An additional question in the survey measured perceived debate performance of Politician B (see Levasseur & Dean, 1996). This variable does not measure persuasiveness per se, yet it was included to gather additional insights into how incivility and simplistic argumentation affect the effectiveness of the political candidate (Appendix 7.4).
[11] Factor loadings: 0.798, 0.878 and 0.832

Perspective inclusiveness

To measure the level of importance citizens attach to the inclusion and discussion of different perspectives in political debate, a scale was created that is labeled the perspective inclusiveness scale. Respondents were asked to rate three items: "I believe it is important that each politician's opinion is included and thoroughly discussed in political debate", "I believe that including and discussing the perspectives of minority groups in political debate is equally important as including and discussing those of majority groups", and "I believe politicians have the obligation to take into account all different perspectives when debating with each other" (1 = completely disagree to 5 = completely agree). The three items load on the same factor[12], and Cronbach's α = 0.799. A sum index was created by adding the scores on the three items (*M* = 11.87; *SD* = 2.13).

Analysis

MANOVAs are used to investigate the influence of different debating styles on the different outcome variables.[13] To analyze moderating effects, three categories were created: respondents scoring high, medium or low on political cynicism and perspective inclusiveness.[14]

Results

Uncivil communication

Results show that the trustworthiness of the political candidate is significantly affected by the way the candidate communicates (see Table 7.2). In both experiments, respondents evaluated Politician B as less trustworthy when he was uncivil toward his political adversary than when he was civil (F = 7.45, p = .007; F = 4.34; p = .038 for Experiment 1 and 2 respectively). Trust in the political system is, as we can expect, a more stable attitude and is only slightly affected. A small spill-over effect is observed at the 0.10 significance level in Experiment 1 (F = 3.81; p = .052). The difference in means in Experiment 2 follows the same direction but is not significant. Overall, these results lend support to H1a: uncivil communication leads to lower levels of political trust than civil communication.

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[12] Factor loadings: 0.818, 0.852 and 0.867

[13] In both experiments, an Instructional Manipulation Check (IMC; Oppenheimer et al., 2009) was included. For robustness purposes, we re-analyze the samples of both experiments with only those respondents who complied with the IMC (Appendix 7.5).

[14] Respondents were divided equally over three categories. For political cynicism, this resulted in N_{low} = 413 (scoring 1–11 on cynicism scale), N_{medium} = 335 (score 12–13), and N_{high} = 352 (score 14–15). For perspective inclusiveness, this resulted in N_{low} = 256 (score 1–10), N_{medium} = 444 (score 11–12), and N_{high} = 400 (score 13–15).

The results further show that participants are not more convinced of the politician's standpoint when communicated in an uncivil way. In Experiment 1, persuasive power was not significantly affected by the way in which the politician expressed his opinion ($F = 0.31$, $p = .578$). Experiment 2 suggests that, contrary to expectations, standpoints expressed in civil ways were more convincing than standpoints expressed in uncivil ways. This effect is marginally significant at the 0.10 level ($F = 3.42$, $p = .065$). Since we hypothesized that uncivil communication would be more effective to persuade citizens than civil communication, H1b does not receive support. Incivility might even decrease effectiveness in persuading citizens.

Table 7.2: Comparison of civil and uncivil communication

Experiment 1	Political trust: Candidate**	Political trust: System[+]	Persuasive power
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Civil	3.21 (0.86)	4.70 (2.10)	3.35 (0.96)
Uncivil	2.94 (0.75)	4.21 (2.15)	3.29 (1.04)

Experiment 2	Political trust: Candidate*	Political trust: System	Persuasive power[+]
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Civil	3.04 (0.93)	4.65 (2.17)	3.40 (0.92)
Uncivil	2.88 (0.87)	4.58 (2.06)	3.25 (0.91)

Notes: $^{+}p <.10$, $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.
Effect sizes (*partial* η^2) are 0.026 (trust in candidate), 0.014 (trust in political system), 0.001 (persuasive power) in experiment 1, and 0.008 (trust in candidate), 0.000 (trust in political system), 0.006 (persuasive power) in experiment 2.
$N_{Experiment1}=280$; $N_{Experiment2}=534$

Simplistic argumentation

The results in Table 7.3 reveal that the way in which politicians justify their claims does not affect citizens' political trust levels. The use of simplistic versus well-justified arguments leads to similar levels of trust in politics. This is observed for both trust in the political candidate and trust in the political system more generally, and is observed both in Experiment 1 ($F = 0.53$, $p = .469$; $F = 0.05$, $p = .826$ for trust in candidate and system respectively) and in Experiment 2 ($F = 1.29$, $p = .257$; $F = 0.02$, $p = .890$). Based on these results, H2a – the expectation that simplistic arguments lead to lower levels of political trust compared to well-justified arguments – does not receive support.

137

Moreover, regarding the persuasive power of the politician's standpoint, Experiment 2 indicates that – again, contrary to expectations – respondents are more convinced when they listened to the politician expressing his stance in a well-justified way compared to when he expressed his stance in a simplistic way. This effect is marginally significant at the 0.10 level ($F = 3.73$, $p = .054$). We do not find the same result in Experiment 1 ($F = 0.05$, $p = .826$). Overall, contrary to H2b, presenting arguments in simplistic ways is not more effective in persuading citizens compared to well-justified arguments. Experiment 2 indicates that it might even be less effective.

Table 7.3: Comparison of well-justified and simplistic argumentation

Experiment 1	Political trust: Candidate	Political trust: System	Persuasive power
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Well-justified	3.21 (0.75)	4.70 (2.10)	3.35 (0.96)
Simplistic	3.14 (0.85)	4.76 (2.23)	3.38 (1.03)

Experiment 2	Political trust: Candidate	Political trust: System	Persuasive power[+]
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Well-justified	3.04 (0.93)	4.65 (2.17)	3.40 (0.92)
Simplistic	3.13 (0.83)	4.67 (2.06)	3.24 (0.93)

Notes: $^{+}p < .10$, $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.
Effect sizes (*partial* η^2) are 0.002 (trust in candidate), 0.000 (trust in political system), 0.000 (persuasive power) in experiment 1, and 0.002 (trust in candidate), 0.000 (trust in political system), 0.007 (persuasive power) in experiment 2.
$N_{Experiment1}=272$; $N_{Experiment2}=562$

Uncivil communication and simplistic argumentation combined

When comparing politicians' combined use of an uncivil and simplistic debating style with a civil, well-justified one, results are in line with our expectations for trust in the political candidate (see Table 7.4). Trust levels are significantly lower when the politician expressed his standpoints in an uncivil, simplistic way compared to a civil, well-justified way ($F = 8.12$, $p = .005$; $F = 8.23$, $p = .004$ for Experiment 1 and 2 respectively). For trust in the political system, the mean scores are also in line with expectations, but the difference is not significant ($F = 1.11$, $p = .293$; $F = 0.58$, $p = .444$). Thus, while trust in the politician is lower after uncivil, simplistic arguments, the same result is not observed for trust in the political system more generally. Consequently, H3a is only confirmed for trust in the politician.

Interestingly, and again contrary to expectations, persuasive power is stronger when the politician communicated in civil and well-justified ways. This effect is strongest in Experiment 2 ($F = 8.81$, $p = .003$). In Experiment 1, the mean scores are also lower when the politician uses uncivil communication and simplistic arguments compared to civil communication and well-justified arguments. This difference is not significant ($F = 1.90$, $p = .169$), but it is marginally significant when analyzing only those respondents that complied with the IMC (see Appendix 7.5, Table A7.5.3). These results run counter to H3b, stating that a civil, well-justified debating style would be less persuasive. The effects on trust in the candidate and persuasive power are thus strongest when uncivil communication and simplistic argumentation are combined, indicating that the combination triggers stronger reactions and leads to stronger disapproval than it does for both elements separately.

Table 7.4: Comparison of civil, well-justified and uncivil, simplistic communication

Experiment 1	Political trust: Candidate**	Political trust: System	Persuasive power
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Civil, justified	3.21 (0.75)	4.70 (2.10)	3.35 (0.96)
Uncivil, simplistic	2.92 (0.92)	4.42 (2.32)	3.20 (0.95)

Experiment 2	Political trust: Candidate**	Political trust: System	Persuasive power**
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Civil, justified	3.04 (0.93)	4.65 (2.17)	3.40 (0.92)
Uncivil, simplistic	2.82 (0.88)	4.51 (2.04)	3.16 (0.97)

Notes: $^+p < .10$, $^*p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.
Effect sizes (*partial* η^2) are 0.029 (trust in candidate), 0.004 (trust in political system), 0.007 (persuasive power) in experiment 1, and 0.015 (trust in candidate), 0.001 (trust in political system), 0.016 (persuasive power) in experiment 2.
$N_{Experiment1}=276$; $N_{Experiment2}=549$

Moderating effects

Political cynicism

First, political cynicism does not moderate any of the relationships between uncivil communication and the dependent variables. There is no significant interaction effect between incivility and political cynicism for trust in the candidate ($F = 1.74$, $p = .176$), trust in the political system ($F = 0.21$, $p = .808$), or persuasive power ($F = 0.41$, $p = .663$). The same holds for simplistic argumentation. There is no significant interaction effect between simplistic arguments and political cynicism for trust in the candidate ($F = 2.05$, $p = .128$),

trust in the political system (*F* = 0.69, *p* = .504), or persuasive power (*F* = 1.53, *p* = .219). This changes when analyzing the combined use of uncivil communication and simplistic argumentation. Two significant interaction effects are observed, both in line with expectations.

First, there is a marginally significant interaction effect for trust in the candidate (*F* = 2.68, *p* = .070; see Figure 7.1). Citizens with low or moderate levels of political cynicism become more trusting of civil politicians using well-justified arguments. The trust levels of citizens with high levels of cynicism are not affected by incivility and simplistic arguments, indicating they accept them more. This interaction effect does not spill over to trust in the political system (*F* = 1.93, *p* = .146). Second, citizens with low or moderate levels of political cynicism are more convinced by the argument when communicated in civil, well-justified ways compared to highly cynical people, who are slightly more convinced by uncivil politicians using simplistic arguments (*F* = 3.99, *p* = .019). Overall, H4a and H4b receive support, indicating that politically cynical citizens accept these debating styles to a greater extent.

Figure 7.1: Interaction effects with political cynicism
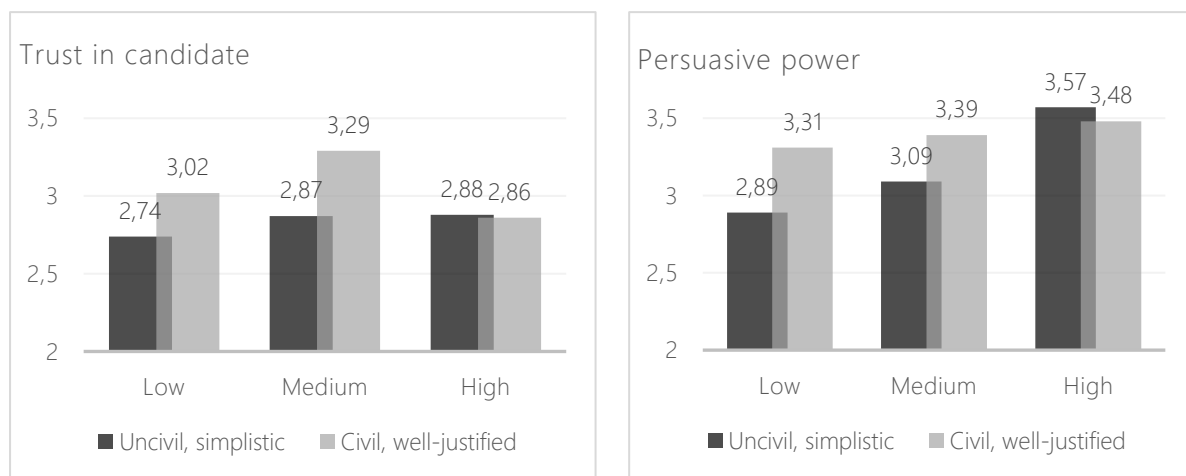
Note: N_{low}=211; N_{medium}=157; N_{high}=181

Perspective inclusiveness

For the perspective inclusiveness moderator, we also do not observe significant interaction effects for uncivil communication or simplistic argumentation only. First, there is no significant interaction effect between incivility and perspective inclusiveness for trust in the candidate (*F* = 1.71, *p* = .181), trust in the political system (*F* = 1.01, *p* = .364), or persuasive power (*F* = 0.95, *p* = .386). There is also no significant interaction effect between simplistic argumentation and perspective inclusiveness for trust in the candidate (*F* = 1.42, *p* = .243), trust in the political system (*F* = 0.24, *p* = .786), or persuasive power (*F* = 1.01, *p* = .366).

When analyzing the combined use of uncivil communication and simplistic argumentation, significant interaction effects are observed again for trust in the candidate and persuasive power, both in line with expectations. First, citizens who highly value different perspectives in political debate have less trust in the candidate that communicates in uncivil, simplistic ways compared to citizens who do not value this. Interestingly, the latter group even has slightly more trust in the candidate when he is uncivil and uses simplistic arguments. The interaction effect is significant at the 0.10 level ($F = 2.55$, $p = .079$; see Figure 7.2). Second, citizens who highly value this are less convinced by uncivil politicians using simplistic arguments compared to citizens moderately or not valuing this ($F = 3.88$, $p = .021$). Again, the latter group is slightly more convinced when the standpoint is communicated in an uncivil, simplistic way. There is no significant interaction effect for trust in the political system ($F = 0.60$, $p = .552$).

Figure 7.2: Interaction effects with perspective inclusiveness
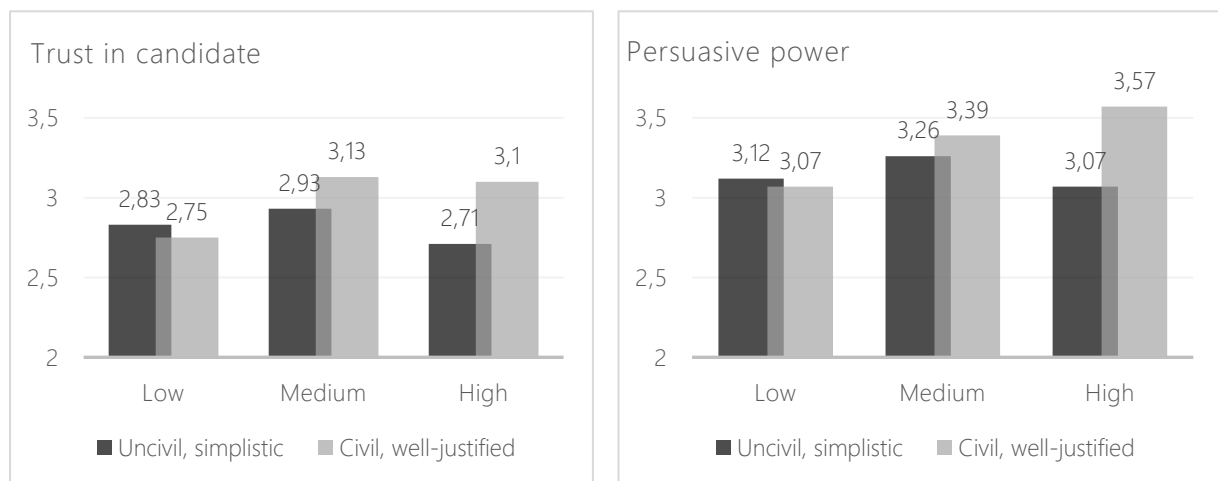
Note: N_{low}=119; N_{medium}=220; N_{high}=219

Conclusion and discussion

This study conducted two survey experiments to investigate the effects of uncivil communication and simplistic argumentation on political trust and persuasive power. We expected to find tensions and explored whether these elements harm political trust on the one hand, but increase politicians' effectiveness in persuading citizens on the other hand. Moreover, we expected that some people, i.e. politically cynical and people who do not value inclusionary debate, would accept incivility and simplistic argumentation to a greater extent.

Overall, we do not find the expected tensions. First, when politicians communicate their stances in an uncivil way, citizens' trust in politics declines, but we do not find it to be a more convincing strategy. On the contrary, Experiment 2's findings suggest it might even be less convincing. Moreover, the effect on trust is strong for the political candidate but small – or non-existent, as Experiment 2 suggests – for the political system. In other words, spill-over effects from the politician to evaluations of the political system are limited. However, as Brooks and Geer (2007, p. 10) argue, one could still worry about the long-term effects of repeated exposure to uncivil attacks, because it "could make politicians as a class appear unseemly", eventually making citizens less trusting of "politicians and the process of politics overall".

Second, politicians' use of simplistic versus well-justified arguments does not affect political trust but might affect persuasive power. In particular, Experiment 2 shows that simplistic arguments are less effective in persuading citizens. Citizens may be more attracted and pay more attention to a simplistic argument but this does not necessarily mean they are also more convinced by arguments formulated that way (McGuire, 1989). One explanation why well-justified arguments are more convincing is because individuals often use heuristics to base their political evaluations or attitudes upon. One such heuristic is length and complexity. As Cobb and Kuklinski (1997) argue, well-justified arguments, being longer and more complex, may consequently imply expertise and authority (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). This might in turn make the politician's arguments more persuasive (Cobb & Kuklinski, 1997).

Our findings further demonstrate that, especially when politicians combine incivility and simplistic arguments, trust in the candidate is lower and it is less effective in convincing citizens compared to when they civilly justify their positions well. Combining these elements might consequently trigger stronger reactions and violate social norms to a larger degree. Furthermore, related to that combined use, we found that citizens with high levels of political cynicism accept this debating style to a greater extent compared to citizens with low levels of political cynicism. The latter group comes to trust politicians less and is persuaded less by simplistic arguments expressed in uncivil ways, while politically cynical citizens' trust levels are not affected and these citizens are slightly more convinced. Moreover, citizens who highly value the inclusion and discussion of different perspectives in political debate show less trust and are convinced less by this debating style while people who do not value this show more trust and are slightly more persuaded by it.

How can these findings explain some of the big successes, such as the Trump election and Brexit, characterized by uncivil, simplistic campaigns? First, based on our main finding, we can conclude that politicians do not win based on incivility and simplistic arguments as these

features lower political trust and persuasive power. This suggests that politicians such as Donald Trump or Boris Johnson are elected despite their communication style, not because of it. Yet in reality we see that some politicians are punished for violating communication norms, while others are not. The reason might be that for populists, politics is precisely about violating norms and changing the system. Their use of a matching, norm-violating style might fit that purpose well. In effect, stylistic elements may be "secondary" to substantive content in driving the populist vote, but its combination might be integral to the success of the populist message (Aslanidis, 2015, p. 98; Bossetta, 2017, p. 718). Second, we also show that effects are conditional. Some groups of people, such as the politically cynical, are slightly more convinced by uncivil, simplistic communication. In other words, when political cynicism is high – which is generally the case within populist parties' voter bases (e.g. Schumacher & Rooduijn, 2013) – an uncivil, simplistic style could play in populists' favor. Investigating these heterogeneous effects across different types of politicians is therefore an exciting avenue for future research.

This study was not without limitations and hence opens more avenues for future research. First, we did not manipulate pro- versus counter-attitudinal exposure. It would be interesting to study whether the effects remain the same when people agree or disagree with the policy stance. Second, trust in the political candidate was measured with one item. Future studies investigating this effect could strengthen the measurement by including more items. Third, do the effects remain when politicians talk about another issue? Testing the effects for strongly polarized issues (e.g., immigration), where the debate often strikes a harsh tone, might especially be interesting and give additional insights. Fourth, we did not test the mechanisms behind the effects. Future research could, for instance, manipulate the length of the argument to study if it drives the persuasive power of politicians' positions. We also recommend future studies to dig deeper into the different effects of uncivil communication and simplistic argumentation in different contexts, and for different kinds of people. Who else is more persuaded by it and why? Finally, most of the effects were small. This might be due to the one-time, short exposure to uncivil, simplistic debate. It would be fruitful to gather more insights into the effect of repeated exposure to uncivil communication and simplistic argumentation, as this might lead to stronger effects.

Chapter 8 : Incivility in post-debate news coverage: decreasing political trust and news credibility?

Research question: How does journalists' focus on incivility in post-debate news coverage affect political trust and news credibility?

Data & method: Two survey experiments were conducted in which participants were exposed to a civil or uncivil debate fragment and/or to post-debate news coverage that was incivility-focused or incivility-free. ANOVAs and t-tests are used to analyze the results.

Main findings: The results confirm previous research findings: the use of incivility by politicians in debates harms their perceived trustworthiness. The effect of incivility-focused news coverage on trust in politicians is more mixed with one experiment revealing a negative effect but this was not replicated in the second experiment. However, there is clear evidence that incivility-focused news coverage decreases the news media's own credibility. Finally, there are indications that the effects of incivility-focused news coverage can depend on the level of incivility in the debate that is covered.

Chapter based on: Goovaerts, I. (2021). Highlighting Incivility: How the News Media's Focus on Incivility Affects Political Trust and News Credibility. *Under Review*.

Introduction

Politicians' use of incivility in political debates grabs the public's attention, arouses and entertains them (Mutz & Reeves, 2005). Moreover, incivility fits the news value of conflict well, which leads journalists to emphasize and even overstate attacks and incivility in campaign and debate coverage (Benoit & Currie, 2001; Muddiman, 2018; Skytte, 2019). In todays' highly competitive, fragmented and commercialized political media landscape, communicative strategies like politicians' use of incivility in debates, and journalists' focus on incivility in the news, are thus effective in the battle for attention (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Mutz, 2015). Yet, despite the attention-grabbing potential of incivility, concerns have been expressed repeatedly about its negative impact on citizens' attitudes towards the political system and towards the press (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996, 1997; Dryzek et al., 2019).

Previous research showed that politicians' use of incivility in political debates lowers citizens' political trust (Goovaerts & Marien, 2020; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Skytte, 2020). Less is known about the impact of the news media's focus on incivility on citizens' trust attitudes. The news media act as an important intermediate actor to interpret political debates. Citizens who watched, but also those who did not watch the debates, can be exposed to news coverage of political debates (Benoit & Currie, 2001). Hence, the reach of post-debate news coverage is likely to be large. For this reason, and because the news media tend to emphasize and even overstate incivility – making politicians appear as more uncivil than they actually are (Skytte, 2019, p. 37) –, it is of crucial importance to study effects of incivility in news coverage on citizens' trust attitudes.

This study aims to expand and deepen our knowledge of the effects of political incivility on citizens' trust attitudes. I expect that the focus on political incivility in the news will spur distrust towards politics, and will turn against the press itself by harming the news media's own credibility (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996, 1997; Cho et al., 2009). Two preregistered survey experiments were designed to investigate these effects. Participants were exposed to a civil or uncivil audio fragment of a televised debate between two politicians and/or to a newspaper article that frames the debate as uncivil or not. This design allows to gather insights into the effects of incivility-focused news coverage on political trust and news credibility, as well as insights on the effects of incivility-focused coverage in combination with different levels of incivility in the debate that is covered. This is important because the attitudes of citizens who watched the debates are still likely to be influenced by post-debate news coverage (Druckman et al., 2010; Fridkin et al., 2008) and because it allows to study the effects of news coverage that *emphasizes* incivility in the debates and the effects of news coverage that *overstates* incivility.

In line with previous studies, the results of this study show that the use of incivility by politicians in debates harms their perceived trustworthiness. In line with expectations, incivility-focused news coverage is found to decrease the news media's own credibility. The effects of incivility-focused news coverage on trust in politicians are more mixed with one experiment revealing a negative effect and one revealing no significant effect. Finally, there are indications that the effects of incivility-focused news coverage are dependent on the actual level of incivility in the debate.

This study advances the existing literature in the following ways. First, we know that the news media tend to emphasize politicians' use of incivility, but empirical evidence about the effects of this journalistic practice is scarce. By studying the effects of incivility-focused news coverage on political trust and news credibility, and its effects in combination with different levels of incivility in the covered debates, this study contributes to filling this gap. Second, incivility research is mainly conducted in the specific U.S. context that is highly polarized and where incivility is a very prominent aspect in politics and in the news media. This study is conducted in a western European context (Belgium) where incivility is also present, but to a lesser degree. Additional insights into incivility effects are gathered this way and it is tested whether expectations hold outside the United States. I expect this to be the case, even to a larger extent as citizens are less used to incivility, meaning that they may adhere stronger to normative expectations about appropriate debate and reporting styles, and react stronger to norm violations (Ben-Porath, 2010; Mutz, 2015).

Incivility in political debates and in post-debate news coverage

Political incivility is defined in this study as politicians' use of impolite, rude or disrespectful communication. It relates to "personal-level" forms of incivility, which is the form of incivility that *violates interpersonal politeness norms* (Muddiman, 2017, p. 3183), and is studied in most political incivility studies (e.g. Brooks & Geer, 2007; Gervais, 2017; Rains et al., 2017). More specifically, personal-level incivility refers to "discursive behaviors that represent the rejection of communication norms pertaining to considerate, courteous, and respectful discussion" (Hopp, 2019, p. 206), and is "a characteristic of the style of interaction rather than of any given individual's opinions per se" (Mutz, 2015, p. 7). It includes elements such as insults, name-calling, obscenity or mockery, and can be directed both toward the character of other politicians and toward their policies (Brooks & Geer, 2007; Stryker et al.,

2016).[1] Citizens generally share the personal-level norm for civility in these debates, and thus expect that politicians do not insult or ridicule each other when discussing politics (e.g. Mutz & Reeves, 2005).

The logic by which the media operate, i.e. media logic, stimulates journalists to focus on conflictual and entertaining elements of political exchanges, such as incivility (Altheide, 2004; Muddiman, 2018). By framing political debates as uncivil, journalists can attract news audiences in a media environment that is highly fragmented, commercialized, and competitive (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Mutz, 2015). As a result, "more often than not the content chosen to fill the ever-widening news hole is negative, even uncivil" (York, 2013, p. 110; Forgette & Morris, 2006; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). In the context of political debate coverage, this takes the form of portraying or framing debates as uncivil (e.g. by using headline wordings such as "a nasty clash between politicians") and emphasizing or even overstating the use of incivility (Muddiman, 2018; Skytte, 2019). This journalistic practice is called *incivility-focused news coverage* in this study.

Previous research that studied the coverage of political debates (this research mainly studies election debate coverage) shows that post-debate news coverage strongly focuses on incivility. In the words of Cho et al. (2009, p. 257): "debate coverage [is] tilted heavily toward personal character, debate style, and gaffs made by candidates during the debates, thus crowding out the coverage of policy debate". Muddiman (2018) shows that campaign coverage in general is highly incivility-focused, and that there are moreover spikes in it after election debates took place. Skytte (2019) shows that images of politicians behaving uncivilly (e.g. shouting, cross-talking) in election debates are heavily over-represented in post-debate coverage and concludes that "the media make politicians appear more uncivil than they are" (p. 37). Benoit & Currie (2001) and Benoit et al. (2004, p. 23) show that post-debate coverage generally fosters the inaccurate impression of U.S. election debates as highly conflictual because they "consistently and significantly over-represent attacks" towards political opponents. Walter & Vliegenthart (2010) show that most appeals made by politicians in the 2006 Dutch election debates were issue attacks, whereas newspapers especially covered personal attacks, which citizens strongly perceive as uncivil (Stryker et al., 2016). More anecdotally, newspaper headlines and leads such as "Party leaders clash during

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[1] Some scholars argue that the personal-level definition is too narrow and that it describes impoliteness rather than incivility (Muddiman, 2017, p. 3183; Papacharissi, 2004). According to these scholars, a message is uncivil when it *violates the political and democratic process*. It are messages that "threaten democracy, deny people their personal freedoms, and stereotype social groups" (Papacharissi, 2004, p. 267). This study does not focus on this latter incivility type but focuses on personal-level forms of incivility that politicians express towards each other's character and policies, in the context of mediated political debates (e.g. election debates).

last election debate" and "The fierce election battle was a heated discussion point" were used in Belgium to cover the latest 2018 and 2019 election debates.[2]

The effects of incivility on political trust and news credibility

Previous research has shown that politicians' use of incivility in mediated political debates decreases citizens' level of trust in politics (Goovaerts & Marien, 2020; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Skytte, 2020). Political trust can be defined in line with Mutz and Reeves' study (2005, p. 3) as follows: "to trust is to assume that a person or institution will 'observe the rules of the game' (Citrin & Muste, 1999, p. 465) and to believe that those involved will act 'as they should' (Barber, 1983)" or, as Miller and Listhaug (1990, p. 358) state, one (person or institution) is trusted when one "perform[s] in accordance with normative expectations". So far, our knowledge is limited with regards to the relationship between incivility-focused news coverage and political trust. Some initial findings do point towards a decrease in political trust when citizens are exposed to incivility-focused news. Research on the effects of *negative* news coverage shows that it lowers political trust (e.g. Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2006). Although giving some first indications, negative news is a broader concept and covers more than incivility-focused news so it is unclear whether we can generalize these results to incivility-focused news.[3] To the best of my knowledge, there is only one study that investigated the effect of incivility-focused news on political trust (Forgette & Morris, 2006). Forgette and Morris analyzed the effect of two different news formats that covered the U.S. State of the Union on political trust. While one news format strongly focused on incivility, the other format did not. The authors find that political trust decreased substantially among those citizens that watched the incivility-focused news format. These are first important insights into the effect of incivility-focused coverage on political trust. The insights are, however, limited to the U.S.-context, and were gathered by studying two real-world news formats. This increases external validity but despite laudable efforts in selecting news fragments of similar length and topics discussed, the design does not allow to hold everything else but incivility constant and therefore decreases the ability to make strong causal claims.

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[2] Some examples (in Dutch): https://www.hln.be/nieuws/binnenland/partijvoorzitters-in-de-clinch-tijdens-laatste-debat-laat-ons-niet-de-dramaqueen-uithangen~ab0f8b16/,
https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/partijvoorzitters-houden-laatste-verkiezingsdebat-politiek-is-een-harde-stiel-en-er-vallen-al-eens-klappen~bb0f8b16/, https://www.gva.be/cnt/dmf20181005_03810177,
https://www.gva.be/cnt/dmf20181010_03824400

[3] Negative news is news coverage that criticizes a politician or party (and is generally contrasted to positive news that supports a politician or party; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2006). Negative news is thus broader than incivility-focused news, because negativity can be civil (criticizing without being uncivil; Fridkin & Kenney, 2011).

Research on the effect of incivility-focused news coverage on news credibility is equally scarce. Similar to political trust, news credibility is also an evaluation that depends on normative expectations held by the public, i.e. normative expectations about appropriate journalistic practices in news reporting (Ben-Porath, 2010; Fico et al., 2004; Henke et al., 2020). It entails several dimensions that scholars put forward and citizens also use in their evaluation, such as the accuracy, fairness, completeness and neutrality of news reporting (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Meyer, 1988; Tsfati et al., 2006). The effects of incivility on news credibility have previously been studied in the context of *user comments* online, where it is shown that incivility in user comments lowers the perceived credibility of the news media (e.g. Borah, 2013; Naab et al., 2020; Prochazka et al., 2018; but see Thorson et al., 2010). The question remains, however, how this plays out in the journalistic context, where *journalists' own* incivility-focused reporting style is studied. Previous research findings show that journalists' use of opinionated and intense language, and a strong focus on the form instead of the substance of politics lowers news credibility (Hamilton & Hunter, 1998; Mukherjee & Weikum, 2015). These findings provide some initial insights and first indications because journalists' focus on political incivility can be seen as a specific type of opinionated, intense language, and reflects a focus on the form instead of the substance. Yet, to my knowledge, studies focusing more specifically on incivility-focused news coverage and its effects on news credibility are lacking so far, leaving this question unanswered.

In sum, we know from previous research that news coverage tends to emphasize and overstate the amount of incivility in a debate. We also know that politicians' use of incivility in mediated political debate lowers citizens' trust in politics, yet less is known about the effects of journalists' focus on incivility in post-debate news coverage. Does this lower political trust in the same way as politicians' use of incivility does? Does it undermine the credibility of the news media itself? We also know little about how the effects of incivility-focused news coverage interact with different levels of incivility in the debate that is covered. Most studies investigating political communication effects focus *either* on political debates, *or* on political news coverage. Yet many citizens do also watch political discussions in the media, such as election debates, political talk shows or other political discussion programs. For these citizens, post-debate news coverage is an additional source of information that interprets the debates that they have watched or listened to. Previous research has already shown that post-debate coverage (e.g. coverage that declares a debate winner or emphasizes certain policy issues) influences citizens' attitudes, reinforces or changes pre-existing attitudes, also among those people who watched debates (Druckman et al., 2010; Fridkin et al., 2008; Hwang et al., 2007). How does this play out for incivility-focused news coverage? For instance, does *overstating* incivility decrease news credibility more severely,

and does adding an *additional* layer of incivility in the news after watching an uncivil debate decrease political trust even more?

Investigating these relationships is important because political trust and news credibility are two valuable outcomes for the well-functioning of political and democratic processes. While a certain degree of skepticism is desirable to enable a critical glance at government performance and news reporting, low levels of political trust and news credibility are harmful (Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). Citizens with low political trust levels are more likely to violate the law and are less likely to support governmental policies, thereby harming the well-functioning of government and democratic stability (Hetherington, 2005; Marien & Hooghe, 2011). Citizens with low news credibility levels are more likely to turn away from the (traditional) news media, which harms the news industry and prevents the news media to fulfill their vital information role in society (Wanta & Hu, 1994). Conversely, when credibility levels are high, citizens consume news more regularly, which, in turn, increases political knowledge, participation, and civic engagement (e.g. Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2018; Hao et al., 2014; Verba et al., 1995).

Expectations

Building on the insights gathered from previous research, I expect that incivility-focused news will spur distrust towards politics, and will turn against the news media itself by harming their own credibility. The overarching mechanism central to these relationships is the *violation of citizens' normative expectations* with regards to appropriate discussion and news reporting practices. In normative democratic theories, particularly deliberative democratic theory, civility is seen as a core quality in political discussion and news reporting (Strömbäck, 2005; Wessler, 2008a). Politicians and the news media alike should provide high-quality policy information as it helps citizens to make well-informed choices and increases the (perceived) legitimacy of politics and democratic processes (Habermas, 1981; Strömbäck, 2005). Political incivility in discussions and in the news would harm that (Rinke, 2016; Rohlinger, 2007; Wessler, 2008a). Interestingly, and importantly, citizens generally share this norm for civility in political discussion and there are also indications that they share the norm for civility in news reporting (Jennstål et al., 2020; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Prochazka et al., 2018). Since both political trust and news credibility depend on citizens' normative expectations, these outcomes are expected to decline when citizens are exposed to incivility-focused news coverage. In what follows, I develop these expectations further for political trust and news credibility respectively.

The main argument developed in previous research to explain why *politicians' use* of incivility in political debates decreases political trust is that it violates civility norms citizens share for political discussion (e.g. Mutz & Reeves). By drawing attention to the incivility of politicians, the news media signal to the public that politicians violated the civility norm. Therefore, I extend this norm violation argument on the behavior of politicians to incivility-focused coverage and expect that this coverage also decreases citizens' political trust levels. Building on earlier studies that found incivility in debates and in the news to decrease both trust in politicians (e.g. Goovaerts & Marien, 2020; Skytte, 2020) and trust in the political system more broadly (Forgette & Morris, 2006; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; but see Goovaerts & Marien, 2020), I expect negative effects on trust in politicians as well as spill-over effects to the political system. Accordingly, two sets of hypotheses are formulated.

> **H1a**: Trust in politicians participating in the debate is lower when they use uncivil communication, compared to civil communication.
> **H1b**: Trust in the political system is lower when citizens are exposed to politicians who use uncivil communication, compared to civil communication.

> **H2a**: Trust in politicians participating in the debate is lower after citizens' exposure to incivility-focused news coverage, compared to incivility-free news coverage.
> **H2b**: Trust in the political system is lower after citizens' exposure to incivility-focused news coverage, compared to incivility-free news coverage.

The dimensions of news credibility, like the accuracy, completeness and neutrality of news reporting (Meyer, 1988), are all linked to "idealized journalistic norms of objectivity, fairness, and balance" that citizens generally share in their evaluations of news credibility (Thorson et al., 2010, p. 292; Tsfati et al., 2006; van der Wurff & Schoenbach, 2014). When journalists violate these journalistic norms and "do not live by their professional standards", news credibility is expected to decline (Maier, 2005; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003, p. 506). Incivility serves as a heuristic cue that could signal low journalistic quality, and the focus on incivility in news reporting is precisely such a practice that violates journalistic norms and could therefore decrease news credibility (Prochazka et al., 2018). Following this argument, and building on previous research that found intense, opinionated and stylistic-focused coverage to decrease news credibility (Hamilton & Hunter, 1998; Mukherjee & Weikum, 2015), I formulate a third hypothesis:

> **H3**: News credibility is lower after citizens' exposure to incivility-focused news coverage, compared to incivility-free news coverage.

