

Unintended Politics:
The Prevalence of Partisan Opinion Expression in Incidental Political Discussions

Yibin Fan

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

University of Washington

2024

Committee:

Benjamin Mako Hill

Yuan Hsiao

Patricia Moy

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Communication

©Copyright 2024

Yibin Fan

University of Washington

Abstract

Unintended Politics:

The Prevalence of Partisan Opinion Expression in Incidental Political Discussions

Yibin Fan

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Benjamin Mako Hill

Department of Communication

Political discussion happening in non-political contexts, referred to as incidental political discussion, is abundant in the everyday lives of ordinary people. However, the characteristics of incidental political discussion are still understudied. Analysis of nearly three thousand comments on mass shootings and gun control across both political and non-political communities on Reddit showed that incidental political discussions are more likely to contain partisan opinion expression on the same issue than purposive political discussions. In addition, the level of incivility did not differ between the two kinds of discussions. This study implies that non-political spaces may become more partisan than political ones in reaction to specific news events, and contributes to the scholarship on political discussion and ideological polarization, highlighting the dynamic nature of political discourse in various contexts.

In recent years, digitalization and mediatization have had a significant impact on political communication, altering the way people interact and communicate with one another on political issues. With the proliferation of digital social media, political discussion previously conducted in offline settings has moved into the public realm of computer-mediated communication, primarily in the form of textual expression (for a review, see Lane et al., 2022). Explicit political spaces have become a breeding ground for online polarized political discourse, which has emerged as a central concern due to the perceived fragmentation of political debates and the growing hostility among political groups (e.g., Yarchi et al., 2021). As a result, increasing polarization has undermined a number of features of deliberation, such as mutual respect, reasoned argumentation, and the willingness to engage with opposing viewpoints.

Existing research on online political polarization is mostly focused on discussion in explicitly political contexts, such as political forums or online communities dedicated to political talk (Marchal, 2022) or the commenting sections of political or partisan news (Coe et al., 2014; Rossini, 2022). Across these contexts, people intentionally engage in political discussions. Nonetheless, research suggests that only a limited part of the public is intentionally interested in politics and engaged with news and discussions in explicitly political contexts (Prior, 2005; e.g., Wojcieszak et al., 2023). In contrast, a large amount of exposure to and engagement with political information happens in non-political contexts (Rajadesingan et al., 2021).

Political discussion that occurs in these non-political contexts, where interlocutors are oriented around something other than politics, is defined as incidental political discussion (Balietti et al., 2021; Minozzi et al., 2020). According to deliberative theorists, incidental political discussion has the potential to counter polarization and achieve mutual understanding

because it occurs in more natural, less confrontational settings. For example, Kim & Kim (2008) argue that, different from instrumental deliberation, incidental political discussion should be understood as *dialogic* deliberation process, through which people “construct the concept of the self and other, the sense of community, and public reason” (p. 51). This process is featured by informal conversations, encouraging participants to listen to diverse perspectives and reflect on their own views, which thus can reduce polarization by highlighting common ground and promoting empathy and understanding among interlocutors.

However, these theoretical claims necessitate empirical validation, as the features of incidental political discussion remain understudied and inconclusive, despite their widespread occurrence in both online and offline settings (e.g., Boczkowski et al., 2018; Minozzi et al., 2020; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). Some scholars have argued that shared interests in non-political contexts could help bridge the ideological divide, depolarize political opinions, and lead to less toxic discussion (Baliatti et al., 2021; Levendusky, 2023; Rajadesingan et al., 2021). Other studies show that the introduction of politics and politicization might stimulate a higher level of affective polarization among discussants (e.g., sports fans, see Peterson & Muñoz, 2022), and political issues might be negatively assessed by the audiences with the primary goal of consuming entertainment media (Harbin, 2023). In addition, most prior studies relied on a limited number of cases of incidental political discussion in one forum (e.g., Chen & McCabe, 2022; Yan et al., 2018); large-scale evidence across multiple types of communities could help researchers to make a broader claim.

