

Political Campaign Ads on Facebook: Investigating the Effects of Incivility in Videos and User Comments on Affective Polarization and Mobilization

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Uncivil campaign ads on social media may polarize and mobilize voters, both directly and indirectly, by fueling affective polarization in user comments. Uncivil campaign content may trigger uncivil comments, thereby further increasing polarization and mobilization. To test the effects of such dynamics, we conducted a survey experiment during the assembly elections in the Indian state of West Bengal in March–April 2021 ($N = 921$). We edited real campaign video ads on Facebook and manipulated their sources (one of two parties: Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP] vs. All India Trinamool Congress [AITC or TMC]), incivility in the video (civil/uncivil), as well as incivility in user comments (civil/uncivil), and examined their effects on affective polarization and political mobilization. We found party identification to be the strongest predictor of affective polarization, with ad incivility playing only a limited role. Our findings help extend the debates on affective polarization in the context of social media, which are becoming increasingly prominent in political campaigns and provides empirical evidence from a non-Western context.

Keywords: affective polarization, incivility, social media, political participation, India

The issue of affective polarization, the degree to which individuals dislike out-partisans, has received widespread academic attention in recent years. Studies have shown that distrust and dislike of people holding opposing views have increased among partisans in the United States and Europe (Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, Malhotra, & Westwood, 2019; Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). At the same time, there have been growing concerns about the rising incivility in political discourse and the concomitant fear that partisans are more likely to support uncivil discourse when it comes from their own parties (Iyengar et al., 2019; Kim, 2018; Muddiman, 2017, 2019, 2021). Despite the growing concerns, studies have found limited effects of political incivility on political participation (Van't Riet &

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Stekelenburg, 2022) and affective polarization (Liang & Zhang, 2021). However, the effects of incivility communicated through video have been found to have stronger effects on political participation as compared with other media (Van't Riet & Stekelenburg, 2022). However, we know little about whether and how exposure to campaign videos within the context of social media may trigger (de)mobilization and affective polarization. To unpack incivility in the highly interactive context of social media, we examine how partisanship in terms of party identification moderates the effects of incivility when individuals encounter civil or uncivil campaign videos on social media.

Given that most campaign videos are responded to with comments on social media, we further examine campaign videos that are accompanied with or without uncivil user comments. This is important as increasingly more campaign ads are delivered through social media (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018), and as a result, the campaign ads cannot be studied in isolation but within the larger ecology and context of social media (Facebook) and user engagement (e.g., likes and comments) within which they are embedded. Moreover, campaign videos have emerged as a prominent part of political campaigns, which can potentially deliver more emotionally appealing and polarizing content in a highly effective manner. Hence, incivility is more likely to be present in campaign videos.

Incivility in campaign ads matters, as it conditions the effects of ads in various ways. Druckman, Gubitz, Levendusky, and Lloyd (2019) showed that, contrary to civil discourse, uncivil discourse by party leaders as relayed through news media reduced in-party support and favorability. They also found that, when incivility seems to come from out-party sources, it makes in-party supporters more extreme. The study by Druckman and colleagues (2019) provides important insights about the counterproductive effect of uncivil discourse in mobilizing support outside political campaigns. However, we know little about how affective polarization manifests itself and how the public either supports or rejects (in)civility in official political campaigns. This is important as evidence suggests that heightened polarization reduces the space for deliberative cross-party discourse and undermines the ideals of a public sphere by weakening an important aspect of democratic society (Boxell, Gentzkow, & Shapiro, 2022; Hansen & Kosiara-Pedersen, 2017; Haselmayer, 2019). This move toward more incivility could be a result of increasing digitalization and a response to the kind of content that social media platforms rely on for revenue. This prioritization on uncivil content on social media is similar to journalistic focus on conflict (Bennett, 2016), as more attention-grabbing content leads to greater user engagement through shares, likes, and comments (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015).

Research shows that affective polarization has been growing globally.² This is in relation to both rising populism and identity politics on the ground (Neyazi, 2018; Zakaria, 2016). Given that identity-based mobilization is more likely to lead to affective polarization, the issue becomes more salient in India, where identity-based mobilization along caste, religious, and regional divides has been an important aspect of electoral campaigns and mobilization (Chandra, 2007; Jaffrelot, 2010). Social identity based on such affiliations creates intergroup animosity, especially during uncivil exchanges. Despite the prominence of social identity in the Indian milieu, the affective dimension of politics has not

² For research on affective polarization outside the United States, see Hartevelde (2021) for Netherlands; Kekkonen and Ylä-Anttila (2021) for Finland.

been the subject of much academic research (Arabaghatta Basavaraj, Saikia, Varughese, Semetko, & Kumar, 2021, being one exception).

Hence, to test the effects of incivility in campaign ads and the uncivil comments in Facebook posts of campaign ads, we conducted an online preregistered survey experiment during the West Bengal state assembly elections in India in March/April 2021 ($N = 921$). The state assembly election was fought in the backdrop of rising COVID-19 cases and became an exemplar of a highly polarized election that saw a regional party, All India Trinamool Congress (AITC or TMC), and a national party, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), pitching against each other (Palshikar, Sardesai, Chatterjee, & Basu, 2021). We tested how campaign videos criticizing the opposing candidate or party, as delivered through Facebook pages of the campaigns, might have increased affective polarization and mobilized the voters. We selected Facebook because this is the most important social media platform for political campaigns with nearly 350 million users in India (Kemp, 2022). We professionally edited real campaign videos and their social media posts, which were then randomly assigned to a sample of the online general population in West Bengal. We then examined (1) the influence of these experimental messages and (2) their interactions with key moderators of political involvement, such as partisanship, ads, and comments incivility. We found a significant effect of party preference on affective polarization, more so among the supporters of the right-wing party BJP, than among the supporters of the center-left TMC. However, incivility in ads and comments did not emerge significant for affective polarization but had limited effects on political participation.

