



**Diana C. Mutz**

**In-Your-Face Politics: The Consequences of Uncivil Media**

*New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015, ISBN: 978-0-691-16511-0, 263 pp., £22.95 hb*

"I wish we lived in the day where you could challenge a person to a duel," Georgia Senator Zell Miller said to Chris Matthews during coverage of the 2004 Republican National Convention. In a 2016 primaries debate, Donald Trump, who has made insulting people a central feature of his presidential campaign, called Texas Senator Ted Cruz "the single biggest liar." It is widely held that incivility in political discourse is destructive to the democratic process and governance. Scholars, journalists, politicians and citizens argue it is on the rise. Uncivil political behavior and associated concerns about the effects of incivility on democracy makes Diana C. Mutz's latest contribution to the field, *In-Your-Face Politics: The Consequences of Uncivil Media*, compelling and timely.

Mutz researches public opinion, political psychology and mass political behavior, with a particular emphasis on political communication at Penn where she teaches and holds the Samuel A. Stouffer Chair in Political Science and Communication. As Director of the Institute for the Study of Citizens and Politics, founded at Penn in 2003, she oversees research on the ways citizens interact with the political world. Mutz's award-winning work includes: "Impersonal Influence: How Perceptions of Mass Collectives Affect Political Attitudes" (2004) and "Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative Versus Participatory Democracy" (2006). Mutz lays out the rigorous research of *In-Your-Face Politics* with clear and often humorous writing that balances accessibility for non-specialists with engaging and thorough coverage for those working in the field.

Mutz defines "uncivil discourse" as communication that violates the norms of politeness for a given culture. She applies what is widely known about social norms and spatial proximity to explicate in-you-face politics. She wrote: "It refers to both the level of incivility and the up-close and personal way that viewers experience political conflict on TV" (5). Mutz draws upon well-established knowledge within the fields of linguistics, evolutionary psychology, political theory, and communication to explore the unique visual perspective television produces, which is more intimate than we are accustomed to having with complete strangers.

Numerous studies focus attention on print media or face-to-face interaction in national political forums and in local public forums where there is direct citizen participation in governance. Mutz, however, examines televised, uncivil political discourse. Because of its audio and visual elements, television has the capacity to arouse positive or negative emotions about uncivil political phenomena in ways that print or radio media does not. Her book addresses whether norm violations typical in face-to-face interactions have consequences when they occur on television. She posits that being "in the viewer's face" matters because of the stakes concomitant to how citizens react to politicians, political engagement, and governance.

The rules of civility permit people of diverse positions to discuss differences in a courteous and considerate manner. Through a series of original studies, using a



representative national survey experiment and survey data from the National Annenberg Election Panel Study (2008, providing extensive data about viewership of specific political programs) Mutz demonstrates that *breaking* the rules of civility has a mixed bag of consequences.

However, Sobieraj and Berry argue in “From Incivility to Outrage” (*Political Communication*, 2011) that Mutz is not addressing the most pressing danger to deliberative democracy—outrage. They define it as “something grander” involving the intention to provoke anger, moral indignation—extreme emotions—through the use of sensationalism, ad hominem attacks, and other outrageous speech. Outrage, they claim, is not political deliberation but melodramatic, verbal competition. The authors are correct, understanding outrage is important, but that does not diminish the need to explore how incivility functions. Mutz lays out compelling evidence that in-your-face politics has consequences for the democratic process that should not be ignored. Her hypothesis is that the way conflict is portrayed in political television produces a negative reaction in viewers because it violates the real-world social norms people are accustomed to.

The experimental, multi-design research of *In-Your-Face Politics* is ambitious, including a political talk show produced by Mutz to obtain a high level of control over the experimental stimuli and laboratory experiments incorporating adults who were not college students. In addition to a rigorous series of experiments, Mutz draws upon her earlier ideas that appear in essays and book projects. She uses a series of seven different laboratory experiments, some including psycho-physiological measures, among other resources to explore her research questions. Mutz is interested in effects of communication styles rather than the political substance of messages. I.e., rather than negative appeals or polarizing issues, she isolates behaviors considered impolite in face-to-face interactions. However, “in the absence of meaningful information about *content*,” Sobieraj and Berry argue, “questions of *effects*, ... , are premature (2011). This is an insightful observation, but it is a claim that requires evidence.

Mutz’s findings confirm her hypothesis that people respond to television in “fundamentally social ways.” To arrive at this she investigates the effects of incivility in three domains: arousal and memory, public perception of the legitimacy of political opponents, and political trust. Mutz writes: “Importantly, arousal is a state of excitation that involves activation of the autonomic nervous system and heightened activity in both mind and body ... Our bodies are energized and prepared for action” (19). As in real-world situations, the sense of physical closeness produced by close-up camera shots intensifies viewers’ emotional reaction to the subject. Breach of another’s personal space is a norm violation in American culture. Particularly, when the offender is someone we dislike or disagree with we tend keep our distance, which is not possible with televised political shows. Hence, the viewer experiences emotional arousal. Mutz finds that incivility is not detrimental among those who share similar views however it has a negative effect on the perceived legitimacy of the political opposition. Trust in government, politicians and politics are, likewise, negatively affected by incivility.



The costs of polarization and loss of trust are high, but the effects of in-your-face politics are not entirely disadvantageous. Though close-up camera perspectives and in-your-face discourse intensifies the negative affect viewers have for disliked politicians and issue positions, it heightens viewer involvement. Politicians express their negative reaction to it and citizens say the vitriol is detrimental to their feelings about politics. Yet, uncivil political talk shows hold viewers' attention. Mutz finds that not only does incivility expose citizens to the deliberative process, it aids recall, and boosts viewer's desire to share what they have learned "even when the arousal is not due to the information that is being shared."

The widely held view is that incivility in political discourse is on the rise. Calls for greater civility are rising in response. However, Mutz posits that political discourse is no more uncivil than earlier times; it is our unprecedented exposure to such exchanges that is on the rise. My observation is that, in addition to increased exposure, how we experience these interactions as a result of technological advancements is affecting our perception of increased incivility. The prescriptions for in-your-face politics proffered by Mutz have been criticized. Some are fair assessments. The investment of additional work to make the recommended solutions more clear if not more developed is needed. Nevertheless, *In-Your-Face Politics* is an important work. The legitimacy of democratic outcomes depends upon the contestation of political options. It is through access to political deliberation that citizens gain awareness of opposing views and their justifications. *In-Your-Face Politics* is a useful investigation into incivility, its negative and positive effects on viewers, and how it functions in support of deliberative democracy. It is a well-written treatment of rigorous research that scholars and students of communication, journalism, and political science will appreciate having access to in their institutions' libraries.

**Z. Hall**

Independent Scholar

Email: [zhall@finepoint-media.com](mailto:zhall@finepoint-media.com)