Finally, I expect that the effects of incivility-focused news coverage will also depend on the level of incivility in the debate that is covered. Different situations can occur, with politicians behaving civilly or uncivilly in the debates, and with journalists focusing on incivility in their news coverage or not. After specifying these situations, I hypothesize how they could influence political trust and news credibility.

Politicians' use of incivility is highly context-dependent (Shea & Sproveri, 2012; chapter 6). Sometimes, politicians discuss politics in an overall civil way, without turning to a debate that is characterized by uncivil bickering. In a first situation, post-debate news coverage "matches" with the actual (civil) debate: journalists do not use incivility-focused language. The news coverage does not frame the debate as uncivil and only focuses, for instance, on the substantive aspects and the policy views expressed in the debate. However, as outlined earlier, following media logic, journalists often decide to overstate incivility. In the second situation, a "mismatch" between politicians' debate style and journalists' coverage style occurs, and citizens' sense of incivility in politics is strongly fed by the news media. The news coverage can, for instance, strongly focus on that one attack that occurred during the debate. This situation is problematic because it creates the impression that interactions where uncivil, while in reality they were not or at least not as much as the coverage seems to suggest.

At other times, politicians in the debates do behave uncivilly. Since the news media are inclined to emphasize the incivility expressed in the debate, a match between debate and coverage style is likely to occur. As Mölders & Van Quaquebeke put it, "political opponents attack each other with words, and media multiply these words in their coverage" (2017, p. 60). In a last situation, a mismatch occurs again. Here, politicians' uncivil communication is not covered in the news. This situation is less likely to occur in reality but not less interesting to study: it gives us insights into how citizens' attitudes are affected when incivility-focused coverage would be less prominent in the media landscape (van der Wurff et al., 2018). How do these different situations affect political trust and news credibility?

Regarding political trust, I expect that citizens' exposure to incivility in debates and incivility-focused coverage afterwards leads to the lowest political trust levels. It adds an *additional layer* of incivility and therefore gives citizens the strongest indication that politicians violated civility norms. In other words, the negative effect of politicians' use of incivility on political trust may be *amplified* when citizens are also exposed to incivility-focused news afterwards. Conversely, exposure to civil debate and incivility-free coverage is expected to lead to the highest political trust levels. Further, I expect mismatches between debate and coverage style to fall in between these two. The question arises whether citizens are most strongly

influenced by politicians' debate style or by the news media's interpretation of the debate. In other words, do citizens rely on what they hear in the debate, or are news media that powerful, meaning that citizens' attitudes are mainly shaped by the news media? As political trust is an evaluation of politics rather than the news media, I expect that it depends stronger on politicians' uncivil debate style than on the journalists' focus on it. Therefore, political trust is expected to decline more when exposed to uncivil debate and incivility-free coverage, than to civil debate and incivility-focused coverage. Still, this latter situation of *overstating* incivility is expected to lead to lower trust in comparison to the situation where the debate is civil and the coverage incivility-free. Together, this leads to hypothesis 4, which is also presented more in detail in Figure 8.1:

H4a: The effect of incivility-focused news coverage on trust in politicians participating in the debate is dependent on the actual level of incivility in the debate that is covered.

H4b: The effect of incivility-focused news coverage on trust in the political system is dependent on the actual level of incivility in the debate that is covered.

Figure 8.1: Schematic presentation of hypothesis 4
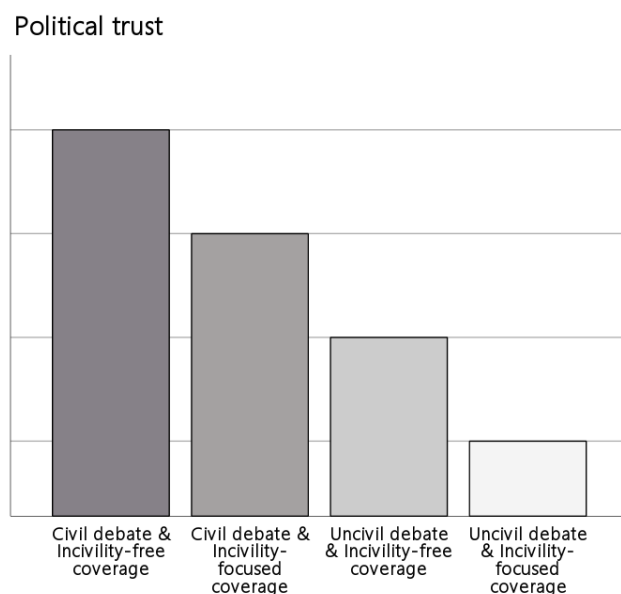
Regarding news credibility, I expect a different pattern. Mismatches between debate and coverage style are expected to lead to stronger violations of journalistic norms than matches. When journalists frame the debate as uncivil while the debate was overall civil, or when journalists do not cover incivility when politicians did behave uncivilly, news credibility is expected to be lower because the coverage is, for instance, less accurate, fair and complete (Maier, 2005). Moreover, news credibility is expected to be lowest in the first case,

i.e. when the news media *overstate* incivility. In this situation, the blame towards politicians for violating civility norms is expected to appear as too strong and unfair, and citizens might punish the news media for that. Matches between debate and coverage style are expected to lead to highest news credibility. In line with H2, incivility-free coverage is expected to lead to even higher news credibility than incivility-focused news coverage when such a match occurs. All of this leads to hypothesis 5, also presented in detail in Figure 8.2:

> **H5**: The effect of incivility-focused news coverage on news credibility is dependent on the actual level of incivility in the debate that is covered.

Figure 8.2: Schematic presentation of hypothesis 5

News credibility

Civil debate & Incivility-free coverage | Civil debate & Incivility-focused coverage | Uncivil debate & Incivility-free coverage | Uncivil debate & Incivility-focused coverage
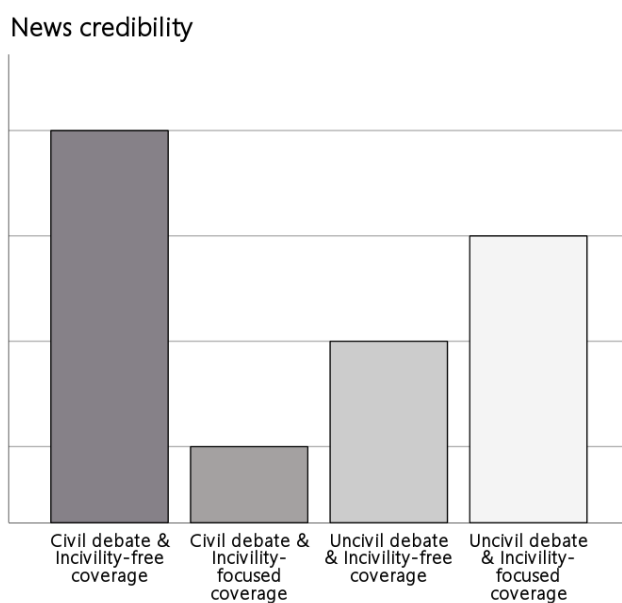
Data and method

Sample

Two survey experiments were conducted to test the formulated hypotheses. Both experiments were preregistered (see https://osf.io/r25a7/).[4] The first experiment was distributed to Flemish citizens (i.e. Dutch-speaking Belgian citizens) via an opt-in online panel coordinated by the University of Antwerp (https://www.ua-burgerpanel.be/), between July 24, 2019 and August 12, 2019. A couple of times a year, the panel members receive emails with an invitation to participate in research and voluntarily decide to fill in the online surveys (max. 4 per year to avoid overburdening them). A batch of 2581 panel members

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[4] For more information, see Appendix 8.2.

received an email with an invitation to this study. 727 started the survey, 642 filled it in completely and 637 also complied with the time exclusion criteria specified in the preregistration (N=637, 73.5% male, 18 to 82 years [M=57.7, SD=13.1], 77,5% with higher education). This sample is not representative for the population in Flanders (i.e. over-represents men, older, and higher educated people; see Appendix 8.1). To check and increase robustness of the results, a second experiment was fielded. This experiment was also fielded in Flanders, among a larger-scale, more diverse sample to ensure better representation of the Flemish population. The international survey sampling company Dynata distributed the survey between January 22, 2020 and January 29, 2020, using a quota-based sampling procedure for gender and age. 1117 participants completed the survey (50.4% male, 18 to 91 years [M=45.9, SD=15.6], 39% higher educated) and 768 people also complied with the specified time exclusion criteria (48.3% male, 18 to 91 years [M=48.2, SD=15.7], 38,9% higher educated).[5] Experiment 2 is a replication and extension of experiment 1. The experimental design is similar, but two experimental conditions are added in experiment 2 (see below).

Experimental design and stimuli

Experiment 1

In a 2 (civil vs. uncivil debate) x 2 (incivility-free vs. incivility-focused news coverage) between-subjects survey experiment, participants were randomly exposed to one of the four conditions. In each condition, participants were first exposed to one of two versions of an election debate fragment about safety policy. In particular, they were asked to listen to an audio fragment in which they hear fictional politician A (Erik Verlaken) express three statements that reflect the debate style used in the debate.[6] In these statements, it becomes clear that politician A thinks that politician B (fictional prime minister Wim Denouw) and his government fell short in the past years to handle safety policy. The substantive content of the debate is exactly the same in both versions and both versions represent disagreement between the politicians, yet the *tone* in which the disagreement is expressed differs.

In the uncivil version, politician A uses insulting language, name-calling, and misrepresentative exaggeration, i.e. "dramatic negative exaggeration in reference to the behaviors, planned behaviors, policies or views of a person" (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011, p. 40),

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[5] For more information on racers in experiment 2 and additional analyses with all participants included, see Appendix 8.6.

[6] Fictional material is used to enhance internal validity. The use of real debates with real politicians could trigger many other thoughts among participants that could affect the results. Moreover, it allows to keep everything constant except for the manipulation of the debate and coverage style. To enhance the external validity, actual election debates and newspaper articles were used as input to design the treatments.

to express his policy stance. These are all prominent forms of political incivility, and citizens also perceive them as uncivil (Stryker et al., 2016). In the civil version, politician A does not use uncivil language. The politician criticizes his opponent, but does so civilly and respectfully, i.e. without using incivility (see Appendix 8.3 for both scenarios). Voice actors were hired to record these audio fragments. Before listening to the fragment, participants read a short introductory text to explain that they would hear three statements from an election debate between two politicians. The fragment takes ca. 1 minute to listen to.[7]

Following the debate fragment, participants were again randomly assigned to one of two conditions where they read a fictional newspaper story covering the debate. In both versions, the journalist informs the reader about the election debate. While the content and lay-out of both newspaper articles is kept constant, the focus of the journalist differs. In the incivility-free version of the news article, the journalist only covers the substantive content of the debate. The journalist makes clear that the two politicians differed in opinion on safety policy, and clarifies the positions of both politicians. The journalist does that without using any reference to incivility in the debate. The second version, i.e. the incivility-focused one, contains the exact same information, but adds an incivility focus to it and frames the debate as an uncivil clash between these two politicians. This is operationalized by changing or adding short sentences or words such as "The politicians debated the safety of our country" to "The politicians engaged in a nasty debate about the safety of our country", or "…Erik Verlaken, who responded that…" to "Erik Verlaken, who rudely responded that…" (see Otto et al., 2020 for a similar approach; see Appendix 8.3 for both scenarios).

Experiment 2
Experiment 2 replicates and extends experiment 1. The four conditions of experiment 1 remain exactly the same, but two conditions are added to the design. In these two conditions, participants were not exposed to a debate. They only read the newspaper article that was either incivility-free or incivility-focused. The reason to add these conditions is to ensure a cleaner test of H2 and H3 about the effects of news coverage only, as participants are not exposed to the debate first. This moreover contributes to the ecological validity of the study as, in reality, many people will only be exposed to news coverage of the debate and not the debate itself. Table 8.1 presents an overview of the different scenarios in both experiments.

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[7] 5-minute audio fragments of election debates were recorded for a larger project on incivility. As participants are asked to listen to a debate *and* read a newspaper article, it was decided to limit the amount of time to listen to the debate by selecting three shorter fragments that reflect the civil vs. uncivil style in the debate. Otherwise, chances of drop-out and limited attention spans strongly increase, harming data quality.

Table 8.1: Overview of scenarios in both experiments

Condition	Stimulus	
Scenario 1	Civil debate + Incivility-free coverage	
Scenario 2	Civil debate + Incivility-focused coverage	
Scenario 3	Uncivil debate + Incivility-free coverage	Experiment 1
Scenario 4	Uncivil debate + Incivility-focused coverage	Experiment 2
Scenario 5	Incivility-free coverage (no debate)	
Scenario 6	Incivility-focused coverage (no debate)	

Manipulation checks for incivility in the debate fragments and in the newspaper articles proved successful in both experiments (see Appendix 8.4).

Measures and analysis

Political trust. First, trust in politician A – the politician whose debate style was manipulated – is measured. In experiment 1, participants were asked to rate him on the statement: "Erik Verlaken is a politician I can trust". In experiment 2, the measurement was expanded by including two additional items: "Erik Verlaken is a credible politician" and "Erik Verlaken is an honest politician" (e.g. Koch & Peter, 2017; 1=completely disagree to 7=completely agree). Cronbach's α=0.913, showing strong internal consistency. An index was created by adding the scores and dividing them by three (M=3.74; SD=1.09). Second, trust in the political system, i.e. trust in political parties, in politicians in general and in the federal parliament, is measured: "Could you indicate on a scale ranging from 0 to 10 how much trust you personally have in the following institutions in general? 0 means that you do not have any trust at all in an institution, and 10 means that you have complete trust" (ESS, 2016). Cronbach's α=0.890 in experiment 1 and 0.926 in experiment 2. An index was again created (0=low trust to 10=high trust; M_1=4.87; SD_1=1.86; M_2=3.74; SD_2=2.17).

News credibility. The news credibility scale developed by Meyer (1988) is used and consists of five items, i.e. trustworthiness, accuracy, fairness, completeness and bias. The participants were asked: "To what degree do you agree with the following statements? The newspaper article I read 1) is trustworthy, 2) is accurate, 3) is fair, 4) tells the whole story, 5) is unbiased" (7-point scale). Cronbach's α=0.924 in experiment 1 and 0.899 in experiment 2. An index was created (1=low credibility to 7=high credibility; M_1=3.80; SD_1=1.23; M_2=3.99; SD_2=1.03).

T-tests and ANOVAs are used to compare the participants in the different experimental groups and investigate whether their attitudes differ significantly from each other in line with the formulated expectations. Results are first reported for experiment 1, followed by results of experiment 2.

Results

Experiment 1

A two-way ANOVA test reveals that the main effect of politicians' use of incivility on trust in the political candidate is significant ($F=50.817$; $p<0.001$). Uncivil politicians ($M=2.87$, $SD=1.23$) are trusted less than civil politicians ($M=3.55$, $SD=1.17$), supporting H1a and supporting the results from previous research (e.g. Goovaerts & Marien, 2020; Skytte, 2020). A significant main effect for the incivility-focused coverage style is also found ($F=7.637$; $p=0.006$). Incivility-focused news coverage leads to lower trust in the candidate ($M=3.07$, $SD=1.28$) than incivility-free coverage ($M=3.34$, $SD=1.20$), supporting H2a. There are no spill-over effects to trust in the political system more broadly, indicated by insignificant relationships (see Appendix 8.5 for an overview of all results). Hence, there is no support for H1b or H2b. Moreover, it is observed that incivility-focused news coverage lowers the credibility of the news media themselves ($F=29.669$; $p<0.001$). Citizens rate the credibility of the news significantly lower when exposed to incivility-focused news coverage ($M=3.55$, $SD=1.30$) than when exposed to incivility-free coverage ($M=4.05$, $SD=1.11$), supporting H3.

Next, H4 and H5 are tested which explore if and how the effects of incivility-focused news coverage interact with the degree of incivility in the debate that is covered. Looking at Figure 8.3A, we observe that, in line with expectations, trust in the political candidate is lowest when the candidate is uncivil and the news article further emphasizes the incivility (H4a). When the candidate is civil and the news article is incivility-free, trust is highest. The mismatches between debate and coverage style fall, as expected, in between these two and trust levels are driven stronger by the politician's incivility than by the journalist's focus on it. When the candidate is uncivil but the journalist does not focus on it, trust is lower than when the journalist overstates incivility. The interaction effect between debate and coverage style is not significant ($F=1.591$, $p=0.208$), because the effect of incivility-focused coverage is not stronger for civil or uncivil debate. A one-way ANOVA and subsequent post-hoc Bonferroni test comparing all scenarios give additional insight into the interactive nature of debate and coverage style. This analysis is conducted because it was specifically described in the hypotheses how all the scenarios would differ from each other and influence trust. The one-way ANOVA model is significant ($F=20.017$, $p<0.001$) and the post-hoc Bonferroni test shows that all scenarios, except scenario 1 and 2, significantly differ from each other and that they differ as hypothesized. The fact that scenario 3 and scenario 4 significantly differ from each other moreover indicates that incivility-focused coverage *amplifies* the negative effect of incivility on trust in the candidate: trust decreases even more when

journalists emphasize politicians' use of incivility. Overall, these results support H4a. H4b on trust in the political system does not receive support (see Figure 8.3B). No significant main or interaction effects are found and none of the scenarios significantly differ from each other. In sum, trust in the political system is not affected by incivility in the debates, by incivility-focused news coverage, or by an interaction between the two (see Appendix 8.5).

The results also show that news credibility depends on the degree of incivility in the debate. Besides the significant main effect of coverage style on news credibility (see above), the two-way ANOVA test reveals a significant interaction effect of debate and coverage style ($F=20.957$, $p<0.001$). Particularly the combination of civil debate and incivility-focused news coverage (scenario 2) reduces credibility. This is visualized in Figure 8.3C and confirmed by a significant one-way ANOVA ($F=19.889$, $p<0.001$) and subsequent post-hoc Bonferroni test. When the candidate does not behave uncivilly but journalists do frame the debate as such, news credibility declines significantly compared to all other three scenarios. The other scenarios do not significantly differ from each other. Thus, as expected, news credibility is lower when there is a mismatch between the degree of incivility in the debate and in the news story, but this occurs only when incivility is overstated. H5 is partially supported.

In summary, findings from experiment 1 lend support to most of the formulated hypotheses. Politicians' use of incivility lowers their own trust evaluations. This effect does not spill over, however, to trust in the political system more broadly, which is a more stable attitude. When citizens are exposed to incivility-focused news coverage, their trust levels in politicians also decline. Again, the effect of incivility-focused news coverage does not spill over to trust in the political system. In addition, the incivility-focused reporting style does not only lower trust in politicians, but also trust in the news media themselves. Finally, the effects of incivility-focused coverage interact with the degree of incivility in the debates. Results show that the negative effect of politicians' use of incivility on trust in the candidate is amplified when the news media draw additional attention to it, and that news credibility is undermined most severely when journalists overstate incivility.

Figure 8.3: One-way ANOVA results – Experiment 1

A. Trust in political candidate

M=3,62 SD=1,08 — c, d
M=3,47 SD=1,25 — c, d
M=3,06 SD=1,26 — a, b, d
M=2,68 SD=1,18 — a, b, c

a. Civil debate & Incivility-free coverage | b. Civil debate & Incivility-focused | c. Uncivil debate & Incivility-free | d. Uncivil debate & Incivility-focused

B. Trust in political system

M=4,80 SD=1,95
M=4,74 SD=1,96
M=5,01 SD=1,79
M=4,91 SD=1,72

a. Civil debate & Incivility-free coverage | b. Civil debate & Incivility-focused | c. Uncivil debate & Incivility-free | d. Uncivil debate & Incivility-focused

C. News credibility

M=4,12 SD=1,10 — b
M=3,18 SD=1,34 — a, c, d
M=3,99 SD=1,12 — b
M=3,91 SD=1,15 — b

a. Civil debate & Incivility-free coverage | b. Civil debate & Incivility-focused | c. Uncivil debate & Incivility-free | d. Uncivil debate & Incivility-focused

Note: The letters a, b, c, d inside the bars represent the scenario(s) from which the respective scenario significantly differs.

Experiment 2

A two-way ANOVA test reveals that the main effect of politicians' use of incivility on trust in the political candidate is significant ($F=12.590$; $p<0.001$): uncivil politicians ($M=3.61$, $SD=1.19$) are trusted less than civil politicians ($M=3.94$, $SD=0.97$), supporting H1a and previous research findings. The main effect of incivility-focused news coverage on trust in the candidate is, however, not significant ($F=0.233$, $p=0.630$). Trust in the candidate does not decline significantly after exposure to incivility-focused coverage ($M=3.79$, $SD=1.07$) compared to incivility-free coverage ($M=3.75$, $SD=1.14$). Experiment 2 allows to conduct an additional analysis because two scenarios, only consisting of the newspaper article (no debate fragment), were added to its design. The difference between the incivility-free ($M=3.72$, $SD=1.08$) and the incivility-focused article ($M=3.66$, $SD=1.01$) is, again, very small and insignificant ($t=0.428$, $p=0.669$). Hence, support for H2a is absent in experiment 2. Next, trust in the political system is not influenced, neither by politicians' own incivility use nor by journalists' focus on it ($F=0.245$, $p=0.621$; $F=1.324$, $p=0.250$). Therefore, H1b and H2b are not supported. Turning to news credibility, it is again observed that the news media's own trust evaluations decrease by incivility-focused coverage. A significant difference is observed when comparing scenario 5 (incivility-free article; $M=4.04$, $SD=1.01$) to scenario 6 (incivility-focused article; $M=3.77$, $SD=1.01$; $t=2.072$, $p=0.039$), and a two-way ANOVA test shows that the main effect of coverage style is marginally significant ($F=3.432$, $p=0.065$), where incivility-focused coverage leads to lower credibility ($M=3.94$; $SD=1.04$) than incivility-free coverage ($M=4.11$; $SD=1.04$). These results support H3.

Next, H4 and H5 are tested. Looking at Figure 8.4A, scenario 4 (uncivil debate, incivility-focused coverage) does not lead to lowest trust in the candidate. We observe that mean scores are lowest when the politician in the debate is uncivil and the article incivility-free (scenario 3). A one-way ANOVA ($F=4.737$, $p=0.003$) and subsequent post-hoc Bonferroni test show, however, that the difference between scenario 3 and 4 is insignificant. The significant differences that are observed in experiment 2 are the ones between scenario 3 on the one hand, and scenario 1 (civil debate, incivility-free coverage) and 2 (civil debate, incivility-focused coverage) on the other hand. In short, scores are lowest for the uncivil debates, but the incivility-focused news coverage does not interact with the degree of incivility in the debates in line with what was expected. Therefore, H4a does not receive support in experiment 2. No significant results are found for trust in the political system, which again indicates that H4b is not supported (see Figure 8.4B). Finally, news credibility scores are slightly lower in both cases of incivility-focused coverage, but it does not interact with the degree of incivility in the debate ($F=0.091$, $p=0.762$). A one-way ANOVA moreover shows that none of the scenarios significantly differ from one another ($F=1.242$, $p=0.294$; see Figure 8.4C). Therefore, H5 is not supported in experiment 2.

Figure 8.4: One-way ANOVA results – Experiment 2

A. Trust in political candidate

B. Trust in political system
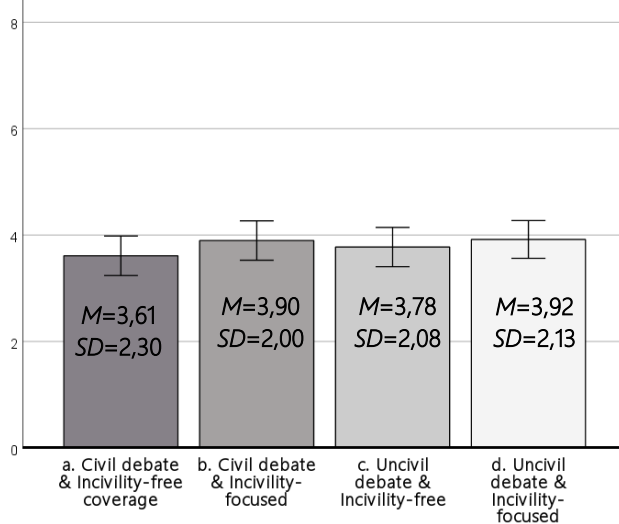
C. News credibility
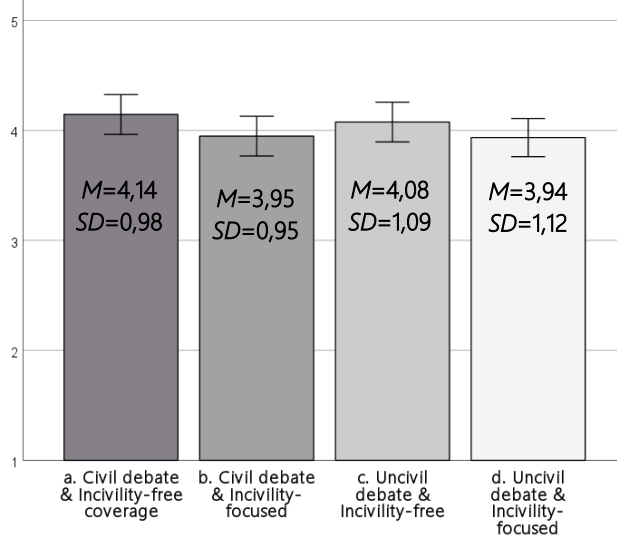
Note: The letters a, b, c, d inside the bars represent the scenario(s) from which the respective scenario significantly differs.

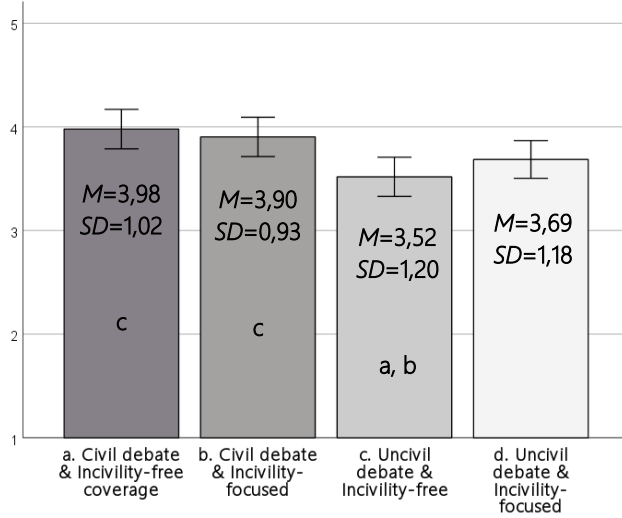In summary, experiment 2 confirms that politicians' use of incivility lowers their own trustworthiness. Trust in the political system is not influenced by politicians' uncivil communication. Trust in politicians or in the political system is not influenced by incivility-focused news coverage in experiment 2. Yet, again, it is found that incivility-focused coverage undermines the news media's own credibility. Finally, the results do not show that the effects of incivility-focused coverage depend strongly on the degree of incivility in the debates. In contrast to experiment 1, no evidence was found for an amplifying effect, where political trust declines more severely when an uncivil debate is followed by additional incivility-focused coverage. The effect of overstating incivility on news credibility was also not replicated in this experiment.

Discussion results experiment 1 and experiment 2

This study showed that some results are replicated across the two experiments, namely the effect of politicians' use of incivility on trust in the candidate (H1) and of incivility-focused coverage on news credibility (H3), showing compelling evidence for these effects. There are also indications for the effect of incivility-focused coverage on trust in the candidate (H2) and for the interactive nature of the effect when news coverage and debates are studied in combination (H4 and H5). Yet, these latter effects were only found in experiment 1, not in experiment 2. The effects observed in experiment 2 are also generally somewhat weaker than those in experiment 1. In this section, I provide two possible explanations for this, which both relate to the composition of the samples.

First, participants in experiment 1 signed up voluntarily to participate in social science related surveys, without (material) incentives, and can fill in max. 4 surveys per year. Hence, these participants are likely to participate out of interest in the research. In experiment 2, participants are contacted via a commercial sampling company, and receive (material) incentives to participate in surveys. Therefore, they might also have other motivations and participate less out of interest than experiment 1 participants. This may influence their attentiveness to fill in surveys and response quality (Singer & Ye, 2013), which is confirmed by the amount of racers and the lower compliance with the Instructional Manipulation Check in experiment 2 (see Appendix 8.6). Hence, experiment 2 participants might have taken the incivility cues less strongly, which may underestimate effects (sizes). In effect, when re-analyzing results of experiment 2 with only the participants who successfully complied with the manipulation checks of the stimuli, some results are more in line with expectations and more similar to those of experiment 1 (see Appendix 8.7). For instance, the interaction effect for news credibility between coverage and debate style becomes significant, where the mismatch scenario 2 leads to lowest credibility scores, followed by mismatch scenario 3

(in line with H5). These subgroup analyses give some more insight into the results, yet we should also be careful to interpret and generalize these results given the smaller *N* and potential randomization bias (Brookes et al., 2001).

Second, the experiment 1 sample is not representative for the Flemish population (e.g. over-represents men, higher educated, older people). Quota-based sampling in experiment 2 ensured a more representative sample (see Appendix 8.1). By over-representing certain groups in society, some effects in experiment 1 may particularly be present among certain groups and not among the wider population, which may provide an explanation for the stronger effects in experiment 1. Some information is present in the experiment 2 survey to conduct subgroup analyses to check this (again, we should be careful with interpreting results based on subgroup analyses). One potential individual-level explanatory variable is education level, where effects are expected to be stronger among the higher educated. However, subgroup analysis with higher educated people in experiment 2 does not show substantial changes in results. The survey also contained information about political cynicism. The effects of incivility on trust attitudes may particularly be present among citizens with low cynicism, and absent among citizens with high cynicism (Goovaerts & Marien, 2020). High politically cynical citizens participated substantially more in experiment 2 than experiment 1. However, subgroup analysis with low politically cynical people do not show substantial changes in results. These are only two potential individual-level characteristics that could explain differences in results, and we should gather more insights on other potential explanatory characteristics. One other important explanatory variable would be political interest. The panel used for experiment 1 over-represents politically interested people (Lefevere et al., 2020, p. 818), yet this variable was not questioned in the survey and therefore could not be tested.[8]

In short, to interpret the weaker/absence of some effects in experiment 2, there is a potential trade-off between participants' lower attentiveness and weaker exposure to the incivility cues on the one hand, and more representativeness in experiment 2 on the other hand. While the first explanation could mean that the results in experiment 2 are underestimated and thus are present and stronger in the population, the second explanation could mean that the effects are present and strong but only in certain parts and not the entire population. I strongly encourage future research to gather more insight on this.

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[8] While we do not have strong theoretical reasons to assume that age and gender would influence the results, older people and men were also considerably over-represented in experiment 1. The results were therefore also re-analyzed for men and for the older half of the sample (aged 50+) of experiment 2. Again, this does not substantially impact results. All results from the subgroup analyses are available upon request.

Conclusion and discussion

Previous research showed that politicians' use of incivility harms political trust (Goovaerts & Marien, 2020; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Skytte, 2020). Since the news media are inclined to focus on incivility when covering politics (e.g. Muddiman, 2018), the question arises what effects this practice has on citizens' attitudes towards politics, but also towards the news media themselves. Studies addressing these questions are limited. This study expected that incivility-focused post-debate news coverage decreases political trust and news credibility. Moreover, it was expected that these effects would interact with the actual degree of incivility in the debate being covered. Two survey experiments were conducted to investigate this, where participants were exposed to a civil or uncivil debate fragment and/or to an incivility-focused or incivility-free newspaper article.

This study confirms previous research findings showing that politicians' use of incivility in political debates decreases their trustworthiness. The effect of incivility-focused news coverage is more mixed. One experiment showed that when the news media frame politicians as uncivil, citizens' trust perceptions towards politicians are negatively influenced, but this was not replicated in a second experiment. As citizens mainly receive their political information via the news and, precisely because the news media tend to emphasize and overstate incivility, it is important to gather more evidence on this question (Skytte, 2019). Ironically, the news media emphasize incivility because it is widely perceived to entertain and attract citizens' attention, yet both experiments of this study show that this practice harms their credibility. Thus, despite its short-term attention-grabbing potential, in the longer run, incivility-focused news coverage harms the news media because low news credibility tends to lead people to turn away from the news. This, in turn, decreases citizens' political knowledge, engagement and participation (e.g. Hao et al., 2014; Verba et al., 1995).

Moreover, this study investigated whether the effects of news coverage vary depending on the actual level of incivility in the debates being covered. The results from the first experiment show that this is the case. First, for *trust in politicians*, trust is highest when politicians are civil and news coverage is incivility-free. Trust declines as soon as politicians are uncivil and, interestingly, an amplifying effect occurred: the negative effect of incivility in the debates is reinforced when journalists further emphasize the incivility. This is important because it means that repeated exposure to incivility can harm trust evaluations severely. Second, for *news credibility*, experiment 1 showed that the negative effect of incivility-focused coverage is strongest when incivility is overstated. When journalists portray political debate as a nasty clash, but politicians overall behaved civilly, news credibility strongly declines. Citizens are thus critical towards the news, especially when they observe

the news media to unfairly frame politics as uncivil. A second experiment failed to replicate these findings, possibly due to lower attentiveness to the treatments in this experiment or due to the different composition of the sample in terms of participants' individual-level characteristics. Therefore, definitive answers to the question on how the effects of news coverage vary depending on the actual level of incivility in the debates cannot be offered.

Finally, this study showed no evidence of effects on trust in the political system more broadly, neither by politicians' own uncivil debate style nor by journalists' incivility-focused reporting style. One of the main explanations for this is the higher stability of this attitude (Norris, 2017). Attitude changes towards the political system do not occur that easily as attitudes towards specific politicians and would, for instance, require more extensive exposure to incivility cues. But this explanation does not yet explain the difference in findings in the U.S. versus Belgian context (Forgette & Morris, 2006; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). This difference may relate to these countries' different political systems. When one or two parties are uncivil in a two-party system, they could easily represent the broader political system as there are only two main parties. When one or two parties behave uncivil in a multi-party system, many other parties in the political arena may still be civil, thereby lowering the chance that the uncivil parties are perceived as representative for the system as a whole.

This study was not without limitations. First, it is likely that different type of people react differently to political incivility (Sydnor, 2019), which may also explain some of the weaker results in experiment 2. Adding moderators, such as political interest or political sophistication, can give more insight into the results. Second, the effect sizes in this study were relatively small. On the one hand, future research could expose participants to an entire audiovisual debate and to more extensive news coverage to see whether and how this influences effect sizes. On the other hand, this study also indicates that even when exposure is limited, negative effects are present. Moreover, four ideal-type scenarios were designed in this study. Future research could design more intermediate variations in the presence of incivility in political debates and news coverage and study how this affects the findings. Third, the debate topic in the experiments was safety policy. Do results differ for other, for instance more polarizing issues such as migration, and if so, how? Fourth, the experiments were conducted in Flanders, Belgium. This region is classified under the democratic corporatist model of politics and media (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) that is characterized, for instance, by a news media environment where norms of objectivity and impartiality are core to the journalistic culture. I expect the theoretical expectations to hold and do not expect opposing directions of the effects in other contexts, e.g. classified under the liberal or the polarized pluralist model (ibid.), but the effects may be weaker or stronger. Norm violations might, for instance, be weaker in countries were citizens are more used to

incivility in politics and in the news. Lastly, this study was specifically focused on mediated political (election) debates and their coverage. The news media's tendency to focus on incivility when covering politics does not relate to such debates specifically. I encourage future research to study the effects of incivility-focused coverage in other contexts and related to other political events. This is important since this study provided first indications that this type of news coverage could not only undermine trust in politicians, but also the news media's own credibility.

Chapter 9 : Conclusion and discussion

In this final chapter, the main findings of this dissertation are summarized and their implications are discussed. Moreover, the limitations of this dissertation and the avenues for future research are presented. This chapter concludes with a societal perspective and proposes a number of suggestions and guidelines for organizing political debates in the media.

Concerns are frequently raised about the uncivil and ill-justified ways in which politicians often seem to express their standpoints and ideas (Dryzek et al., 2019). Yet these concerns and allegations are often based on assumptions rather than systematic empirical evidence. This dissertation contributed to filling this gap by systematically and empirically analyzing (1) the evolution of politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified arguments over time (1985-2019), (2) different micro, meso, and macro-level determinants that could influence politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified arguments, and (3) the effects of incivility and ill-justified arguments on citizens' trust in politics and in the news. This was done by using an overarching approach, where the deliberative ideal of civility and well-justified arguments served as a theoretical and methodological benchmark. I focused on the venue of political debates in the media, which is important because the media play a pivotal role in society to connect politicians and the wider citizenry to each other (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Habermas, 1996). Based on the content analyses and experiments that were conducted, five main conclusions can be drawn. The first three conclusions provide answers to the three research questions that guided this dissertation. The fourth and fifth conclusions go beyond these research questions. The fourth conclusion discusses the "competitive advantage" of communicating in uncivil, ill-justified ways for populist politicians, which became apparent after analyzing and combining the findings across several chapters. The final conclusion discusses the value of mediated political debates in a deliberative democracy.