Literature Review

Incivility, Social Media, and Affective Polarization

Incivility in political discussion has been an important and growing phenomenon in various democracies. Although a detailed discussion on the reasons for the rise of incivility is beyond the scope of this study, incivility itself has been variously defined in existing literature and is shown to be context dependent (Stryker, Conway, Bauldry, & Kaul, 2021). Incivility goes beyond quotidian impoliteness (Papacharissi, 2004) and includes the use of insults, slurs, and swear words (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). It also involves the use of derogatory alternative views that indirectly deny freedom of expression to individuals (Jamieson, Volinsky, Weitz, & Kenski, 2017). Muddiman (2017) concurred that personal-level incivility can be considered a violation of politeness norms through acts like insults; however, public-level incivility can be viewed as a violation of reciprocity norms through acts like refusing to work together. Political incivility can also be imagined by three dimensions: insulting utterances like vulgarities, deceptive practices like exaggeration, and the discursive dimension like interrupting the speaker (Stryker et al., 2021). Yet, these characteristics are not the sole determinants of uncivil perceptions. Simple disagreement comments directed to in-group members, even in the absence of uncivil content features like the aforementioned dimensions of incivility, were perceived as uncivil by members of the same partisanship (Liang & Zhang, 2021). Thus, judgements of incivility are subject to constant negotiation depending on the context and the position. For example, political identification is one factor that influences perceptions of political incivility, whereby in-group politicians are perceived as more civil (Muddiman, 2017), and uncivil comments by in-group members are judged more leniently (Kim, 2018).

Although political incivility is often associated with the use of extreme speech, the expression of incivility is also closely embedded within the specific cultural context to appeal to local citizens. For example, one of the BJP's campaign videos for West Bengal attacked the incumbent chief minister Mamata Banerjee by addressing her as *pishi*, a word that means aunt in the Bengali language but carried specific derogatory overtones in the political context at that time.³ Hence, most of the uncivil discourse could be better understood only within the local cultural setting (Mutz, 2015) but must be conceptualized beyond impoliteness as argued by Muddiman (2017) and Papacharissi (2014). Building upon the literature, we define incivility as any arguments that are hostile, aggressive, disrespectful, and unnecessary toward a person, topic, or event and encompasses insults, name-calling, infuriating, and radical language.

Nowhere is the increasing incivility of political discourse more visible today than on social media platforms (Bor & Petersen, 2022)—and this is further exacerbated by the rise in prominence of online political campaigns (Kosmidis & Theocharis, 2020). Attack ads dominate campaign messages, but not all attack ads are uncivil as highlighted above. Campaign attack ads that contain uncivil language may play a role not only in mobilizing voters but also in affectively polarizing them. Moreover, the business model that social media platforms like Facebook rely on incentivizes the use of campaign ads that can potentially fuel affective polarization. User comments on any posts are open to the public, thus affording the potential for debates, arguments, and vitriolic attacks among people with opposing views (Sundar, 2004). Hence, in this context, the effects of campaign incivility on polarization and mobilization may not only be direct but also be moderated by user engagement with these campaign ads (see also Rossini, Stromer-Galley, & Zhang, 2021). Specifically, uncivil campaign content may trigger uncivil comments on Facebook, and those comments may both polarize and mobilize voters' reactions to the ads too. As politics become more prominent in users' news feeds on Facebook during elections because Facebook allows political campaign ads on its platform, it is important to analyze whether campaigns ads can also result in polarization.

Affective Polarization and Political Campaigns

Political polarization provides a useful theoretical framework to understand how extreme rivalry in politics (be it through issue positions, ideologies, and affect) may undermine democratic decision making by promoting groupthink (Pew Research Center, 2016). For our study, we investigate the role of affective polarization, a relatively newer concept that scholars have used to describe polarization that is driven less by ideological or issue positions, but more by affective or emotional reactions and animosity (Iyengar et al., 2012, 2019). In other words, emotion is accorded a central role in this framework. An important phenomenon in today's political communication is how affect-driven mobilization is superseding rational or argument-based debates on issues in shaping perceptions and behaviors. Studies show the growing tendency among citizens to dislike out-party politicians and members (Iyengar et al., 2019). The phenomenon of affective polarization is grounded in social identity theory, which posits that individuals inherently desire to view their in-group members in a positive light (Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

³ The term projects Mamata Banerjee as someone who enhances her familial interests by supporting her nephew's (Abhishek Banerjee) political career within her party. The use of *pishi*, in this context, has less to do with respect to an elderly aunt-like figure and more with charges of nepotism that are leveled against her.

Affective polarization is considered a threat to democratic deliberation because citizens are resistant to the ideas of engaging with people with counter viewpoints (McCoy & Somer, 2019). As such, they will be less likely to engage with the details of arguments when their perceptions are determined by emotional reactions. The presence of a high degree of affective polarization may result in extreme evaluations of both in- and out-parties and leaders, while the presence of low levels of affective polarization indicate that individuals evaluate them similarly.

The affective orientation of individuals toward leaders and parties are bound to be influenced by campaign ads when such ads contain (un)civil messages. Research has shown that social media platforms, including Facebook, can foster echo chambers, where users are predominantly exposed to content that aligns with their preexisting beliefs and opinions (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015). This selective exposure can lead to the reinforcement and amplification of partisan viewpoints, thus contributing to affective polarization (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016). We extend this line of work by testing the influence of professional political campaign ads (institutional political information), as they are delivered through Facebook posts of the campaign pages. Hence, we examine how interpersonal dynamics in social media may shape campaign communications.

Recent empirical research has cast doubt on the pervasiveness of echo chambers on social media. For instance, Guess, Lyons, Nyhan, and Reifler (2018) found that these homogeneous networks may not be as widespread as previously assumed. However, it is worth noting that even in like-minded online spaces, the presence of echo chambers may inadvertently contribute to the normalization of uncivil behavior. This can occur when group norms within an echo chamber encourage or tolerate incivility, leading to a more permissive environment for such behavior to thrive. Based on these discussions, we hypothesize that:

H1: Participants who view campaign ads from an out-party will exhibit greater levels of negative affect toward out-party sources and get mobilized more in terms of vote intention for their own parties and post engagement (i.e., intention to reply/comment and share the post) compared with participants who see campaign ads from in-party sources.