This study aims to define and operationalize incidental political discussion and to understand its characteristics. Set in the large social media platform Reddit, taking mass

shootings and gun control as the topic of discussion, and by analyzing large-scale textual comments, the study examines the partisanship and incivility of incidental political discussions compared to conversations in explicitly political spaces.

This study contributes to the current literature in three significant ways. First, theoretically, it provides a rationale for understanding the features of incidental political discussions and their implications for political polarization and deliberation. While existing literature typically suggests that incidental political discussions exhibit less polarized opinions and less uncivil discourse, my findings challenge this notion. I discover that incidental political discussions are more likely to contain partisan opinions compared to purposive discussions on the same political issues, with no significant difference in the degree of incivility between the two types of discussions.

Second, methodologically, this research introduces an innovative and precise operationalization of digital incidental political discussion as political discourse occurring in non-political contexts. This enables a direct and valid comparison with purposive discussions, uncovering previously unexplored characteristics of incidental political discussions. This methodological framework can be expanded to any future research.

Third, empirically, the study contributes by compiling a comprehensive dataset for the textual analysis of viewpoints on gun control issues from thousands of social media comments. This dataset achieves a high level of accuracy, significantly improving upon the accuracy deficits identified in previous research endeavors on this topic (e.g., Zhang et al., 2023).

In the following sections, I begin by reviewing existing research work on incidental political discussion. Next, I briefly introduce the empirical setting for this study—Reddit, the

chosen case issue—gun policy and mass shootings. Then I illustrate the data collection process and measures of key concepts, followed by reporting the results of hypothesis testing. Finally, I discuss the implications of empirical findings to current research on political discussion, public opinion, and ideological polarization on digital media.

Incidental Political Discussion

Political discussion refers to conversations about specific political and public issues without being constrained by formal procedural rules (Kim & Kim, 2008). Participants contribute to political discussion by expressing their opinions or positions on specific political issues. According to deliberation theorists, political discussion is important for democracy because it can help people exchange their opinions on public issues, foster considered positions, and become more informed and engaged as citizens (e.g., Freelon, 2015; Graham & Wright, 2014; Marchal, 2022; Yan et al., 2018).

As researchers have suggested (Eveland et al., 2011; Lane et al., 2022; Minozzi et al., 2020), political discussion can happen with quite various goals and in different contexts. Minozzi et al. (2020) distinguish two kinds of political discussions based on the contexts where they happen. *Purposive political discussion* is defined as political discussion sought by people with the primary goal of having political conversations. People may intentionally seek others to engage in political conversation, for example, they may visit online communities with topics on politics to post discussions. Many people do seek such conversations, and the largest political communities online, such as r/politics, a political community on Reddit, have hundreds of thousands of participants and tens of thousands of posts each month (Marchal, 2022), where people talk about politics intentionally and purposefully. In contrast, political discussion in

non-political contexts is termed *incidental political discussion*, which Minozzi et al. (2020) define as political discussion happening in contexts where the aim of gathering is not primarily political.

Incidental political discussion is important to look into firstly due to its widespread existence. Research has shown that it happens more often than purposive political discussion. Based on a panel data set of 114 networks from 14 sites between 2008 and 2016, Minozzi et al. (2020) found that political discussion is more often incidental than purposive, and political talk appears to be driven more by opportunity than intent in everyday lives. People in surveys report that they typically have other social relationships with their political discussion partners (Minozzi et al., 2020) or in other than political-themed online spaces (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). Studies with observational data from social media platforms echo these results: for example, on Reddit, nearly half of political discussion is estimated to happen in non-political communities (Rajadesingan et al., 2021).

Second, incidental political discussion may bring specific democratic consequences, which is important as it impacts how a large number of ordinary people who don't have strong political interests or frequent exposure to political talk will perceive the political opinion climate. For example, by investigating an online group discussing popular reality TV shows, Chen and McCabe (2022) found that political issues discourage members from continuing discussion, while most members retain a moderate level of tolerance of the political debate happening there. Similarly, in a sports forum, Yan et al. (2018) showed that diverse modes of deliberative discussion happened there, including liberal individualist and communitarian forms of communication. Offline incidental political discussion was also followed by higher frequency

and quality of civic engagement (Minozzi et al., 2020) and decreased opinion polarization in political discussions (Levendusky, 2023).