Main conclusions

Conclusion 1: Politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified arguments is not on the rise
Contrary to the many concerns and allegations, and contrary to expectations, I did **not find empirical evidence indicating a decline in the quality of political debate over time** (1985-2019). A systematic content analysis of 35 years of Belgian televised election debates revealed no evidence of a rise in politicians' use of ill-justified arguments nor of an upsurge in politicians' use of incivility. Moreover, most of the time, politicians discuss politics with their opponents in a civil manner and regularly provide reasons for their standpoints. From a normative and empirical point of view, these results are important because they show that politicians' communication did not increasingly deviate from the deliberative ideal of civility and justification.

With regard to justifications, chapters 4 and 5 showed that across the Belgian, Dutch, German and UK cases, well-justified arguments are, on average, present in almost half of politicians' utterances in televised debates (see also Wessler & Schultz, 2007). Chapter 5 studied justifications over time and investigated three elements that define a well-justified argument: the *mere presence* of a justification for the standpoints politicians put forward in the debate, the *number* of justifications that politicians provide for a standpoint, and the *relevance* of their justifications (i.e. are the reasons well connected to the standpoint that is being made). The results clearly show that there is no decline (nor rise) in the mere presence of a justification or in the relevance of the justifications provided. Interestingly, a decline over time in the number of justifications politicians provide for a standpoint is detected. This can be attributed to a shift that occurred after the mid-nineties. During the first period (1985-1995), 30.3% of politicians' standpoints were underpinned with two or more justifications. In the 25-year period thereafter, this number decreased to an average of 19.6%. One explanation may be that, in 1995, commercial broadcaster VTM organized its first election debate, which could have stimulated public broadcaster VRT to compete with VTM in the newly emerged battle for viewers. This finding resonates well with the idea that, since media logic permeated the media landscape in the nineties, the "soundbite culture" we live in became more pervasive, with the result that politicians' timespans to explain their policy positions became more limited (Altheide, 2004; De Landtsheer et al., 2008; Esser, 2008). Another reason may be that, in 1995, populist politicians were invited for the first time to participate in the election debates. These politicians are known for their greater use of uncivil, ill-justified statements, and mainstream politicians also tend to copy these communication forms when debating with populists in election debates (Bossetta, 2017; see below). This finding of a decreasing number of justifications can be problematic, particularly

when complex issues are discussed. When a discussion of such issues is reduced to one-liner justifications, the basis for making well-informed and legitimate political decisions is being compromised (Milstein, 2020; Zarefsky, 1992). Yet, important to note is that we do not observe a *continuous* decrease after 1995. In other words, a sudden decrease occurs in 1995, as compared to the years before, but the number of justifications provided after 1995 remains on a similar level and fluctuates around a lower baseline. Hence, for the past 25 years, we can again conclude that there was no decline in the number of justifications politicians provide for their standpoints in Belgian televised debates.

With regard to incivility, chapters 4 and 6 also indicate that, across the Belgian, UK, German and Dutch cases, politicians are civil towards each other in the large majority of their utterances. Chapter 6 investigated incivility over time and showed that the trend line is characterized by pronounced ups and downs over the years (see more below), but again there has been no overall decline (nor rise) in incivility over the past 35 years. An interesting finding to note is that incivility follows an almost identical pattern for the debates aired on the public broadcaster VRT and commercial broadcaster VTM until 2007, but from 2009 (i.e. the following election year) to 2019, an increasing trend in incivility can be observed for debates on the commercial broadcaster. This is not the case for debates hosted on the public broadcaster, where incivility does not rise nor decline. Competition and market-driven logics are stronger among commercial, as compared to public, channels, and the public broadcaster is moreover bound more strongly to a journalistic code of politically informing the public (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004; Brants & Van Praag, 2006). The increasing competition and fragmentation of the media landscape may provide an explanation as to why incivility was stimulated more on the commercial broadcaster during that 10-year time period. Notwithstanding this interesting finding of a rise in incivility between 2009 and 2019 on the commercial broadcaster, looking at the overall 35-year time pattern, it can be concluded that incivility did not increase in Belgian televised debates.

In sum, this dissertation provides systematic, empirical evidence that questions the often-heard allegation that politicians have increasingly been discussing politics in uncivil and ill-justified ways. One may wonder then why these allegations, concerns and intuitions about rising incivility and ill-justified arguments are so prevalent? The main explanation could be that it is the politicians' surrounding environment, and not the politicians themselves, that uses or emphasizes politicians' incivility and ill-justified arguments more, thereby feeding the idea of politicians' increasing use of it. First, the news media may play a crucial role in this. Previous research showed that campaign and post-debate *news coverage* has substantially changed over the years. Political news has become increasingly negative, and the average soundbite length covered in the news has been decreasing over the years

(Farnsworth & Lichter, 2007; Geer, 2012; Reinemann & Wilke, 2007). This may be an indication that incivility (a narrow, specific type of negativity) also became more prominent in political news coverage, and that there is less room for well-justified arguments in the news. Thus, by increasingly portraying political debates as uncivil and ill-justified and by increasingly highlighting politicians' use of incivility and one-liners, the news media may nourish the belief that it are the politicians themselves who have come to resort to these communication forms more often (see also Walter, 2014)[1].

Second, the rise of social media appears to have made political discussions among the *wider public* more anonymous and simplistic, which often makes online political discusisgns uncivil and ill-justified (Esau et al., 2020; Ott, 2017). The lower deliberative quality of online discussions and comments (e.g. on online platforms or news websites) could again have triggered feelings of more uncivil and ill-justified political debate overall. Yet again, this does not automatically translate to the debate style of politicians who participate in media debates. In other words, it is important to clearly *distinguish between the communicator* (e.g. politicians, journalists or citizens) and *the venue* (e.g. mediated debate or online discussion) when making claims about trends in political debate quality.

Next to this, there could be another explanation – one that relates to the argument that long-term political communication trends observed in one western democracy are frequently assumed to take place in other western democracies too (Wilke & Reinemann, 2001). Therefore, feelings of declining debate quality may be fed by such trends found in other countries or contexts. On the topic of debate quality, research studying trends are generally performed in the highly competitive and polarized political and media system of the United States, where a decline in political discourse quality has been found (e.g. Shea & Sproveri, 2012; Uslaner, 1993). This context strongly differs from the less competitive Belgian context that was studied in this dissertation. Therefore, it is important to take different contexts into account when analyzing time trends, and we should be particularly careful in drawing similarities between countries that strongly differ with regards to their media and political system characteristics, especially the degree of competitiveness (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). In sum, this dissertation shows that findings on trends in debate quality

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[1] Walter (2014) makes a similar argument. In her study, Walter analyzed the evolution of negative campaigning, i.e. a strategy where a politician's communication focuses on the opponent and their weaknesses (in contrast to a positive strategy, where politicians emphasize their own views and strengths; Geer, 2006). Negativity is, however, broader than incivility. Incivility refers to *the way* or *tone* by which negativity is expressed (negativity can be perfectly civil; Fridkin & Kenney, 2011). Still, interestingly, the study shows that negativity (in party election broadcasts and election debates) is on the rise in the United States but that there is less evidence for such a rise in European countries. Walter also argues that we should look into news coverage of election campaigns because the focus on negativity may have increased in that context.

cannot be rashly generalized from highly competitive systems like the U.S. to less competitive systems like Belgium, or vice versa (see also Walter, 2014).

On a final note, the finding that there has been no decline in the debate quality of politicians does not mean that we should not care about incivility and ill-justified arguments in political debates. Although many of the speech acts in these debates are civil and well-justified, incivility and ill-justified arguments are not absent. The ill-justified and uncivil utterances that are present in the debates can still have an impact and lower, for instance, the perceived legitimacy of opponents or the informative value of the debates (Amsalem, 2019; Mutz, 2007). It are moreover precisely these statements that are likely to be picked up in the news media and, as a result, to be spread more widely in the public sphere. Therefore, it remains important to gather insights into politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified arguments and study, for instance, its determinants and effects, to which I will turn in the next conclusions.

Conclusion 2: Politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified arguments is highly context-specific

The absence of a clear rise or decline in debate quality does not equate *stability* of debate quality throughout the years. Rather, the time trends showed *volatile* patterns with ups and downs over time. Accordingly, the second main conclusion is that **politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified arguments is highly contingent or context-specific**. Contextual variables that are present in certain debates at certain points in time strongly influence whether politicians discuss politics in uncivil, ill-justified ways. This conclusion follows from the research conducted in chapters 4, 5 and 6, which studied potential determinants (RQ2) operating at the macro level (country context), meso level (media and debate context) and micro level (politicians' individual-level context). Most of the studied determinants explain at least some of the variation in the debates, and it are particularly the studied determinants that operate at the debate level and the politicians' individual level that explain most of the variation.

At the macro level, the influence of a country's electoral system was studied. Contrary to expectations as well as the findings of studies investigating debate quality in parliament (e.g. Steiner et al., 2004), electoral rules that foster coalition-building and power-sharing do not stimulate politicians to use more civil and well-justified arguments in televised debates. For justifications, variation between the three countries under study (i.e. the Netherlands, United Kingdom, Germany) is, overall, rather limited. For incivility, some more variation between the countries can be observed, but this variation cannot be explained by a country's electoral rules. The debates in both the consensus (NL) and majoritarian system

(UK) include more incivility than the debates in the mixed-member proportional system of Germany, whose power-sharing rules are situated in between those of the Netherlands and the UK. One explanation for these cross-national variations in incivility relates to the presence of right-wing populist politicians, who were present in the Dutch and UK debates, but not in the German debates. Chapter 4 shows that these populist politicians use substantially more incivility than other politicians, and that non-populist politicians in turn react with more incivility towards right-wing populist politicians than towards other politicians, which makes the debates in the UK and the Netherlands more uncivil overall. Next, an explanation for the lesser degree of variation in election debates than in parliamentary debates may be that debating in election debates encourages a different mindset among politicians than debating in parliament, i.e. a mindset that is focused on winning office rather than on the act of governing and finding compromise (Gutmann & Thompson, 2014). Therefore, televised debates may be more similar across countries than parliamentary debates.

At the meso level, this dissertation investigated the media and debate context. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 examined determinants in election debates that varied *between* debates, namely the type of broadcaster on which the debate is aired, and the presence of populist politicians in the debate. The results revealed that incivility is, as expected, more prevalent on the commercial broadcaster, as compared to the public broadcaster. This difference between broadcasters was not found for the presence of ill-justified arguments. Thus, while commercial broadcasters appear to stimulate more incivility than public broadcasters, they do not seem to stimulate poorly justified statements more (e.g. shorter answers, more one-liners). Results for populist presence were also in line with expectations: when populist politicians are present, the debates include more incivility and more ill-justified arguments. The higher levels of incivility are particularly driven by right-wing populist politicians, not by left-wing populist politicians (see chapter 4). The results are also driven by non-populist politicians, who react more uncivilly towards right-wing populists than towards other politicians. Next, chapter 6 (on incivility) investigated several determinants in election debates that vary *within* the debates. The results showed that incivility is substantially higher the more politicians are simultaneously debating with each other (especially once more than four politicians are debating), and when moral topics (as compared to non-moral topics) are discussed. Chapter 6 also showed that one uncivil statement in the debate often spurs additional uncivil statements – incivility spurs more incivility. These results were in line with expectations and indicate that specific design features of a debate could substantially influence its debate quality, such as the format of the debate, the topics chosen for discussion, and the role of the moderator with regard to dismissing incivility when it occurs.

At the micro level, politicians' individual characteristics were analyzed. First, chapter 4 and 6 both studied the influence of politicians' populist ideology.[2] The populist ideology is a strong predictor of political debate quality. Results reveal that right-wing and left-wing populist politicians use more ill-justified arguments than non-populist politicians and, as addressed earlier, that right-wing populist politicians use more incivility than non-populist politicians (chapter 4 and 6) and left-wing populist politicians (chapter 4). Chapter 6 also studied two other individual-level determinants of incivility and showed that male politicians and politicians in opposition use more incivility than female and incumbent politicians. All these results are in line with expectations and indicate that debate quality depends substantially on the type of politician who is speaking. Moreover, chapter 6 (on incivility) shows that the effects are strongest at the within-debate level and at the individual level as compared to the between-debate level, and that once we control for the determinants situated at the within-debate and individual levels, the effects at the between-debate level (broadcaster type and populist presence) disappear. This means that the effects at the between-debate level can be explained by the differences that are situated at the within-debate and individual level.

Overall, these findings confirm the importance of **investigating communicative patterns in relation to their context** rather than in isolation (Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019; Shea & Sproveri, 2012). Even though the list of determinants studied in this dissertation is not exhaustive, we can clearly see their influence on the quality of politicians' communication in televised debates. Moreover, and importantly, these findings show that under certain conditions, higher deliberative debate quality is more likely to be reached. Therefore, these findings are also important from a societal point of view, because they can be taken into account when organizing political debates in the media. Since it are particularly the within-debate level and individual-level determinants that explain most variation and have the greatest influence on politicians' debate quality, it is less challenging for debate organizers to take these determinants (as compared to country-level determinants, for instance) into account when organizing debates. Organizational decisions could, for instance, relate to the format of the debate and to the composition of groups of politicians who enter into debate with each other. This does not mean, however, that one should organize debates only with female, non-populist and incumbent politicians who discuss non-moral topics. Evidently, it is important to organize civil, well-justified debates that are inclusive as well to ensure that the strength of these debates, namely a variety of politicians discussing politics

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[2] The difference between the populism determinant at the meso and micro level is that the micro-level determinant studies populism at the politicians' individual level, i.e. does the speaking politician in the debate have the populist ideology or not. The meso-level determinant studies populism at the higher debate level, i.e. are populist politicians present in the debate or not (see chapter 2, pp. 35-36).

side by side, is kept. I elaborate further on this in the last section of this chapter, which discusses how political debates in the media can be organized to create a more deliberative debate sphere in the media while at the same time being realistic and taking into account the media and politicians' goal of grabbing and holding citizens' attention.

Conclusion 3: Trust in political candidates and trust in the news decline

The third conclusion of this dissertation concerns the effects of incivility and ill-justified arguments on citizens' levels of trust in politics and in the news. This dissertation shows that, overall, when exposed to incivility and ill-justified arguments, citizens' **trust in the political candidate and in the news decline** and that, at least in the short run, **trust in the political system is not influenced**. This third conclusion consists of several sub-conclusions, because, depending on the predictor (i.e. incivility, ill-justified arguments, or a combination) and outcome variable (i.e. trust in candidate, political system, or in news media) under study, the effects differ (i.e. trust either declines or is not influenced). Overall, the following sub-conclusions, which will be discussed in more detail below, can be drawn. The first five sub-conclusions relate to incivility. This dissertation provides evidence that **(1)** trust in political candidates declines when they debate in uncivil ways, and **(2)** there are also indications that trust in political candidates declines when journalists focus on incivility in post-debate news coverage; **(3)** trust in the political system more broadly is not influenced by politicians' use of incivility, **(4)** nor by journalists' focus on political incivility; and **(5)** when journalists focus on incivility in post-debate coverage, the news media's own credibility declines. The following two sub-conclusions relate to ill-justified arguments: politicians' use of ill-justified arguments does not influence political trust, **(6)** neither in political candidates, **(7)** nor in the political system. The final three sub-conclusions relate to politicians' combined use of incivility and ill-justified arguments. This combination **(8)** leads to the strongest norm violation and decreases trust in political candidates most, but, again, **(9)** it does not influence trust in the political system. Moreover, it is found that **(10)** the effects of politicians' combined use of incivility and ill-justified arguments interact with citizens' level of political cynicism and with the degree to which they value inclusionary debate. For an overview, see Table 9.1.

Table 9.1: Overview of relationships and effects

Predictor variable	Actor	Outcome variable	Effect
Incivility	Politicians	Trust in political candidate	Declines
Incivility	Journalists	Trust in political candidate	Declines
Incivility	Politicians	Trust in political system	No effect
Incivility	Journalists	Trust in political system	No effect
Incivility	Journalists	Trust in news media	Declines
Ill-justified arguments	Politicians	Trust in political candidate	No effect
Ill-justified arguments	Politicians	Trust in political system	No effect
Combination	Politicians	Trust in political candidate	Declines (+moderation effects)
Combination	Politicians	Trust in political system	No effect

Notes: Incivility by journalists means that journalists framed a political debate as uncivil in their post-debate news coverage. "Combination" refers to politicians' combined use of incivility and ill-justified arguments.

With regard to *incivility*, it is shown across the four experiments conducted in chapters 7 and 8 that uncivil politicians are trusted less than civil politicians. Thus, as expected, politicians who act uncivilly in the debates violate citizens' normative expectations and are consequently perceived as less trustworthy by the public. Although using incivility may be tempting, for instance to attract attention, it could harm politicians' trust evaluations severely. In addition, chapter 8 shows that there are indications that the decrease in trust in political candidates not only occurs when politicians themselves behave uncivilly, but could also occur when journalists emphasize political incivility in their news coverage and thus signal to the public that politicians have violated normative expectations. Additionally, there are indications that, when citizens watch or listen to an uncivil debate *and* are exposed to incivility-focused news coverage afterwards, this effect could be aggravated, meaning that trust declines even further. As a consequence, the news media have a crucial societal role to play when it comes to the public's trust in politics (Cappella, 2002). Hence, it is important that the news media take these effects into account when covering political debates. Moreover, results revealed that the news media themselves would benefit from taking account of these insights as focusing on incivility could turn against them. Chapter 8 developed a novel argument about the effects of incivility-focused coverage on news credibility, and reveals that journalists' emphasis on incivility when covering politics decreases their own credibility. In other words, journalists' focus on incivility may serve as a heuristic cue that signals low journalistic quality and, by extension, lowers news credibility (Muddiman, 2013; Prochazka et al., 2018). This could have severe consequences as well since low news credibility causes citizens to turn away from the news, thereby reducing civic and political engagement (e.g. Hao et al., 2014). Linking these findings back to conclusion

1, if incivility-focused *news coverage* would in fact be on the rise (as argued in conclusion 1), this could have severe consequences for citizens' trust in politicians and in the news.

Contrary to expectations and to findings in the United States (Forgette & Morris, 2006; Mutz & Reeves, 2005), this dissertation shows that spill-over effects from decreasing trust in political candidates to decreasing trust in the political system more broadly are very small (chapter 7, experiment 1) or non-existent (chapter 7, experiment 2; chapter 8, experiment 1 and 2). The absence of this effect could be explained by the stronger stability of the attitude of trust in political institutions than in specific politicians (Norris, 2017). These attitude changes may not occur that easily and would, for instance, require more extensive or more long-term exposure to incivility. Hence, the one-time exposure in the experiments may not cause a decrease in trust in the political system, but it could be a possibility that this effect would occur in the longer term, with repeated exposure to incivility. This explanation does not yet explain the difference in findings in the U.S. versus Belgian context. This difference may be related to these countries' different political systems. When one or two parties behave uncivilly in a two-party system, they could easily come to represent the broader political system as there are only two main parties. When one or two parties behave uncivilly in a multi-party system, however, many other parties in the political arena may still be civil, thereby lowering the chance that the uncivil parties are perceived as representative of the system as a whole. Hence, the higher use of incivility by politicians from some political parties in a multi-party context may pose less severe problems for trust in the political system than in a majoritarian context, which we did not know up until now because of the strong dominance of the U.S. literature on incivility.

With regard to *ill-justified arguments*, the findings do not support the expectation that politicians' use of ill-justified arguments leads to lower political trust than their use of well-justified arguments (chapter 7). These effects are absent for both trust in the candidate and trust in the political system more broadly. Citizens thus seem to accept it when politicians do not justify their standpoints well in these mediated debates and when they make use of ill-justified, simplistic arguments to make their point. The norm violation of civility is thus stronger than the norm violation of providing justifications. Moreover, it may be that citizens lower their expectations for politicians' use of well-justified arguments in these mediated debates because they know that politicians will try everything they can to persuade the audience at home. Therefore, citizens may accept the use of ill-justified arguments more in these debates as compared to parliamentary debates for instance, where actual decisions need to be taken (Hooghe et al., 2017; Seyd, 2015). Thus, not only may deliberative democratic scholars distinguish between different expectations for deliberative qualities to be present in different debate venues (see chapter 2); citizens might do the same.

Interestingly, when politicians discuss politics in uncivil *and* ill-justified ways, citizens' normative expectations are violated the most, leading to stronger disapproval than for both debate elements separately. In other words, when politicians use ill-justified arguments and incivility in combination, the strongest decline in trust in the political candidate is observed. Citizens may thus accept that politicians do not justify their policy positions well in the debates, but when combined with another norm violation like incivility, stronger reactions are triggered and trust evaluations decline more. A violation of the civility norm may make citizens more critical towards the uncivil politician and makes citizens therefore more likely to judge the politician more critically overall and less willing to accept his or her use of ill-justified arguments.

In summary, several of the sub-conclusions together lead to the **overall conclusion that deviations from the deliberative ideal do indeed decrease citizens' trust attitudes, at least for trust in political candidates and in the news**. The results also indicate that the stronger or more frequent the violation of normative expectations, the more severe the effects may be. First, there are indications that trust levels decline more severely when citizens are exposed to incivility in multiple occasions, for instance when they are exposed to incivility in political debates *and* to incivility in the news. Second, the results indicate that trust levels decline more when politicians violate social norms twice, i.e. when incivility and ill-justified arguments are used in combination rather than separately. In sum, it can be concluded that it is important that political debates in the media happen in civil, well-justified ways. Yet, interestingly and importantly, the observed effects do not influence all groups in society equally, which brings me to the final finding I would strongly like to emphasize.

Chapter 7 showed that some citizens accept politicians' *combined* use of uncivil communication and ill-justified argumentation more than others. In particular, two moderating variables were studied, namely political cynicism and perspective inclusiveness (i.e. the value citizens attach to the inclusion and discussion of different perspectives in political debate). These moderating variables both influenced the effects of politicians' use of uncivil, ill-justified statements on citizens' trust in the political candidate.[3] First, while citizens with low levels of political cynicism have less trust in politicians who discuss politics in uncivil, ill-justified ways, the trust levels of politically cynical citizens are not affected by it. In other words, politically cynical citizens do not seem to mind if politicians use uncivil, ill-justified statements. Second, citizens who highly value the inclusion and discussion of

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[3] The moderating effects were not present when studying politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified arguments separately, again showing that it is important to study norm violations in combination.

different perspectives in political debate show less trust in politicians who use uncivil, ill-justified statements than citizens who do not value this. The explanation could be that such a debate style hinders inclusive political debate and thorough discussions from taking place. In sum, the effect of politicians' combined use of incivility and ill-justified arguments on citizens' trust in the candidate is conditional: some people have a stronger reaction to it than others and therefore have lower trust in politicians who debate in uncivil, ill-justified ways. Interestingly, it seems that it are particularly citizens who share characteristics of the voters' base of populist parties that accept the uncivil, ill-justified statements more, which brings me to the fourth conclusion of this dissertation.

Conclusion 4: The "competitive advantage" for populist politicians

The fourth conclusion connects findings from the content analyses to those of the experiments, and uncovers that there is a **competitive advantage for populist politicians** when it comes to the use of uncivil, ill-justified statements in mediated political debates. Chapters 4 and 6 both showed that populist politicians use substantially more incivility and ill-justified arguments as compared to non-populist politicians. Chapter 7 revealed that it are particularly those voters who are attracted to these populist parties who accept these communication forms more so than voter bases of other non-populist parties. In effect, the populist voter base is more politically cynical than the voter bases of mainstream parties (e.g. Schumacher & Rooduijn, 2013). Moreover, populist voters are likely to share populist politicians' belief that there is only one general will of the people, thereby criticizing the debating character that is inherent to politics and thus valuing inclusive debate to a lesser degree (Mudde, 2004; Urbinati, 1998). What is more, besides trust as the outcome, chapter 7 also studied the outcome of persuasive power. The findings showed that, overall, politicians' use of civil, well-justified statements is more persuasive than their use of uncivil, ill-justified statements. Yet, again, the findings also showed that it are precisely the highly cynical citizens and citizens who do not value inclusionary debate who are (slightly) more likely to be persuaded by ill-justified arguments expressed in uncivil ways.

Therefore, while citizens generally punish politicians for violating debate norms, this does not seem to apply for citizens who are attracted to populist politicians. This may lead to an advantageous situation for populist politicians: they are inclined to use more incivility and ill-justified arguments and also seem to benefit from it. How can this be explained? One of the core reasons why citizens vote for populist parties is to protest against the established political order (Goovaerts et al., 2020; Schumacher & Rooduijn, 2013). Thus, for populist politicians, politics is precisely about violating norms and changing the established order. Their use of a norm-violating debate style may therefore fit and match that purpose extremely well. While the use of certain communicative elements, such as incivility and ill-

justified arguments, may be "secondary" to the more substantive and ideological reasons that drive populist voting behavior, the combination of norm-violating communication styles and ideas may be integral to the success of populist parties (Aslanidis, 2015, p. 98; Bossetta, 2017, p. 718). Additionally, given that the news media are inclined to cover norm-violating styles because it attracts the public's attention, the media could feed the success of populists further (Mazzoleni, 2008).

This advantageous situation for populists could be enhanced even more when mainstream politicians adopt this debate style too. Mainstream politicians may come to resort to similar communication strategies in order to compete with populist politicians in the debates more effectively (see chapter 4; Bossetta, 2017; but see Valentim & Widmann, 2021). Yet the results of this dissertation show that this practice may actually harm mainstream politicians' success as most politicians are trusted less when they violate normative expectations (chapter 7 and 8). While populists may not directly benefit from a decline in trust in their opponents, indirectly it does play to their advantage.

From a normative point of view, these findings may be worrisome. Given populist parties' growing success worldwide, it seems that certain parts of the citizenry do not care that much about the uncivil, ill-justified communication style adopted by those parties, and will elect populist leaders in spite of their norm-violating discourse. Therefore, given their rising success, the question is not merely *if* the generally shared norms of deliberative communication are fading (at least among some societal groups) but also *to what degree* (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Valentim, 2021). This, in turn, raises the question of how the political debate environment will develop in the future, between politicians, between citizens and in the media, and with what effects. Being aware of this development and preventing discussion norms from eroding is important, because "when ideas about democracy change, so do the practices of democracy" (Hanson, 1985, p. 7).

Conclusion 5: The deliberative value of political debates in the media

The final conclusion relates back to the observation that the media in general, and mediated political debates in particular, are an underexplored venue in the field of deliberative democracy and that little is known about their deliberative potential in the wider deliberative system. As outlined in chapter 2, they are an unlikely place to find high-quality deliberation (e.g. because of media logic) but this does not necessarily mean that they cannot have deliberative value or cannot contribute in the wider deliberative system. In effect, despite their unlikely status, I conclude that **political debates in the media can contribute to a more deliberative debate sphere**. Politicians evidently do not *always* justify their standpoints well in civil ways in these debates, but this dissertation showed that politicians do often provide

justifications for many of their standpoints, and are civil towards each other most of the time. The presence of deliberative qualities like justification and civility in these mediated debates have the potential to stimulate learning effects among the wider public and allow citizens to arrive at better-informed political opinions and decisions when exposed to these debates (see also Benoit et al., 2003), which is one of the core goals of deliberation.

This conclusion can be linked to the few available studies which already connected the venue of political debate in the media to deliberative democratic theory. Similarly, these few available studies theoretically claimed (Coleman, 2020; Turkenburg, in press) and empirically showed (e.g. Davidson et al., 2017; Wessler & Schultz, 2007) that these debates have deliberative value and are a valuable part of the deliberative system. Again, their reasoning is that these debates are to a certain extent deliberative, and can therefore stimulate learning and reflection among citizens. This certainly does not mean, however, that these debates are perfect. Politicians do also turn to the use of personal attacks and simplistic one-liners in these debates and it is very important to be aware of that, especially in those debates where these elements are most prevalent (i.e. the prevalence of these elements is highly context-dependent; conclusion 2), because the higher the prevalence of these elements, the lower the learning effects and the more severe the effects on attitudes such as trust in politicians (conclusion 3). Therefore, a next step in deliberation research would be to study in greater detail how *variations* in the prevalence of different deliberative qualities increase or decrease different deliberative outcomes, such as learning and legitimacy perceptions. I will turn to this point in more detail below when discussing avenues for future research. Yet, overall, this dissertation showed that politicians do not constantly turn to the use of uncivil, ill-justified statements but regularly discuss politics with each other in civil and well-justified ways. Hence, it can be concluded from this dissertation that political debates in the media have the potential to contribute to a deliberative democracy because they are, at least to a certain extent, deliberative, rather than purely destructive.

Limitations and avenues for future research

In the following paragraphs, I will reflect on this dissertation's main limitations and simultaneously discuss avenues for future research.

First, this dissertation focused on the venue of political debates in the media, and particularly studied the **case of televised election debates**. As addressed in chapter 3 (research design), the theoretical arguments and findings of this dissertation are not limited to election debates but are expected to be generalizable to different debate venues or discussion

programs in the media where politicians discuss politics with each other (e.g. Wessler & Schultz, 2007). Notwithstanding, since our insights are so limited still with regards to this venue of mediated political debates, it would be fruitful for future research to also study the evolution, determinants and effects of uncivil, ill-justified statements in different discussion programs. Moreover, to develop a broader and deeper understanding of incivility and ill-justified arguments in the political realm, it is important to study and reflect on other mediated venues where citizens are likely to be exposed to uncivil, ill-justified statements too. As mentioned in conclusion 1, venues such as social media and the on and offline news environment also expose citizens (potentially much more so) to uncivil and ill-justified political discourse. These venues do not necessarily pit politicians against each other, but are also political information venues directed at the public that influence their attitudes and behavior. The findings of chapter 8 already showed that it is important to take the news environment into account when studying incivility effects. Extending this dissertation's research to these other contexts would contribute to the line of research that has already increasingly started to study incivility and justifications in social media discussions (e.g. Esau et al., 2020; e.g. Oz et al., 2018) and in news content (e.g. Wessler, 2008a; Wessler & Rinke, 2014).

I strongly encourage future research to continue down this road, because many questions still remain. For instance, there is only limited evidence on the evolution of incivility and justifications in those two other venues. To my knowledge, there are some studies that have examined and confirmed the increasing shortening of political statements in the news over time, a phenomenon which limits citizens' exposure to well-justified political arguments (e.g. Farnsworth & Lichter, 2007; Smith, 1989). But how did journalists' focus on incivility evolve over time? And what do trends of incivility and justifications look like on social media? Moreover, I invite future research to compare the evolution, determinants and effects of uncivil, ill-justified statements *across media platforms* (Esau et al., 2020). Sydnor (2018) showed that the same level of incivility is perceived as more uncivil depending on the platform where citizens are exposed to it. For instance, citizens perceive incivility in audio (e.g. radio) and video (e.g. TV) as more uncivil than in written texts (e.g. news websites), and similar incivility levels are perceived as more uncivil in tweets than in other text-based messages. As a consequence, depending on the platform citizens engage with, the effects of poor debate quality could be stronger or weaker (Druckman, 2003). Moreover, it would be interesting to study how different determinants play out across platforms. This dissertation showed, for instance, that male and populist as well as politicians in opposition use more incivility than female, mainstream and incumbent politicians. Is journalists' political coverage balanced in that regard, or does bias exist in their coverage by highlighting the incivility of female or incumbent politicians more?

Second, this dissertation focused on **two debate qualities**, civility and justifications, that defined the (deliberative) quality of politicians' communication, which means that other debate quality elements were not included (except for chapter 5, which was broader in focus). Other elements could enhance deliberative debate quality too. Two examples of such elements are the provision of *truthful* information or the *accessibility* of communication to all groups in society (e.g. use of personal stories or anecdotes; e.g. Black, 2008). To develop a broader and deeper understanding of the quality of political debate, future research could study the evolution, determinants and effects of such other elements as well. Some insights on truthful and accessible communication have been gathered already, but several questions remain. Research on fake news and misinformation (in contrast to truthful information) has been booming over the past years. We already learned that those elements can also harm trust in the news media and in politics (see e.g. Balmas, 2014; Ognyanova et al., 2020; Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). We know less, however, about patterns of fake news, particularly in the venue of mediated political debate. Most research on fake news is conducted in the social media venue, where it can spread extremely fast, or in the news. It would be interesting to see how the evolution towards a "post-truth era" influences the prevalence of false statements in mediated debates among politicians too. At this stage, research on the accessibility of political discourse to all groups in society is more in its infancy. The ideals of deliberative debate have evolved over time, with rational-discourse elements such as respect and justifications having been core elements from the start, and accessibility elements such as story-telling and anecdotes having been included more recently (see e.g. Bächtiger et al., 2007, 2018 for discussion). This evolution happened as a response to criticisms that the rational-discourse elements exclude marginalized groups in society from participating in political debate (Young, 2000; see chapter 2). Although more limited, research on discourse accessibility has been increasing (see e.g. Maia et al., 2020; Muradova et al., 2020). I encourage future research to continue along this path and to specifically study the evolution (see also chapter 5), determinants and effects of accessible communication forms in debates in the media.

Third, this dissertation showed that it is important to investigate the evolution, determinants and effects of incivility and justification in general. It is possible that there is more nuance to add to the conclusions drawn in this dissertation once we start to dig deeper into different *types* of incivility or *types* of justifications. Incivility can be expressed in different ways and some types of incivility, such as name-calling or racial slurs, are (perceived as) more uncivil than other forms of incivility, such as making fun of someone (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011; Stryker et al., 2016). As a next step, future research could study whether the types of incivility that are more extreme show a different evolution than less extreme types (e.g. did the most

extreme forms increase over time while the less severe forms did not?); whether and, if so, which determinants lead to more extreme incivility; and how different types of incivility influence citizens' attitudes, such as political trust. The same goes for justifications. Some scholars draw a distinction between individualistic or communitarian justifications (McGraw et al., 1993; see also Steenbergen et al., 2003), or between pragmatic, ethical-political and moral justifications (Wendler, 2014; see also McGraw, 1991). Moreover, and related to the previous point on truthfulness, one could also study the epistemic quality of justifications. Future research could thus also gather more insights into the patterns, determinants and effects of different types and forms of justification.

Fourth, political trust and news credibility are two important outcomes for the well-functioning of democracy (see chapter 2) that were studied in this dissertation, but there are also other important **outcomes** that could be influenced by uncivil, ill-justified discourse. Potentially, there are negative *and* positive effects for democracy. There are several fruitful paths for future research, and I will specify some of them. On the negative side, the outcome of trust studied in this dissertation is one type of legitimacy perception, which focuses on the legitimacy of the *outlet* that communicates or distributes political information in certain ways (e.g. politicians or news media). But what about the perceived legitimacy of the *substance*, i.e. the policy proposals and decisions themselves? First indications show that the perceived legitimacy of policy decisions decreases when they are not justified well to the public (e.g. Esaiasson et al., 2017). Studies that examine how the perceived legitimacy of positions and decisions is influenced when politicians communicate them in uncivil ways are virtually non-existent. Gathering more evidence on these relationships is important as a democracy thrives best when the perceived legitimacy of political decisions is high, especially among the "losers" of a decision (i.e. those who disagree; Anderson et al., 2005). Another outcome that future research could study is polarization. High levels of polarization in society are often linked to non-deliberative political exchanges, among politicians, citizens, and in the media (Dryzek et al., 2019). Some first insights confirm the harmful effect of incivility on affective polarization (Druckman et al., 2019; Skytte, 2020), but the empirical link with justifications is virtually absent. Moreover, the pressing question remains to what degree high polarization levels in society are the *consequence* or the *cause* of uncivil, ill-justified discourse.

Aside from all the concerns and (potential) negative effects that formed the starting point of this dissertation, we should not be blinded with regard to potential positive effects on some democratic outcomes. As outlined earlier, criticism was voiced against deliberative democratic theory to specify rational-discourse ideals that may exclude some groups in society from engaging with and comprehending politics (e.g. Sanders, 1997; Young, 2000).

Some empirical studies have already shown that incivility mobilizes people more and fosters more engagement with politics than civility (e.g. Brooks & Geer, 2007), but findings are mixed (e.g. Otto et al., 2020). Future studies could further explore these relationships and study, for instance, which groups in society become more interested in and engaged with politics and comprehend it better when political subjects are discussed in more simplistic and less civilized elitist ways. In short, I encourage future research to take a broader perspective when studying politicians' use of uncivil, ill-justified communication and take into account potential positive consequences too.