Incivility and Political Mobilization

Studies show a rise in more extreme and confrontational political debates both offline on television and at rallies as well as online on social media (Sydnor, 2019). Yet conflicting evidence exists regarding the effects of incivility on affective polarization and political participation (Hwang, Kim, & Huh, 2014; Liang & Zhang, 2021). Hwang et al. (2014) found that exposure to uncivil online comments had no effect on attitude polarization. However, this does not imply that incivility has no effect on the political landscape. Borah (2014) shows a positive effect of political incivility on political participation. Similarly, research suggests that uncivil comments, compared with civil ones, motivate political participation (Chen & Lu, 2017). Hwang and colleagues (2014) also found that incivility prompted perceptions of mass partisan polarization, which reduces expectations about public deliberation. They suggested that "low expectations of the deliberative potential of public discussion might not only suppress participation in deliberative discussions but also increase intergroup hostility and make compromise more difficult" (Hwang et al., 2014, p. 630). Although

these studies suggest that incivility can discourage participation in political discussions, other studies have found that political incivility had no effect on political participation (Van't Riet & Van Stekelenburg, 2022). Still others demonstrated that uncivil comments, mediated by perceived incivility, is negatively associated with online and offline political participation (Liang & Zhang, 2021). A plausible explanation for the different conclusions may be that Van't Riet and Van Stekelenburg's (2022) meta-analytic approach that studied publications with experimentally manipulated incivility conditions did not account for the subjective judgements of perceived incivility.

Irrespective of the effects of incivility on affective polarization and mobilization, uncivil discourse is bound to invoke strong reactions both among supporters and opponents. When political parties target the opposition with uncivil language, this can elicit negative affect among out-party supporters. But uncivil discourse has been found to create strong negative emotions among in-party supporters as well (Druckman et al., 2019). It is therefore important to understand whether partisans support incivility during election campaigns or whether they are repelled by it. The support for incivility among partisans during election campaigns could be driven by tactics deployed solely to win elections; the assumption being that, once the election is over, political discourse will return to normal. Considering the theoretical discussion, we propose the following hypotheses:

H2a: (In)civility of ads will moderate the effect of campaign ads from out-parties on out-party hostility, political mobilization, and post engagement. Participants who view uncivil video ads from out-parties will be more affectively polarized and also more mobilized in terms of vote intention for their own parties and their intentions to reply/comment and share the posts as compared with participants who see civil ads.

H2b: (In)civility of comments will moderate the effect of campaign ads from out-parties on out-party hostility, political mobilizations, and post engagements. Participants who view uncivil video comments from out-parties will be more affectively polarized and also more mobilized in terms of vote intentions for their own parties and their intentions to reply/comment and share the posts as compared with participants who see civil ads.

The Empirical Context

Elections for the 294-member state assembly in West Bengal was one of the most bitterly fought and talked-about elections in recent Bengal history. The polling was held in seven phases from March 27 to April 29, 2021. Given that this election was held against the backdrop of rising coronavirus cases in India, most political parties, barring the BJP, opposed the decision of the Election Commission of India (ECI) to hold the election in seven phases and accused the ECI of favoritism toward the BJP. The BJP, which is the ruling party at the center, was the main opposition party in the state. The TMC, led by the chief minister Mamata Banerjee, was the incumbent. The BJP and TMC aside, there were two other major parties—the Indian National Congress and the Communist Party of India, Marxist—in the fray, but their levels of support in the state were very low (Bagchi, 2021). Although the TMC was able to retain the power in the state, the campaign turned out to be highly polarized and acrimonious (Palshikar et al., 2021; see Online Appendix 1b for more details: <https://osf.io/zhmaf/>).

Method

To test these proposed effects, we conducted a preregistered survey experiment where participants answered a series of questions following their exposures to edited campaign video posts on Facebook.

Participants

The online survey was administered from March 22 to 27, 2021, in the days leading up to the West Bengal election (right before the voting started) by the survey firm YouGov. The target was the general adult population, with a sample of 974 respondents obtained using a nonprobability-based quota-sampling method matched to represent the online population's demographic composition. We first asked respondents about their political identifications that were then used to filter the respondents. Following our preregistration plan, only BJP and TMC supporters were retained; respondents identifying with these two political parties were then sampled proportionally. Each participant was randomly assigned to one of eight experimental conditions (see Online Appendix 2a). All hypotheses and data-collection details were preregistered at a public research repository (<https://aspredicted.org/xc8ra.pdf>). We excluded 58 respondents who indicated that they were unable to fully hear the video since they failed our exposure check, leaving us with 921 respondents (BJP = 488, TMC = 433). The sample comprises a well-educated lower-income younger group: education (coded on a 7-point scale with 1 = "Not applicable: Illiterate" and 7 = "Graduate or Post Graduate Professional"; $M = 5.776$, $SD = 1.031$); income (coded on a 11-point scale with 1 = "Below Rs 5,000" and 11 = "Rs, 500,001 or above"; $M = 4.856$, $SD = 2.61$); age (18–74; $M = 31.352$, $SD = 10.625$); gender (45.4% female).

Experiment Design

Our experiment adopts a 2 (incivility of ads: civil vs. uncivil ads) by 2 (incivility of comments: civil vs uncivil comments) by 2 (party of ads: BJP vs. TMC ads) between-subjects design. We used experimental stimuli comprising videos that depict a Facebook post containing a campaign video accompanied by a user comment. The eight videos used were real Facebook campaign advertisements, edited to ensure a uniform video length. Based on the intent as well as the tone of delivery, half of these videos were deemed civil and the other half uncivil by three trained coders (Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.88$); campaign advertisements deemed civil mainly focused on promoting the party's achievements, whereas campaign advertisements deemed uncivil focused on attacking the other party in a manner that included the use of derogatory remarks and negative elements, such as mockery, humiliation, debasement, and slander. Original comments posted on these Facebook videos were manually extracted and were shortlisted for coding for tone—civil versus uncivil (Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.83$); those that met our basic requirements (uniformity in terms of length as well as intensity of tone implied) were added as part of the stimuli.⁴ We aimed for maximizing external validity by selecting (and editing) real campaign videos posted on Facebook; while this design choice might be taking away from internal validity, it is a more realistic reflection of the diversity of videos voters had been exposed to during the campaign. Further details can be found in Online Appendix 2b.

⁴ The names of the commenters used were made up for the experiment.

Manipulation Check

To ensure that participants were accorded ample time for stimuli exposure, respondents were required to watch the video for at least 70 seconds and were given the option of replaying the video. For our subjective manipulation check, we find that respondents assigned to viewing an uncivil Facebook advertisement tended to rate the video as being more uncivil as compared with those viewing a civil Facebook advertisement, on average ($t(913.9) = 5.694, p < 0.001$; further details are in Online Appendix 2c). Hence, these findings provide evidence that the stimuli did work.