Though incidental political discussion is common in everyday political communicative practices of ordinary people and it may have particular democratic consequences, its features are not well understood. Existing studies of political discussion are overwhelmingly focused on purposive political discussions, such as those happening in politics-themed communities (e.g., An et al., 2019; Marchal, 2022), or social media posts with explicit hashtags on political issues (e.g., Zheng et al., 2019). Also, studies of incidental political discussions have usually focused on only one non-political forum (Chen & McCabe, 2022; Yan et al., 2018), while broader claims may require larger-scale investigations.

This study aims to enhance the understanding of incidental political discussions by comparing them with purposive ones, focusing on two critical dimensions: content and style. The content dimension encompasses the political topics discussed and the opinions expressed toward these topics. Analyzing the content provides insights into public concerns and reveals aspects of publicly expressed opinions on specific issues (Yarchi et al., 2021). The examination of style, particularly the level of incivility, is crucial for evaluating the tone and manner of discourse. Focusing on incivility allows for an assessment of the quality, inclusiveness, and constructiveness of dialogic deliberation within these discussions (Rossini, 2022). By comparing the content and style of incidental and purposive political discussions, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of their broader implications for political discourse and public expressive engagement.

Opinion Expression in Political Discussion

Existing literature on political discussion suggests that purposive political discussions are particularly susceptible to partisan opinion expression (e.g., Yarchi et al., 2021). This susceptibility arises because purposive discussions typically occur in explicitly political contexts where participants are more likely to engage with their political identities and align their opinions with partisan lines to fit in with group norms and expectations. In such environments, the focus is often on reinforcing existing beliefs and rallying support for one's political group, which can intensify partisan divisions and reduce the likelihood of encountering diverse or moderate perspectives, thus resulting in partisan polarization (Lelkes, 2016; Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016).

In contrast, incidental political discussion may make opinion expression less partisan due to there being more common ground between discussants. Previous studies show that discussions with people who have shared non-political characteristics were associated with decreased degree of opinion polarization (Baliotti et al., 2021; Levendusky, 2023), partly because people feel less “us vs. them” dualism when conducting political discussion and are more influenced by their commonalities (e.g., professional, hobby, social). Such informal gatherings are conceptualized as “third spaces” (Chen & McCabe, 2022; Graham, 2012; Wright, 2012; Yan et al., 2018), seemingly non-political in their inherent reason for existence, but political talk may still surface in these spaces organically. As a result, individuals may be more inclined to listen to and consider different viewpoints to maintain positive relationships and avoid conflicts with their conversation partners (Kim & Kim, 2008), which is oftentimes the case for incidental political discussion.

Additionally, the absence of party identity in incidental political discussion suggests the possibility of depolarization. According to social identity theory and computer-mediated communication studies, people tend to conform to group norms when their group identity cues are present, and they identify themselves as specific group members in such contexts (e.g., Chen & McCabe, 2022). In political discussion, party identity plays a role in group identification (Marchal, 2022), and the group norm is largely to express their partisan leaning voices. However, because incidental political discussion is happening in not explicitly political spaces, there are no pre-existing party identification settings in the discussion. As a result, individuals may feel less pressure to conform to the political norms of a particular party (Minozzi et al., 2020; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009) and be more willing to express their opinions in a nuanced and thoughtful manner.

It is also worth noting that incidental political discussion may also witness clear-cut political claims due to at least two reasons. First, non-political spaces usually do not foster deep conversations on politics, either because participants' initial exposure to political topics does not entail complex cognitive processing (Prior, 2007), or given audiences might resist politicization of entertainment content (Harbin, 2023). This lack of consideration can lead to clear-cut claims that are closer to partisan opinion expression rather than moderate, nuanced expression. Second, it is also possible that significant parts of political expressions might merely come from limited “supercommenters” who are politically interested (Graham & Wright, 2014; Yang & Hsiao, 2023), whose claims are usually more partisan or extreme.