Fifth, this dissertation revealed that politicians' use of uncivil, ill-justified statements is context-specific (conclusion 2) and that its effects too are conditional (see conclusion 3). This **conditionality** merits more scholarly attention. Although there are several paths one can take, I will focus on three in particular. First, *partisan identity* plays an important role in public opinion and attitude formation (Druckman et al., 2013). Citizens have strong tendencies to be loyal to their "own" party and to distinguish their party positively from the other parties (Leeper & Slothuus, 2014). Therefore, partisan citizens may accept incivility and ill-justified arguments more from politicians who belong to their own party than from "out-party" politicians (Skytte, 2019). The main effects of uncivil, ill-justified statements on citizens' trust attitudes shown in this dissertation may therefore be moderated by partisanship. Hence, I encourage future experimental research to gather more insights on this potential factor and to include partisanship as a moderator when studying the effects of politicians' use of uncivil, ill-justified statements. Second, future research could consider the conditional impact of the *topic under discussion*. Chapter 6 already indicated that incivility tends to be higher when moral (in contrast to non-moral) issues are discussed (see also Steiner et al., 2004 on polarizing topics). Which topics drive this more specifically? How do highly contentious issues, such as migration, affect incivility use? And how does the complexity of the issues discussed influence the use of justifications? Do politicians justify their positions better when complex issues are discussed or do they refrain from this and turn to simplistic one-liners once topics become hard to explain? The debate topic may also condition the effects of uncivil, ill-justified statements (de Fine Licht, 2014b). In the experiments carried out in this dissertation, the topic that politicians discussed was safety policy. Do results differ when other, for instance more controversial or complex issues are discussed, and, if so, how? Lastly, *timing* may play a role in the sense that politicians may make more use of tactics such as incivility and simplistic messages when discussing *policy proposals or ideas* than when discussing *decisions that were already taken*. After all, before decisions are taken, politicians still need to persuade voters. After decision-making, they particularly need to make sure that citizens perceive the decisions as legitimate, which may require more civility and justification (de Fine Licht & Esaiasson, 2018). Therefore, future

research could study the conditional impact of politicians' discussion of proposals and ideas versus decisions that were already taken.

Sixth, a novel overarching **causal mechanism** to explain the effects of incivility and ill-justified arguments on trust attitudes was advanced in this dissertation, but this mechanism was not directly tested. Building on past theories and studies, I argued that citizens' exposure to uncivil, ill-justified discussion violates their normative expectations and therefore decreases their trust in politics and in the news. Additional research is needed to directly test this causal mechanism (see e.g. Mutz & Reeves, 2005). Experimental research could, for instance, include measurements of citizens' adherence to discussion norms, and study to what degree violations of these norms influence their trust attitudes. This type of research could also examine whether there are different degrees in adherence to these normative expectations by different types of people. I am currently designing a survey together with Sofie Marien and Emma Turkenburg to analyze to what degree citizens share the expectation that deliberative communicative ideals should be followed by politicians, and whether citizens who score high on attitudes such as affective polarization and populist attitudes share these expectations to a lesser extent than citizens scoring low on these attitudes (which responds to limitation four on conditionality as well). As a next step, it will be studied whether trust attitudes decrease most among those type of people that adhere most to discussion norms.

Seventh, the experiments in this dissertation exposed participants briefly to short written and audio excerpts of election debates and news coverage that were created based on input from the content analyses and real-world news coverage. Future research could increase ecological validity further, where participants watch, for instance, an entire political discussion program in their home environment that is manipulated with regard to its level of incivility and justifications, and receive manipulated post-debate news updates afterwards. This could be done by creating videos and news articles that are based on real-world examples that include incivility, slogans and one-liners, and by creating videos and news articles that reflect the deliberative ideal to compare them to (similarly to what was done in this dissertation but then more extensively). Participants' attitudes could both be measured using real-time tracking and some days after. Creating these more extensive experiments is more challenging due to various practical considerations but would allow to gather more evidence in more ecologically valid settings and would give additional insights into (the strength of) the effects of uncivil, ill-justified political discourse.

Finally, I want to emphasize one more **general avenue for future research in the field of deliberative democracy**. I have alluded to this path already when discussing conclusion 5,

which concluded that political debates in the media can contribute to a more deliberative debate sphere and have value in the wider deliberative system. Today, there is no clarity yet in the field of deliberative democracy about how *different deliberative goals* (e.g. epistemic, ethical, or legitimacy goals) are precisely influenced by *different degrees* in the presence of *different deliberative qualities* (e.g. civility, justification, equal participation), at *different sites* of deliberation (e.g. mediated debates, parliamentary debates, citizen assemblies) (Bächtiger & Lindell, 2016; Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019). Overall, this dissertation found that a substantial number of utterances in the debates are civil and well-justified, which drives the conclusion that these debates have important value in a deliberative democracy and could for instance increase the epistemic quality of political opinions in society. This does not mean that the debates are the ideal deliberative cases: a certain degree of politicians' utterances in the debates is uncivil and ill-justified. Today, the question remains how different degrees of qualities like civility and justification in mediated debates impact different deliberative goals more concretely. For instance, what minimum levels of civility are to be present in debates to ensure that epistemic and legitimacy goals are not harmed? Moreover, and relatedly, political debates in the media are not the ultimate venue for finding high-quality deliberation and there are other venues where higher-quality deliberation takes place. This does not necessarily pose a problem in a deliberative system: we cannot and should not expect that all venues and sites of deliberation contribute in the same way to different deliberative goals (Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012). The question remains, however, how we should interpret different results more concretely across different sites of deliberation. In sum, the field of deliberative democracy would benefit greatly from "novel theoretical thinking of what high and low quality deliberation means in the context of various sites of a democratic system" (Bächtiger & Lindell, 2016). One option could be to theorize about, but also empirically study, different "threshold values", or ranges of values, and how they impact different goals of deliberation in different venues. While this is not a straightforward or easy task, it could help the field to draw more concrete conclusions about the deliberative value of different deliberative qualities at different sites.

To conclude, although recently gaining more prominence, the role of the mass media in general, and the role of political debates in the media more specifically, remains largely underexplored in the deliberative democracy scholarship (Maia, 2018; Rinke, 2016). Yet theoretically and empirically, it is a fruitful avenue for future research to continue along this path (see e.g. Coleman, 2020; Davidson et al., 2017; Häussler, 2018; Rinke et al., 2013; Turkenburg, in press; van der Wurff et al., 2016; Wessler & Rinke, 2014).

Societal contribution

This last part of my dissertation is dedicated to a discussion of its societal contribution. In particular, it addresses the following question: What can we learn from this dissertation to create a more deliberative, yet realistic, mediated debate sphere in practice? One of the main criticisms towards deliberative democratic theory is that it sets unattainable, unrealistic goals to achieve, particularly in non-ideal contexts like political debates organized in the media (Shapiro, 1999; Walzer, 1999). The media and politicians alike are often triggered to turn to and strategically use incivility, soundbites and one-liners with the aim of grabbing and holding viewers' and voters' attention. Yet, importantly, I want to note again that this dissertation showed that it is not completely unrealistic to expect some level of deliberative (in this case: civil and well-justified) communication in political debates organized in the media (see also Wessler & Schultz, 2007). Even in the highly competitive venue of televised election debates, politicians do provide justifications for their standpoints at least to a certain extent, and are often civil. In short, it is not all doom and gloom. This does not mean, however, that these debates live up fully to their deliberative potential. Politicians do not always justify their positions well and there is a certain degree of incivility (and in some debates this is much more prevalent than in others). This could still harm democratic outcomes, such as trust in politicians, as this dissertation has shown.

Hence, I propose a set of guidelines in the following paragraphs to create a more deliberative debate sphere among politicians in the media, but at the same time I aim to strike a balance between reaching this normative deliberative ideal, and what is realistic in practice. In particular, I will contrast the normative deliberative goal of civil and well-justified debate to one key goal of both politicians and the media, namely attracting citizens' attention – a goal which could lead to a "violation" of the normative deliberative ideals.[4] I discuss the two key players that could contribute to achieving that balance, i.e. *politicians* and the *media*, and will also discuss how involving *the wider public* can contribute to it. In short, with the proposed guidelines, a societal contribution is made to foster the creation of a *more* deliberative debate sphere in the media, without imposing unrealistic goals and

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[4] I contrast the normative ideal to the goal of attracting attention because attracting citizens' attention is a *key goal* of *both politicians and the media*. There are also other goals that may violate the normative ideal of civil, well-justified debate, such as politicians' goal of winning elections, leading them to use different strategies that may also violate deliberative ideals. I do not focus on this latter goal because there is limited evidence that undeliberative forms of communication actually work to persuade citizens and win elections (see e.g. chapter 7). Besides that, I want to note and recognize that the media, particularly the public service broadcasters, do share the deliberative goal of politically informing people, and that they can contribute to a more deliberative sphere. Yet, they also want to attract as many viewers as possible which often favors the coverage of uncivil, simplistic messages.

asking *too* much. The proposed guidelines are based on the theoretical and empirical insights gathered in this dissertation, and are further illustrated with some real-world examples.

Politicians

First, I will discuss how politicians can contribute to a more deliberative debate sphere when participating in debates organized in the media, without losing sight of ways to reach the public and get their message across.

Give criticism and challenge your opponent, but do so respectfully: Disagreement and conflict are key and essential in any democracy. This should also be reflected in debates in the media where politicians discuss politics side by side and aim to stand out and distinguish themselves from the other candidates. Debate viewers should have a clear view of the different standpoints and positions of the different candidates. However, giving criticism and challenging opponents does not equal incivility. One can express criticism and engage in serious debate about different viewpoints without humiliating one's opponents or ridiculing their views. The media are inclined to cover conflict and disagreement in general (it does not necessarily need to be *uncivil* conflict), so it is possible to attract attention without severely harming politics and democracy, or compromising the substance of the debate. Although civil conflict may attract less media attention than uncivil conflict, one has to weigh the pros (attracting slightly more attention) against the cons of engaging in conflict in civil or uncivil ways (violating norms, causing harm to politics and democracy, etc.). Moreover, the use of explicitly uncivil language to get a message across, like insults or name-calling, does not contribute to the substance of one's plea, so citizens will not learn anything more by using this type of uncivil language. In effect, such uncivil statements are "superfluous" (Brooks & Geer, 2007, p. 5) or "unnecessary", meaning that they "do not add anything of substance to the discussion" (Coe et al., 2014, p. 660). Explicitly uncivil statements are moreover the least accepted by citizens, especially when they are directed at the *character* of one's opponents (Fridkin & Kenney, 2011; Stryker et al., 2016). Hence, these uncivil statements and personal attacks could do more harm than good, both for democracy and for the politician speaking.

When using slogans and one-liners, explain them immediately: Slogans and one-liners are powerful tools to get messages across and to attract further media attention. They stick to one's mind and are ready-made statements for journalists to use in their political news coverage. Therefore, they are effective in attracting journalists', viewers' and voters' attention. Yet they do not provide extensive and proper explanation or justification of one's standpoints. A one-liner, slogan, or soundbite can include a sort of compressed argument

189

(e.g. *"Build a wall and crime will fall!"*[5]), but the message remains extremely simplistic. As soon as politicians include proper reasoning in the statement, it would no longer be a one-liner. Debating with such ill-justified statements can be dangerous. It makes the discussion simplistic and could convince people of a standpoint without properly informing them about it. Therefore, when participating in debates organized in the media, politicians should immediately provide further explanation for such simplistic statements, meaning that they should use well-justified arguments to substantiate their position. This provides a middle ground: politicians can grab attention but it is not at the cost of providing well-justified arguments in the debates. Citizens are thus more likely to keep watching the debate because their attention is triggered, and at the same time they are also exposed to well-justified arguments in the debates. Moreover, it gives the news media, which often cover these debates afterwards, the ammunition to inform the public well. Although they will most likely cover the debates' slogans or soundbites in their news headlines, they are at least given the opportunity to inform the public further in the remainder of their news articles or broadcasts. Even if they do not take that opportunity, which would be another point of discussion, many of today's media debates are uploaded on the broadcasters' websites, allowing citizens to look for more information there.

Remember that uncivil, ill-justified statements may not persuade citizens: Chapter 7 revealed that, although citizens may be more attracted and pay more attention to debates that include uncivil and ill-justified statements, it does not necessarily mean that they are also more convinced by them (McGuire, 1989). Quite the contrary, these statements tend to persuade citizens less, meaning that a backlash effect occurs. It is thus entirely possible to use civil and well-justified arguments and simultaneously stay committed to your ideological agenda and convince voters of your standpoints (Boatright, 2019).

"When others go low, go high": The previous guideline may not apply for everyone, however, as chapter 7 also revealed that some voters are slightly more persuaded by positions expressed in uncivil, ill-justified ways, which may even benefit the success of some (populist) politicians who already make more use of this type of communication (see conclusion 4). In order to prevent debate norms from fading, I recommend politicians to make each other aware in the debates that this debate style violates norms for proper political discussion, and to serve as an example for citizens by committing themselves *and* stimulating other politicians in the debates to justify their positions and to be civil (see also Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Politicians can explicitly ask their opponents to be respectful if necessary and to explain their positions further when they are not well clarified (I noticed

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[5] Donald J. Trump (*@realDonaldTrump*), January 23, 2019

while coding the election debates that some politicians sometimes do that already). This idea has already been recommended and succinctly put (with a one-liner) by former First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama:

"When they go low, we go high"

- Michelle Obama
Democratic National Convention, July 25, 2016

Although it may be tempting for politicians to disregard this advice and fight back with the same tactics, especially when being attacked themselves (see chapter 4 and 6), it may not be the best strategy, neither for democracy nor for one's own success. Hence, I recommend politicians not to be tempted to use these tactics as they generally will not even help to persuade the public. Even more, using and stimulating civility and well-justified arguments in political debates (and beyond) can even work as a strategy to distinguish oneself from other politicians and to provide a *clear alternative* to those politicians who make more use of uncivil, ill-justified communication. When politicians explicitly distinguish themselves in this way, it can even attract considerable attention too. For instance, during the 2019 electoral campaign in Belgium, the leader of the liberal party Open VLD, Gwendolyn Rutten, wrote an open letter that explicitly asked the other party leaders not to engage in mudslinging because this would only feed the "anti-politics".[6] This letter received substantial media attention during the campaign. The Belgian Christian democrats (CD&V) also often work with the concepts of respect and reason in their campaign slogans (e.g. "Choose respect, decency and common sense"), with the aim of providing a clear alternative to politics that is based on disrespect and lack of reason.[7] In sum, when politicians *explicitly* adopt and stimulate the use of a civil and well-justified debate style, they cannot only contribute to a more deliberative debate sphere, but also provide a counterweight and a clear alternative, *and* attract attention.

The media
Evidently, it would be impossible for politicians to follow the above-mentioned guidelines if the media would not allow civil, well-justified debate to take place in the first place. Hence, the media have an extremely important role to play in the organization of civil, well-justified debates. Again, I will discuss how the media can contribute to a more deliberative debate

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[6] https://www2.openvld.be/open-brief-van-gwendolyn-aan-haar-collega-partijvoorzitters/
[7] https://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/respect-fatsoen-en-gezond-verstand-inzet-van-de-verkiezingen-voor-wouter-beke/article-normal-1197147.html?cookie_check=1617549502;   https://www.cdenv.be/wie-zijn-we/doe-mee/voorrang-van-respect/

sphere, without losing sight of ways to grab and hold the public's attention. Grabbing and holding citizens' attention is moreover not only important from a media perspective, it is also a necessary first step for citizens to learn something from watching or listening to the debates.

Create an exciting format that simultaneously stimulates civility and well-justified argument: This dissertation showed that many of the differences in debate quality that occur within and between debates are explained by determinants that are situated at the debate level (meso) and at the politicians' individual level (micro). Several of these results can therefore be taken into account when organizing the debates, especially when designing their format. I argue, based on this dissertation's results, that it is possible to create an exciting format while simultaneously fostering a more deliberative debate sphere. There are several options to achieve this.

First, the number of politicians who are engaged in a discussion at the same moment could be kept within certain limits. We see that the more politicians are simultaneously debating with each other, the higher the amount of incivility in the debate. This is also likely to cause more interruptions, which prevents politicians from justifying their positions well. Especially in multi-party systems, it is important to organize inclusive debates with politicians from different sides to ensure that citizens are exposed to the different options. Yet this does not mean that they should all take part in the discussion at the same time. Groups of politicians could be created (as we often see already in election debates) that have a maximum of two, three or four politicians engaged in debate. If a region or country has several populist politicians, groups could be created that include several mainstream politicians as well in order to overrule populists' greater use of incivility and ill-justified arguments (Valentim & Widmann, 2021). Including more than one or two non-populist politicians in these groups with a populist politician could also prove useful because, in interaction, non-populist politicians tend to copy populists' debate style (chapter 4; Bossetta, 2017).

Second, we see that those debate moments where politicians are given some time and space to set out their vision before entering the discussion (as seen, for instance, in some election debates that open with a form of opening statements) generally score high on deliberative debate quality. These moments should be included and treasured in the debates because they allow politicians to clarify their viewpoints right before the start of the discussion with the other debate participants. This could be done, for instance, by starting each round of discussion about a certain topic with some time (e.g. one or two minutes) for each individual politician to explain his/her viewpoint and opening the discussion right after.

Third, some debate topics will foster higher debate quality than others (see e.g. chapter 6; Steiner et al., 2004). Although further research on the aspect of debate topic is advisable, current insights suggest that it could be fruitful to organize the debate in such a way that there is some alternation in the discussion of moral or highly controversial issues with other important or salient but less polarizing or non-moral issues (evidently, this is only the case if the debate has the aim of discussing several topics, such as an election debate). This balance could not only be helpful purely because of the fact that some topics stimulate higher debate quality, but also because it could limit the *action-reaction effect* of incivility that was shown in chapter 6 of this dissertation (where one uncivil statement spurs additional uncivil statements).

Stimulate civil, well-justified discussion more: The *debate moderators* have an important role to play in leading the debates and in stimulating a civil and well-justified discussion. The importance of this role was, for instance, recently exemplified by the abundancy of news headlines and (online) commentary by citizens, journalists and pundits alike after the 2020 U.S. Presidential election debates. Whereas the commentary strongly criticized the moderating style of Chris Wallace, moderator of the first presidential debate, it highly praised the moderating style of Kristen Welker, moderator of the final presidential debate.[8] In contrast to Chris Wallace, Kristen Welker was widely praised for her ability to keep the candidates in line, providing them with enough response time to respond to each other, and keeping the debate respectful without too many interruptions from the candidates (a newly installed rule of muting the candidates' microphones at certain times in the debate also helped; see below). Again, this shows that debates that are civil and well-justified are praised by the public, and can also attract substantial amounts of attention (this is also potentially so because the U.S. public was not really used to this, giving it a "surprise" effect). In general, I strongly encourage the debate moderators to take up such a role and stimulate civil and well-justified discussion more. For instance, when politicians use slogans in the debates, moderators could prompt the candidates more to explain their position further. When conducting the content analyses for this dissertation, it became apparent that the debates often include a section where politicians could only answer the moderators' questions with a "yes or no" or by answering the question with "one sentence" and where the moderators interrupted politicians in case they tried to explain their position further. This practice should be avoided as it often creates polarizing moments where politicians do not get the chance to add nuance to their answers. Similarly, debate moderators could

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[8] See e.g. https://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2020-54655482;
https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/23/arts/television/debate-kristen-welker.html

stimulate politicians more to be respectful towards each other, and to point out to the candidates when they are being disrespectful.

Create explicit awareness about the norm of civil, well-justified discussion: During the debate, more explicit awareness could be created among the politicians who participate in the debate, and among the wider public, about the norms of civility and justification when discussing politics. Moderators could do so, for instance, by stating at the start of the debate that the debate participants should follow certain rules of conduct, such as being civil towards each other and explaining positions well, and by stating why this is important (e.g. by stating that there are different opinions in society and that the public should get the chance to listen to them carefully in order to form well-thought-out opinions). Related to the previous guideline, debate moderators could also reiterate these expectations when politicians do not live up to the norm during the debate. This is something that we already increasingly see on online discussion platforms, one such example being the "code of conduct comments" by different newspapers and broadcasters in their Instagram or Facebook comment sections. In these comments, the media channel in question will write a general comment stating that the discussion in the comment section should be respectful, or address a targeted comment to disrespectful citizens more directly. This practice could be used more often in mediated debates as well. Another example that raised considerable awareness about norm-violating behavior in mediated debates (and stimulated more civil discussion; previous guideline) was the instalment of the "mute button" in the 2020 final U.S. Presidential election debate, where each candidate's microphone was muted during their opening statements that preceded each round of discussion.[9] Installing this mute button was a response to the first 2020 presidential debate that was strongly characterized by incivility and interruptions. Installing this clearly signaled to politicians and to the wider public that constantly interrupting each other violates discussion norms. Although it should not be standard at all times in each debate in order not to silence politicians, it could be considered in those cases where too many interruptions prevent the public from following the debate or understanding what the politicians are saying.

To conclude this media section, Juárez-Gámiz et al. (2020) show in their comprehensive book on televised election debates that several countries have installed an independent debate commission to organize a country's election debates. Such debate commissions could play an important role in helping the media to set out and comply with guidelines for the organization of the election debates.

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[9] e.g. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/19/us/politics/trump-biden-muted-debate.html

The wider public

Ideally, the audience of a mediated political debate is attentive to and aware of violations of deliberative discussion norms to ensure that they are not just attracted, guided and persuaded by strategic rhetorical tools used in the debates that distracts them from the substance of the discussion. Giving the debate audience guidelines – as I did for politicians and the media – for watching, listening to or engaging with the debates would therefore be a logical approach. Such a "guide for debate viewers" has also been proposed earlier by Diana Carlin (2000). Carlin's guide is broader in focus in the sense that it is not just focused on creating awareness of discussion norm violations, but aims to improve the broader debate experience. If citizens follow Carlin's guidelines[10], they would, however, also be well-equipped to recognize norm violations and distinguish better between deliberative discussion or empty rhetoric (especially when following the guidelines in bold in footnote 10). Although I believe that Carlin's guidelines are, if followed, certainly useful and promising, they may raise extremely high and unrealistic expectations for citizens and may impose too much of a burden on citizens who are tuning in to the debates for information or just for entertainment. Hence, rather than formulating guidelines for citizens, I will take a step back and encourage and emphasize the importance of investing more in initiatives taken in the wider public sphere to educate citizens to be attentive to and be aware of discussion norm violations. I will particularly focus on two such initiatives, namely deliberative citizen initiatives and civic education initiatives. These initiatives educate citizens and raise awareness about proper discussion norms. They will not only decrease the effort required of citizens to follow debate viewing guidelines like the ones proposed by Diana Carlin, but will also increase the chances that citizens themselves engage in respectful and well-justified discussion, for instance with friends, family, acquaintances or colleagues (Shaffer, 2019).

A first promising avenue are deliberative citizen initiatives that are increasingly organized and installed all over the world (OECD, 2020). I have already referred to these initiatives

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[10] See Carlin, 2000, pp. 170-175, who specifies the following guidelines: 1. Prepare ahead of the debate; 2. Watch with others and discuss what you saw and heard; 3. Take notes; 4. Do not determine a winner or a loser; 5. Know the duties and limitations of the office for which a person is campaigning; 6. Set aside partisan views; 7. Identify the major issues candidates outline in opening and/or closing statements; **8.** Identify the candidates' debate strategies (e.g. "Does the candidate simply attack opposing views or does the candidate offer constructive solutions that are shown to be superior to those of opponents?"); 9. Identify how the candidates portray themselves; **10.** Consider the limitations of the questions asked in the debates; 11. Be aware of technical limitations of televised debates; **12.** Understand the limitations of the format (e.g. "Formats that limit the length of responses and allow for little rebuttal time do not provide candidates with an opportunity to get beyond slogans and superficial explanations."); 13. Recognize the existence of multiple agendas in a debate; 14. Watch more than one debate; 15. Try to learn more from the news media or candidate information sources after the debate.

earlier in this dissertation when discussing likely versus unlikely places to find high-quality deliberation. In such deliberative citizen initiatives (e.g. mini-publics, citizen juries), randomly selected citizens come together to discuss political issues in small groups and, based on these discussions, formulate considered recommendations to public authorities. Before the participants enter the small-group discussions, they generally receive *guidelines on deliberative discussion norms* (or sometimes discuss and compose such rules themselves), and the discussions are generally *moderated or facilitated* by an intermediary person to ensure that the participants are open to other views, provide reasons for their own views, and engage in respectful discussion (Landwehr, 2014). In other words, citizens are given first-hand experience to discuss politics in deliberative ways. Creating familiarity with such discussion norms is a "first critical step" to encourage citizens to discuss politics deliberatively with other people in other situations as well, and to increase awareness of norm violations (Shaffer, 2019, p. 197).

This familiarity with discussion norms can also be taught at an earlier age already, through civic education, which is becoming an increasingly important and established part of the school curriculum (European Commission, 2012). Civic education in schools aims to stimulate the development of democratic attitudes, such as political tolerance, and competent democratic citizenship (Dewey, 1916; Youniss, 2011). One important aspect of civic education is to create the skill to deliberatively discuss different (controversial) topics with people with whom we may disagree (Hess, 2009; Maurissen et al., 2018; Parker, 2003). Hence, already at an early age, citizens can learn at school how to provide reasons for their standpoints, listen carefully to the standpoints of others, and engage in civil discussion with each other. In sum, encouraging and investing more in civic education programs and in teachers' capacity and skills to stimulate civil, well-justified discussions in the classroom is another promising avenue to increase citizens' capability to engage in civil, well-justified discussion, and to be critical towards violations of discussion norms, for instance in political debates organized in the media.

To conclude, there are several routes different stakeholders in society can take to ensure that the discussion of politics in (and outside) the media can live up more fully to the deliberative ideals of civility and justification. This way, destructive consequences of low debate quality can be diminished, and the realization of deliberative goals can be enhanced.

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Appendices

Appendix chapter 4

Table of contents

Appendix 4.1: Party system information

Table A4.1: Party system of countries studied (2009-2015)

Country	Election year	Parties in Parliament	Number of seats in parliament	Parties in government
Netherlands	2010	VVD (Partij voor Vrijheid en Democratie)	31/150	VVD
				PvdA
		PvdA (Partij van de Arbeid)	30/150	(PVV support)
		PVV (Partij voor de Vrijheid)	24/150	
		CDA (Christen-Democratisch Appèl)	21/150	
		SP (Socialistische Partij)	15/150	
		D66 (Democraten 66)	10/150	
		GL (GroenLinks)	10/150	
		CU (ChristenUnie)	5/150	
		SGP (Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij)	2/150	
		PvdD (Partij voor de Dieren)	2/150	
	2012	VVD	41/150	VVD
		PvdA	38/150	PvdA
		PVV	15/150	
		SP	15/150	
		CDA	13/150	
		D66	12/150	
		CU	5/150	
		GL	4/150	
		SGP	3/150	
		PvdD	2/150	
		50PLUS	2/150	
Germany	2009	CDU/CSU	194 + 45 / 622	CDU/CSU
		SPD	146/622	FDP
		FDP	93/622	
		Die Linke	76/622	
		Bündnis 90/Die Grünen	68/622	
	2013	Union (CDU/CSU)	311/631	Union
		SPD	193/631	SPD
		Die Linke	64/631	
		Bündnis 90/Die Grünen	63/631	

United Kingdom	2010	Conservative Party	306/650	Conservative Party
		Labour Party	258/650	Liberal Democrats
		Liberal Democrats	57/650	
		Democratic Unionist Party	8/650	
		Scottish National Party	6/650	
		Sinn Féin	5/650	
		Plaid Cymru	3/650	
		Social Democratic and Labour Party	3/650	
		Green Party	1/650	
		Alliance Party	1/650	
		Independent	1/650	
		Speaker	1/650	
	2015	Conservative Party	331/650	Conservative Party
		Labour Party	232/650	
		Scottish National Party	56/650	
		Liberal Democrats	8/650	
		Democratic Unionist Party	8/650	
		Sinn Féin	4/650	
		Plaid Cymru	3/650	
		Social Democratic and Labour Party	3/650	
		Ulster Unionist Party	2/650	
		United Kingdom Independence Party	1/650	
		Green Party	1/650	
		Others	1/650	

Appendix 4.2: Additional information on the analyzed televised election debates

Table A4.2.1: Information on the analyzed debates

Country	Inaugural Debate	Broadcast Date	Channel	No. Participants	Length (min.)	Viewing figures
Germany	1972 (W. Germany)	13/09/2009	ARD, ZDF, RTL, Sat.1, Phoenix	2	92	14.26
		14/09/2009	ARD	3	75	4.19
		1/09/2013	ARD, ZDF, RTL, ProSieben, Phoenix	2	93	17.70
		2/09/2013	ARD	3	60	4.05
The Netherlands	1963	8/06/2010	NPO1	3	55	1.02
		8/06/2010	NPO1	8	100	2.69
		26/08/2012	RTL 4	4	104	1.67
		4/09/2012	RTL 4	8	120	1.39
United Kingdom	2010	22/04/2010	SKY	3	90	4.6
		29/04/2010	BBC1	3	90	8.4
		2/04/2015	ITV	7	120	7.4
		16/04/2015	BBC1	5	90	8.8

Table A4.2.2: Information on topics discussed in the debates

Country	Debate year	Topics
Germany	2009	1) Evaluation last coalition period, 2) financial crisis, 3) social justice ,4) minimum wage, 5) future of automotive industry, 6) health care, 7) military operations in Afghanistan
	2009	1) Crime, 2) taxes, 3) employment, 4) income inequality, 5) pensions, 6) education, 7) coalitions
	2013	1) Fiscal politics, 2) stability support program (ESM) for Greece, 3) employment policy, 4) pensions, 5) health care, 6) child care, 7) international espionage (NSA scandal), 8) military operation in Syria, 9) coalitions
	2013	1) Social inequalities, 2) minimum wage, 3) pensions, 4) EU fiscal policy, 5) taxes/budget, 6) coalitions
The Netherlands	2010	1) Legalizing soft drugs, 2) agriculture and food production, 3) safety, 4) economic crisis
	2010	1) The future of the Netherlands, 2) austerity, 3) coalitions, 4) leadership
	2012	1) Europe, 2) healthcare, 3) austerity, 4) leadership
	2012	1) Europe, 2) health care, 3) pensions, 4) economic crisis

(Table A4.2.2 continued)

United Kingdom	2010	1) International affairs (Europe, involvement in conflict areas, climate change, visit of the Pope), 2) faith in the political system, 3) pensions, 4) coalitions, 5) migration
	2010	1) Economy (spending cuts, taxes, bonuses for bankers, manufacturing industry), 2) immigration, 3) housing, 4) opportunities for students
	2015	1) Economic deficit, 2) National Health Service, 3) immigration, 4) future of the young generation
	2015	1) Government spending & debt, 2) housing crisis, 3) defence spending, 4) immigration, 5) coalitions

Table A4.2.3: Participants in the debates

Country	Debate year	Participants + political party	Number of populist candidates
Germany	2009	A. Merkel (CDU), F. Steinmeier (SPD)	0
	2009	O. Lafontaine (*Die Linke*), J. Trittin (*Bündnis90/Die Grünen*), G. Westerwelle (FDP)	1 (left)
	2013	A. Merkel (CDU), P. Steinbrück (SPD)	0
	2013	R. Brüderle (FDP), G. Gysi (*Die Linke*), J. Trittin (*Bündnis90/Die Grünen*),	1 (left)
The Netherlands	2010	M. Thieme (*Partij voor de Dieren*), K. van der Staaij (SGP), R. Verdonk (*Trots op Nederland*)	1 (right)
	2010	J. P. Balkenende (CDA), J. Cohen (PvdA), F. Halsema (*GroenLinks*), A. Pechtold (D66), E. Roemer (SP), A. Rouvoet (CU), M. Rutte (VVD), G. Wilders (PVV)	2 (1 left, 1 right)
	2012	E. Roemer (SP), M. Rutte (VVD), D. Samsom (PvdA), G. Wilders (PVV)	2 (1 left, 1 right)
	2012	S. H. Buma (CDA), A. Pechtold (D66), E. Roemer (SP), M. Rutte (VVD), D. Samsom (PvdA), J. Sap (*GroenLinks*), A. Slob (CU), G. Wilders (PVV)	2 (1 left, 1 right)
United Kingdom	2010	G. Brown (Labour), D. Cameron (Conservatives), N. Clegg (Liberal Democrats)	0
	2010	G. Brown (Labour), D. Cameron (Conservatives), N. Clegg (Liberal Democrats)	0
	2015	N. Bennett (Green Party of England and Wales), D. Cameron (Conservatives), N. Clegg (Liberal Democrats), N. Farage (UKIP), E. Miliband (Labour), N. Sturgeon (SNP), L. Wood (Plaid Cymru)	1 (right)
	2015	N. Bennett (Green Party of England and Wales), N. Farage (UKIP), E. Miliband (Labour), N. Sturgeon (SNP), L. Wood (Plaid Cymru)	1 (right)

Table A4.2.4: Format of the debates

Country	Debate year	Format
Germany	2009	First opening statements, followed by duel with the two candidates (answer the same questions) + open debate in between questions. Debate ends with closing statements.
	2009	Debate with all 3 politicians, roughly answering the same questions.
	2013	First opening statements, followed by duel with the two candidates (answer the same questions) + open debate in between questions. Debate ends with closing statements.
	2013	Debate with all 3 politicians, roughly answering the same questions.
The Netherlands	2010	First 3 duels, followed by a debate with all 3 politicians.
	2010	4 duels, 2 debates with four politicians, 1 general debate with all 8 politicians.
	2012	Format organised per topic handled: first opening statements by each politician, followed by a duel, followed by a general round of discussion. Debate ends with closing statement by each politician.
	2012	Format organised per statement (4): 4 participants participate per statement. They first vote 'for', 'against', or 'neutral' & give an opening statement, followed by a debate with these 4 politicians, followed by the policy positions of the other 4 politicians who did not participate in the debate. There were short individual sessions in between where the moderator asks questions to one specific politician. Debate ends with closing statement of each politician.
United Kingdom	2010	First opening statements by each politician. Throughout the debate 8 audience questions are posed. Each participant first gets the time to respond individually to each audience question, afterwards the floor is open for debate with all 3 politicians. Debate ends with closing statement of each politician.
	2010	First opening statements by each politician. Throughout the debate 8 audience questions are posed. Each participant first gets the time to respond individually to each audience question, afterwards the floor is open for debate with all 3 politicians. Debate ends with closing statement of each politician.
	2015	First opening statements by each politician. Throughout the debate 4 audience questions are posed. Each participant first gets the time to respond individually to each audience question, afterwards the floor is open for debate with all 7 politicians. Debate ends with closing statement of each politician.
	2015	First opening statements by each politician. Throughout the debate 5 audience questions are posed. Each participant first gets the time to respond individually to each audience question, afterwards the floor is open for debate with all 5 politicians. Debate ends with closing statement of each politician.

Appendix 4.2.5: Case selection of debates

In the **Netherlands** four debates from the 2010 and 2012 election period were selected which together represent the **fragmented party system** of the Netherlands well. This includes for the 2010 campaign: a debate between the leaders of the 8 biggest parties and a debate between 3 smaller parties. For the 2012 campaign this contains a debate between the leaders of the 8 biggest parties and a debate between the 4 leaders of the biggest parties. The **presence of populist politicians** in Dutch politics is also well-represented in the selection of these four debates. In all debates populist politicians were present. Especially the right-wing populist party PVV knew great success already in 2010 and 2012. Its party leader Geert Wilders was present in three of the four debates. Rita Verdonk, party leader of the smaller right-wing populist party called "Trots Op Nederland" was present in one debate. Left-wing populist Emile Roemer from the Socialist Party was present in two out of four debates. In sum, by analyzing these debates which include many different parties, and several populist candidates, especially the popular populist right-wing, the Dutch political context is represented well in terms of both its party system and the populist presence.

In **Germany** four debates from the 2009 and 2013 election period were selected which together represent the **party system** well. In both the 2009 and 2013 campaign we selected the debate between the two leading candidates ("TV Duel") and the debate between the three smaller-party top candidates ("TV Dreikampf"). As such the debates between the candidates of the main parties are included (which have a long history in government), and the debates between the parties with less votes and less seats in parliament are included (i.e. FDP, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, Die Linke). These smaller parties include parties that have been in the government coalitions and parties that have not been part of the government coalition (i.e. FDP, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen have governed with CDU/CSU or SPD). The **presence of populist politicians** in German politics at the time of study is also well-represented in the selection of these four debates. During the analyzed time frame, no right-wing populist parties were present in the debates, representing what the party system looked like in 2009 and in 2013. AfD, now widely known as a far-right populist party in Germany, participated in the 2013 elections but was still very small (result below the electoral threshold). Die Linke is a left-wing populist party and participated in 2 debates in the sample. In sum, by analyzing these debates which include different parties, and populist candidates, the German political context is represented well in terms of both its party system and the populist presence.