Measures

Outcome Measures

Affective Polarization

Two measures of effective polarization were employed as dependent variables: out-politician and out-party effect. The former measures the extent to which partisans dislike the party leaders of other parties, whereas the latter extends the consideration to the abstract notion of a political party. As compared with the out-party effect, the out-politician effect represents a more personal measure because it is generally easier for people to associate feelings with tangible conceptions such as people rather than an overarching conception such as a political party. Respondents were asked to rate both the political party and party leader on a feeling thermometer scale ranging from 0 (unfavorable) to 100 (favorable). Feeling thermometers are standard survey instruments used for measuring affective polarization (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Iyengar et al., 2019). We took the difference between scores given to one's own party and the rival party and subsequently created indexes separately for party ($M = 36.393, SD = 29.050$) and leader ($M = 40.897, SD = 30.913$). This dummy coding allowed us to test in-party and out-party hypothesized effects and avoid complicated three-way interactions in our models.

Political Mobilization

We used three measures of political mobilization as dependent variables: turnout intention, vote intention for BJP, and vote intention for TMC. For turnout intention, we asked: "How likely is it that you will vote in the coming West Bengal assembly election?" Turnout intention was measured on a 5-point scale (1 = very unlikely, 5 = very likely; $M = 3.991, SD = 1.290$). For vote intention, we asked: "How likely is it that you will cast your vote for one of the following political parties in the coming West Bengal assembly election?" A 4-point scale (1 = highly unlikely, 4 = highly likely) was used for both vote intention for BJP ($M = 2.657, SD = 1.232$) and TMC ($M = 2.608, SD = 1.199$).

Post Engagement

Post engagement is measured from the perspective of two behaviors commonly associated with interactions taking place on social media: the intention to reply/comment and the intention to share the Facebook post. The latter is further separated to consider sharing intentions in the context of social media

as well as via face-to-face mediums. For the intention to reply, we asked: "How likely are you to reply to this comment seen in the post?" ($M = 2.608$, $SD = 1.392$). On the other hand, for sharing intention, we asked: "How likely is it that you will share this video with friends and family in the following mediums?" Both questions were measured on a 5-point scale (1 = Not at all likely, 5 = Extremely likely). Intention to share the Facebook post on social media is a composite index that comprises WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.923$; $M = 2.733$, $SD = 1.453$). A separate measure was used for intention to share via face-to-face interactions ($M = 2.691$, $SD = 1.518$).

Moderator

Incivility of Campaign Advertisements and User Comments

The treatments assigned, which are the incivility of the campaign ads and incivility of the user comments, are used as moderators.

Independent Variables

Partisanship

Studies show that party identifications are closely associated with partisan identity and vote intention (Bonneau & Cann, 2015). Furthermore, in parliamentary elections, party identifications as compared with leadership evaluations, have been found to have strong effects on vote choice (Bean & Mughan, 1989), including in India (Kumar, 2021). Hence, we use party identifications as a proxy for partisanship. To measure partisanship, respondents were asked the following question: "Which political party do you intend to vote for in the coming West Bengal assembly election 2021, or which party are you leaning toward?" More than half of the respondents ($n = 488$; 53%) indicated support for BJP as opposed to TMC ($n = 433$; 47%).

Analytical Strategy

An OLS multiple linear regression model is fitted to the data to test our postulated hypotheses; two-way interaction effects are included to represent the hypothesized moderation effects.⁵ Before fitting the models, all variables are rescaled to lie between 0 and 1, allowing the effect sizes to be directly comparable. Tables 1, 2, and 3 show the results for affective polarization, political mobilization, and post engagement, respectively.⁶

Results

H1 posits that exposure to out-party campaign ads will induce greater levels of negative affect toward out-party sources as well as increased mobilization in terms of vote intention and ad post

⁵ Supplementary materials (data, code, and questionnaire) could be accessed from <https://osf.io/zhmaf/>

⁶ Analogous results based on the full sample of 974 participants, including those who failed the exposure check, are presented in Appendix 5.

engagement. To test this, we refer to the interaction between the BJP party membership and party of ad variable. For affective polarization, Table 1 shows that, on average, BJP supporters reported a decrease in their out-politician and out-party negative affect by 0.162 and 0.154, respectively, when the party of the ad shown is BJP (as opposed to TMC). Conversely, for TMC supporters, the expected value of the out-politician and out-party negative affect increases by 0.067 and 0.069, respectively, when the party of the ad is BJP (see "Party of ad" coefficient). These interaction effects are shown in Figure 1, which shows that participants exposed to a BJP ad reported lower levels of negative affect toward out-leader (top-panel) and out-party (bottom-panel) when identifying as a BJP supporter.⁷ In contrast, for the political mobilization measures, Table 2 shows that no analogous evidence could be found at the 0.05 level.⁸

Table 1. Causal Effect on Affective Polarization.

	Out-Politician Affect	Out-Party Affect
Intercept	0.383*** (0.029)	0.336*** (0.028)
BJP supporters (BJP = 1; TMC = 0)	0.082* (0.040)	0.091* (0.038)
Ad incivility	-0.005 (0.030)	-0.034 (0.028)
Comment incivility	-0.026 (0.030)	0.000 (0.028)
Party of ad (BJP = 1; TMC = 0)	0.067* (0.030)	0.069* (0.028)
BJP supporters × Ad incivility	0.018 (0.041)	0.035 (0.038)
BJP supporters × Comment incivility	0.015 (0.041)	-0.020 (0.038)
BJP supporters × Party of ad	-0.162*** (0.041)	-0.154*** (0.038)
<i>N</i>	921	921
<i>R</i> ² (adjusted)	0.013	0.014
<i>F</i>	2.712**	2.886**

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

⁷ The interaction plots visualize the predicted marginal means, with 95% confidence intervals, computed over all combinations between the respondent's and advertisement's party, with other variables held at their mean.

⁸ For the political mobilization measures, respondents who indicated that they are highly likely to vote for both BJP and INC ($N = 37$) are excluded. This is done to reduce any potential noise in the regression on the directional vote intention measures.