Based on the above discussions, prior literature provides a general argument that incidental political discussions are less likely to contain partisan opinion expression than

purposive ones. This argument is supported by the presence of non-political commonalities among discussants and the absence of political or partisan cues, which significantly influence the nature of the political opinions expressed. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that incidental political discussions are less likely to contain partisan opinion expression compared to purposive discussions. Accordingly, H1 posits:

H1: Comments in incidental political discussion are less likely to have a partisan opinion than those in purposive political discussion.

Incivility of Political Discussion

Incivility is a major criterion for evaluating the style of online political discussions, regardless of their substantial content. Building on prior research (Coe et al., 2014; Goovaerts & Turkenburg, 2022; Rossini, 2022), I conceptualize incivility as a violation of discussion and social norms, as signaled by the tone (e.g., insults, vulgarity) of a message or by the style of its delivery (e.g., shouting). In addition, there is recently a new call for distinguishing intolerance from incivility (Rossini, 2022, 2023), which refers to the intolerant discourses targeted at particular groups, oftentimes minorities. Though there is conceptual fuzziness of incivility, I follow Hansen (2023), based on a review of related concepts, to understand incivility as an umbrella term to include impoliteness, violating social norms, and intolerance.

Incidental political discussions may be more civil and social compared to those purposive ones within explicitly political contexts. One major contributor to the hostility frequently observed in online political discussions is affective polarization, where partisans tend to view those from opposing parties negatively and those from their own party positively (Hutchens et al., 2019). This heightened antagonism can be understood through the presence of party

identification (such as Republicans and Democrats) triggering group identities and fostering an 'us versus them' mentality. Unlike race or gender, both of which are protected by strong social norms and laws against discrimination, there are no comparable norms to moderate hostility towards members of the opposing political party (Iyengar et al., 2019). Moreover, the open hostility displayed by political leaders toward their adversaries signals that such behavior is acceptable (Banks et al., 2021), which is often the case of purposive political discussions stimulated by political figures.

Researchers have examined ways to reduce partisan animosity, often drawing on studies of intergroup conflict. One effective strategy involves highlighting a shared superordinate identity. According to Common Ingroup Identity Model (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2011), Levendusky (2023) demonstrated that encouraging Republicans and Democrats to see each other as fellow Americans, rather than as opponents, helped recategorize them into a common ingroup, thereby reducing animosity and fostering more positive attitudes. While my study does not directly test this theory, I propose that interactions in non-political contexts may emphasize shared identities. This could shape how cross-partisan political discussions are conducted in these settings, potentially leading to more civil dialogue.

Given the above literature review, H2 sets forth expectations that civility in incidental and purposive political discussion.

H2: Comments in incidental political discussion exhibit less incivility than those in purposive political discussion.

Methods

Empirical setting: Reddit and Online Political Discussion

This study is set in Reddit, one of the largest social media platforms for people to talk with each other and form communities online (Beel et al., 2022; Marchal, 2022). I choose to study Reddit for several reasons. First, as Rajadesingan et al. (2021) have suggested, Reddit has accommodated many political discussions that serve as rich materials to investigate. Second, many Reddit communities focus on political discussion (defined as “political communities,” to be described in the following measures) while others do not. When users engage in political discussion in political communities, they are participating in political discussion as the primary goal. In contrast, political discussion happening in non-political communities is incidental political discussion because people don’t take engagement in political discussion there as their primary goal but only encounter these discussions incidentally. Third and last, Reddit is also reported as a platform with salient partisan opinion expression and ideological divergence (Waller & Anderson, 2021); thus, it is a good site for exploring features of incidental political discussion in terms of polarization or deliberation based on large-scale behavioral data.