In the **UK** four debates from the 2010 and 2015 election period were selected which together represent the **party system** of the UK well. In 2010 televised election debates were held for the first time and these debates were held again in 2015. We selected two debates from the 2010 election period, and included the two election debates that were held during the 2015 election period. The **2010 election debates** include the leaders of the three largest parties: David Cameron (Conservatives), Gordon Brown (Labour), and Nick Clegg (Liberal Democrats). Organizing TV election debates among the leaders of the three largest parties was a joint proposal of three broadcasters (BBC, ITV and BSkyB). The reasoning behind this proposal was that this choice represented the UK party system well e.g. being less fragmented than the Dutch and German party system. This selection of parties proved controversial with Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National Party (SNP) believing they had been unfairly excluded. However, despite their complaints the original selection was upheld, with the justification being that the parties not included only field candidates in parts of the UK (White, 2015). We selected two from the three debates from the 2010 UK election to aid comparability with the debates from the other countries. As all three debates

broadcasted in 2010 were similar in format, we selected two of the three debates at random. The one debate missing is the ITV debate which was the UK's inaugural debate and focused on domestic affairs. It had just under 10 million viewers, had the same party leaders, and followed a very similar format and duration as the other two debates from that election campaign. As such there is no reason to think that excluding this debate from the sample skewed the results. Indeed, we have very similar findings to Davidson et al. (2017) who included this debate in their sample and who found similar levels of deliberative quality across all three 2010 debates.

Importantly, the 2010 election resulted in a hung parliament, for the first time in more than 60 years of Labour or Conservatives governing alone. This result made the exclusion of challenger parties from televised debates harder to justify for future elections. Inclusion became the key issue of the televised debates in **the 2015 televised debates**, particularly with the increase in popularity of right-wing populist UKIP who were third in the polls and who had "won the most votes in the 2014 European Parliamentary Elections, the first time that a party outside the Conservative-Labour duopoly has achieved this in a nation-wide election since 1906" (Anstead, 2015, p. 6). UKIP also had two seats in the House of Commons for the first time through winning by-elections. Therefore, UKIP was included in the initial invite from the broadcasters on this occasion. Selecting a debate that includes UKIP not only allows to analyze the UK party system well but also allows us to test the hypothesis on populism. The inclusion of UKIP prompted complaints from the Greens, Plaid Cymru, SNP and Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). After some wrangling between broadcasters and parties it was agreed to have two televised debates that were more inclusive than those from the previous election. The first was broadcast by ITV and included leaders from seven parties: David Cameron (Conservatives), Natalie Bennett (Greens), Gordon Brown (Labour), Nick Clegg (Liberal Democrats), Leanne Wood (Plaid Cymru), Nicola Sturgeon (SNP), and Nigel Farage (UKIP). The second was broadcast by the BBC and was branded as a "challenger" debate and included the same leaders at the ITV debate except for Cameron and Clegg, whose parties had formed a coalition government together. This was primarily because Cameron had reluctantly agreed to attend only one debate, claiming it was unfair that the DUP had been excluded from the broadcasts. Both debates are included in our sample, and by our definition still qualify as televised debates. In sum, by analyzing these four debates which include different parties, and populist candidates, the UK political context is represented well in terms of both its party system, the populist presence and the changes throughout 2010 and 2015. Despite these changes, we should note that the UK has a very long history of one-party governments and until recently little fragmentation of the party system. While fragmentation has been increasing in the last couple of years, the party system is still much less fragmented than the Dutch and German system, providing us leverage to build our theoretical argument about the influence of the electoral system incentives on communicating collaboratively in TV election debates. The possibility of a coalition government exists, but its chances are much lower than is the case for the Netherlands or Germany and the anticipation of the nature of the coalition is clearer compared to the Netherlands.

Appendix 4.3: Inter-coder reliability scores

Table A4.3: Inter-coder reliability scores

	United Kingdom			Germany			Netherlands		
	LJD	RTD	CIV	LJD	RTD	CIV	LJD	RTD	CIV
Percentage agreement	84	91	86	81	87	90	73	80	91
Cohen's kappa	0.76	0.81	0.61	0.71	0.74	0.66	0.60	0.61	0.80

Note: LJD = Level of justification; RTD = Respect towards demands; CIV = Civility

Appendix chapter 5

Table of content

Appendix 5.1: Overview of the debates

Table A5.1: Overview of the debates

Year	Debate	Broad-caster	Government level	Participants
1985	De Laatste Ronde: Slotdebat	VRT	National	4: W. Martens (CVP), G. Verhofstadt (PVV), K. Van Miert (SP), V. Anciaux (VU)
1987	De Confrontatie: De Eerste Ronde	VRT	National	5: M. Vogels (AGALEV), F. Swaelen (CVP), J. Vandemeulebroucke (VU), A. Neyts (PVV), L. Tobback (SP)
1991	De Laatste Ronde: Verkiezingsdebat	VRT	National	5: L. Tobback (SP), P. Dewael (PVV), W. Martens (CVP), M. Vogels (AGALEV), J. Gabriëls (VU)
1995	Verkiezingsdebat	VRT	National	6: V. Dua (AGALEV), B. Anciaux (VU), J. van Hecke (CVP), L. Tobback (SP), G. Verhofstadt (VLD), J. Van Hauthem (VB)
1999	Woord Tegen Woord: Ultieme Debat	VRT	National + regional	6: M. Vogels (AGALEV), L. Tobback (SP), G. Verhofstadt (VLD), G. Annemans (VB), B. Anciaux (VU), J.L. Dehaene (CVP)
1999	Verkiezingsdebat Stoelendans	VTM	National + regional	6: J.L. Dehaene (CVP), G. Verhofstadt (VLD), L. Tobback (SP), M. Vogels (AGALEV), B. Anciaux (VU), F. Dewinter (VB)
2003	Woord Tegen Woord: Begindebat	VRT	National	3: G. Verhofstadt (VLD), S. De Clerck (CD&V), S. Stevaert (SP.A)
2003	Woord Tegen Woord: Slotdebat	VRT	National	9: G. Bourgeois (N-VA), P. Dewael (VLD), M. Vogels (Groen), F. Van den Bossche (SP.A), F. Vanhecke (VB), P. De Crem (CD&V), S. Stevaert (SP.A), S. De Clerck (CD&V), G. Verhofstadt (VLD)
2003	Ultieme Verkiezingsdebat	VTM	National	3: S. Stevaert (S.PA), S. De Clerck (CD&V), G. Verhofstadt (VLD)
2004	Het Groot Debat	VRT	Regional	9: B. Somers (VLD), F. Vanhecke (VB), V. Dua (Groen), I. Vervotte (CD&V), B. Anciaux (Spirit), G. Annemans (VB), G. Verhofstadt (VLD), S. Stevaert (SP.A), Y. Leterme (CD&V)
2004	Woord Tegen Woord: Slotdebat	VRT	Regional	5: B. Somers (VLD), S. Stevaert (SP.A), Y. Leterme (CD&V), F. Vanhecke (VB), V. Dua (Groen)
2004	Kopstukkendebat	VTM	Regional	5: V. Dua (Groen), S. Stevaert (SP.A), Y. Leterme (CD&V), G. Verhofstadt (VLD), F. Dewinter (VB)
2007	Het Groot Debat	VRT	National	3: G. Verhofstadt (Open VLD), Y. Leterme (CD&V), J. Vande Lanotte (SP.A)
2007	Lijsttrekkersdebat	VRT	National	5: F. Vanhecke (VB), V. Dua (Groen), J. Vande Lanotte (SP.A), Y. Leeterme (CD&V), G. Verhofstadt (Open VLD)
2007	Het Ultieme Debat	VTM	National	5: J. Vande Lanotte (SP.A), V. Dua (Groen), G. Verhofstadt (Open VLD), Y. Leterme (CD&V), F. Dewinter (VB)

2009	Het Groot Debat	VRT	Regional	8: B. De Wever (N-VA), G. Lambert (SLP), D. Van Mechelen (Open VLD), M. Vogels (Groen), F. Dewinter (VB), F. Vandenbroucke (SP.A), J. M. Dedecker (LDD), K. Peeters (CD&V)
2009	Stem Van Vlaanderen	VTM	Regional	8: J. M. Dedecker (LDD), D. Van Mechelen (Open VLD), F. Dewinter (VB), F. Vandenbroucke (SP.A), K. Peeters (CD&V), B. De Wever (N-VA), M. Vogels (Groen), G. Lambert (SLP)
2010	Het Groot Debat	VRT	National	7: M. Thyssen (CD&V), A. De Croo (Open VLD), F. Dewinter (VB), C. Gennez (SP.A), B. De Wever (N-VA), J. M. Dedecker (LDD), W. Van Besien (Groen)
2010	Oog In Oog	VRT	National	7: M. Thyssen (CD&V), A. De Croo (Open VLD), B. Valkeniers (VB), C. Gennez (SP.A), W. Van Besien (Groen), J. M. Dedecker (LDD), B. De Wever (N-VA)
2010	Kopstukkendebat	VTM	National	7: J. M. Dedecker (LDD), A. De Croo (Open VLD), W. Van Besien (Groen), F. Dewinter (VB), J. Vande Lanotte (SP.A), M. Thyssen (CD&V), B. De Wever (N-VA)
2014	Zijn Er Nog Vragen?	VRT	National + regional	6: W. Van Besien (Groen), B. Tobback (SP.A), K. Peeters (CD&V), M. De Block (Open VLD), B. De Wever (N-VA), G. Annemans (VB)
2014	Nationaal Debat	VTM	National + regional	2: B. De Wever (N-VA), P. Magnette (PS)
2019	Het Grote Debat	VRT	National + regional	6: B. De Wever (N-VA), J. Crombez (SP.A), T. Van Grieken (VB), W. Beke (CD&V), M. Almaci (Groen), G. Rutten (Open VLD)
2019	Lijsttrekkersdebat (Part 2)	VTM	National + regional	7: B. De Wever (N-VA), M. Almaci (Groen), W. Beke (CD&V), J. Crombez (SP.A), G. Rutten (Open VLD), P. Mertens (PVDA), T. Van Grieken (VB)

Notes. In 1995, an election debate was also organized on VTM that we collected from the VTM archive. However, the videotape was broken and therefore we could not include this election debate in our analysis.

In 2014, the debate formats are a bit different compared to other years. The reason is that Jean-Luc Dehaene, prime minister of Belgium from 1992 to 1999, passed away 10 days before the election. Out of respect, this led to the broadcasters' decision to cancel the originally planned election debates.

Appendix 5.2: Examples of reflection-promoting speech indicators

Table A5.2: Examples of reflection-promoting speech indicators (translated from Dutch to English)

Component	Indicator	Example
Justification component (Standpoint in bold, justifications underlined, relevant link in bold & underlined)	No justification	Jean-Marie Dedecker, 2009 VRT debate, turn 9: **"I am in favor of supporting healthy companies. I am pro support."**
	One justification	Bart De Wever, 2019 VTM debate, turn 57: "**The 45% tax bracket of the personal income tax must be removed,** <u>such that people are left with more net salary of their gross salary</u>"
	Multiple justifications	Louis Tobback, 1999 VTM debate, turn 82: "I will now turn to employment. Why is **employment the absolute priority?** <u>Firstly,</u> **because** <u>there are still a little less than 200,000 - we are below the limit - but there are still far too many unemployed people. Second,</u> **because** <u>there are a lot of women who have degrees, have training, knowledge and skills and who do not find a job due to a lack of jobs. Third, and perhaps primarily,</u> **because** <u>there are a lot of people who have a good job, who are well-paid, in a well-functioning company that makes good profits, and yet they are afraid of being replaced by a young person who costs less.</u> **So,** **employment is an absolute priority for us, also in the coming period.**"
	Relevance of justification: unclear link between standpoint and justification	Vera Dua, 2007 VTM debate, turn 73: *Moderator*: "Yes, we are going to have to do those two things. You [to Vera Dua] are actually saying 'a climate minister must do that,' and that minister must come from your party, I understand." *Vera Dua*: "**Yes** [referring to climate minister having to come from her party]**,** what is our input in this election? That is: <u>we are facing enormous challenges</u>, and <u>it would actually be irresponsible for a green party not to take responsibility. That's why</u>." Gerolf Annemans, 2004 VRT debate, turn 118: *Moderator*: "I remember from a conversation in *de Zevende Dag* [Belgian political discussion program on TV] that CD&V also thought that should indeed be organized: free education. Do you have a unique point of view there? " *Gerolf Annemans*: "No, you shouldn't misunderstand me. I'm just saying that **free education is a myth**, but that **we have to move on to a more cost-less education**. <u>It speaks for itself. There are parents who have to bear the costs, which should not be the costs of the parents</u>. But that has nothing to do with free education."
	No different perspective(s) included	Kris Peeters, 2009 VTM debate, turn 30: "I will make sure that we also give the automotive sector a future, and I am convinced that the car of the future can also be made in Flanders. And we are now in a very difficult period. There is an overcapacity of cars, but I am convinced that Volvo, for example, but also Opel, can have a future if the right emphasis is placed there. And if we, as the government, provide guarantees for loans that can be taken out to bridge this period."

Perspective component	Different perspective(s) included – neutral	Frank Swaelen, 1987 VRT debate, turn 172:
		"[A question] Addressed to the Volksunie. It is about another aspect of the quality of life, namely education. In the end, what is the attitude of the Volksunie with regards to education in our country? We have often seen each other in the school pact committee. In the past you have often taken the same positions as the socialists [Frank Swaelen was a Christian democrat]. You yourself are in favor of the pluralistic school – you have the right to - but how does all this fit in with your ideas about the freedom of education, with your attitude towards Catholic education? In your view, should the pluralistic school ultimately replace the existing schools?"
	Different perspective(s) included – dismissive	Frank Swaelen, 1987 VRT debate, turn 162:
		"(…) Minister De Croo has been trying for a few years now to heighten the speed limit on motor ways from 120 to 130 kilometers per hour. I do not understand this. One can know in advance with a mathematical certainty that this will increase the number of deaths and injuries on the road. And therefore I ask madam Neyts: how do you explain Minister De Croo's stubbornness on that topic? He hides behind the European harmonization, but that cannot be an argument, can it?"
	Different perspective(s) included – appreciative	Steve Stevaert, 2003 VRT debate, turn 52 (on abortion as a breaking point):
		"No, no, no, but it is important. You [to Stefaan De Clerck, politicians from another party] say that it is not one of the four breaking points, but in the past, the position of the CD&V was that they would change the euthanasia law, but I think - I think that's a good point of you."
	No falsifiable claim(s)	Louis Tobback, 1991 VRT debate, turn 135:
		"Yes, as far as we are concerned, solidarity with regard to replacement incomes cannot be altered. So neither with regard to pensions, nor with regard to unemployment, nor with regard to sickness benefits. But I do not see why, if one builds the hospital according to Flemish standards and, moreover, teaches medicine according to Flemish standards, one should not be able to federalize the hospital day price (…). I don't see the logic of it. The same applies for child allowances, for which they claim to conduct a demographic policy. Anyway, I think it's clear."
Information component	Falsifiable claim(s) (underlined)	Jean-Marie Dedecker, 2010 VTM debate, turn 36:
		"I thought that was a beautiful intervention by that woman. And I will talk about that. You were just talking about the unemployment drop. Let's think about the poverty line for a family in our country with two children. Do you know how much that is? That is calculated at 1,844 euros. Let's talk about putting people to work. You know, if you earn 1,805 euros a month you end up in a marginal tax bracket of 40 percent. Then tell me, with the system that exists today, how are you going to solve that poverty? If that gentleman or lady goes to work, then they pay 40 percent taxes. That's the ridiculous thing about our system."
	Falsifiable claim(s) that also refer to the	Bart De Wever, 2014 VRT debate, turn 132:
		"Yes, that is certainly the case, and this is also shown by the studies we have, which show that for people who are suspended from long-term unemployment, only one third suddenly finds a job, one third goes to social assistance, and one

checkable source (underlined)	third cannot claim anything. These studies are done by the Higher Institute for Labor. So indeed, we give benefits easily. Therefore, they are far too low, for far too many people, and these people stay in it for ten years or more. We give benefits to people who come out of school - which no one else does – and they can then stay there forever. That's not how we will get out of the crisis."
No policy-related information	Louis Tobback, 1999 VTM debate, turn 152-154: *Moderator*: "You are spreading the one-liners at high speed" *Louis Tobback*: "No, no, no. Why is this a one-liner again?" *Moderator* tries to interrupt: "Doesn't that take away…" *Louis Tobback*: "Now tell me, now tell me. A number of 'bon mots' have been expressed here by my colleagues during the evening." *Moderator*: "You never do that, do you? You never do that, do you?" *Louis Tobback*: "But why aren't theirs one-liners, and mine are? Because mine are better?" *Moderator*: "That was another one." *Louis Tobback*: "Well, thank you." *Moderator*: "Let's be serious for a moment" *Louis Tobback*: "Very serious. But, you're going to stay serious too then, aren't you?" *Moderator*: "I've been trying to do nothing else all night, believe me." *Louis Tobback*: "Well, then you did not succeed."
Policy-related information	All examples in this Table – except for the 'no policy-related information' example – are examples of turns containing policy-related information.
Numerical support (underlined)	Johan Vande Lanotte, 2007 VRT debate, turn 81: *Johan Vande Lanotte*: "Of course, but I overheard you talking about a report. I'd like to see the report. And there are such reports. The Flemish government, with Mr. Leterme as the Prime Minister, measures confidence in the justice system every year. In 1999, 18 out of 100 Flemish people had confidence in the justice system […]. In 2006 that was 35. That's twice as much. That means that if the next government […] *Moderator*: "That's a perception, Mr. Vande Lanotte." *Johan Vande Lanotte*: ""No no, that is the trust that the people have. That means that we have to do just as well next time, and hopefully exceed 50. But it also means that trust has grown. And I think that the first thing we need to do, is to make sure that the judiciary can deal with the essentials. Today, everything goes to court. Yet we have had an example with regard to divorces. Twenty years ago, 80 percent of divorce proceedings were 'long procedures'. Today, 80 percent is decided by 'mutual consent', also for other matters."
Low complexity: Flesch-Douma score for Dutch version = 90.68)	Vera Dua, 1995 VRT debate, turn 96 & 97: *Moderator*: "This is politics. Mrs. Dua?" *Vera Dua*: "I wanted to respond to your initial question first. So you assumed the scenario that Vlaams Blok would achieve 20 percent." *Moderator* in between: "Right" *Vera Dua*: "I think that would be very bad. I get the chills when I read certain program points of the Vlaams Blok because it is indeed a racist party. But I think that the message to the political world must therefore be that something must be done about the breeding ground of the Vlaams Blok. And that is, in the first place, that they have to ensure that, for people who are walking around with

		frustrations, who live in bad conditions, that they put all their energy into the task to make neighborhoods liveable again, to ensure that there are jobs again, that the people regain confidence in politics and, in connection therewith, in the political culture. Because in the end, no matter how you twist or turn it, all the affairs that have taken place from within the traditional parties are of course at the basis of the anti-political atmosphere that exists. And in that sense, as a party, we have always applied strict rules ourselves, and we also discussed this in parliament, yet often - much to my regret Mr. Van Hecke - we were not followed by the traditional parties."
Accessibility component	High complexity: Flesch-Douma score for Dutch version = 11.85)	Pieter De Crem, 2003 VRT debate, turn 102: "Mr Vanhecke, a gap is looming between what you say and what you do, and there is an even larger gap looming between your image of humanity and ours, because we base our policy on people. [...] We start from people, people in diversity. I am the mayor in Aalter, and I cannot speak about the "Aalters people". I am a candidate in East Flanders. [...] The "East Flemish people", the East Flemish people do not exist, but you always talk about your own people. And your own people, that's something that you [...]. But that is in diversity, but you rely on a romantic image that no longer exists. A romantic image of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that Flanders is homogeneous, and that you can apply general theories to it, and that is not the case. We are in favor of the Flemish citizen of the twenty-first century."
	Low concreteness	De Clerck, 2003 VRT debate, turn 148: "Yes, it is. Let us quietly have a look at how margins and the budget can be realized at the same time. But you want everything at the same time." (M-score for Dutch version = 0.761) Frank Vanhecke, 2004 VRT debate, turn 33: "No that's not true. To begin with, I don't know if the protection of life is an archaic idea. I think that's a civilization idea of all times." (M-score for Dutch version =1.203)
	High concreteness	Mieke Vogels, 2009 VRT debate, turn 95: "That's right. That's right. And then I would like to comment a bit on what Mr. Van Mechelen is saying. All hands on deck, but your party and the parties in the Flemish government are constantly saying that more people should go to work, that we have to work longer, that we have to work harder. But if you work more, harder and longer, well, then you cannot take care of your children, you cannot take care of your sick parents, then you cannot take care of persons with disabilities. And then the question is: shouldn't we start thinking about giving people the chance again to decide this for themselves?" (M-score for Dutch version= 3.645) Patrick Dewael, 1991 VRT debate, turn 105: "Diesel, a pint of beer, fuel oil." (M-score for Dutch version =4.732)
	Illustration(s) (underlined)	Jean-Marie Dedecker, 2009 VRT debate, turn 15: "Well, you have to make sure that you don't make mistakes from the past. I look across the language border, I look at Wallonia. With what is Wallonia still lagging behind today? What happened to the reconversion in the 60s, reconversion in

the 70s? <u>Government money was then deposited in the metallurgy, in the siderurgy, and today they are still lagging behind.</u> But for Opel, I want guarantees, but real guarantees to ensure innovation, because Flanders is always talking about research and development. Do you know that we are lagging behind in Europe and that only 1.83 percent of those subsidies were allocated there?"

Bart Somers, 2004 VRT debate 2, turn 107:

"What does Leterme do with his little blocks? He divides the cake. And he says: we're going to invest some of it in health care, we're going to invest some of it in education, and so on. Our first concern is that there should be more blocks. And that is why we resolutely opt for a tax reduction, because we think: if we lower taxes, then… <u>let me give you a good example: we have reduced registration duties. What was the result? That more people bought houses, more people sold houses, and the state, the government, had more money, and the people had to pay less.</u> You can tell the same story for the other duties. These are the good things. This is the policy that we want to pursue."

Anecdote(s) (<u>underlined</u>)	Meyrem Almaci, 2019 VRT debate, turn 89: "So, if we want to talk about how to integrate, we can talk about these kind of things. Second, the gap in the labor market. The debate on practical tests [i.e. tests for discrimination]. Because when people don't feel at home - it's also about things that I've experienced myself. <u>When I made a call to rent a house with my personal family name, when I was still, when I worked as an academic at the VUB [i.e. university], and had a decent salary as a researcher, I received 'no' as an answer. And when I called with my husband's name, I got a 'yes'.</u> And the fact is that, after all these years, the Flemish government has not yet been able to implement practical tests, and we are just going to say yes to that."
Figurative language (<u>underlined</u>)	Alexander De Croo, 2010 VTM debate, turn 82: "<u>When you sit around the table. If you decide with your partner, we are going to renovate a house. But, if you also say to that person: you should know that I will leave the family within two years. Well, then you can start that negotiation, huh</u>. That doesn't work, does it? You have to trust each other if you want to sit around the table with people. And if people know that, in the end, the intention is not to continue working together, then you cannot reach an agreement. " Bart De Wever, 2014 VTM debate, turn 121: "But I'll get to that now. In the 1980s, severe socio-economic measures were taken. The PS comes back after that, and we have to start from scratch. So you will never be able to separate the socio-economic and the community affairs from each other because they are one. <u>Those are two doors, but you end up in the same living room</u>. If you ever really want to establish order in this country, then you will have to intervene quickly socio-economically, but in the long run you will also have to go for confederalism. I am firmly convinced of that."

Appendix 5.3: Principle component analyses

The principal component analyses (PCA) are based on tetrachoric or polychoric correlation tables in case of binary or categorical data respectively. For the perspectives component, no PCA was conducted, since this component comprises only two indicators. The two indicators of the perspectives-component correlate highly (tetrachoric rho = 0.9993; Pearson's r = 0.958).

Table A5.3.1: Reflection index

Component	Component loading
Justification	0.890
Perspectives	0.768
Information	0.794
Accessibility	0.709
Variance explained by one component	62.86%
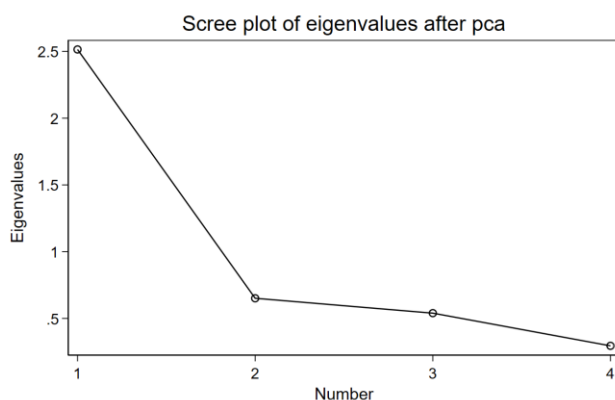
Table A5.3.2: Justification component

Indicator	Component loading
Presence of justifications	1
Number of justifications	0.973
Relevance of justifications	0.972
Variance explained by one component	96.43%
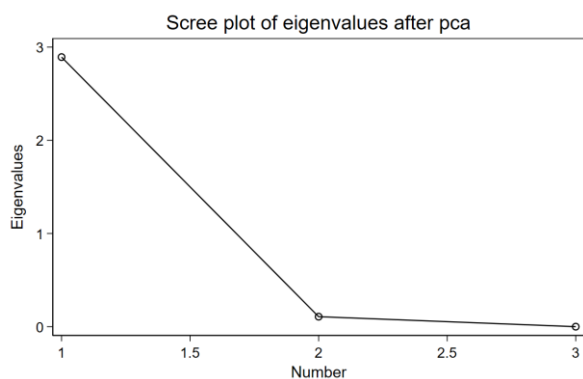
Table A5.3.3: Information component

Indicator	Component loading
Falsifiable information	0.967
Source of information	0.788
Numerical information	0.768
Policy-related information	0.832
Variance explained by one component	70.95%

Scree plot of eigenvalues after pca
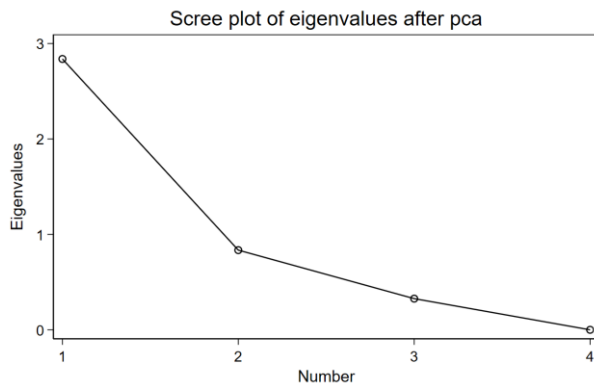
Table A5.3.4: Accessibility component

Indicator	Component loading
Presence of illustrations	0.848
Presence of anecdotes	0.512
Presence of figurative language	0.654
Flesch-Douma score	-0.432
Concreteness	0.512
Variance explained by one component	37.32%

Scree plot of eigenvalues after pca
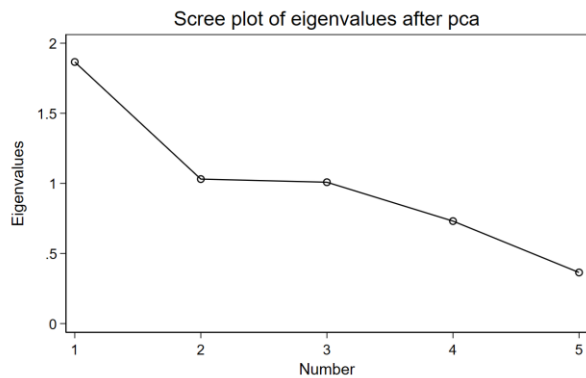
Appendix 5.4: Flesch-Douma score interpretation

The interpretation of Flesch-Douma scores is based on the original Dutch work by Douma (1960):

Table A5.4: Flesch-Douma score interpretation

Score	Level
0 – 30	Very difficult
30 – 45	Difficult
45 – 60	Fairly difficult
60 – 70	Standard
70 – 80	Fairly easy
80 – 90	Easy
90 – 100	Very easy

Appendix 5.5: Inter-coder reliability scores

Table A5.5: Inter-coder reliability scores

Indicator	Cohen's Kappa	% Agreement
Presence of justification(s)	0.828	91.4%
Number of justifications	0.695	89.7%
Relevance of justification(s)	0.774	89.0%
Inclusion of different perspectives	0.685	91.2%
Engagement with different perspectives	0.673	91.4%
Presence of falsifiable claim	0.771	88.5%
Presence of source	0.709	97.2%
Presence of numerical support	0.881	97.0%
Presence of policy-related claims	0.746	93.0%
Presence of illustration	0.791	90.1%
Presence of anecdote	0.748	99.5%
Presence of figurative language	0.769	93.7%
Total	0.756	92.6%

Note. All percentage agreements are between 88.5% and 99.5%, indicating substantial to almost perfect agreement. All Cohen's Kappa's, which is a conservative measure for inter-coder reliability that corrects for similar coding by chance, are 0.673 or higher, indicating moderate to substantial agreement. Inter-coder reliability scores are not included for the Flesch-Douma and the concreteness scores because these are not calculated manually.

Appendix 5.6: Construction of indexes

Table A5.6 shows how the reflection-index is constructed. First, a summation is made of each indicator per component. This leads to a minimum and a maximum score for each component. For instance, the justifications component ranges from 0 to 3; the perspectives component ranges from 0 to 2. Since the number of indicators differs per component, the scores are next divided by the number of indicators each component contains. The reason behind it is that each component has a similar weight in the final reflection-index. This works a bit differently for the accessibility component, because *comprehensibility* was measured with two indicators, and *vividness* with three indicators. Therefore, we add an extra step for this component to make sure complexity and vividness have the same weight within the accessibility component (see Table A5.6). Last, to arrive at the final index, we add the 0 – 1 scores of each component. This results in a final reflection-score that ranges from 0 to 4.

Table A5.6: Construction of the indexes

Component	Indicator	Scores	Min-Max score	Divide by	Add up and divide by	Index range
Justification	Presence	0/1				
	Number	0/1	0 – 3	3	n/a	0 – 1
	Relevance	0/1				
Perspectives	Presence	0/1	0 – 2	2	n/a	0 – 1
	Type	0/1				
Information	Falsifiable claim	0/1				
	Source	0/1	0 – 4	4	n/a	0 – 1
	Numbers	0/1				
	Policy-related	0/1				
Accessibility	FD-Complexity	0 – 100[1]	0 – 100	100	2	
	Concreteness	1 – 5	1 – 5	5		
	Illustration	0/1			2	0 – 1
	Anecdote	0/1	0 – 3	3		
	Figurative language	0/1				
Index						0 – 4

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[1] The Flesch-Douma scores generally have a value between 0 and 100 (and in the few cases were the scores exceeded 100 or were lower than 0, we recoded them to 100 or 0 respectively).

Appendix 5.7: Descriptive statistics for reflection-promoting speech per election year

Table A5.7.1: Descriptive statistics for general index and components

Year	Index general		Justifications		Perspectives		Information		Accessibility	
	mean (sd)	Diff	mean (sd)	diff	mean (sd)	diff	mean (sd)	diff	mean (sd)	diff
1985	1.411 (0.983)	/	0.390 (0.440)	/	0.219 (0.408)	/	0.417 (0.241)	/	0.384 (0.139)	/
1987	1.317 (0.851)	-0.094	0.391 (0.438)	+0.001	0.152 (0.346)	-0.067	0.381 (0.207)	-0.036	0.394 (0.118)	+0.010
1991	1.630 (0.984)	+0.313	0.475 (0.436)	+0.084	0.277 (0.440)	+0.125	0.461 (0.250)	+0.080	0.418 (0.124)	+0.024
1995	1.085 (0.859)	-0.545	0.284 (0.403)	-0.191	0.146 (0.348)	-0.131	0.282 (0.220)	-0.179	0.375 (0.123)	-0.043
1999	1.184 (0.849)	+0.099	0.358 (0.407)	+0.074	0.138 (0.340)	-0.008	0.307 (0.228)	+0.025	0.380 (0.108)	+0.005
2003	1.180 (0.824)	-0.004	0.348 (0.407)	-0.010	0.127 (0.329)	-0.011	0.316 (0.227)	+0.009	0.390 (0.118)	+0.010
2004	1.311 (0.787)	+0.131	0.407 (0.401)	+0.059	0.141 (0.347)	+0.014	0.359 (0.227)	+0.043	0.405 (0.126)	+0.015
2007	1.312 (0.747)	+0.001	0.427 (0.396)	+0.020	0.086 (0.279)	-0.055	0.416 (0.234)	+0.057	0.382 (0.116)	-0.023
2009	1.315 (0.794)	+0.003	0.378 (0.400)	-0.049	0.127 (0.333)	+0.041	0.388 (0.216)	-0.028	0.423 (0.137)	+0.041
2010	1.431 (0.843)	+0.116	0.466 (0.417)	+0.088	0.153 (0.357)	+0.026	0.397 (0.234)	+0.009	0.414 (0.139)	-0.009
2014	1.303 (0.945)	-0.128	0.356 (0.410)	-0.110	0.189 (0.389)	+0.036	0.367 (0.261)	-0.030	0.392 (0.126)	-0.022
2019	1.210 (0.839)	-0.093	0.267 (0.378)	-0.089	0.150 (0.357)	-0.039	0.403 (0.247)	+0.036	0.390 (0.134)	-0.002

Note. Mean scores for the general index and separate component indexes per year with standard deviations between brackets and difference in mean in comparison to previous election year.

Table A5.7.2: Descriptive statistics for justification indicators

Year	Presence		Number		Relevance	
	mean(sd)	diff	mean(sd)	diff	mean(sd)	diff
1985	0.481 (0.501)	/	0.299 (0.459)	/	0.390 (0.489)	/
1987	0.480 (0.501)	-0.001	0.275 (0.447)	-0.024	0.417 (0.494)	+0.027
1991	0.598 (0.492)	+0.118	0.337 (0.474)	+0.062	0.489 (0.501)	+0.072
1995	0.360 (0.481)	-0.238	0.172 (0.378)	-0.165	0.318 (0.467)	-0.171
1999	0.475 (0.500)	+0.115	0.188 (0.392)	+0.016	0.412 (0.493)	+0.094
2003	0.460 (0.499)	-0.015	0.184 (0.387)	-0.004	0.400 (0.490)	-0.012
2004	0.554 (0.498)	+0.094	0.196 (0.397)	+0.012	0.470 (0.500)	+0.070
2007	0.586 (0.493)	+0.032	0.195 (0.396)	-0.001	0.501 (0.501)	+0.031
2009	0.514 (0.500)	-0.072	0.176 (0.381)	-0.019	0.444 (0.498)	-0.057
2010	0.600 (0.49)	+0.086	0.272 (0.445)	+0.096	0.525 (0.500)	+0.081
2014	0.466 (0.500)	-0.134	0.190 (0.393)	-0.082	0.411 (0.493)	-0.114
2019	0.375 (0.485)	-0.091	0.173 (0.379)	-0.017	0.254 (0.436)	-0.157

Note. Mean scores for the justification indicators per year with standard deviations between brackets and difference in mean in comparison to previous election year.

Table A5.7.3: Descriptive statistics for perspectives indicators

Year	Presence		Type of engagement	
	mean(sd)	diff	mean(sd)	diff
1985	0.230 (0.422)	/	0.209 (0.407)	/
1987	0.172 (0.378)	-0.058	0.132 (0.340)	-0.077
1991	0.293 (0.457)	+0.121	0.261 (0.440)	+0.129
1995	0.153 (0.361)	-0.140	0.138 (0.345)	-0.123
1999	0.145 (0.353)	-0.008	0.130 (0.337)	-0.008
2003	0.132 (0.339)	-0.013	0.122 (0.327)	-0.008
2004	0.143 (0.351)	+0.011	0.139 (0.346)	+0.017
2007	0.085 (0.279)	-0.058	0.087 (0.282)	-0.052
2009	0.127 (0.333)	+0.042	0.127 (0.333)	+0.040
2010	0.159 (0.366)	+0.032	0.148 (0.355)	+0.021
2014	0.190 (0.393)	+0.031	0.187 (0.391)	+0.039
2019	0.152 (0.360)	-0.038	0.148 (0.356)	-0.039

Note. Mean scores for the perspectives indicators per year with standard deviations between brackets and difference in mean in comparison to previous election year.