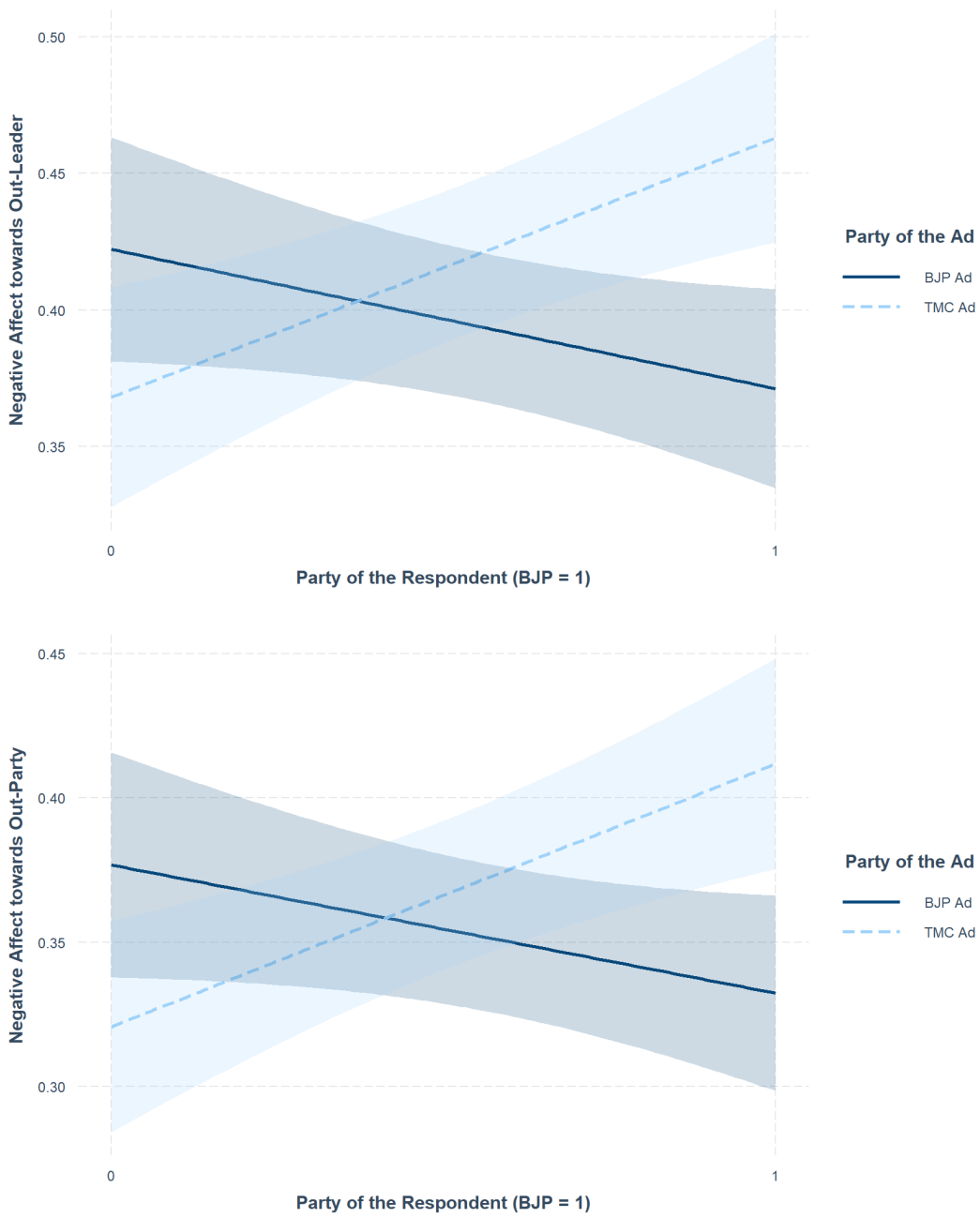


Figure 1. Moderating role of exposure to party ad on the relationship between party membership and out-leader and out-party negative affect.

Table 2. Causal Effect on Political Mobilization.

	Turnout Intention	BJP Vote Intention	TMC Vote Intention
Intercept	0.759*** (0.032)	0.235*** (0.029)	0.827*** (0.029)
BJP supporters (BJP = 1; TMC = 0)	0.035 (0.044)	0.537*** (0.040)	-0.489*** (0.040)
Ad incivility	-0.040 (0.032)	-0.020 (0.029)	-0.020 (0.029)
Comment incivility	-0.014 (0.032)	-0.007 (0.029)	-0.008 (0.029)
Party of ad (BJP = 1; TMC = 0)	-0.017 (0.032)	0.028 (0.029)	-0.047 (0.029)
BJP supporters × Ad incivility	0.002 (0.044)	0.031 (0.040)	-0.019 (0.040)
BJP supporters × Comment incivility	0.027 (0.044)	0.050 (0.040)	-0.025 (0.040)
BJP supporters × Party of ad	-0.027 (0.044)	-0.022 (0.040)	-0.014 (0.040)
<i>N</i>	884	884	884
<i>R</i> ² (adjusted)	0.002	0.481	0.433
<i>F</i>	1.241	118.032***	97.157***

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

As for intention to engage with the post, Table 3 presents evidence for all three measures of post engagement. On average, BJP supporters reported an increase of 0.129 in their intention to reply/comment when the party of ad shown is BJP; for intention to share on social media (SM) and via face-to-face interactions (F2F), we observe an analogous average increase of 0.146 and 0.139, respectively. These interaction effects are depicted in Figure 2, which shows that intention to engage with the post (across all three measures) is higher when the party of the Facebook advertisement is consistent with that of the party of the respondent. Taken together, our findings provide support for H1 only with regard to affective polarization but not political mobilization and post engagement, such that participants exposed to out-party campaign ads recorded greater levels of negative affect toward out-party sources but lower levels of intention for post engagement; for political mobilization outcome measures, participants recorded no significant change after exposure; hence, we claim only partial support for H1.

Table 3. Causal Effect on Post Engagement.