The current study chooses mass shooting and gun control as the case for political discussion topics to investigate for two reasons. First, recent political communication studies have seen this issue as a salient divisive topic in online political discussion (Beel et al., 2022; Demszky et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2023), in which there exists ideological divergence, with Democrats typically supporting gun control and Republicans advocating for gun rights. Second, there are abundant discussions on gun control and mass shooting on Reddit (Beel et al., 2022) which suggests that sufficient observational data will be available. Given that prolific political discussion is stimulated after particular well-known news and public events, I choose October

2017 as the time window to look into since there was a mass shooting in Las Vegas on October 1, 2017, which sparked national debates on gun control, mental health, and public safety.

Data Collection

Data for this study were sourced from all subreddits on Reddit spanning the period from October 1st, 2017, the date of the Las Vegas mass shooting incident, to October 31st, 2017. Data collection was facilitated using Jason Baumgartner's Pushshift.io API (Baumgartner et al., 2020). Among the extensive corpus of 130,854,211 comments posted during this specified timeframe, 611,889 comments were specifically harvested, as they contained at least one of the predefined search strings, namely: "gun," "shooter," "shooting," "firearm," "second amendment," "2nd amendment," "nra," "national rifle association," and "control laws." This set of keyword search strings was a union set from pertinent research by Zhang, et al. (2022), and Beel et al. (2022), which focused on political discourse regarding gun control and mass shootings within social media, specifically on platforms such as Twitter and Reddit.

However, it's noteworthy that prior studies have grappled with the challenge of inaccurate keyword-based sampling strategies for sample construction, as not all textual instances containing these keywords inherently signify relevant political discussions. Due to the fact that my dataset contains discussions from various contexts, the same keyword might indicate quite different meanings and substantial discussions in different contexts. For example, “shooting” in a video game community does not usually involve gun control. In addition, if discussions only mention some features of guns or gun sale, but are not related to public policy, they should also not be viewed as political discussions. Both conditions may result in false positive cases in identifying political discussions.

In my study, I introduce an innovative approach to improve accuracy that leverages a GPT-assisted framework to discern whether a given Reddit comment can be categorized as political concerning gun control and mass shooting issues. First, I conducted the keyword searching to make a set of comments potentially regarding gun control and mass shootings. Second, by supplying the GPT-3.5-turbo model by OpenAI's ChatGPT API with instances of "political" and "non-political" labeled Reddit comments in the prompt, I solicit binary responses, namely "yes" or "no," to determine the political nature of each comment. Evaluation of the model's performance, based on a randomly selected sample of 100 comments hand-coded by me, revealed a precision rate of 100%, a recall rate of 95.24%, and an F1 score of 97.56%, demonstrating remarkable effectiveness. Details about how prompts were used to interact with the GPT model have been provided in supplementary materials.

Following the GPT-assisted labeling process applied to the entire collection of comments, 187,581 comments related to gun and mass shooting issues were identified. This indicates that 69.4% of the comments initially selected using keywords were false positives, emphasizing the importance of filtering to exclude unrelated and apolitical content. It can be viewed as the population of gun issue discussions in Oct. 2017 on Reddit. They are from 2,016 subreddits, among which 158 subreddits have more than 100 comments in each of them. The mean word count of each comment was 91 words.

Then I adopted a stratified random sampling strategy. After randomly selecting 15 political and non-political subreddits respectively from 158 subreddits with over 100 comments in it, I randomly select 100 comments for each subreddit, to compose a set of 3,000 comments as the sample for further analysis. Previous work has demonstrated the weak performance of

automated approaches to classifying social media discourses into “gun-control” and “gun-rights” categories after mass shooting events (Zhang et al., 2019, 2023; details were also discussed in the supplemental materials).¹ To largely limit the bias from the classifier, I conduct a human-based content analysis against this sample of 3,000 comments.