Table A5.7.4: Descriptive statistics of information indicators

Year	Falsifiable		Source		Numerical		Policy	
	mean(sd)	diff	mean(sd)	diff	mean(sd)	diff	mean(sd)	diff
1985	0.551 (0.499)	/	0.053 (0.226)	/	0.198 (0.399)	/	0.866 (0.341)	/
1987	0.515 (0.501)	-0.036	0.059 (0.236)	+0.006	0.054 (0.226)	-0.144	0.897 (0.305)	+0.031
1991	0.603 (0.491)	+0.088	0.136 (0.344)	+0.077	0.179 (0.385)	+0.125	0.924 (0.266)	+0.027
1995	0.268 (0.444)	-0.335	0.023 (0.150)	-0.113	0.084 (0.278)	-0.095	0.751 (0.433)	-0.173
1999	0.362 (0.481)	+0.094	0.038 (0.191)	+0.015	0.058 (0.234)	-0.026	0.771 (0.421)	+0.020
2003	0.391 (0.488)	+0.029	0.022 (0.148)	-0.016	0.086 (0.28)	+0.028	0.765 (0.424)	-0.006
2004	0.452 (0.498)	+0.061	0.032 (0.177)	+0.010	0.103 (0.304)	+0.017	0.849 (0.359)	+0.084
2007	0.542 (0.499)	+0.090	0.030 (0.170)	-0.002	0.199 (0.400)	+0.096	0.895 (0.307)	+0.046
2009	0.517 (0.500)	-0.025	0.010 (0.101)	-0.020	0.140 (0.347)	-0.059	0.886 (0.318)	-0.009
2010	0.510 (0.500)	-0.007	0.042 (0.201)	+0.032	0.157 (0.364)	+0.017	0.881 (0.324)	-0.005
2014	0.466 (0.500)	-0.044	0.040 (0.196)	-0.002	0.178 (0.383)	+0.021	0.782 (0.413)	-0.099
2019	0.481 (0.501)	+0.015	0.057 (0.231)	+0.017	0.208 (0.407)	+0.030	0.866 (0.342)	+0.084

Note. Mean scores for the information indicators per year with standard deviations between brackets and difference in mean in comparison to previous election year.

Table A5.7.5: Descriptive statistics for accessibility indicators

Year	Flesch-Douma		Concreteness		Illustrations		Anecdotes		Figurative	
	mean (sd)	Diff	mean (sd)	diff	mean (sd)	diff	mean (sd)	diff	mean (sd)	diff
1985	0.719 (0.220)	/	0.466 (0.149)	/	0.369 (0.484)	/	0.011 (0.103)	/	0.150 (0.358)	/
1987	0.778 (0.191)	+0.059	0.451 (0.173)	-0.015	0.373 (0.485)	+0.004	0.005 (0.070)	-0.006	0.142 (0.350)	-0.008
1991	0.740 (0.169)	-0.038	0.488 (0.126)	+0.037	0.462 (0.500)	+0.089	0.005 (0.074)	+0.000	0.196 (0.398)	+0.054
1995	0.802 (0.197)	+0.062	0.426 (0.173)	-0.062	0.268 (0.444)	-0.194	0.004 (0.062)	-0.001	0.134 (0.341)	-0.062
1999	0.793 (0.165)	-0.009	0.457 (0.144)	+0.031	0.316 (0.466)	+0.048	0.012 (0.107)	+0.008	0.081 (0.273)	-0.053
2003	0.797 (0.167)	+0.004	0.458 (0.151)	+0.001	0.328 (0.470)	+0.012	0.010 (0.101)	-0.002	0.117 (0.321)	+0.036
2004	0.777 (0.158)	-0.020	0.467 (0.128)	+0.009	0.329 (0.470)	+0.001	0.012 (0.109)	+0.002	0.222 (0.416)	+0.105
2007	0.728 (0.172)	-0.049	0.466 (0.131)	-0.001	0.352 (0.478)	+0.023	0.014 (0.117)	+0.002	0.137 (0.345)	-0.085
2009	0.773 (0.159)	+0.045	0.480 (0.156)	+0.014	0.367 (0.483)	+0.015	0.023 (0.151)	+0.009	0.266 (0.443)	+0.129
2010	0.759 (0.161)	-0.014	0.467 (0.145)	-0.013	0.391 (0.488)	+0.024	0.009 (0.094)	-0.014	0.245 (0.431)	-0.021
2014	0.782 (0.179)	+0.023	0.444 (0.155)	-0.023	0.347 (0.477)	-0.044	0.012 (0.110)	+0.003	0.153 (0.361)	-0.092
2019	0.803 (0.186)	+0.021	0.449 (0.189)	+0.005	0.300 (0.459)	-0.047	0.007 (0.084)	-0.005	0.152 (0.360)	-0.001

Note. Mean scores for the accessibility indicators per year with standard deviations between brackets and difference in mean in comparison to previous election year.

Appendix 5.8: Reflection-promoting speech split out per broadcaster

Figure A5.8.1: General index mean scores split out per broadcaster
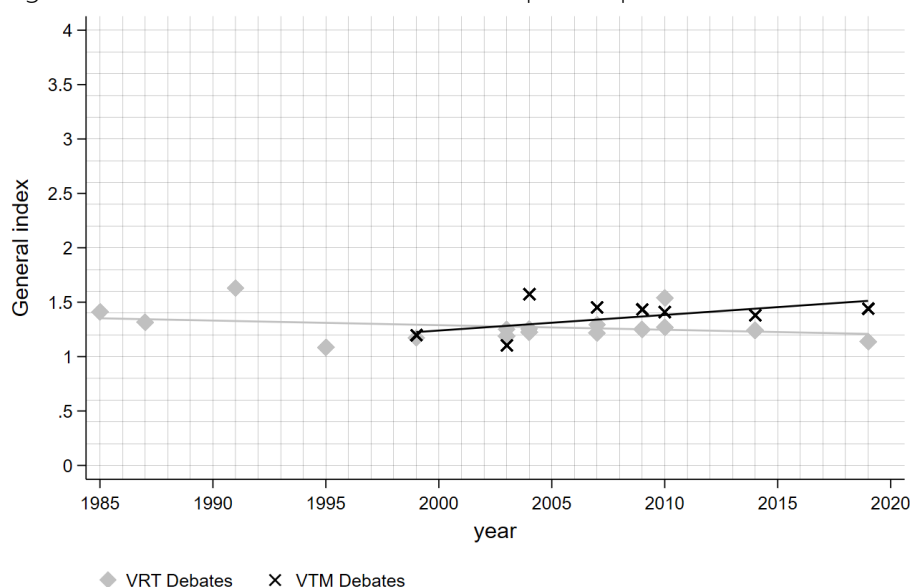
Figure A5.8.2: Time trends split out per broadcaster

a. Justification component

b. Perspectives component

c. Information component

d. Accessibility component
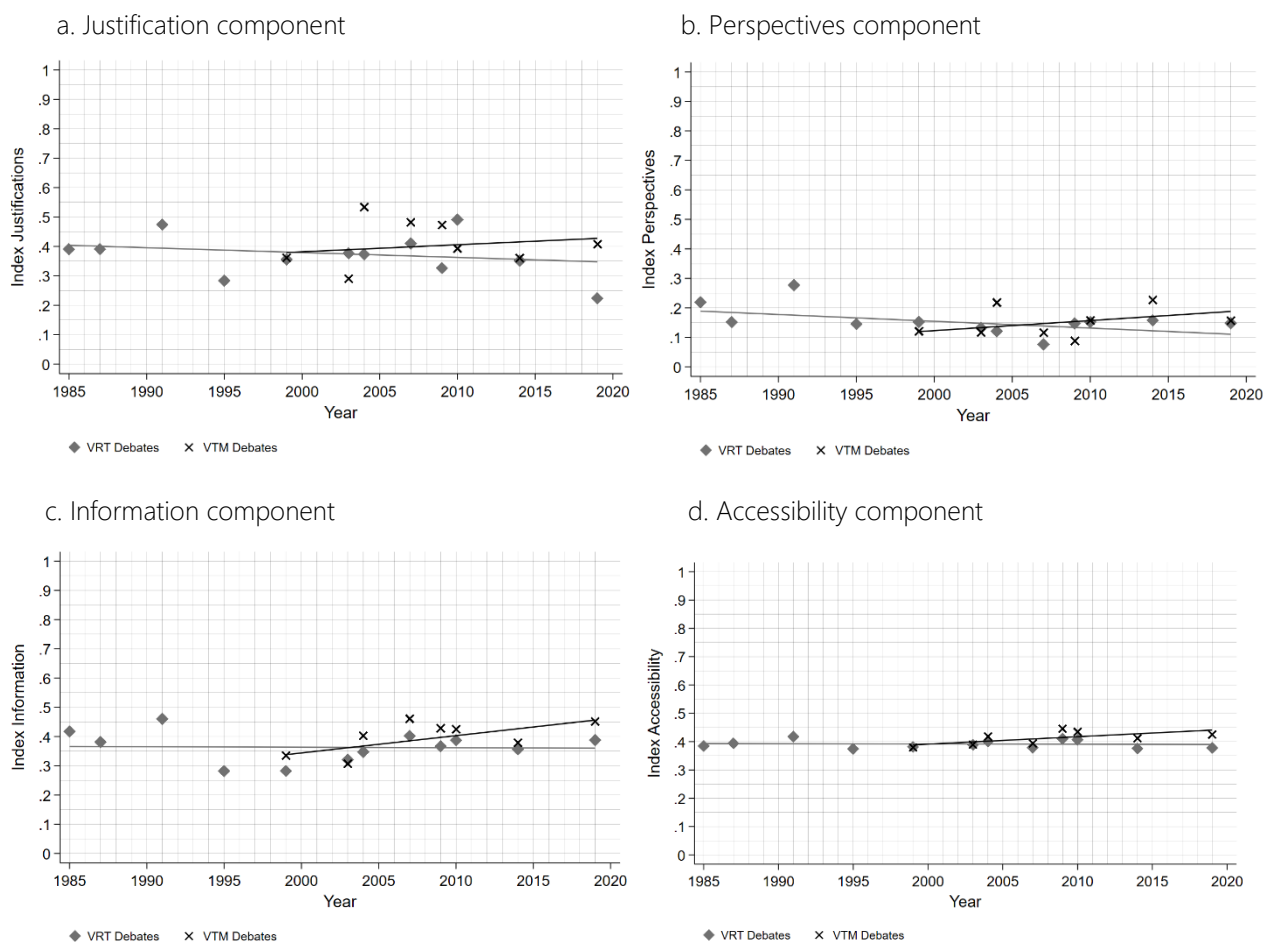
Table A5.8.1: Results for general index split out per broadcaster

	General Index B(SE)	General Index VRT debates B(SE)	General Index VTM debates B(SE)
Time	-0.002 (0.002)	-0.004 (0.002)**	0.014 (0.005)**
Broadcaster	0.072 (0.031)*	/	/
Intercept	1.246 (0.046)***	1.356 (0.034)***	1.010 (0.116)***
R²	0.002	0.002	0.008
N (turns)	4146	3114	1032

Notes. Estimates are the results of OLS linear regressions. Entries are unstandardized coefficients and standard errors (in parentheses). *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Table A5.8.2: Results for justifications and perspectives components split out per broadcaster

	Justifications	Justifications VRT	Justifications VTM	Perspectives	Perspectives VRT	Perspectives VTM
	B(SE)	B(SE)	B(SE)	B(SE)	B(SE)	B(SE)
Time	-0.001	-0.002	0.002	-0.002	-0.002	0.003
	(0.001)	(0.001)*	(0.002)	(0.001)**	(0.001)***	(0.002)
Broadcaster	0.029	/	/	0.006	/	/
	(0.015)			(0.013)		
Intercept	0.368	0.406	0.343	1.174	0.191	0.068
	(0.022)***	(0.017)***	(0.054)***	(0.019)***	(0.014)***	(0.046)
R^2	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.002	0.004	0.003
N (turns)	4146	3114	1032	4146	3114	1032

Notes. Estimates are the results of OLS linear regressions. Entries are unstandardized coefficients and standard errors (in parentheses). *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Table A5.8.3: Results for information and accessibility components split out per broadcaster

	Information	Information VRT	Information VTM	Accessibility	Accessibility VRT	Accessibility VTM
	B(SE)	B(SE)	B(SE)	B(SE)	B(SE)	B(SE)
Time	0.000	-0.000	0.006	0.000	-0.000	0.003
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.001)***	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)***
Broadcaster	0.020	/	/	0.017	/	/
	(0.009)*			(0.005)***		
Intercept	0.333	0.366	0.249	0.371	0.393	0.349
	(0.013)***	(0.009)***	(0.033)***	(0.007)***	(0.005)***	(0.017)***
R^2	0.002	0.000	0.017	0.004	0.000	0.013
N (turns)	4146	3114	1032	4146	3114	1032

Notes. Estimates are the results of OLS linear regressions. Entries are unstandardized coefficients and standard errors (in parentheses). *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Appendix 5.9: Regression results for the separate indicators

Table A5.9.1: Results for justification indicators

	Presence of justifications		Number of justifications		Relevance of Justifications	
	B(SE)	Odds ratio	B(SE)	Odds ratio	B(SE)	Odds ratio
Time	0.001	1.001	-0.016	0.984	-0.001	0.999
	(0.004)		(0.004)***		(0.004)	
Intercept	-0.006		-1.009		0.272	
	(0.077)		(0.091)***		(0.078)***	
Pseudo R^2	0.000		0.003		0.000	
N (turns)	4146		4146		4146	

Notes. Estimates are logistic regression results. Entries are logit coefficients with standard errors (in parentheses) and odds ratios. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Table A5.9.2: Results for perspectives indicators

	Presence of engagement		Type of engagement	
	B(SE)	Odds ratio	B(SE)	Odds ratio
Time	-0.016 (0.005)**	0.984	-0.009 (0.005)	0.991
Intercept	-1.406 (0.102)***		-1.612 (0.107)***	
Pseudo R²	0.003		0.001	
N (turns)	4146		4146	

Notes. Estimates are logistic regression results. Entries are logit coefficients with standard errors (in parentheses) and odds ratios. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Table A5.9.3: Results for information indicators

	Falsifiable		Source mentioned		Numerical		Policy-related	
	B(SE)	Odds ratio	B(SE)	Odds ratio	B(SE)	Odds ratio	B(SE)	Odds ratio
Time	0.003 (0.004)	1.003	-0.023 (0.009)**	0.997	0.024 (0.005)***	1.024	0.002 (0.005)	1.002
Intercept	-0.214 (0.078)**		-2.770 (0.181)***		-2.364 (0.125)***		1.615 (0.105)***	
Pseudo R²	0.000		0.005		0.006		0.000	
N (turns)	4146		4146		4146		4146	

Notes. Estimates are logistic regression results. Entries are logit coefficients with standard errors (in parentheses) and odds ratios. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Table A5.9.4: Results for accessibility indicators – language comprehensibility

	Flesch-Douma	Concreteness
	B(SE)	B(SE)
Time	0.001(0.000)*	-0.000(0.000)
Intercept	0.761(0.007)***	0.461(0.006)***
R²	0.001	0.000
N (turns)	4146	4146

Notes. Estimates are linear regression results. Entries are unstandardized coefficients and standard errors (in parentheses). *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Table A5.9.5: Results for accessibility indicators – language vividness

	Illustrations		Anecdotes		Figurative language	
	B(SE)	Odds ratio	B(SE)	Odds ratio	B(SE)	Odds ratio
Time	-0.003 (0.004)	0.997	0.018 (0.018)	1.018	0.014 (0.005)**	1.014
Intercept	-0.574 (0.081)***		-4.866 (0.404)***		-1.869 (0.108)***	
Pseudo R²	0.000		0.002		0.002	
N (turns)	4146		4146		4146	

Notes. Estimates are logistic regression results. Entries are logit coefficients with standard errors (in parentheses) and odds ratios. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Appendix 5.10: Robustness check – Ordered logistic regression

Table A5.10: Robustness check: ordered logistic regression results for reflection components

	Justifications B(SE)	Odds ratio	Perspectives B(SE)	Odds ratio	Information B(SE)	Odds ratio
Time	-0.004 (0.003)	0.996	-0.015(0.005)**	0.986	0.006 (0.003)	1.006
/cut 1	-0.097 (0.075)		1.428 (0.102)		-1.625 (0.077)	
/cut 2	0.177 (0.075)		1.514 (0.102)		0.265 (0.072)	
/cut 3	1.275 (0.078)				1.836 (0.078)	
/cut 4					4.649 (0.165)	
Pseudo R^2	0.000		0.002		0.000	
N (turns)	4146		4146		4146	

Notes. Estimates are ordered logistic regression results. Entries are ordered logit coefficients with standard errors (in parentheses) and odds ratios. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Appendix chapter 6

Table of content

Appendix 6.1: Overview of the debates

Table A6.1: Overview of the debates

Year	Debate	Broad-caster	Government level	Participants	Incivility (%)
1985	De Laatste Ronde: Slotdebat	VRT	National	4: W. Martens (CVP), G. Verhofstadt (PVV), K. Van Miert (SP), V. Anciaux (VU)	9.4
1987	De Confrontatie: De Eerste Ronde	VRT	National	5: M. Vogels (AGALEV), F. Swaelen (CVP), J. Vandemeulebroucke (VU), A. Neyts (PVV), L. Tobback (SP)	8.4
1991	De Laatste Ronde: Verkiezingsdebat	VRT	National	5: L. Tobback (SP), P. Dewael (PVV), W. Martens (CVP), M. Vogels (AGALEV), J. Gabriëls (VU)	10.7
1995	Verkiezingsdebat	VRT	National	6: V. Dua (AGALEV), B. Anciaux (VU), J. van Hecke (CVP), L. Tobback (SP), G. Verhofstadt (VLD), J. Van Hauthem (VB)	11.9
1999	Woord Tegen Woord: Ultieme Debat	VRT	National + regional	6: M. Vogels (AGALEV), L. Tobback (SP), G. Verhofstadt (VLD), G. Annemans (VB), B. Anciaux (VU), J.L. Dehaene (CVP)	14.4
1999	Verkiezingsdebat Stoelendans	VTM	National + regional	6: J.L. Dehaene (CVP), G. Verhofstadt (VLD), L. Tobback (SP), M. Vogels (AGALEV), B. Anciaux (VU), F. Dewinter (VB)	14.0
2003	Woord Tegen Woord: Begindebat	VRT	National	3: G. Verhofstadt (VLD), S. De Clerck (CD&V), S. Stevaert (SP.A)	3.9
2003	Woord Tegen Woord: Slotdebat	VRT	National	9: G. Bourgeois (N-VA), P. Dewael (VLD), M. Vogels (Groen), F. Van den Bossche (SP.A), F. Vanhecke (VB), P. De Crem (CD&V), S. Stevaert (SP.A), S. De Clerck (CD&V), G. Verhofstadt (VLD)	6.8
2003	Ultieme Verkiezingsdebat	VTM	National	3: S. Stevaert (S.PA), S. De Clerck (CD&V), G. Verhofstadt (VLD)	4.6
2004	Het Groot Debat	VRT	Regional	9: B. Somers (VLD), F. Vanhecke (VB), V. Dua (Groen), I. Vervotte (CD&V), B. Anciaux (Spirit), G. Annemans (VB), G. Verhofstadt (VLD), S. Stevaert (SP.A), Y. Leterme (CD&V)	8.5
2004	Woord Tegen Woord: Slotdebat	VRT	Regional	5: B. Somers (VLD), S. Stevaert (SP.A), Y. Leterme (CD&V), F. Vanhecke (VB), V. Dua (Groen)	15.8

2004	Kopstukkendebat	VTM	Regional	5: V. Dua (Groen), S. Stevaert (SP.A), Y. Leterme (CD&V), G. Verhofstadt (VLD), F. Dewinter (VB)	13.9
2007	Het Groot Debat	VRT	National	3: G. Verhofstadt (Open VLD), Y. Leterme (CD&V), J. Vande Lanotte (SP.A)	0.9
2007	Lijsttrekkersdebat	VRT	National	5: F. Vanhecke (VB), V. Dua (Groen), J. Vande Lanotte (SP.A), Y. Leteerme (CD&V), G. Verhofstadt (Open VLD)	17.1
2007	Het Ultieme Debat	VTM	National	5: J. Vande Lanotte (SP.A), V. Dua (Groen), G. Verhofstadt (Open VLD), Y. Leterme (CD&V), F. Dewinter (VB)	6.1
2009	Het Groot Debat	VRT	Regional	8: B. De Wever (N-VA), G. Lambert (SLP), D. Van Mechelen (Open VLD), M. Vogels (Groen), F. Dewinter (VB), F. Vandenbroucke (SP.A), J. M. Dedecker (LDD), K. Peeters (CD&V)	6.0
2009	Stem Van Vlaanderen	VTM	Regional	8: J. M. Dedecker (LDD), D. Van Mechelen (Open VLD), F. Dewinter (VB), F. Vandenbroucke (SP.A), K. Peeters (CD&V), B. De Wever (N-VA), M. Vogels (Groen), G. Lambert (SLP)	18.5
2010	Het Groot Debat	VRT	National	7: M. Thyssen (CD&V), A. De Croo (Open VLD), F. Dewinter (VB), C. Gennez (SP.A), B. De Wever (N-VA), J. M. Dedecker (LDD), W. Van Besien (Groen)	5.9
2010	Oog In Oog	VRT	National	7: M. Thyssen (CD&V), A. De Croo (Open VLD), B. Valkeniers (VB), C. Gennez (SP.A), W. Van Besien (Groen), J. M. Dedecker (LDD), B. De Wever (N-VA)	15.2
2010	Kopstukkendebat	VTM	National	7: J. M. Dedecker (LDD), A. De Croo (Open VLD), W. Van Besien (Groen), F. Dewinter (VB), J. Vande Lanotte (SP.A), M. Thyssen (CD&V), B. De Wever (N-VA)	11.2
2014	Zijn Er Nog Vragen?	VRT	National + regional	6: W. Van Besien (Groen), B. Tobback (SP.A), K. Peeters (CD&V), M. De Block (Open VLD), B. De Wever (N-VA), G. Annemans (VB)	6.7
2014	Nationaal Debat	VTM	National + regional	2: B. De Wever (N-VA), P. Magnette (PS)	20.7
2019	Het Grote Debat	VRT	National + regional	6: B. De Wever (N-VA), J. Crombez (SP.A), T. Van Grieken (VB), W. Beke (CD&V), M. Almaci (Groen), G. Rutten (Open VLD)	7.4

| 2019 | Lijsttrekkersdebat (Part 2) | VTM | National + regional | 7: B. De Wever (N-VA), M. Almaci (Groen), W. Beke (CD&V), J. Crombez (SP.A), G. Rutten (Open VLD), P. Mertens (PVDA), T. Van Grieken (VB) | 21.2 |

Notes. In 1995, an election debate was also organized on VTM that we collected from the VTM archive. However, the videotape was broken and therefore we could not include this election debate in our analysis.

In 2014, the debate formats are a bit different compared to other years. The reason is that Jean-Luc Dehaene, prime minister of Belgium from 1992 to 1999, passed away 10 days before the election. Out of respect, this led to the broadcasters' decision to cancel the originally planned election debates.

Appendix 6.2: Overview of descriptives of predictor variables

Table A6.2: Overview of descriptives of predictor variables

Independent variables	Code	Amount	Amount (in % of turns)
Populism			
Non-populist politician	0	40/48 politicians	88.3%
Populist politician	1	8/48 politicians	11.7%
Incumbency		/	
Incumbent	0	/	46.6%
Challenger	1	/	53.4%
Gender			
Male	0	38/48 politicians	85.4%
Female	1	10/48 politicians	16.6%
Issue morality*		/	
Non-moral issue	0	/	84.7%
Moral issue	1	/	15.3%
Debate format		/	
1 politician	1	/	12.6%
2 politicians	2	/	31.3%
3 politicians	3	/	11.8%
4 politicians	4	/	10.4%
5 politicians	5	/	9.4%
6 politicians	6	/	15.0%
7 politicians	7	/	6.6%
8 politicians	8	/	2.9%
Action-reaction		/	
Civil statement	0	/	90.2%
Uncivil statement	1	/	9.8%
Broadcaster			
VRT	0	16/24 debates	75.1%
VTM	1	8/24 debates	24.9%
Populist presence			
Absent	0	7/24 debates	31.7%
Present	1	17/24 debates	68.3%

(Table A6.2 continued)

Election year

1985	1985	1 debate (VRT)	4.4%
1987	1987	1 debate (VRT)	4.9%
1991	1991	1 debate (VRT)	4.3%
1995	1995	1 debate (VRT)	6.3%
1999	1999	2 debates (1 VRT, 1 VTM)	8.4%
2003	2003	3 debates (2 VRT, 1 VTM)	14.2%
2004	2004	3 debates (2 VRT, 1 VTM)	11.9%
2007	2007	3 debates (2 VRT, 1 VTM)	10.5%
2009	2009	2 debates (1 VRT, VTM)	9.4%
2010	2010	3 (2 VRT, 1 VTM)	10.8%
2014	2014	2 (1 VRT, 1 VTM)	7.9%
2019	2019	2 (1 VRT, 1 VTM)	6.9%
Government level elections			
Regional	0	5/24 debates	21.3%
Federal	1	13/24 debates	55.5%
Both	2	6/24 debates	23.2%

*Note.* *In line with the definition of moral issues on p. 109 (Colombo, 2021; Engeli et al., 2012), moral issues (code 1) are abortion, animal rights, drug policy, euthanasia, equality between men and women, life quality, migration, political credibility and decency, and poverty. All other issues (e.g. car industry, economy, environment, foreign policy, law & order, social security, state reform, and taxes) received code 0.

Appendix 6.3: Descriptive results

Table A6.3: Descriptive and Chi²-analyses for incivility-inducing determinants

Variable	Civil (%)	Uncivil (%)	Chi²-value (χ^2)	P-value	Cramer's V
Broadcaster			16.147	< 0.001	0.063 (weak)
VRT (public)	91.2	8.8			
VTM (commercial)	86.9	13.1			
Populist presence			9.532	0.002	0.048 (weak)
Absent	92.2	7.8			
Present	89.1	10.9			
Issue type			2.506	0.113	0.025 (no assoc.)
Non-moral	90.4	9.6			
Moral	88.4	11.6			
Number of debaters			56.235	< 0.001	0.117 (moderate)
One	94.2	5.8			
Two	91.5	8.5			
Three	93.8	6.2			
Four	89.9	10.1			
Five	85.5	14.5			
Six	88.6	11.4			
Seven	84.5	15.5			
Eight	79.3	20.7			
Action-reaction			13.913	< 0.001	0.058 (weak)
Civil statement	90.7	9.3			
Uncivil statement	84.9	15.1			
Populist ideology			42.166	< 0.001	0.101 (moderate)
Non-populist	91.2	8.8			
Populist	81.8	18.2			
Incumbency			48.807	< 0.001	0.109 (moderate)
Incumbent	93.6	6.4			
Challenger	87.1	12.9			
Gender			9.819	0.002	0.049 (weak)
Male	89.5	10.5			
Female	93.7	6.3			

Figure A6.3: Time trend split out per broadcaster
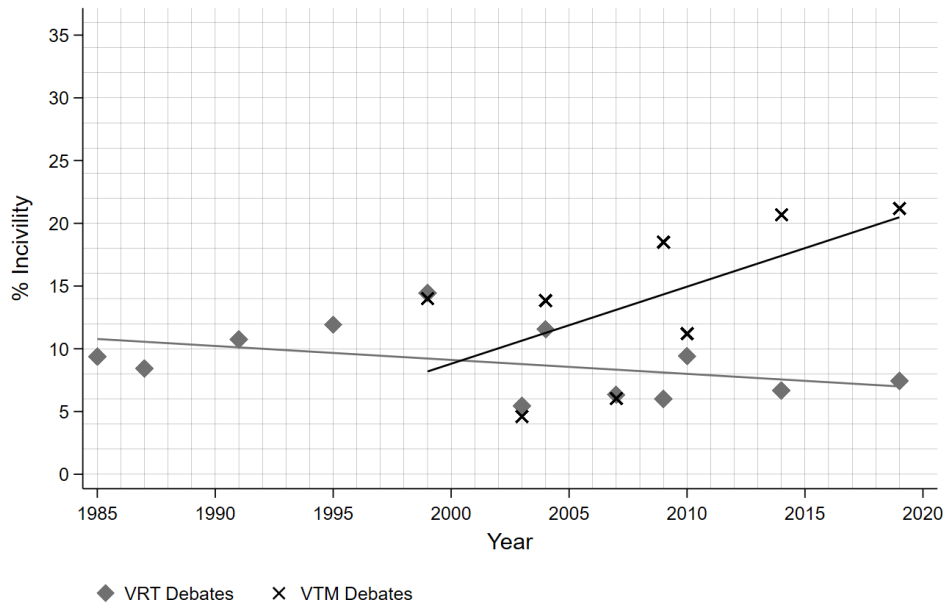
Appendix 6.4: Bayesian multilevel logistic regression

Figure A6.4: Inspecting (non-)convergence: trace, autocorrelation, and density plots
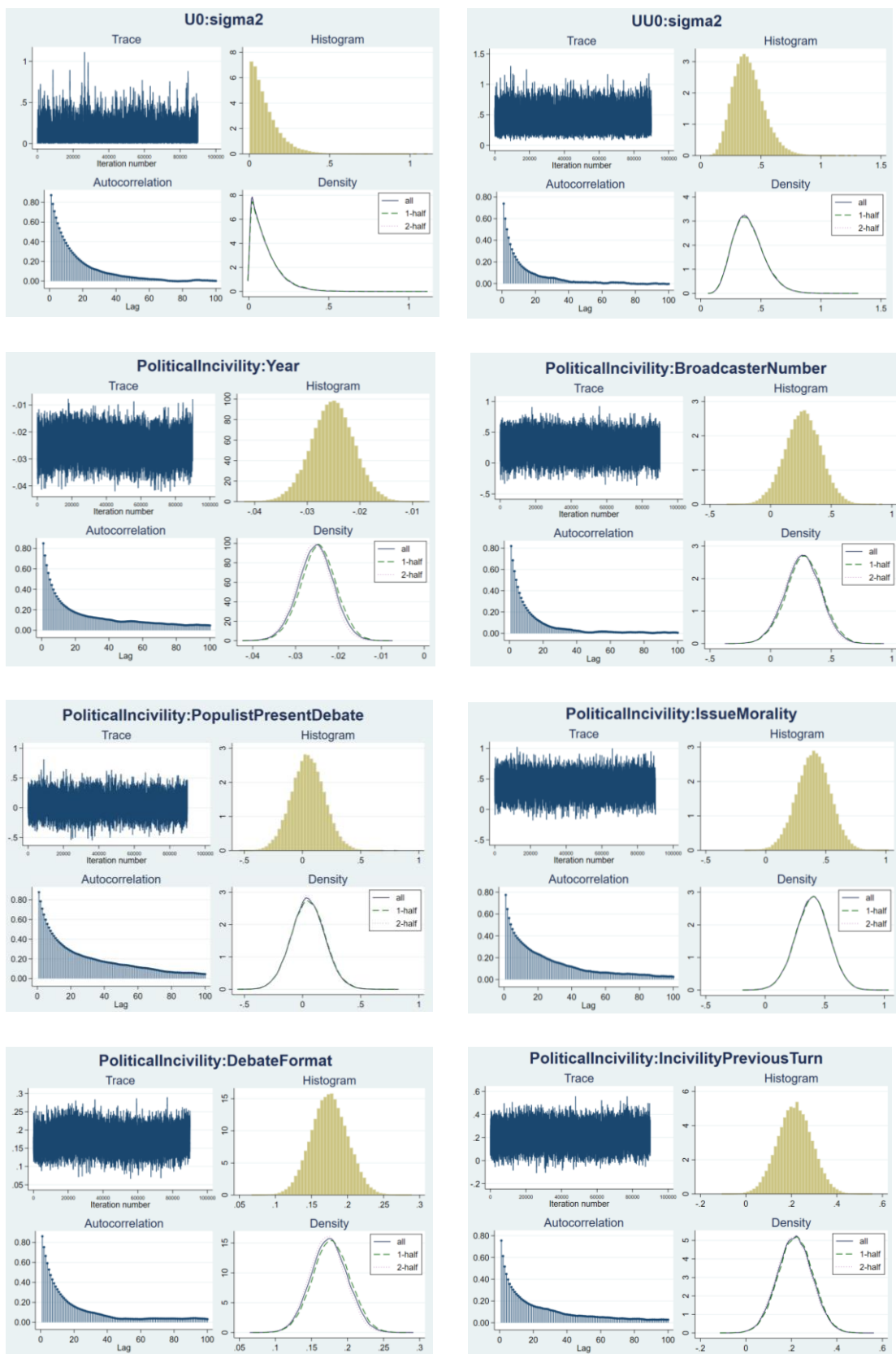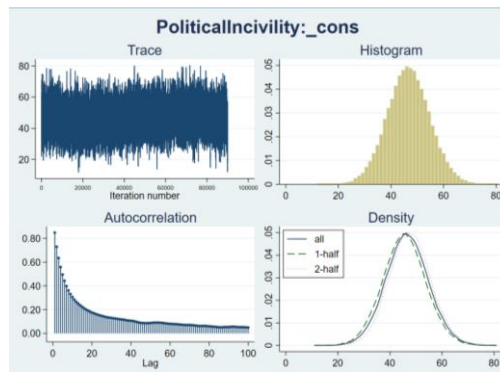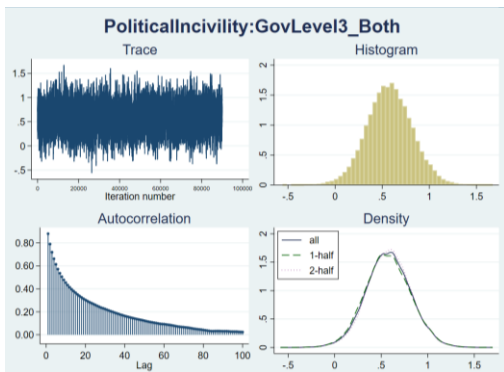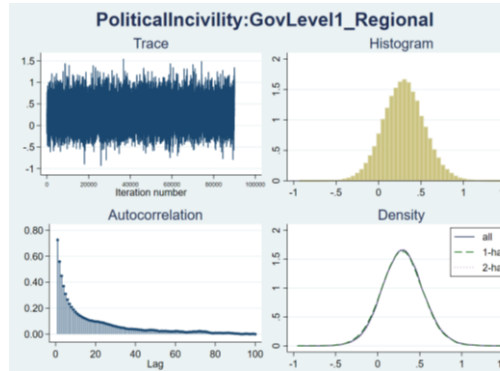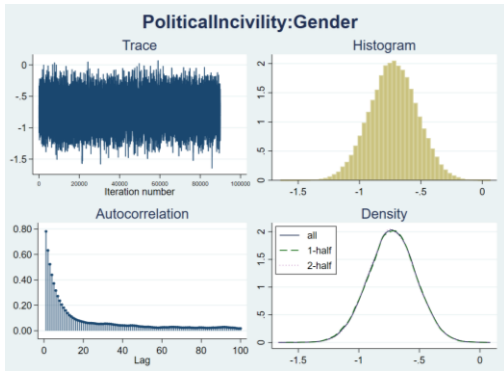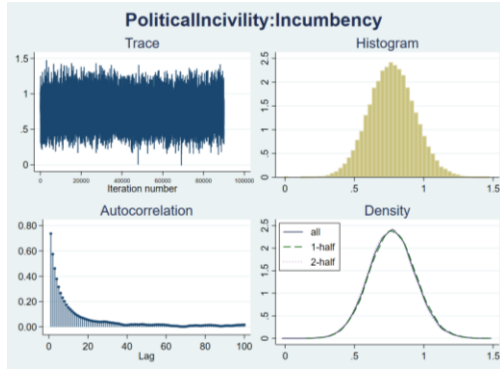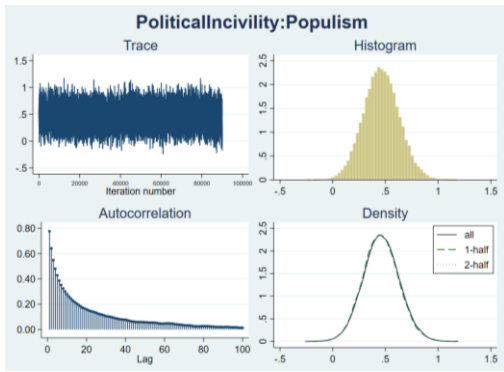
Table A6.4: Bayesian model building (Model I – Model IV)

Variables	Model I			Model II		
	Posterior mean (SD)	95% CI	Odds Ratios	Posterior mean (SD)	95% CI	Odds Ratios
Intercept	20.137 (32.442)	-42.229, 86.182	$e^{20.137}$	49.741 (32.492)	-14.327, 114,149	$e^{49.741}$
Time	-0.011 (0.016)	-0.044, 0.020	0.989	-0.026 (0.016)	-0.059, 0.006	0.974
Broadcaster				0.502 (0.269)	-0.032, 1.037	1.652
Populist presence				0.679 (0.316)	0.060, 1.307	1.972
Issue morality						
Format						
Action-reaction						
Populist ideology						
Incumbency						
Gender						
Government level (ref: federal)						
Regional	0.423 (0.346)	-0.239, 1.131	1.527	0.182 (0.301)	-0.419, 0.780	1.197
Both	0.629 (0.356)	-0.055, 1.354	1.876	0.425 (0.318)	-0.189, 1.070	1.530
Variance						
$\sigma^2_{speaker}$	0.673 (0.191)	0.360, 1.106		0.679 (0.182)	0.377, 1.087	
σ^2_{debate}	0.211 (0.163)	0.013, 0.626		0.124 (0.118)	0.007, 0.434	
DIC	2483.52			2481.61		

Notes. Entries are logit coefficients and standard deviations (in parentheses), logit coefficients of the 95% credible interval (CI), and odds ratios. Model specifications: MCMC sample size = 90,000; burn-in = 50,000; thinning interval = 10; inverse gamma (0.01; 0.01) prior distributions for the varying intercepts; normal distribution with mean of 0 and variance 10,000 for all other parameters. The Deviance Information Criterium (DIC) is reported in the last row. There was no sign of non-convergence for any of the parameters.