	Intention to reply/comment	Intention to share on SM	Intention to share via F2F
Intercept	0.486*** (0.033)	0.480*** (0.036)	0.473*** (0.034)
BJP supporters (BJP = 1; TMC = 0)	-0.143** (0.045)	-0.122* (0.050)	-0.115* (0.048)
Ad incivility	-0.079* (0.033)	-0.048 (0.036)	-0.018 (0.035)
Comment incivility	-0.056+ (0.033)	-0.021 (0.036)	-0.032 (0.035)
Party of ad (BJP = 1; TMC = 0)	-0.068* (0.033)	-0.082* (0.036)	-0.068+ (0.035)
BJP supporters × Ad incivility	0.144** (0.046)	0.101* (0.050)	0.066 (0.048)
BJP supporters × Comment incivility	0.077+ (0.046)	0.061 (0.050)	0.097* (0.048)
BJP supporters × Party of ad	0.129** (0.046)	0.146** (0.050)	0.139** (0.048)
<i>N</i>	921	921	921
<i>R</i> ² (adjusted)	0.018	0.010	0.012
<i>F</i>	3.352**	2.294*	2.577*

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

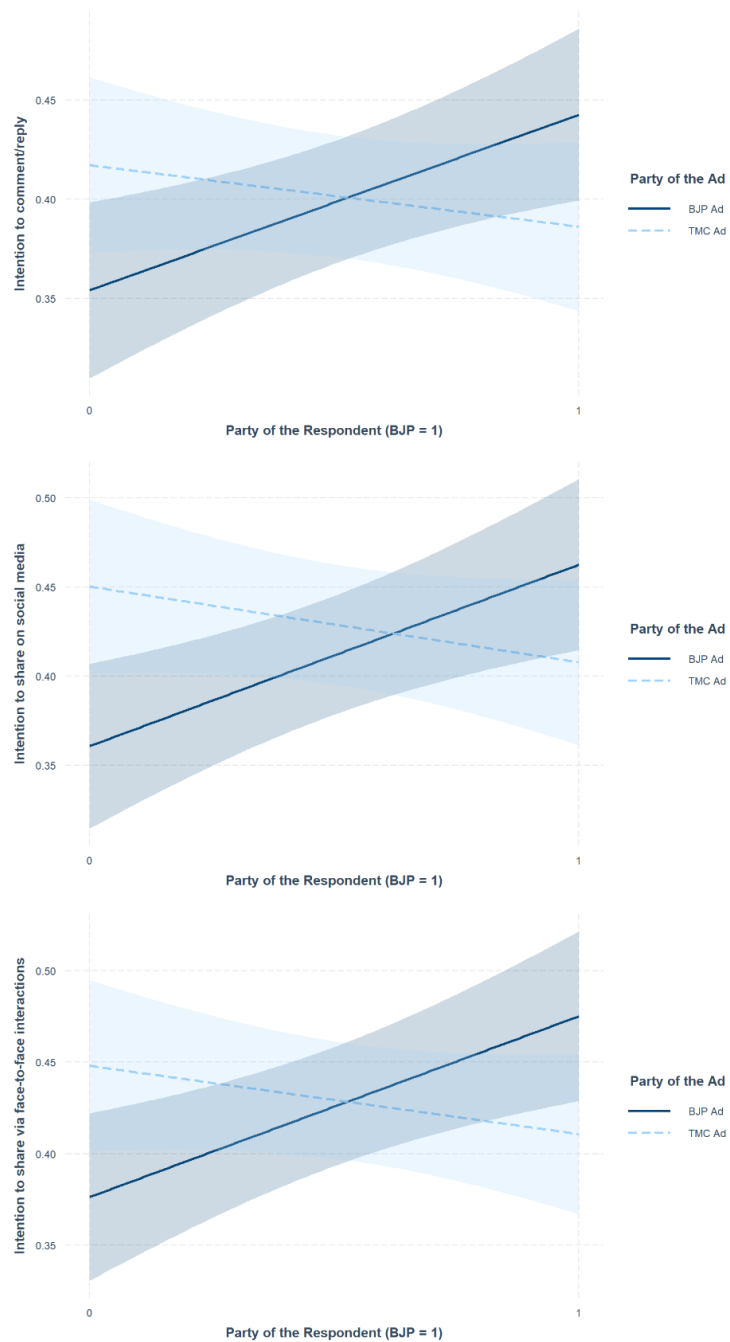


Figure 2. Moderating role of exposure to party ad on the relationship between party membership and measures of post engagement.

H2a postulates that exposure to uncivil campaign ads will strengthen the positive relationship between exposure to out-party campaign ads and affective polarization, political mobilization, and post engagement. We consider the interaction between ad incivility with BJP party membership to assess support for H2a. For affective polarization and political mobilization, Tables 1 and 2 show that no evidence could be found for the moderation effect of ad incivility at the 0.05 level. For post engagement, Table 3 shows that, on average, BJP supporters reported an increase in the intention to reply/comment by 0.144 when the ad is uncivil; for intention to share on SM, an analogous average increase of 0.101 is observed. Figure 3 shows these effects where respondents exposed to an uncivil ad reported higher intention to comment/reply and share on SM when identifying as BJP supporters. In contrast, no similar evidence could be found for intention to share via F2F. Taken together, H2a is partially supported because participants exposed to uncivil ads showed a greater tendency to engage with the post by replying/comment and sharing on SM; in contrast, no significant effects could be found for either affective polarization or political mobilization or even intention to share via F2F.

