Does Candidate **Aggression** Motivate **Online Incivility**? Gender, Partisanship, and Populist Performance

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Research Objectives

- *Examining how political elites'* **combative political style** *transgressing* **norms of civility** *contributes to* **the crisis of public communication**

- *Analyzing how* **verbal**, **tonal**, *and* **visual** *markers of* **political aggression** *fosters higher levels of* **social media toxicity**

Crisis of Public Communication

Increasing uncivility and threats of violence erode the public sphere (Schlesinger, 2020), countering media's potential to improve public communication and enrich deliberative democracy (Coleman & Blumler, 2009). This rise of contentious politics challenges the maintenance of deliberative norms. *We contend that political candidates' aggressive style will engender uncivil reactions from citizens on social media,* especially directed at their political opponent. Acknowledging that candidate *gender and partisan acceptance of aggression complicates this dynamic* (Vraga, 2017), this paper explores a three-part research question in the context of the 2016 U.S. presidential debates.

Research Questions

RQ1: *Does* **candidate aggression** *motivate* **uncivil online expression**?

RQ2: *How does this relationship differ for* **Hillary Clinton** *compared to* **Donald Trump**?
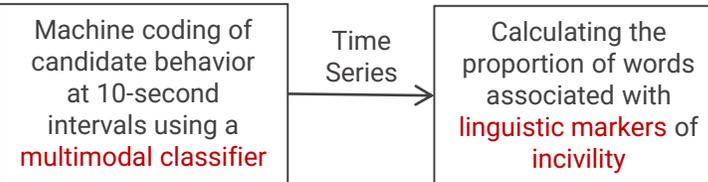
RQ3: *Does candidate aggression increase* **gendered harassment** *toward* **Hillary Clinton**?

Methods

Data

- **Televised Debates:** C-SPAN coverage of the debates in the 2016 presidential election

- **Twitter:** Time synced Twitter data generated from a search on candidate mentions through GNIP
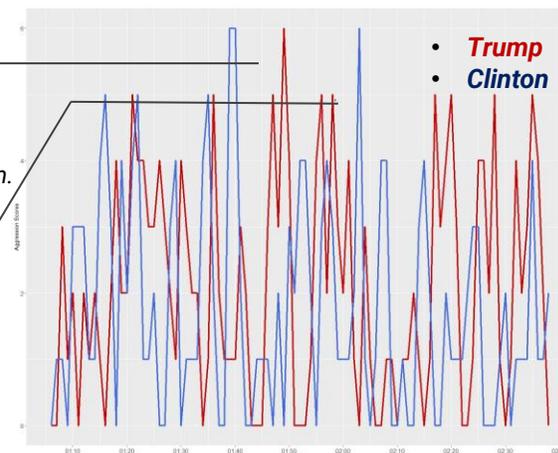
Analyses

Machine coding of candidate behavior at 10-second intervals using a **multimodal classifier** → Time Series → Calculating the proportion of words associated with **linguistic markers** of **incivility**

Results

Candidates' Aggression Behavior Over Time

"So there's some **bad things** going on. Some really **bad things**."
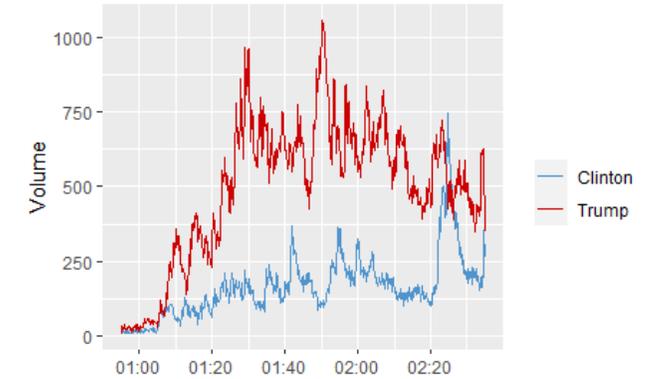
"He has really started his political activity based on this **racist lie**"

Results

Uncivil Expressions on Twitter Over Time

After accounting for the time-dependent nature of the Twitter data, we found a **negative association** between *Trump's aggressive behavior* and *number of uncivil expressions* in tweets mentioning *Clinton* (b = -6.84, p = 0.03) (**RQ1**).

We also found a **negative association** between *Clinton's aggressive behavior* and *number of uncivil expressions* in tweets mentioning *Trump* (b = -15.59, p = 0.01) (**RQ1**).

This relationship did not differ for Clinton compared to Trump (**RQ2**).

There was **no significant association** between *candidate aggression* and *gendered harassment* in tweets mentioning Clinton (**RQ3**).

Discussion

Our study sheds new light on scholarships that examine the crisis of public communication by demonstrating initial evidence that citizens *could mitigate the aggressive behaviors of political elites on social media by muting their uncivil expressions* toward the targeted candidate of aggression.