Variables	Model III Posterior mean (SD)	Model III 95% CI	Model III Odds Ratios	Model IV Posterior mean (SD)	Model IV 95% CI	Model IV Odds Ratios
Intercept	46.721 (5.101)	36.540, 56.673	$e^{46.721}$	46.648 (8.198)	30.621, 62.960	$e^{46.648}$
Time	-0.025 (0.003)	-0.030, -0.020	0.975	-0.025 (0.004)	-0.033, -0.017	0.975
Broadcaster	0.322 (0.186)	-0.046, 0.686	1.380	0.266 (0.148)	-0.030, 0.556	1.305
Populist presence	0.373 (0.242)	-0.105, 0.848	1.452	0.047 (0.144)	-0.236, 0.333	1.048
Issue morality	0.400 (0.144)	0.116, 0.681	1.492	0.396 (0.140)	0.117, 0.668	1.486
Format	0.165 (0.041)	0.084, 0.246	1.180	0.175 (0.025)	0.126, 0.225	1.191
Action-reaction	0.296 (0.124)	0.051, 0.538	1.344	0.215 (0.076)	0.067, 0.364	1.240
Populist ideology				0.461 (0.170)	0.133, 0.801	1.586
Incumbency				0.770 (0.166)	0.447, 1.101	2.160
Gender				-0.725 (0.196)	-1.113, -0.345	0.484
Government level (ref: federal)						
Regional	0.267 (0.282)	-0.291, 0.823	1.306	0.298 (0.248)	-0.184, 0.799	1.347
Both	0.526 (0.212)	0.114, 0.949	1.692	0.578 (0.241)	0.105, 1.055	1.782
Variance						
$\sigma^2_{speaker}$	0.665 (0.176)	0.376, 1.061		0.399 (0.130)	0.185, 0.689	
σ^2_{debate}	0.061 (0.068)	0.005, 0.253		0.104 (0.093)	0.007, 0.346	
DIC		2460.52			2440.83	

Notes. Entries are logit coefficients and standard deviations (in parentheses), logit coefficients of the 95% credible interval (CI), and odds ratios. Model specifications: MCMC sample size = 90,000; burn-in = 50,000; thinning interval = 10; inverse gamma (0.01; 0.01) prior distributions for the varying intercepts; normal distribution with mean of 0 and variance 10,000 for all other parameters. The Deviance Information Criterium (DIC) is reported in the last row. There was no sign of non-convergence for any of the parameters.

Appendix 6.5: Frequentist multilevel logistic regression

Table A6.5: Results from frequentist multilevel logistic regression (Model I – Model IV)

Variables	Model I		Model II	
	Logit coefficients (SE)	Odds Ratios	Logit coefficients (SE)	Odds Ratios
Intercept	18.220 (30.807)	$e^{18.220}$	55.114 (29.287)[+]	$e^{55.114}$
Time	-0.010 (0.015)	0.990	-0.029 (0.015)[+]	0.971
Broadcaster type			0.519 (0.227)*	1.681
Populist presence			0.647 (0.297)*	1.909
Issue morality				
Format				
Action-reaction				
Populist ideology				
Incumbency				
Gender				
Government level (ref: federal)				
Regional	0.403 (0.310)	1.496	0.123 (0.270)	1.131
Both	0.612 (0.323)[+]	1.844	0.417 (0.274)	1.517
Variance				
$\sigma_{speaker}$	0.631 (0.176)		0.640 (0.175)	
σ_{debate}	0.133 (0.108)		0.033 (0.081)	
Log likelihood	-1265.77		-1261.93	
AIC	2543.54		2539.86	

Notes. Entries are logit coefficients, standard errors (in parentheses), and odds ratios. Intraclass correlation (ICC) in the null model has a value of 0.201 (SD = 0.037; CI = 0.138, 0.284) at the speaker level, and a value of 0.041 (SD = 0.030; CI = 0.009, 0.161) at the debate level.
[+]p <.10, *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Variables	Model III Logit coefficients (SE)	Model III Odds Ratios	Model IV Logit coefficients (SE)	Model IV Odds Ratios
Intercept	49.603 (27.050)[+]	$e^{49.603}$	49.387 (25.972)[+]	$e^{49.387}$
Time	-0.027 (0.014)[+]	0.974	-0.027 (0.013)*	0.974
Broadcaster type	0.326 (0.215)	1.386	0.289 (0.209)	1.336
Populist presence	0.361 (0.291)	1.435	0.165 (0.279)	1.180
Issue morality	0.381 (0.158)*	1.464	0.365 (0.160)*	1.440
Format	0.160 (0.039)***	1.174	0.150 (0.039)***	1.162
Action-reaction	0.319 (0.161)*	1.375	0.318 (0.162)*	1.374
Populist ideology			0.475 (0.231)*	1.608
Incumbency			0.771 (0.186)***	2.163
Gender			-0.632 (0.247)*	0.531
Government level (ref: federal)				
Regional	0.250 (0.520)	1.283	0.224 (0.250)	1.251
Both	0.489 (0.250)[+]	1.631	0.518 (0.249)*	1.678
Variance				
$\sigma_{speaker}$	0.628 (0.156)		0.370 (0.125)	
σ_{debate}	$5.02e^{-33}$ $(1.16e^{-17})$		0.035 (0.072)	
Log likelihood	-1247.54		-1228.96	
AIC	2515.08		2485.91	

Notes. Entries are logit coefficients, standard errors (in parentheses), and odds ratios. Intraclass correlation (ICC) in the null model has a value of 0.201 (SD = 0.037; CI = 0.138, 0.284) at the speaker level, and a value of 0.041 (SD = 0.030; CI = 0.009, 0.161) at the debate level.

[+]p <.10, *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Appendix chapter 7

Table of content

Appendix 7.1: Scenarios text-based experiment

Debate 1: Civil and well-justified

Moderator: "Ok, we will now move on to the next topic in this debate: safety. Mr. Verlaken already mentioned that safety on the streets increases by the presence of more police officers on the street. Mr. Denouw, what is your opinion about this?"

Wim Denouw: "I do not agree with that. Safety won't increase merely by the presence of more police officers."

Moderator: "Mr. Verlaken, you do think it will increase safety?"

Erik Verlaken: "Indeed, I disagree with Mr. Denouw. I do think we should increase the number of police officers because this way we can combat crime and vandalism in an efficient way. After all, this leads to a more controlled environment which deters criminals and vandals, and policemen can also quickly intervene when things go wrong. That's why we want more policemen on the street."

Debate 2: Uncivil and well-justified

Moderator: "Ok, we will now move on to the next topic in this debate: safety. Mr. Verlaken already mentioned that safety on the streets increases by the presence of more police officers on the street. Mr. Denouw, what is your opinion about this?"

Wim Denouw: "I do not agree with that. Safety won't increase merely by the presence of more police offic..." *[Erik Verlaken interrupts]*

Erik Verlaken: "That's really ridiculous, Mr. Denouw! It doesn't make sense! I think we should increase the number of police officers because this way we can combat crime and vandalism in an efficient way. After all, this leads to a more controlled environment which deters criminals and vandals, and policemen can also quickly intervene when things go wrong. That's why we want more policemen on the street."

Debate 3: Civil and simplistic

Moderator: "Ok, we will now move on to the next topic in this debate: safety. Mr. Verlaken already mentioned that safety on the streets increases by the presence of more police officers on the street. Mr. Denouw, what is your opinion about this?"

Wim Denouw: "I do not agree with that. Safety won't increase merely by the presence of more police officers."

Moderator: "Mr. Verlaken, you do think it will increase safety?"

Erik Verlaken: "Indeed, I disagree with Mr. Denouw. I do think we should increase the number of police officers as more policemen on the streets means less criminality and vandalism."

Debate 4: Uncivil and simplistic

Moderator: "Ok, we will now move on to the next topic in this debate: safety. Mr. Verlaken already mentioned that safety on the streets increases by the presence of more police officers on the street. Mr. Denouw, what is your opinion about this?"

Wim Denouw: "I do not agree with that. Safety won't increase merely by the presence of more police offic…" [Erik Verlaken interrupts]

Erik Verlaken: "That's really ridiculous, Mr. Denouw! It doesn't make sense! I think we should increase the number of police officers as more policemen on the streets means less criminality and vandalism."

Appendix 7.2: Scenarios audio-based experiment (translated from Dutch)

Transcript debate 1: Civil and well-justified
Jingle at start of debate & applause by the public

Moderator: Good evening everyone and welcome to the general election debate. Let's get started with the first debate. We will debate the following statement: "More power should be given to the safety services in our country". Erik Verlaken, you can start with your opening statement.

Erik Verlaken: During the past years, unsafety levels have been increasing in Belgium. This is due to the threat of terror, the threat of serious crime, but also modern crime such as organized cybercrime. And in the past years, the necessary steps to solve this have not been undertaken by the current Prime Minister and his government. And we would like to change that. Therefore, we strive to give more power to our safety services. This applies to the police, the judiciary, the intelligence services, and also to defense. Only this way we will be able to modernize the approach of our security services. Their working method has already been the same for several years, while the working method of criminals has constantly been changing and has been modernized. Therefore, we need to make more use of, for instance, the data we obtain from ANPR cameras, also called smart cameras, and the analyses of high-level IT people who have access to important internet data, and so on. We have to start using that. And yet these policies that are necessary to increase safety weren't realized by the Prime Minister and his government. But they are really needed. It was only last week that the National Security Think Thank confirmed that more powers do indeed lead to more safety.

Moderator: Ok, yes, Mr. Denouw?

Wim Denouw: I won't deny what Mr. Verlaken is saying here: there has indeed been an increase in threat of terror, threat of serious crime and cybercrime, but, what he does not say is that the government has already taken several actions, and that these services already have more than enough powers. For instance, many additional cameras have been installed, and the police has been equipped way better in the danger zones. So the necessary steps, they have been taken. What we really do not want is to give people the feeling they are constantly being watched. We also shouldn't burden those services with extra work and even more tasks. What we should do, however, is to free

up more money, and make sure that that money is used in efficient ways. And that's what we have been doing in the past, and that's also how we aim to continue in the future.

Moderator: Ok, Mr. Verlaken?

Erik Verlaken: Yes, look, that's not right. Unfortunately, major steps have not been taken. Without those extra powers, extra money won't be the solution. It does not allow security services to rely on modern technologies. Consequently, they might be receiving additional resources, but those resources are outdated and not adapted to the way criminals are working today. If, however, the smart cameras were to be used more easily, it would be easier to identify the perpetrators. Last week, for example, a robbery in Mechelen *[Belgian city]* was solved that way. In short, by giving more powers, we could solve one third crimes more than with the extra money you are talking about. Many reports confirm this, and yet still you are against it and advocate these outdated resources. More capacity is indeed required for the proper use of new instruments, and we will create that by investing in people and trainings. Money alone is not going to increase safety. Therefore, we have to go beyond your proposal and give more powers. That's what people are waiting for today.

Moderator: Mr. Denouw, what is your answer to this?

Wim Denouw: In the past years, our government has really ensured that major steps have been taken for our safety policy. Extra money was invested in the intelligence services, in the judiciary, the police and in the military. And we also intend to continue our policy in the future. That money is invested in the many and extensive powers those services already have today. And that extra money is really needed there, to make sure these services have the necessary resources to do their job well. That's how we improve our safety policy, make it more efficient, and make sure safety levels go up. You're taking insufficient account of the limited capacities, and of the privacy legislation. Creating more and more powers does not help us further, powerful safety services on the other hand do.

Moderator: Ok Mr. Verlaken, we're almost running out of time. One last reaction?

Erik Verlaken: Yes, we do not agree with that. We must really dare to mention the problems that exist today regarding safety, and also dare to tackle these problems. Belgium is in need of a stronger safety policy. The same powers were given for many years, but the working method of our services is outdated, making the identification and tracking of criminal networks difficult. As a result, too many criminals still slip through the net. Neighboring countries such as France already use these new techniques and they are tackling safety issues faster, better, and more effectively. Let's make sure our services can use these techniques to make our country safer. In other words, vote for safety, vote for us.

Transcript debate 2: Uncivil and well-justified
Jingle at start of debate & applause by the public

Moderator: Good evening everyone and welcome to the general election debate. Let's get started with the first debate. We will debate the following statement: "More power should be given to the safety services in our country". Erik Verlaken, you can start with your opening statement.

Erik Verlaken: During the past years, unsafety levels have been increasing in Belgium. This is due to the threat of terror, the threat of serious crime, but also modern crime such as organized cybercrime. And what has happened in the past years? Nothing has happened! Under your weak leadership, Prime Minister, under your weak leadership, safety policy became one huge mess. Really, you made a mess of it! And we would like to change that. Therefore, we strive to give more power to our safety services. This applies to the police, the judiciary, the intelligence services, and also to defense. Only this way we will be able to modernize the approach of our security services. Their working method has already been the same for several years, while the working method of criminals has constantly been changing and has been modernized. Therefore, we need to make more use of, for instance, the data we obtain from ANPR cameras, also called smart cameras, and the analyses of high-level IT people who have access to important internet data, and so on. We have to start using that. But our Prime Minister and his lousy government do not understand that. They do not understand these policies are necessary to increase safety levels. But just think it through for once. It was only last week that the National Security Think Thank confirmed that more powers do indeed lead to more safety.

Moderator: Ok, yes, Mr. Denouw?

Wim Denouw: I won't deny what Mr. Verlaken is saying here: there has indeed been an increase in threat of terror, threat of serious crime and cybercrime, but, what he does not say is that the government has already taken several actions *[Erik Verlaken laughing]*, and that these services already have more than enough powers. For instance, many additional cameras have been installed, and the police has been equipped way better in the danger zones. So the necessary steps, they have been taken *[Erik Verlaken interrupts: there's no need to lie!]*, they have been taken. What we really do not want is to give people the feeling they are constantly being watched *[Erik Verlaken interrupts: yes but]*. We also shouldn't burden those services with extra work and even more tasks. What we should do, however, is to free up more money, and make sure that that money is used in efficient ways. And that's what we have been doing in the past, and that's also how we aim *[Erik Verlaken tries to interrupt: but no no]* to continue *[Erik Verlaken interrupts: no no stop stop stop]* in the future.

Moderator: Ok, Mr. Verlaken?

Erik Verlaken: Yes, you should stop lying to the people. The government has not taken any major steps, no. Without those extra powers, extra money won't solve anything! It does not allow security services to rely on modern technologies. Consequently, they might be receiving additional resources, but those resources are outdated and not adapted to the way criminals are working today. If, however, the smart cameras were to be used more easily, it would be easier to identify the perpetrators. Last week, for example, a robbery in Mechelen was solved that way. In short, by giving more powers, we could solve one third crimes more than with the extra money you are talking about. Many reports confirm this, but no, you are against it. Soon you will even advocate investments in swords, equestrian trainings and horses! More capacity is indeed required for the proper use of new instruments, and we will create that by investing in people and trainings. Your proposal is too ridiculous for words. Therefore, we have to go beyond that and give more powers. That's what people are waiting for today, not your hollow and stupid phrases.

Moderator: Mr. Denouw, what is your answer to this?

Erik Verlaken: In the past years, our government has really ensured that major steps have been taken for our safety policy. Extra money was invested in the intelligence services, in the judiciary, the police and in the military. And we also intend to continue our policy in the future *[Erik Verlaken: Hm yes *ironic laugh*]*. That money, that money is invested in the many and extensive powers those services already have today. And that extra money is really needed there, to make sure these services have the necessary resources to do their job well. That's how we improve our safety policy, make it more efficient, and make sure safety levels go up. You're taking insufficient account of the limited capacities, and of the privacy legislation *[Erik Verlaken *expresses unbelief*]*. Creating more and more powers does not help us further, powerful safety services on the other hand do.

Moderator: Ok Mr. Verlaken, we're almost running out of time. One last reaction?

Erik Verlaken: Yes, yes, look, Mr. Denouw, you really live in a different world, don't you? When it comes to safety in the past years, you were just a zero, one big zero! You're bad at this. Belgium is in need of strong leadership qualities, Mr. Denouw, not a weak Prime Minister pursuing a weak safety policy like you have always done. The same powers were given for many years, but the working method of our services is outdated, making the identification and tracking of criminal networks difficult. As a result, too many criminals still slip through the net. Neighboring countries such as France already use these new techniques and they are tackling safety issues faster, better, and more effectively. Let's make sure our services can use these techniques to make our country safer. In other words, do not vote for money waster Denouw, but vote for safety, vote for us.

Transcript debate 3: Civil and simplistic
Jingle at start of debate & applause by the public

Moderator: Good evening everyone and welcome to the general election debate. Let's get started with the first debate. We will debate the following statement: "More power should be given to the safety services in our country". Erik Verlaken, you can start with your opening statement.

Erik Verlaken: During the past years, unsafety levels have been increasing in Belgium. There is the threat of terror, the threat of serious crime, and organized cybercrime. And in the past years, the necessary steps to solve this have not been undertaken by the current Prime Minister and his government. And we would like to change that. We strive to give more power to our safety services. This applies to the police, the judiciary, the intelligence services, and also to defense. These policies that are necessary weren't realized by the Prime Minister and his government. But they are really needed. We want more powers, as more power means more safety.

Moderator: Ok, yes, Mr. Denouw?

Wim Denouw: I won't deny what Mr. Verlaken is saying here: there has indeed been an increase in threat of terror, threat of serious crime and cybercrime, but, what he does not say is that the government has already taken several actions, and that these services already have more than enough powers. For instance, many additional cameras have been installed, and the police has been equipped way better in the danger zones. So the necessary steps, they have been taken. What we really do not want is to give people the feeling they are constantly being watched. We also shouldn't burden those services with extra work and even more tasks. What we should do, however, is to free

up more money, and make sure that that money is used in efficient ways. And that's what we have been doing in the past, and that's also how we aim to continue in the future.

Moderator: Ok, Mr. Verlaken?

Erik Verlaken: Yes, look, that's not right. Unfortunately, major steps have not been taken. Money alone won't increase safety levels. Without extra powers, extra money won't be the solution. It does not allow security services to rely on modern technologies. They might be receiving additional resources, but they are outdated and inadequate. We have to fight against crime on equal footing. We have to go beyond your proposal and give more powers. More capacity is indeed required at the safety services, and we will create it. That's what people are waiting for today.

Moderator: Mr. Denouw, what is your answer to this?

Wim Denouw: In the past years, our government has really ensured that major steps have been taken for our safety policy. Extra money was invested in the intelligence services, in the judiciary, the police and in the military. And we also intend to continue our policy in the future. That money is invested in the many and extensive powers those services already have today. And that extra money is really needed there, to make sure these services have the necessary resources to do their job well. That's how we improve our safety policy, make it more efficient, and make sure safety levels go up. You're taking insufficient account of the limited capacities, and of the privacy legislation. Creating more and more powers does not help us further, powerful safety services on the other hand do.

Moderator: Ok Mr. Verlaken, we're almost running out of time. One last reaction?

Erik Verlaken: Yes, we do not agree with that. We must really dare to mention the problems that exist today regarding safety, and also dare to tackle these problems. Belgium is in need of a stronger safety policy. The same powers were given for many years, while new techniques exist to tackle safety issues faster, better, and more effectively. Let's make sure our services can use these techniques to make our country safer. In other words, vote for safety, vote for us.

Transcript debate 4: Uncivil and simplistic
Jingle at start of debate & applause by the public

Moderator: Good evening everyone and welcome to the general election debate. Let's get started with the first debate. We will debate the following statement: "More power should be given to the safety services in our country". Erik Verlaken, you can start with your opening statement.

Erik Verlaken: During the past years, unsafety levels have been increasing in Belgium. There is the threat of terror, the threat of serious crime, and organized cybercrime. And what has happened in the past years? Nothing has happened! Under your weak leadership, Prime Minister, under your weak leadership, safety policy became one huge mess. Really, you made a mess of it! And we would like to change that. We strive to give more power to our safety services. This applies to the police, the judiciary, the intelligence services, and also to defense. Our Prime Minister and his lousy government do not understand that these policies are necessary. But just think it through for once. We want more powers, as more power means more safety.

Moderator: Ok, yes, Mr. Denouw?

Wim Denouw: I won't deny what Mr. Verlaken is saying here: there has indeed been an increase in threat of terror, threat of serious crime and cybercrime, but, what he does not say is that the government has already taken several actions *[Erik Verlaken laughing]*, and that these services already have more than enough powers. For instance, many additional cameras have been installed, and the police has been equipped way better in the danger zones. So the necessary steps, they have been taken *[Erik Verlaken interrupts: there's no need to lie!]*, they have been taken. What we really do not want is to give people the feeling they are constantly being watched *[Erik Verlaken interrupts: yes but]*. We also shouldn't burden those services with extra work and even more tasks. What we should do, however, is to free up more money, and make sure that that money is used in efficient ways. And that's what we have been doing in the past, and that's also how we aim *[Erik Verlaken tries to interrupt: but no no]* to continue *[Erik Verlaken interrupts: no no stop stop stop]* in the future.

Moderator: Ok, Mr. Verlaken?

Erik Verlaken: Yes, you should stop lying to the people. The government has not taken any major steps, no. Money alone won't increase safety levels. Without extra powers, extra money won't solve anything! It does not allow security services to rely on modern technologies. They might be receiving additional resources, but they are outdated. You are actually saying you will invest equestrian trainings instead of modern trainings. Our people are being shot and threatened with Kalashnikovs, and you, you give them more swords. Your proposal is too ridiculous for words. We have to go beyond that and give more powers. More capacity is indeed required at the safety services, and we will create it. That's what people are waiting for today, not your hollow and stupid phrases.

Moderator: Mr. Denouw, what is your answer to this?

Erik Verlaken: In the past years, our government has really ensured that major steps have been taken for our safety policy. Extra money was invested in the intelligence services, in the judiciary, the police and in the military. And we also intend to continue our policy in the future *[Erik Verlaken: Hm yes *ironic laugh*]*. That money, that money is invested in the many and extensive powers those services already have today. And that extra money is really needed there, to make sure these services have the necessary resources to do their job well. That's how we improve our safety policy, make it more efficient, and make sure safety levels go up. You're taking insufficient account of the limited capacities, and of the privacy legislation *[Erik Verlaken *expresses unbelief*]*. Creating more and more powers does not help us further, powerful safety services on the other hand do.

Moderator: Ok Mr. Verlaken, we're almost running out of time. One last reaction?

Erik Verlaken: Yes, yes, look, Mr. Denouw, you really live in a different world, don't you? When it comes to safety in the past years, you were just a zero, one big zero! You're bad at this. Belgium is in need of strong leadership qualities, Mr. Denouw, not a weak Prime Minister pursuing a weak safety policy like you have always done. The same powers were given for many years, while new techniques exist to tackle safety issues faster, better, and more effectively. Let's make sure our services can use these techniques to make our country safer. In other words, do not vote for money waster Denouw, but vote for safety, vote for us.

Appendix 7.3: Manipulation checks

To check if manipulations for uncivil and simplistic communication were successful, we asked participants to rate the questions "To what degree do you think Erik Verlaken reacts in a respectful way?" and "To what degree do you think Erik Verlaken explains his standpoint?". In order not to prime respondents, these questions were asked after the questions measuring the outcome variables. Independent Samples T tests show manipulations were successful. Uncivil conditions differed significantly from the civil ones: $T=10.22$; $p<0.001$ for experiment 1 ($M_{civil}=3.75$; $M_{uncivil}=2.66$; 5-point scale); $T=-12.65$; $p<0.001$ for experiment 2 ($M_{civil}=4.89$; $M_{uncivil}=3.59$; 7-point scale). Simplistic conditions differed significantly from the well-justified ones: $T=6.02$; $p<0.001$ for experiment 1 ($M_{justified}=3.53$; $M_{simplistic}=2.86$; 5-point scale); $T=-2.05$; $p=0.041$ for experiment 2 ($M_{justified}=4.81$; $M_{simplistic}=4.63$; 7-point scale).

Appendix 7.4: Effects on perceived debate effectiveness

An additional question in the survey measured perceived debate performance of politician B (see Levasseur & Dean, 1996). Participants were asked: "In the media people often talk about politicians as winners or losers of a political debate. To what extent do you think that one of the two politicians won this debate?" (1 = Wim Denouw was absolutely the winner of the debate to 5 = Erik Verlaken was absolutely the winner of the debate). This variable does not measure persuasiveness per se, yet it was included to gather additional insights into how uncivil, simplistic communication affects the effectiveness of the political candidate using uncivil, simplistic communication.

Results in Tables A7.4.1, A7.4.2 and A7.4.3 show that there are no significant effects of uncivil communication, simplistic argumentation, and its combined use on the politician's perceived debate performance. Only the mean scores in Table A7.4.3 for the effect of the combined use of uncivil and simplistic communication in experiment 1 differ to some extent. This difference goes in the same direction as the difference we observed in our study for the effect of uncivil, simplistic communication on persuasive power. This indicates again that uncivil, simplistic communication seems to be less effective than civil, well-justified communication. The difference in means is not significant, however. Moreover, political cynicism and perspective inclusiveness do not moderate any of the relationships between uncivil communication, simplistic communication, or its combined use and perceived debate effectiveness.

Table A7.4.1: Comparison of civil and uncivil communication

	Experiment 1	Experiment 2
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Civil	3.22 (0.95)	3.19 (0.90)
Uncivil	3.27 (0.92)	3.21 (0.91)

Notes: $^+p<.10$, $*p<.05$, $**p<.01$, $***p<.001$.
Experiment 1: $N=280$; $F=0.20$, $p=0.655$, partial $\eta^2=0.001$.
Experiment 2: $N=534$; $F=0.07$, $p=0.794$, partial $\eta^2=0.000$.

Table A7.4.2: Comparison of well-justified and simplistic argumentation

	Experiment 1	Experiment 2
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Well-justified	3.22 (0.95)	3.19 (0.90)
Simplistic	3.24 (1.04)	3.13 (0.84)

Notes: $^+p<.10$, $^*p<.05$, $^{**}p<.01$, $^{***}p<.001$.
Experiment 1: $N=272$; $F=0.03$, $p=0.862$, partial $\eta^2=0.000$.
Experiment 2: $N=562$; $F=0.73$, $p=0.395$, partial $\eta^2=0.001$.

Table A7.4.3: Comparison of civil, well-justified and uncivil, simplistic communication

	Experiment 1	Experiment 2
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Civil, justified	3.22 (0.95)	3.19 (0.90)
Uncivil, simplistic	3.07 (0.94)	3.22 (0.91)

Notes: $^+p<.10$, $^*p<.05$, $^{**}p<.01$, $^{***}p<.001$.
Experiment 1: $N=276$; $F=1.86$, $p=0.173$, partial $\eta^2=0.007$.
Experiment 2: $N=549$; $F=0.12$, $p=0.729$, partial $\eta^2=0.000$.

Appendix 7.5: Robustness check

In Table A7.5.1, A7.5.2, and A7.5.3, results are presented for analyses with those participants that complied with the Instructional Manipulation Check. The IMC was a question asked at the end of the survey to check if respondents filled in the survey carefully: "Could you please indicate the number 0 on the scale below? This question is important to us because it allows us to check whether everyone filled in the questions carefully" (scale ranging from 0 to 5).

When comparing the results from analyses with all participants versus with only those that complied with the IMC, we see that effects go in similar directions, but that effects in experiment 1 generally become stronger while effects in experiment 2 generally become weaker. One explanation for this might be that the survey experiment of experiment 1 was shorter than the one in experiment 2. Experiment 1 consisted of a limited amount of questions and a very short debate to read. Survey experiment 2 consisted of several additional questions (e.g. moderating variables) and participants had to engage longer with the debate. As a consequence, as the IMC came at the end of the survey experiment, more time passed since participants got the IMC question in experiment 2. People might have paid less attention when filling in the IMC in experiment 2 which means we might have deleted participants from the dataset here who might have actually got the treatment.

Table A7.5.1: Comparison of civil and uncivil communication

Experiment 1	Political trust: Candidate***	Political trust: System*	Persuasive power
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Civil	3.27 (0.73)	4.55 (2.16)	3.41 (0.96)
Uncivil	2.88 (0.85)	3.95 (2.14)	3.25 (1.10)

Experiment 2	Political trust: Candidate	Political trust: System	Persuasive power
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Civil	3.02 (0.95)	4.48 (2.15)	3.37 (0.94)
Uncivil	2.89 (0.85)	4.50 (2.07)	3.28 (0.90)

Notes: $^{+}p<.10$, $^{*}p<.05$, $^{**}p<.01$, $^{***}p<.001$.
Experiment 1: $N=212$; Trust in candidate: $F=12.81$, $p<0.001$, partial $\eta^2=0.057$; Trust in political system: $F=4.11$, $p=0.044$, partial $\eta^2=0.019$; Persuasive power: $F=1.17$, $p=0.281$, partial $\eta^2=0.006$.
Experiment 2: $N=456$; Trust in candidate: $F=2.41$, $p=0.121$, partial $\eta^2=0.005$; Trust in political system: $F=0.01$, $p=0.942$, partial $\eta^2=0.000$; Persuasive power: $F=1.09$, $p=0.298$, partial $\eta^2=0.002$.

Table A7.5.2: Comparison of well-justified and simplistic argumentation

Experiment 1	Political trust: Candidate	Political trust: System	Persuasive power
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Well-justified	3.27 (0.73)	4.55 (2.16)	3.41 (0.96)
Simplistic	3.23 (0.78)	4.64 (2.32)	3.44 (1.07)

Experiment 2	Political trust: Candidate	Political trust: System	Persuasive power^{+}
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Well-justified	3.02 (0.95)	4.48 (2.15)	3.37 (0.94)
Simplistic	3.11 (0.83)	4.50 (2.08)	3.21 (0.95)

Notes: $^{+}p<.10$, $^{*}p<.05$, $^{**}p<.01$, $^{***}p<.001$.
Experiment 1: $N=210$; Trust in candidate: $F=0.17$, $p=0.681$, partial $\eta^2=0.001$; Trust in political system: $F=0.08$, $p=0.773$, partial $\eta^2=0.000$; Persuasive power: $F=0.04$, $p=0.850$, partial $\eta^2=0.000$.
Experiment 2: $N=474$; Trust in candidate: $F=1.30$, $p=0.254$, partial $\eta^2=0.003$; Trust in political system: $F=0.01$, $p=0.931$, partial $\eta^2=0.000$; Persuasive power: $F=3.33$, $p=0.069$, partial $\eta^2=0.007$.

Table A7.5.3: Comparison of civil, well-justified and uncivil, simplistic communication

Experiment 1	Political trust: Candidate***	Political trust: System	Persuasive power[+]
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Civil, justified	3.27 (0.73)	4.55 (2.16)	3.41 (0.96)
Uncivil, simplistic	2.85 (0.93)	4.38 (2.35)	3.18 (0.98)

Experiment 2	Political trust: Candidate**	Political trust: System	Persuasive power**
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Civil, justified	3.02 (0.95)	4.48 (2.15)	3.37 (0.94)
Uncivil, simplistic	2.81 (0.89)	4.38 (2.08)	3.14 (1.00)

Notes: [+]$p<.10$, *$p< .05$, **$p< .01$, ***$p< .001$.
Experiment 1: $N=208$; Trust in candidate: $F=13.29$, $p< 0.001$, partial $\eta^2=0.061$; Trust in political system: $F=0.30$, $p=0.584$, partial $\eta^2=0.001$; Persuasive power: $F=2.99$, $p=0.085$, partial $\eta^2=0.014$.
Experiment 2: $N=466$; Trust in candidate: $F=6.27$, $p=0.013$, partial $\eta^2=0.013$; Trust in political system: $F=0.30$, $p=0.581$, partial $\eta^2=0.001$; Persuasive power: $F=6.33$, $p=0.012$, partial $\eta^2=0.013$.

Appendix chapter 8

Table of content

Appendix 8.1: Sample description

Table A8.1: Sample description experiment 1 and 2, compared to Flemish population

	Flemish population	Experiment 1	Experiment 2
Gender			
Male	49,5%	73,5%	48,3%
Female	50,5%	26,1%	51,3%
Other	/	0,3%	0,4%
Age			
18-24	10,9%	0,8%	8,1%
25-34	17,2%	5,8%	15,9%
35-44	17,8%	11,3%	16,7%
45-54	19,4%	16,8%	22,0%
55-64	19,1%	28,6%	18,8%
65+	15,8%	36,7%	18,6%
Higher education	38,3%	77,5%	38,9%

Source Flemish population: StatBel 2020 (https://statbel.fgov.be/nl)
Note: age group percentages in the Flemish population were calculated based on the 18-75 year old population in Flanders.

Appendix 8.2: Additional information on preregistration

Both experiments were preregistered at https://osf.io/r25a7/. Before conducting the second experiment, feedback was gathered on the first experiment. The feedback that was gathered led to an updated design for the second experiment (i.e. 2 experimental conditions were added), which is the reason why an updated file of the preregistration is added. Moreover, there are three non-substantial deviations from the preregistration which are explicated here to ensure full transparency.

First, in the preregistration, it is explained that incivility-focused coverage will be compared to what is called "content-focused" coverage. After receiving feedback, it was decided to label the latter concept differently and to opt for the concept "incivility-free" coverage instead of "content-focused" coverage. The reason is that both the incivility-focused and the incivility-free conditions contain – content-wise – the exact same information (i.e. the journalist informs the reader about the policy preferences expressed in the debate). The only difference is that, in the incivility-focused condition, an emphasis on incivility in the debate is added. This emphasis is absent in the incivility-free condition. Second, this paper builds on the previous research finding that politicians' use of incivility lowers political trust and thus expects this to take place. This was not explicitly formulated with an hypothesis in the preregistration but was added as an hypothesis in the paper. Third, in the preregistration analysis plan it was specified that scenario 1 and 2 would be compared in experiment 1 to test H2 and H3 on the effect of the type of news coverage (without taking into account the degree of incivility in the debate), and that scenario 5 and 6 would be compared in experiment 2. While still comparing scenario 5 and 6 in experiment 2, we do not just compare scenario 1 to scenario 2 in experiment 1. Rather, two-way ANOVAs are conducted to test H2 and H3 to report main effects because using discrete one-way ANOVAs only could over-capitalize on chance and present challenges to isolate key effects. The information of comparing scenario 1 to scenario 2 is not lost, however, since we also conduct the one-way ANOVAs and subsequent post-hoc Bonferroni tests comparing all scenarios to one another (in the second part of the analysis).

Appendix 8.3: Stimulus material

Appendix 8.3.1: Debate scenarios – Civil & uncivil (translated from Dutch to English)

Statement	Civil statements	Uncivil statements
#1	**Erik Verlaken**: Well, look, during the past years, unsafety levels have been increasing in Belgium. And in the past years, the necessary steps to solve this have not been undertaken by the current Prime Minister and his government.	**Erik Verlaken**: Well, look, during the past years, unsafety levels have been increasing in Belgium. And what has happened in the past years? Nothing has happened! Under your weak leadership, Prime Minister, under your weak leadership, safety policy became one huge mess. Really, you made a mess of it!
#2	**Moderator**: Ok, Mr. Verlaken? **Erik Verlaken**: We have to go beyond your proposal and give more powers. More capacity is indeed required at the safety services, and we will create it. That's what people are waiting for today.	**Erik Verlaken** (interrupts): Stop, stop, stop, stop, stop! **Moderator**: Ok, Mr. Verlaken? **Erik Verlaken**: Yes, you should stop lying to the people. Really, your proposal is too ridiculous for words. We have to go beyond that and give more powers. More capacity is indeed required at the safety services, and we will create it. That's what people are waiting for today, not your hollow and stupid phrases.
#3	**Erik Verlaken**: Yes, we do not agree with that. We must really dare to mention the problems that exist today regarding safety, and also dare to tackle these problems. The same powers were given for many years, while new techniques exist to tackle safety issues faster, better, and more effectively. Belgium is in need of a new and a stronger safety policy.	**Erik Verlaken**: Mr. Denouw, you really live in a different world, don't you? When it comes to safety in the past years, you were just one big zero. You can't solve this. The same powers were given for many years, while new techniques exist to tackle safety issues faster, better, and more effectively. Belgium is in need of strong leadership qualities, Mr. Denouw, not a weak Prime Minister that implements a weak safety policy like you have always done.