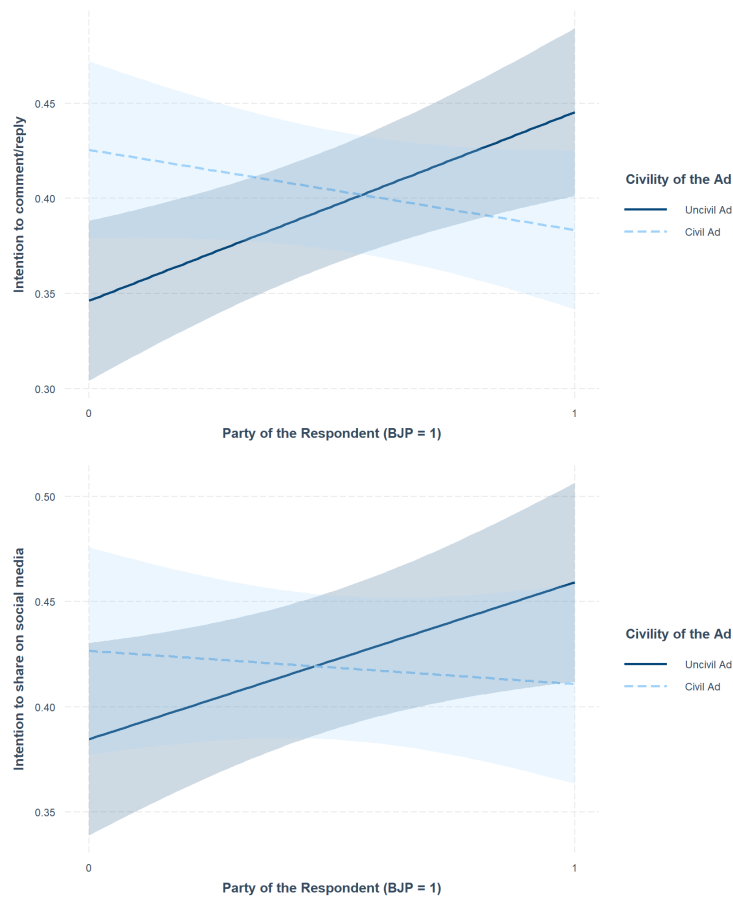


Figure 3. Moderating role of civility of the campaign ad on the relationship between party membership and intention to comment/reply and share on social media.

H2b proposes that exposure to uncivil comments will strengthen the positive relationship between exposure to out-party campaign ads and our three outcome measures. For testing H2b, we examine the interaction between comment incivility and BJP party membership. For both affective polarization and political mobilization, Tables 1 and 2 present no evidence for the hypothesized moderation effects of comment incivility at the 0.05 level. In contrast, for post engagement, Table 3 shows that for BJP supporters, the effect on intention to share via F2F increases by an average of 0.097 when the comment is uncivil. This is illustrated in Figure 4, which shows that respondents who encountered an uncivil comment reported a higher intention to share via F2F when identifying as a BJP supporter. No similar evidence could be found for other measures of post engagement. Taken together, these findings only support H2b in terms of intention to share via F2F. Participants exposed to uncivil comments displayed a greater tendency to share the post via F2F; in contrast, no similar evidence was found for other outcome measures.⁹ Hence, we claim only partial support for H2b.

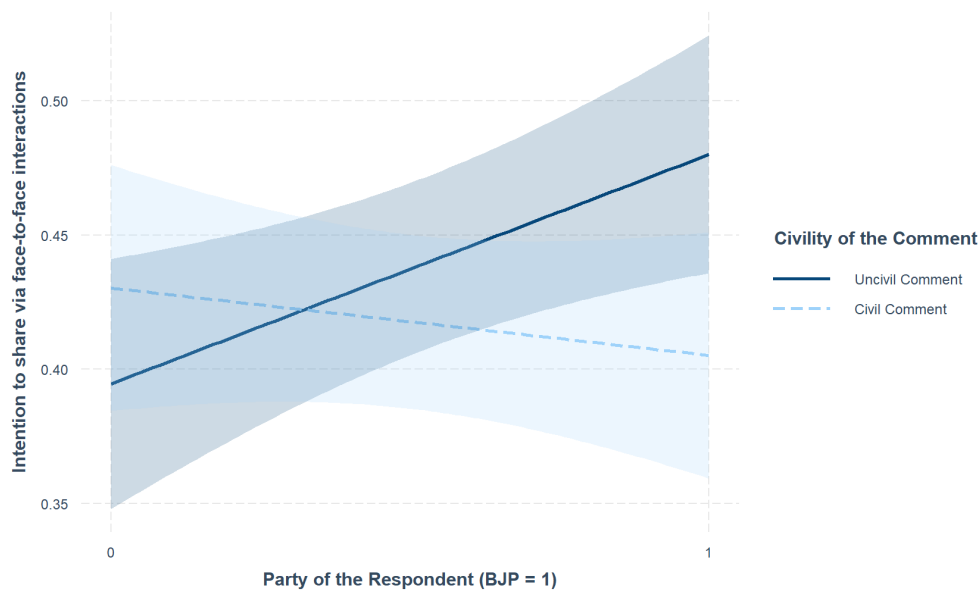


Figure 4. Moderating role of civility of the user comment on the relationship between party membership and intention to share via face-to-face interactions.

Discussion

This study analyzed how exposure to uncivil as compared with civil campaign videos and user comments within the context of Facebook might trigger affective polarization, political mobilization, and post engagement. Evidence for the interaction effects of uncivil campaign videos and uncivil user comments are mixed: although little empirical evidence was found supporting their impacts on affective polarization and political mobilization, there are indications that these interactions significantly influence respondent's

⁹ Note that we make no claim as to the intention of the post/comments.

propensity to engage with the post. In particular, our results suggest that when exposed to uncivil campaign ads or uncivil user comments, BJP supporters are more likely to show intention for post engagement in terms of replying to comments and sharing the posts on SM or via face-to-face interactions. The results also showed that partisanship is a prominent predictor of both affective polarization and post engagement, with participants exposed to out-party campaign ads exhibiting greater levels of negative affect toward out-parties and lower levels of intention for post engagement as compared with those exposed to in-party campaign ads. Interestingly, affective polarization is found to be rooted not in uncivil discourse but rather in partisan identity, supporting the existing study (Liang & Zhang, 2021). In the case of political mobilization, the effect of partisanship is more nuanced as it seems that exposure to out-party (or in-party) ads is not found to have an effect on all three measures of political mobilization, but party membership remains a significant predictor for vote intention for a given political party, in line with existing expectations. Overall, our study adds to the growing literature to understand how (in)civility in campaigns on SM leads to affective polarization and political engagement (Kim, 2018; Muddiman, 2019; Van't Riet & Stekelenburg, 2022; Wolf, Strachan, & Shea, 2012) and provides novel empirical evidence from a non-Western context to the role of incivility on affect, political mobilization, and post engagement.

In line with research conducted in the polarized U.S. context, our study shows that partisanship remains a notable predictor (Iyengar et al., 2012, 2019; Muddiman, 2017; Wolf et al., 2012) for affective polarization, voting intentions (turnout and vote choice), and the intention to engage with the post. The prominent role of partisanship affecting how respondents evaluate messages has also been supported in other studies (Kosmidis & Theocharis, 2020; Muddiman, 2017). This finding has significant implications for the persuasive power of campaign ads in the days leading up to an already polarized election. Partisanship results also suggest that parties "retaining their support" among those who already support them, is highly relevant. However, the lack of evidence found for the moderation effects of ad incivility and user comment incivility indicates that incivility in campaign ads might not have much effect above and beyond the animus arising from existing partisan feelings. These results suggest that the root of affective polarization is multifaceted and needs further investigation. Of note also is the finding that exposure to uncivil campaign ads resulted in a marginal reduction in turnout intention and suggest that incivility as expressed in campaign ads may depress voter turnout. This result provides further evidence supporting Kahn and Kenney's (1999) findings of a negative relationship between negativity and political participation. Given that political participation is viewed as an essential element of any healthy democracy, it implies that incivility is harmful to the proper functioning of democracy.