Measurement

A partisan comment is a comment with an explicit opinion on either partisan side, indicated by dependent binary variable *partisan_opinion*. For my study on gun control—a topic with sharply divided opinions in the United States—I analyzed comments for their expressed viewpoints. Generally, opinions fell into two main camps: pro-gun comments advocating for gun rights and opposing stringent gun policies, and anti-gun comments favoring restrictions on gun ownership and supporting more rigorous gun control measures. This division is usually aligned with partisan affiliations, with conservatives typically backing pro-gun positions and liberals favoring anti-gun perspectives. When there is no explicit opinion to tell from the comment text, for example, some discussed gun control and mass shootings without a clear stance on policy, categorized as “neutral.” In contrast, others presented arguments for both sides without a definitive conclusion, labeled as “mixed.” This process identified five primary opinion categories: comments that did not substantively talk about gun control were deemed “irrelevant;”

¹ In the work by Zhang et al. (2019, 2023), they have constructed a machine learning classifier based on word embedding to identify the gun-control or gun-rights discourses on Twitter. As they reported, “for the gun control discourse classifier, they (precision, recall, and F1 score) were .60, .31 and .41; for the gun rights discourse classifier, they reached .69, .52 and .59 (2019:189).” This quality of performance is fairly weak, leading to much inaccuracy in further analysis. They have also mentioned that they still accept these results since the classification results were consistent with hashtag-based approach (i.e. use hashtags like #2ndamendment to classify). However, with a hashtag leaning to pro-gun views doesn’t necessarily mean the text of the tweet itself is pro-gun. Since Reddit comments don’t usually contain hashtags as Twitter, and after explanatory analyses by several other automated coding approaches (discussed in supplemental materials), I generally believe that the approaches mentioned above do not promise qualified accuracy for further analysis.

comments were classified as having a clear opinion (“pro-gun” or “anti-gun”) or not (“neutral” or “mixed”). Irrelevant comments are excluded from further analysis. The codebook with examples are included in the supplemental materials.

To ensure accuracy, two independent coders evaluated all 3,000 comments in the dataset. Measures of intercoder reliability were adequate, with Cohen's Kappa at .759, Krippendorff's alpha at .758, and the percentage of agreement at .851 for the 3,000 comment coding. After coding, 34 comments were either too short to have clear meaning or coded as irrelevant. As a result 2,966 comments are analyzed in the final dataset for hypothesis testing.

Incivility, as reviewed in previous sections, refers to impoliteness, violation of discussion norms, and intolerance towards other social groups. All comments in the stratified sample are evaluated in three dimensions by Perspective API (Jigsaw, 2021): toxicity (defined as ‘a rude, disrespectful, or unreasonable comment that is likely to make you leave a discussion’, aligned with the feature of violating social norms in discussion), insult (indicating impoliteness), and identity attack (indicating intolerance towards particular social groups). Each dimension reports a value between 0 and 1, indicating the probability that this comment is classified toxic, insult, or identity attack. I selected a threshold of 0.7 suggested by Perspective API for use by social science researchers, and dichotomized the variable. To make a composite of three dimensions, the dependent variable *incivility* would be “1” if any of the three dimensions are “1”.

Incidental political discussion is operationalized in the following ways: As Hofmann et al. (2022) defined based on the setting of Reddit, online political communities are defined as communities that focus on authentic political discussion. Founded on a validated and robust machine learning approach, they have released a list of 605 political communities on Reddit that

meet the definition. All subreddits in my dataset were coded accordingly into two categories: political vs. non-political.² All comments regarding gun control in non-political subreddits are counted as incidental political discussion, while those in political subreddits are purposive. Incidental ones have “0”, while purposive ones have “1” in the binary independent variable *political_context*.

I had two control variables included in the statistical analysis: (1) *word_count*, referring to the length of any comment. This might be relevant for predicting dependent variables since longer comments possibly contain more words that might lean uncivil and could also make the opinion expression less explicit and more nuanced. (2) *reply*, referring to whether the current comment is a response to prior comments. It might be relevant since interaction might fuel debates impacting the opinion expression, or the whole incivility degree of the conversation thread.