Debate between Verlaken and Prime Minister Denouw about the safety of our country

In the run-up to the elections, the Great Election Debate was broadcast on TV Channel One yesterday. The different party leaders competed against each other in several duels. Citizens across the country were rightly looking forward to the final duel between Prime Minister Wim Denouw and opposition leader Erik Verlaken. They debated the security of our country. The discussion highlighted the differences between the two.

Both politicians made it clear to voters that they want to tackle security policy thoroughly and want to focus on the security of our country. Both politicians agree on the importance of this issue, but how they will approach and tackle it turns out to be different. Prime Minister Denouw wants to continue his policy: "we will continue to free up more money and we will use that money efficiently to invest it in the security services". "That is insufficient" according to Erik Verlaken, who responded that there is a need for a stronger security policy, where we deploy more security powers.

Prime Minister Denouw emphasizes that it will be untenable to saddle up the services with extra work. Verlaken disagrees with this and proposes to invest more in new techniques and instruments at the security services in order to "tackle safety issues faster, better, and more effectively ".

Interested in more policy positions of the party leaders? You can watch the debate on our news website again.

Verlaken clashes in snarky debate with Prime Minister Denouw about the safety of our country

In the run-up to the elections, the Great Election Debate was broadcast on TV Channel One yesterday. The different party leaders competed against each other in several duels. Citizens across the country were rightly looking forward to the final duel between Prime Minister Wim Denouw and opposition leader Erik Verlaken. They engaged in a nasty debate about the security of our country. Conflict and rude statements were not lacking. The fierce and offensive discussion highlighted the differences between the two.

Both politicians made it clear to voters that they want to tackle security policy thoroughly and want to focus on the security of our country. Both politicians agree on the importance of this issue, but how they will approach and tackle it led to fierce conflict. Prime Minister Denouw wants to continue his policy: "we will continue to free up more money and we will use that money efficiently to invest it in the security services". "That is ridiculous" according to Erik Verlaken, who rudely responded that there is a need for a stronger security policy, where we deploy more security powers.

Prime Minister Denouw emphasizes that it will be untenable to saddle up the services with extra work. The conflict was quickly provoked and Verlaken responded with a number of crude statements. He argues that that's nonsense and proposes to invest more in new techniques and instruments at the security services in order to "tackle safety issues faster, better, and more effectively".

Interested in more strong statements of the party leaders? You can watch the debate on our news website again.

Appendix 8.4: Manipulation checks

Manipulation checks stimulus material: incivility in debates and in news coverage

To check if manipulations of incivility in the election debate and in the newspaper article were successful, participants were asked to rate the questions "To what degree do you think the statements in the audio fragment of the political debate were respectful?" (1 = very disrespectful to 7 = very respectful) and "To what degree do you think the newspaper article was focused on bickering and conflict in the debate?" (1 = very limited to 7 = very extensively). In order not to prime respondents, these questions were asked after the questions that measure the outcome variables. Independent Samples T-tests show that the manipulations were successful.

The uncivil debate differed significantly from the civil debate in experiment 1: $T = -22.834$, $p < 0.001$ ($M_{uncivil} = 2.88$; $M_{civil} = 4.86$), and in experiment 2: $T = -10.680$, $p < 0.001$ ($M_{uncivil} = 3.47$; $M_{civil} = 4.61$). Incivility-focused news coverage differed significantly from incivility-free news coverage in experiment 1: $T = 14.413$, $p < 0.001$ ($M_{uncivil} = 4.70$; $M_{civil} = 3.22$), and in experiment 2: $T = 10.256$, $p < 0.001$ ($M_{uncivil} = 4.46$; $M_{civil} = 3.58$).

Realism debate fragments experiment 2

In the second experiment a question was also asked about the realism of the audio debate fragments. Participants who were exposed to an audio fragment of a debate (condition 1 – 4) were asked to rate the statement "We would like to know your opinion about how realistic you think the debate fragment was that you listened to. Please indicate this on the scale below, where 0 means very unrealistic and 10 means very realistic. There was no significant difference between the civil and uncivil debate fragment: $T = -0.591$, $p = 0.555$ ($M_{uncivil} = 5.79$; $M_{civil} = 5.69$).

Appendix 8.5: Overview of all results

Experiment 1

Table A8.5.1: Descriptives of debate and news coverage style

		Trust in political candidate		Trust in political system		News credibility	
		Mean (SD)	*N*	Mean (SD)	*N*	Mean (SD)	*N*
Debate style	Civil	3.55 (1.17)	315	4.77 (1.96)	315	3.66 (1.31)	314
	Uncivil	2.87 (1.23)	322	4.96 (1.76)	322	3.95 (1.13)	322
Coverage style	Incivility-free	3.34 (1.20)	321	4.90 (1.87)	321	4.05 (1.11)	321
	Incivility-focused	3.07 (1.28)	316	4.83 (1.85)	316	3.55 (1.30)	315

Table A8.5.2: Descriptives all scenarios

	Trust in political candidate		Trust in political system		News credibility	
Scenario	Mean (SD)	*N*	Mean (SD)	*N*	Mean (SD)	*N*
1. Civil + Incivility-free	3.62 (1.08)	159	4.80 (1.95)	159	4.12 (1.10)	159
2. Civil + Incivility-focused	3.47 (1.25)	156	4.74 (1.96)	156	3.18 (1.34)	155
3. Uncivil + Incivility-free	3.06 (1.26)	162	5.01 (1.79)	162	3.99 (1.12)	162
4. Uncivil + Incivility-focused	2.68 (1.18)	160	4.91 (1.72)	160	3.91 (1.15)	160

Table A8.5.3: Two-way ANOVA results

	Trust in political candidate			Trust in political system			News credibility		
	F	p-value	Partial η^2	F	p-value	Partial η^2	F	p-value	Partial η^2
Debate style	50.817	<0.001	0.074	1.685	0.195	0.003	10.047	0.002	0.016
Coverage style	7.637	0.006	0.012	0.277	0.599	0.000	29.669	<0.001	0.045
Interaction	1.591	0.208	0.003	0.015	0.902	0.000	20.957	<0.001	0.032

Table A8.5.4: One-way ANOVA results

	Trust in political candidate			Trust in political system			News credibility		
	F	p-value	Partial η^2	F	p-value	Partial η^2	F	p-value	Partial η^2
All scenarios compared	20.017	<0.001	0.087	0.659	0.577	0.003	19.889	<0.001	0.086

Table A8.5.5: Post-hoc Bonferroni test for trust in political candidate

Compare...	To...
Scenario 1 (civil + incivility-free)	Scenario 2
	Scenario 3***
	Scenario 4***
Scenario 2 (civil + incivility-focused)	Scenario 1
	Scenario 3*
	Scenario 4***
Scenario 3 (uncivil + incivility-free)	Scenario 1***
	Scenario 2*
	Scenario 4*
Scenario 4 (uncivil + incivility-focused)	Scenario 1***
	Scenario 2***
	Scenario 3*

Note: $^{+}p<.10$, $^{*}p<.05$, $^{**}p<.01$, $^{***}p<.001$.

Table A8.5.6: Post-hoc Bonferroni test for news credibility

Compare...	To...
Scenario 1 (civil + incivility-free)	Scenario 2***
	Scenario 3
	Scenario 4
Scenario 2 (civil + incivility-focused)	Scenario 1***
	Scenario 3***
	Scenario 4***
Scenario 3 (uncivil + incivility-free)	Scenario 1
	Scenario 2***
	Scenario 4
Scenario 4 (uncivil + incivility-focused)	Scenario 1
	Scenario 2***
	Scenario 3

Note: $^{+}p<.10$, $^{*}p<.05$, $^{**}p<.01$, $^{***}p<.001$.

Experiment 2

Table A8.5.7: Descriptives of debate and news coverage style

		Trust in political candidate		Trust in political system		News credibility	
		Mean (SD)	N	Mean (SD)	N	Mean (SD)	N
Debate style	Civil	3.94 (0.97)	255	3.76 (2.16)	255	4.05 (0.97)	255
	Uncivil	3.61 (1.19)	267	3.85 (2.10)	267	4.00 (1.11)	267
Coverage style	Incivility-free	3.75 (1.14)	255	3.69 (2.19)	255	4.11 (1.04)	255
	Incivility-focused	3.79 (1.07)	267	3.91 (2.06)	267	3.94 (1.04)	267

Note: Descriptive results of scenario 5 and scenario 6 are not included here (see descriptive results below in Table A8.5.8).

Table A.8.5.8: Descriptives all scenarios

Scenario	Trust in political candidate		Trust in political system		News credibility	
	Mean (SD)	*N*	Mean (SD)	*N*	Mean (SD)	*N*
1. Civil + Incivility-free	3.98 (1.02)	127	3.61 (2.30)	127	4.14 (0.98)	127
2. Civil + Incivility-focused	3.90 (0.93)	128	3.90 (2.00)	128	3.95 (0.95)	128
3. Uncivil + Incivility-free	3.52 (1.20)	128	3.78 (2.08)	128	4.08 (1.09)	128
4. Uncivil + Incivility-focused	3.69 (1.18)	139	3.92 (2.13)	139	3.94 (1.12)	139
5. Incivility-free	3.72 (1.08)	122	3.43 (2.29)	122	4.04 (1.01)	122
6. Incivility-focused	3.66 (1.01)	124	3.76 (2.23)	124	3.77 (1.01)	124

Table A8.5.9: T-test results scenario 5 versus scenario 6

	Trust in political candidate		Trust in political system		News credibility	
	t	p-value	t	p-value	t	p-value
Scenario 5 vs. Scenario 6	0.428	0.669	1.151	0.251	2.072	0.039

Table A8.5.10: Two-way ANOVA results

	Trust in political candidate			Trust in political system			News credibility		
	F	p-value	Partial η²	F	p-value	Partial η²	F	p-value	Partial η²
Debate style	12.590	<0.001	0.024	0.245	0.621	0.000	0.200	0.655	0.000
Coverage style	0.233	0.630	0.000	1.324	0.250	0.003	3.432	0.065	0.007
Interaction	1.614	0.204	0.003	0.150	0.699	0.000	0.091	0.762	0.000

Table A8.5.11: One-way ANOVA results

	Trust in political candidate			Trust in political system			News credibility		
	F	p-value	Partial η²	F	p-value	Partial η²	F	p-value	Partial η²
All scenarios compared	4.737	0.003	0.027	0.571	0.634	0.003	1.242	0.294	0.007

Table A8.5.12: Post-hoc Bonferroni test for trust in political candidate

Compare...	To...
Scenario 1 (civil + incivility-free)	Scenario 2
	Scenario 3**
	Scenario 4
Scenario 2 (civil + incivility-focused)	Scenario 1
	Scenario 3*
	Scenario 4
Scenario 3 (uncivil + incivility-free)	Scenario 1**
	Scenario 2*
	Scenario 4
Scenario 4 (uncivil + incivility-focused)	Scenario 1
	Scenario 2
	Scenario 3

Note: $^+p<.10$, $*p<.05$, $**p<.01$, $***p<.001$.

Appendix 8.6: Results for all participants (no time exclusion criteria)

There were many racers in experiment 2, compared to experiment 1. One explanation might be that participants voluntarily participate in experiment 1 and are thus likely to participate out of interest in the research. Participants collected via large sampling companies such as Dynata, might have different, for instance, material, incentives to participate and might therefore fill in surveys less carefully / attentively. An analysis of the Instructional Manipulation Check (IMC, Oppenheimer et al. 2009) shows that 21.9% of participants in experiment 2 did not comply with the IMC (compared to 5.3% in experiment 1), which indicates that attentiveness was indeed lower. As a robustness check, results are re-analyzed with all participants who completely filled in the survey, i.e. without applying the time exclusion criteria that were specified in the preregistration analysis plan. This means that 642 participants are included here for experiment 1 (compared to 637) and 1117 participants for experiment 2 (compared to 768). Overall, results are similar with and without time exclusion criteria. Only the significant difference in mean scores for news credibility disappears when comparing condition 5 with condition 6 in experiment 2, and the one-way ANOVA test for trust in the candidate in experiment 2 does not show a significant difference anymore between scenario 2 and 3.

Experiment 1

Table A8.6.1: Descriptives debate and news coverage style

		Trust in political candidate		Trust in political system		News credibility	
		Mean (SD)	*N*	Mean (SD)	*N*	Mean (SD)	*N*
Debate style	Civil	3.55 (1.16)	319	4.77 (1.95)	319	3.65 (1.30)	319
	Uncivil	2.88 (1.23)	323	4.96 (1.76)	323	3.95 (1.13)	323
Coverage style	Incivility-free	3.34 (1.20)	324	4.91 (1.87)	324	4.05 (1.11)	324
	Incivility-focused	3.08 (1.28)	318	4.83 (1.85)	318	3.55 (1.30)	318

Table A8.6.2: Descriptives all scenarios

	Trust in political candidate		Trust in political system		News credibility	
	Mean (SD)	*N*	Mean (SD)	*N*	Mean (SD)	*N*
1. Civil + Incivility-free	3.61 (1.07)	161	4.80 (1.94)	161	4.11 (1.09)	161
2. Civil + Incivility-focused	3.48 (1.25)	158	4.75 (1.97)	158	3.18 (1.33)	158
3. Uncivil + Incivility-free	3.07 (1.25)	163	5.02 (1.79)	163	3.99 (1.12)	163
4. Uncivil + Incivility-focused	2.68 (1.18)	160	4.91 (1.72)	160	3.91 (1.15)	160

Table A8.6.3: Two-way ANOVA results

	Trust in political candidate			Trust in political system			News credibility		
	F	p-value	Partial η^2	F	p-value	Partial η^2	F	p-value	Partial η^2
Debate style	51.243	<0.001	0.074	1.685	0.195	0.003	10.681	0.001	0.016
Coverage style	7.638	0.006	0.012	0.276	0.600	0.000	30.031	<0.001	0.045
Interaction	1.798	0.180	0.003	0.033	0.855	0.000	20.949	<0.001	0.032

Table A8.6.4: One-way ANOVA results

	Trust in political candidate			Trust in political system			News credibility		
	F	p-value	Partial η^2	F	p-value	Partial η^2	F	p-value	Partial η^2
All scenarios compared	20.184	<0.001	0.087	0.667	0.573	0.003	20.357	<0.001	0.087

Table A8.6.5: Post-hoc Bonferroni test for trust in political candidate

Compare...	To...
Scenario 1 (civil + incivility-free)	Scenario 2
	Scenario 3***
	Scenario 4***
Scenario 2 (civil + incivility-focused)	Scenario 1
	Scenario 3*
	Scenario 4***
Scenario 3 (uncivil + incivility-free)	Scenario 1***
	Scenario 2*
	Scenario 4*
Scenario 4 (uncivil + incivility-focused)	Scenario 1***
	Scenario 2***
	Scenario 3*

Note: $^+p<.10$, $*p< .05$, $**p< .01$, $***p< .001$.

Table A8.6.6: Post-hoc Bonferroni test for news credibility

Compare...	To...
Scenario 1 (civil + incivility-free)	Scenario 2***
	Scenario 3
	Scenario 4
Scenario 2 (civil + incivility-focused)	Scenario 1***
	Scenario 3***
	Scenario 4***
Scenario 3 (uncivil + incivility-free)	Scenario 1
	Scenario 2***
	Scenario 4
Scenario 4 (uncivil + incivility-focused)	Scenario 1
	Scenario 2***
	Scenario 3

Note: $^+p<.10$, $*p< .05$, $**p< .01$, $***p< .001$.

Experiment 2

Table A8.6.7: Descriptives debate and news coverage style

		Trust in political candidate		Trust in political system		News credibility	
		Mean (SD)	N	Mean (SD)	N	Mean (SD)	N
Debate style	Civil	3.95 (0.95)	356	3.99 (2.27)	356	4.08 (0.94)	356
	Uncivil	3.69 (1.22)	354	3.98 (2.26)	354	4.00 (1.13)	354
Coverage style	Incivility-free	3.82 (1.14)	352	3.97 (2.32)	352	4.11 (1.07)	352
	Incivility-focused	3.82 (1.06)	358	4.00 (2.21)	358	3.97 (1.01)	358

Note: Descriptive results of scenario 5 and scenario 6 are not included here (see descriptive results below in Table A8.5.8).

Table A8.6.8: Descriptives all scenarios

	Trust in political candidate		Trust in political system		News credibility	
	Mean (SD)	*N*	Mean (SD)	*N*	Mean (SD)	*N*
1. Civil + Incivility-free	4.04 (0.96)	177	4.01 (2.34)	177	4.19 (0.95)	177
2. Civil + Incivility-focused	3.87 (0.93)	179	3.97 (2.20)	179	3.98 (0.93)	179
3. Uncivil + Incivility-free	3.61 (1.26)	175	3.93 (2.29)	175	4.03 (1.17)	175
4. Uncivil + Incivility-focused	3.76 (1.17)	179	4.03 (2.22)	179	3.96 (1.09)	179
5. Incivility-free	3.66 (1.09)	203	3.73 (2.25)	203	4.00 (1.04)	203
6. Incivility-Focused	3.66 (1.08)	204	3.92 (2.32)	204	3.89 (0.96)	204

Table A8.6.9: T-test results

	Trust in political candidate		Trust in political system		News credibility	
	t	p-value	t	p-value	t	p-value
Scenario 5 vs. Scenario 6	0.045	0.964	0.850	0.396	1.104	0.270

Table A8.6.10: Two-way ANOVA results

	Trust in political candidate			Trust in political system			News credibility		
	F	p-value	Partial η^2	F	p-value	Partial η^2	F	p-value	Partial η^2
Debate style	10.707	0.001	0.015	0.003	0.957	0.000	1.268	0.261	0.002
Coverage style	0.003	0.959	0.000	0.038	0.845	0.000	3.163	0.076	0.004
Interaction	3.729	0.054	0.005	0.182	0.670	0.000	0.884	0.348	0.001

Table A8.6.11: One-way ANOVA results

	Trust in political candidate			Trust in political system			News credibility		
	F	p-value	Partial η^2	F	p-value	Partial η^2	F	p-value	Partial η^2
All scenarios compared	4.778	0.003	0.020	0.074	0.974	0.000	1.772	0.151	0.007

Table A8.6.12: Post-hoc Bonferroni test for trust in political candidate

Compare...	To...
Scenario 1 (civil + incivility-free)	Scenario 2
	Scenario 3**
	Scenario 4
Scenario 2 (civil + incivility-focused)	Scenario 1
	Scenario 3
	Scenario 4
Scenario 3 (uncivil + incivility-free)	Scenario 1**
	Scenario 2
	Scenario 4
Scenario 4 (uncivil + incivility-focused)	Scenario 1
	Scenario 2
	Scenario 3

Note: $^+p<.10$, $^*p<.05$, $^{**}p<.01$, $^{***}p<.001$.

Appendix 8.7: Experiment 2 results - participants complying with manipulation check

A subgroup analysis was conducted with only those participants that successfully complied with the manipulation check. This was operationalized as follows: participants who were exposed to the uncivil debate were only included when they scored 3 or less than 3 on the question "To what degree do you think the statements in the audio fragment of the political debate were respectful?". Participants who were exposed to the civil debate were only included when they scored 5 or more than 5 on that question. Similarly, participants who were exposed to the incivility-focused article were only included when they scored 5 or more than 5 on the question "To what degree do you think the newspaper article was focused on bickering and conflict in the debate?". Participants who were exposed to the incivility-free article were only included when they scored 3 or less than 3. We should be careful with drawing too strong conclusions as *N* in each condition is rather low.

Table A8.7.1: Descriptives debate and news coverage style

		Trust in political candidate		Trust in political system		News credibility	
		Mean (SD)	*N*	Mean (SD)	*N*	Mean (SD)	*N*
Debate style	Civil	4.20 (0.81)	73	3.91 (2.12)	73	4.06 (1.04)	73
	Uncivil	3.08 (1.24)	64	3.75 (2.07)	64	3.92 (1.21)	64
Coverage style	Incivility-free	3.63 (1.24)	73	3.65 (2.11)	73	4.19 (1.08)	73
	Incivility-focused	3.72 (1.10)	64	4.05 (2.07)	64	3.77 (1.14)	64

Note: Descriptive results of scenario 5 and scenario 6 are not included here (see descriptive results below in Table A8.7.2).

Table A8.7.2: Descriptives all scenarios

	Trust in political candidate		Trust in political system		News credibility	
	Mean (SD)	*N*	Mean (SD)	*N*	Mean (SD)	*N*
1. Civil + Incivility-free	4.28 (0.84)	43	3.74 (2.24)	43	4.46 (0.82)	43
2. Civil + Incivility-focused	4.09 (0.75)	30	4.17 (1.95)	30	3.49 (1.08)	30
3. Uncivil + Incivility-free	2.71 (1.13)	30	3.53 (1.94)	30	3.81 (1.29)	30
4. Uncivil + Incivility-focused	3.40 (1.26)	34	3.94 (2.18)	34	4.01 (1.15)	34
5. Incivility-free	3.73 (1.09)	56	3.32 (2.29)	56	4.06 (1.18)	56
6. Incivility-focused	3.56 (1.05)	69	3.96 (2.19)	69	3.61 (1.15)	69

Table A8.7.3: T-test results

	Trust in political candidate		Trust in political system		News credibility	
	t	p-value	t	p-value	t	p-value
Scenario 5 vs. Scenario 6	0.919	0.360	1.594	0.114	2.126	0.035

Table A8.7.4: Two-way ANOVA results

	Trust in political candidate			Trust in political system			News credibility		
	F	p-value	Partial η²	F	p-value	Partial η²	F	p-value	Partial η²
Debate style	41.778	<0.001	0.239	0.348	0.556	0.003	0.120	0.730	0.001
Coverage style	2.060	0.154	0.015	1.332	0.250	0.010	4.269	0.041	0.031
Interaction	6.378	0.013	0.046	0.001	0.975	0.000	9.816	0.002	0.069

Table A8.7.5: One-way ANOVA results

	Trust in political candidate			Trust in political system			News credibility		
	F	p-value	Partial η²	F	p-value	Partial η²	F	p-value	Partial η²
All scenarios compared	16.747	<0.001	0.274	0.515	0.672	0.011	5.135	0.002	0.104

Table A8.7.6: Post-hoc Games-Howell test for trust in political candidate

Compare...	To...
Scenario 1 (civil + incivility-free)	Scenario 2
	Scenario 3***
	Scenario 4**
Scenario 2 (civil + incivility-focused)	Scenario 1
	Scenario 3***
	Scenario 4*
Scenario 3 (uncivil + incivility-free)	Scenario 1***
	Scenario 2***
	Scenario 4
Scenario 4 (uncivil + incivility-focused)	Scenario 1**
	Scenario 2*
	Scenario 3

Note: $^{+}p<.10$, $^{*}p<.05$, $^{**}p<.01$, $^{***}p<.001$.

Table A8.7.7: Post-hoc Bonferroni test for news credibility

Compare...	To...
Scenario 1 (civil + incivility-free)	Scenario 2**
	Scenario 3^{+}
	Scenario 4
Scenario 2 (civil + incivility-focused)	Scenario 1**
	Scenario 3
	Scenario 4
Scenario 3 (uncivil + incivility-free)	Scenario 1^{+}
	Scenario 2
	Scenario 4
Scenario 4 (uncivil + incivility-focused)	Scenario 1
	Scenario 2
	Scenario 3

Note: $^{+}p<.10$, $^{*}p<.05$, $^{**}p<.01$, $^{***}p<.001$.

Appendix 9: Doctoraten in de Sociale Wetenschappen en in de Sociale en Culturele Antropologie

https://soc.kuleuven.be/fsw/doctoralprogramme/ourdoctors

PhD Summaries

English summary

In recent years, concerns have been raised repeatedly about the poor quality of the political debate. Particularly the uncivil and ill-justified ways in which politicians regularly seem to express their views and standpoints raise scholarly and public concern (e.g. Dryzek et al., 2019). Yet despite severe concerns, surprisingly often statements such as "we are currently living in an era of incivility" or "soundbite culture" are based on anecdotes and assumptions rather than systematically driven research. This dissertation contributes to filling this gap and specifically advances our knowledge of the *evolution*, the *determinants*, and the *effects* of politicians' use of *uncivil* (i.e. disrespectful) and *ill-justified* (i.e. poorly reasoned) arguments in mediated political debates. Accordingly, three research questions guide this dissertation: (1) Did politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified arguments increase over time (1985-2019)?; (2) Which determinants influence politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified arguments? For instance, how do populism, media characteristics and country-specific characteristics influence it?; and (3) How are citizens' attitudes, specifically their trust attitudes towards politics and towards the news media, affected by incivility and ill-justified arguments? By studying these questions in the western European context, novel insights are brought to the predominantly U.S.-focused literature on mediated debate quality.

To address these three questions, I connect the field of political communication to the theory of deliberative democracy. Within deliberative democratic theory, *civility* and *well-justified arguments* are two of the key ideals that define a high-quality political debate (e.g. Bächtiger et al., 2018; Wessler, 2008). These normative ideals can therefore serve as conceptual and methodological benchmarks to investigate causes and consequences of deviations from it (Steiner et al., 2004). Hence, I innovatively use the deliberative benchmark as a systematic, empirical tool to study (1) to what degree politicians deviate from this benchmark over time; (2) which determinants influence deviations from this benchmark; (3) how deviations from this benchmark influence citizens' trust attitudes. Furthermore, I study these questions in the venue of political debates in the media (e.g. televised election debates). The deliberative quality of political debates is largely underexplored in *mediated* debate venues (as compared to parliamentary debates, for instance). Given the mass media's vital role in society to politically inform citizens and to connect politicians and the citizenry to each other, it is of utmost importance to theorize about and empirically study debate quality there (Habermas, 1996).

Through a combination of quantitative content analyses and experiments, several original data sets were collected. To investigate the evolution (RQ1) and determinants (RQ2) of

politicians' use of incivility and ill-justified arguments, a large-scale dataset of Belgian televised election debates (1985-2019) was collected, as well as a dataset of election debates from the United Kingdom, Germany and the Netherlands (2009-2015). To study the effects of incivility and ill-justified arguments on citizens' trust attitudes (RQ3), four survey experiments were designed and conducted among Belgian citizens.

Contrary to concerns and expectations, the results from a systematic content analysis of 35 years of Belgian election debates reveal no evidence of a rise in politicians' use of incivility nor of an upsurge in their use of ill-justified arguments (RQ1). Rather than systematically increasing or decreasing over time, debate quality is shown to be highly context-dependent (RQ2). For instance, the findings reveal that populist politicians, male politicians and politicians in opposition have lower debate quality than non-populist, female and incumbent politicians, and that a higher number of debaters – particularly more than three – and discussion of moral topics, decrease debate quality. Moreover, this dissertation shows that citizens' exposure to uncivil, ill-justified debate could harm their trust attitudes (RQ3). Politicians' use of uncivil, ill-justified statements is shown to decrease their perceived trustworthiness, and the news media's emphasis on political incivility in post-debate news coverage moreover decreases the news media's own credibility. Interestingly, however, the results also show that politicians' use of uncivil, ill-justified statements does not affect all citizens similarly. Some type of citizens, such as the politically cynical, accept uncivil, ill-justified discourse more than other citizens, such as the less politically cynical. Connecting this result to the results from the content analyses, this dissertation points towards a "competitive advantage" for populist politicians. Not only do populist politicians use uncivil, ill-justified discourse more than non-populist politicians, their generally more politically cynical voter base also seems to accept this type of discourse more. From a normative point of view, these findings may be worrisome. Given populist parties' growing success worldwide, it seems that certain parts of the citizenry do not care that much about the uncivil, ill-justified discourse that is more often adopted by those parties, and will elect populist leaders in spite of their norm-violating discourse.

Besides this potential populist challenge, there is also another final finding worth emphasizing. This dissertation reveals that politicians do regularly justify their policy positions and are most of the time civil when discussing politics in the media. Hence, and contrary to the argument that the mass media are no place to look for deliberative communication, I conclude from this dissertation that political debates in the media have the potential to contribute to a more deliberative debate sphere. In other words, I conclude that mediated political debates are, at least to a certain extent, deliberative, rather than purely destructive.

Taken together, this dissertation builds on insights from both the field of deliberative democracy and the field of political communication and explicitly connects them by using deliberative democratic theory as a benchmark to study political communication phenomena, namely politicians' use of uncivil communication and ill-justified argumentation in mediated political debates. By connecting these fields, this dissertation makes significant novel contributions to both fields, at a theoretical, an empirical and a societal level.

Dutch summary / Nederlandstalige samenvatting

In de voorbije jaren werden er herhaaldelijk zorgen geuit over de lage kwaliteit van het politieke debat. Voornamelijk de onbeschofte en simplistische manier waarop politici hun standpunten vaak lijken te communiceren wekt zowel academische als publieke bezorgdheid (Dryzek et al., 2019). Ondanks deze ernstige bezorgdheden zijn uitspraken zoals "we leven vandaag in een tijdperk van onbeschoftheid" of in een "soundbite cultuur" verrassend vaak gebaseerd op anekdotes en assumpties, in plaats van op systematisch uitgevoerd onderzoek. Dit proefschrift draagt bij aan het opvullen van deze leemte in de literatuur, en bevordert meer specifiek onze kennis over de *evolutie*, de *determinanten*, en de *effecten* van *onbeschofte* (d.w.z. respectloze) en *onberedeneerde* (d.w.z. weinig onderbouwde) argumenten in politieke debatten in de media. Overeenkomstig daarmee leiden drie onderzoeksvragen dit proefschrift: (1) Is het gebruik van onbeschofte communicatie en onberedeneerde argumentatie door politici over de tijd heen toegenomen (1985-2019)?; (2) Welke determinanten beïnvloeden het gebruik van onbeschofte communicatie en onberedeneerde argumentatie?; en (3) Hoe worden de attitudes van burgers, met name hun vertrouwen in de politiek en in de nieuwsmedia, beïnvloed door onbeschofte communicatie en onberedeneerde argumentatie? Door deze vragen in de West-Europese context te bestuderen worden nieuwe inzichten verworven en wordt bijgedragen aan de overwegend V.S.-gedomineerde literatuur over de kwaliteit van politieke debatten in de media.

Om deze drie onderzoeksvragen te beantwoorden verbind ik het onderzoeksdomein van politieke communicatie met de theorie van deliberatieve democratie. Binnen de deliberatieve democratsiche theorie zijn *beleefdheid* en *welberedeneerde argumenten* twee centrale idealen die een hoge debatkwaliteit definiëren (bijv. Bächtiger et al., 2018; Wessler, 2008). Deze normatieve idealen kunnen daarom gebruikt worden als conceptuele en methodologische maatstaven om oorzaken en gevolgen van afwijkingen ervan te bestuderen (Steiner et al., 2004). Daarom gebruik ik de deliberatieve maatstaf of *benchmark* op innovatieve wijze als een systematisch, empirisch instrument om te onderzoeken (1) in hoeverre politici over de tijd heen van deze benchmark zijn afgeweken; (2) welke determinanten afwijkingen van deze benchmark veroorzaken; (3) hoe afwijkingen van deze benchmark de vertrouwensattitudes van burgers beïnvloeden. Bovendien onderzoek ik deze vragen in de context van politieke debatten in de media (bijv. verkiezingsdebatten). Wetenschappelijk inzicht in de deliberatieve kwaliteit van politieke debatten is zeer beperkt voor de *gemedieerde* debatcontext (in vergelijking met parlementaire debatten bijvoorbeeld). Gezien de vitale rol van de massamedia in de samenleving om burgers

politiek te informeren en om politici en burgers met elkaar te verbinden, is het van essentieel belang om zowel theoretisch als empirisch de kwaliteit van het politieke debat in de gemedieerde context te onderzoeken (Habermas, 1996).

Door middel van een combinatie van kwantitatieve inhoudsanalyses en experimenten werden verschillende originele datasets verzameld. Om de evolutie (RQ1) en determinanten (RQ2) van het gebruik van onbeschofte communicatie en onberedeneerde argumentatie te onderzoeken werd een grootschalige dataset van Belgische verkiezingsdebatten verzameld (1985-2019), evenals een dataset met verkiezingsdebatten uit het Verenigd Koninkrijk, Duitsland en Nederland (2009-2015). Om de effecten van onbeschofte communicatie en onberedeneerde argumentatie op de vertrouwensattitudes van burgers te onderzoeken (RQ3) werden vier survey experimenten ontworpen en uitgevoerd bij Belgische burgers.

In tegenstelling tot de bezorgdheden en verwachtingen, onthullen de resultaten van een systematische inhoudsanalyse van 35 jaar aan Belgische verkiezingsdebatten dat er geen bewijs is voor een toename in het gebruik van onbeschofte communicatie door politici, noch van een toename in het gebruik van onberedeneerde argumenten (RQ1). Eerder dan een systematische daling of stijging over de tijd heen, blijkt de kwaliteit van politieke debatten in sterke mate contextafhankelijk te zijn (RQ2). De bevindingen tonen bijvoorbeeld dat populistische politici, mannelijke politici en politici in de oppositie een lagere debatkwaliteit hebben dan niet-populistische, vrouwelijke, en regerende politici, en dat een groter aantal debatterende politici – vooral vanaf meer dan drie – en discussies over morele onderwerpen de debatkwaliteit doen afnemen. Bovendien tonen de resultaten van dit proefschrift dat de vertrouwensattitudes van burgers geschaad kunnen worden bij blootstelling aan onbeschoft, onberedeneerd debat (RQ3). De gepercipieerde betrouwbaarheid van politici daalt wanneer ze onbeschofte, onberedeneerde uitspraken doen, en de nadruk die de nieuwsmedia geregeld leggen op de onbeschofte communicatie van politici schaadt bovendien de nieuwsmedia hun eigen geloofwaardigheid. Interessant is echter dat de resultaten ook aantonen dat het gebruik van onbeschofte, onberedeneerde uitspraken door politici niet alle burgers op dezelfde manier beïnvloedt. Sommige burgers, zoals de politiek cynische burgers, accepteren het gebruik van onbeschofte, onberedeneerde uitspraken meer dan andere burgers, zoals de minder politiek cynische burgers. Door dit resultaat te koppelen aan de resultaten van de inhoudsanalyses, wijst dit proefschrift op een "concurrentievoordeel" voor populistische politici. Niet alleen maken populistische politici vaker gebruik van een onbeschoft, onberedeneerd discours, ook lijkt hun algemeen meer politiek cynische kiezersbasis dit soort discours meer te accepteren.

Vanuit een normatief oogpunt kunnen deze bevindingen zorgwekkend zijn. Gezien het wereldwijde, groeiende succes van populistische partijen lijkt het erop dat bepaalde delen van de bevolking zich niet zo druk maken over het onbeschofte, onberedeneerde discours dat deze partijen vaker gebruiken, en zullen ze populistische leiders verkiezen ondanks hun norm-overtredende discours.

Naast deze potentiële populistische uitdaging is er nog een andere laatste bevinding de moeite waard om te benadrukken. Dit proefschrift toont immers dat politici toch vaak hun beleidsstandpunten uitleggen en verantwoorden en dat ze het merendeel van de tijd beleefd zijn wanneer ze politieke discussies voeren in de media. Daarom, en in tegenstelling tot het argument dat de massamedia geen plek zouden zijn om te zoeken naar vormen van deliberatieve communicatie, concludeer ik uit dit proefschrift dat politieke debatten in de media het potentieel hebben om bij te dragen aan een meer deliberatieve debatsfeer. Met andere woorden, ik concludeer dat gemedieerde politieke debatten, althans tot op zekere hoogte, deliberatief zijn, eerder dan puur en alleen destructief.

Alles bij elkaar genomen bouwt dit proefschrift voort op inzichten uit zowel het domein van deliberatieve democratie als het domein van politieke communicatie, en worden beide domeinen expliciet verbonden door de theorie van deliberatieve democratie te gebruiken als een maatstaf om politieke communicatiefenomenen te bestuderen, met name het gebruik van onbeschofte communicatie en onberedeneerde argumentatie door politici in politieke debatten in de media. Door deze domeinen met elkaar te verbinden draagt dit proefschrift in belangrijke mate en op vernieuwende wijze bij aan beide domeinen, op een theoretisch, een empirisch en een maatschappelijk niveau.

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