Furthermore, our study shows that political participation in terms of intention to engage with posts, reply to comments, and share in face-to-face interactions are more pronounced among BJP supporters. This could be attributed to the fact that BJP is not only ideologically driven but also a cadre-based party and their supporters possess a strong in-group identity, motivated by an urgent desire to protect and advocate for their political beliefs (Jaffrelot, 2021; Neyazi & Schroeder, 2021). This determination has been further bolstered since the BJP formed the national government in 2014. Research suggests that supporters of right-wing political parties are often characterized by their high levels of organization and strong ideological commitments, which can manifest in various ways, including heightened online engagement and a proactive defense of their party affiliations (Stier, Posch, Bleier, & Strohmaier, 2017).

Given the growing integration of digital spaces in our daily lives, the study provides important insights to understand the relationship between affective polarization and SM in a divided society. Although studies have shown that spending more time online could increase the probability of encountering uncivil content (Barnidge, Kim, Sherrill, Luknar, & Zhang, 2019; Frischlich, Schatto-Eckrodt, Boberg, & Winterlin, 2021), our study did not find any association between exposure to uncivil content in terms of uncivil video ads and comments leading to affective polarization. Similarly, given that the selective exposure to partisan news media has been found to be associated with affective polarization (Garrett et al., 2014; Lau, Andersen, Ditonto, Kleinberg, & Redlawsk, 2017), our study helps in understanding whether exposure to certain kinds of ads (civil or uncivil) as delivered through Facebook can have similar effects.

What could the null effects found for uncivil comments on affective polarization and political mobilization mean? It is possible that Facebook users in general do not pay much attention to comments. This is also supported in a previous study that shows people typically ignore engagement metrics such as likes, and comments while consuming news (Mukerjee & Yang, 2021). Although we made sure that respondents saw the comments, the null effect of comments might also be related to the experimental setup in which respondents were provided with a cover page/screenshot of comments and their attention might have not focused on the user comments present in the post. In real life, however, users might engage more with comments if they see that these are written by people whom they are connected with or know. Also, real-time comments might include more interactive content like videos and GIFs that users can like or react to. In the absence of these conditions, the null impact of uncivil comments should be treated with caution. This is important as other recent research shows that digital indicators, such as like or downvote buttons, can sway discussion civility (Jaidka, Zhou, Lelkes, Egelhofer, & Lecheler, 2022), and YouTube decided to make dislike buttons for videos nonpublic (The YouTube Team, 2021). This shows that, despite our null effects, exposure to such comments could still be possible.

The Indian polity is notably marked by salience of social identity in terms of caste, religion, and region, with political parties often capitalizing on these identities in their campaigns to garner voter support (Chandra, 2007). Moreover, since 2014, which saw the BJP capturing power at the national level, the Hindu-Muslim divide has been further exacerbated. Given this entrenchment and the importance of social identities, we expect that substantive affective polarization has likely occurred in recent elections. Importantly, partisanship appears to be stronger among the right-wing BJP supporters, raising concerns since the BJP has advanced its electoral prospects primarily by emphasizing the Hindu-Muslim divide in society. Owing to the stronger feelings of animosity from BJP voters toward both opposition parties and opposition candidates, one can expect this religion-based identity to gain further traction—the only silver lining being the ineffectiveness of incivility in mobilizing and polarizing voters. Hence, the effect of sociocultural values, as suggested by Van't Riet and Stekelenburg (2022), cannot be ignored when analyzing the role of incivility in political mobilization.

Limitations and Future Research

The study has certain limitations. Although the experimental design of the study helped in establishing causation, the study was limited by being based on the online population from a single Indian state. Further, the online respondents used in this sample study consisted mainly of the English-speaking middle class and

were not representative of the population of West Bengal (with a population of than 90 million people, a literacy rate of 76.3%, and the Internet penetration around 40%). Second, we used only a few ad stimuli, which, despite being based on real ads, may not have been representative of the kind of ads that people actually saw. Third, the design of the experimental interface meant that our respondents might have behaved very differently compared with how they would behave if they were actually on Facebook. Fourth, we note that although polarization was apparent, the extent to which it is affective was not fully clear because our incivility manipulations, both in ads and SM reactions, did not induce any change. This null effect indicates that the affective component may not be very relevant or, alternatively, it was so entrenched to begin with that it was not further increased or decreased by incivility interventions. We therefore cannot rule out either interpretation. Future research needs to tackle this "affective" component in a more direct way to determine the nature of this polarization. Fifth, as mentioned in the methods section, another limitation is that our results may be conservative because of the use of different videos in all conditions. We cannot be entirely sure whether some of the null results observed were because of the phenomenon of interest or the nature and diversity of videos that favored external over internal validity. This can be addressed in future research with the use of same videos. Finally, even if we had shown that manipulation did not work for comments, it is hard to rule out null effects as a theoretical finding because respondents not paying attention to comments would be indicative of how comments did not matter much for them while watching these political ad videos.

Given the ascendancy of the BJP and the increasingly polarized electorate, future studies would benefit by measuring affective polarization at the national level too to discern underlying trends. This is important, as interparty animosity can also negatively affect social interactions beyond the political sphere (Iyengar et al., 2019). In a highly diverse country such as India, affective polarization can exacerbate the underlying societal divides. To the best of our knowledge, this study is one of the first to examine the relationship between affective polarization and incivility in the context of a political campaign in India. Importantly, this study makes a significant contribution to the growing literature on incivility and affective polarization. Theoretically, our study shows how incivility, an increasingly significant phenomenon in political campaigns globally, could have limited effects on voter mobilization, largely restricted to extreme partisans. This finding can be a lesson for political parties and campaign managers, suggesting engaging in incivility is not a prerequisite for mobilizing their supporters.

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