Results

Descriptions of my data are included in Figure 1 and following illustrations. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of four categories of opinion expression in comments across 15 political and 15 non-political subreddits. Each type of subreddits contains 1483 comments (50% of all), after filtering irrelevant ones. Overall, there are 1,260 comments with a neutral attitude in the dataset, which takes the highest proportion of 42.5%, 731 anti-gun comments (24.7%), 561 pro-gun comments (18.9%), and 414 with a mixed attitude (13.9%). Partisan comments (sum of

² I have also validated Hoffman et al.'s list of political subreddits by hand coding. For the 30 subreddits included in the dataset, I went to the webpage of these subreddits and checked their (1) introduction and scope; (2) the community rules, to find out if there is a focus on authentic political discussion; (3) estimated proportion of political discussions from study by Rajadesingan et al., 2021, to make sure that empirically the subreddits have held certain amount of political discussions. The validation outcome is the same with the release from Hoffman et al. (2022).

anti- and pro-gun comments, 43.6% of all) are fewer than comments with neutral/mixed attitudes (56.4%). Regarding incivility, 5.3% of the comments are classified as uncivil, while the vast majority, 94.7%, are considered civil.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

To test H1, which predicted that incidental political discussion would be less likely to include partisan comments (compared to purposive political discussion), I fitted a multilevel logistic regression model with *partisan_opinion* as the dependent variable. In this model, I included random effects for both *subreddit* and *author*. The random effects for subreddit control for differences between various subreddits, accounting for the fact that some subreddits may have different baseline levels of partisan opinions. Additionally, I included random intercept terms for the author to ensure the independence of observations, as multiple comments from the same author could otherwise violate this assumption³. The results are presented in the left column of Table 1. I found evidence contrary to H1: When other variables are held at their mean values, the log odds of purposive political discussions including explicitly partisan comments is $-.627$ ($p < .001$). Expressed as an odds ratio of $.53$, the data indicate that the probability of partisan gun-related comments occurring in politically oriented online contexts is significantly *less* than that in non-political contexts, contrary to what H1 posited. These results thus serve as counter-evidence to the argument that the potential common ground in non-political contexts may mitigate partisan opinion expression.

³ In the final dataset, 2,966 comments were from 2,225 unique authors, and 30 comments were from authors that deleted their account at the time of data collection, so these 30 comments are labeled as N/A in their author. For the remaining 2,936 comments and 2,225 authors included in the regression model, 1,838 authors made only one comment, 384 authors made more than one but fewer than 10 comments, and three authors made ten or more comments. Based on these descriptive results, I believe that ‘supercommenters’ mentioned in literature review are not the case for the current dataset overall.

[Insert Table 1 here]

To test H2, which predicted that incidental political discussion would involve comments that are more civil than those found in purposive discussion, I fitted a multilevel logistic regression model with incivility as the dependent variable, and the results are presented in the right column of Table 1. I did not find evidence in favor of H2; there is no significant difference in incivility between incidental and purposive political discussions in my sample. In other words, the context of political discussion—whether incidental or purposive—does not appear to affect the level of incivility. This suggests that the context or intent behind political conversations might not play a significant role in shaping the civility of the discussion, and also challenges the expectation that non-political contexts would naturally foster more civil discourse due to the presence of common ground and shared non-political identities.

Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, the study reveals findings that challenge the potential to contain less partisan opinion expression in incidental political discussions, which exhibit a greater prevalence of partisan commentary compared to their purposive counterparts. This also serves as a counterevidence of the premise that incidental political discussions can decrease opinion polarization in experimental studies (e.g., Baliatti et al., 2021).

It has several implications for ongoing and future research. First, explicit political communities can still be the better spaces for deliberation and thoughtful political opinion expression. For example, in a large proportion of comments in political news commenting sections, people express their political opinions justified with arguments, rather than only by making single claims (Ksiazek, 2018; Rossini, 2022), which makes their opinions more

comprehensive and less likely to be partisan. Thus, fostering explicitly political spaces might be a way for users in online communities to be more thoughtful on public issues, such as implementing specific tags for political discussions in non-political communities (Chen & McCabe, 2022).

Second, it is also worth investigating the mechanisms about why incidental political discussions witness more partisan opinions. One possible explanation could be that these discussions often occur in contexts where there is less focus and depth compared to structured, purposive political discussions (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009)⁴.

Third, while the study found that incidental political discussions contain more partisan comments than purposive discussions, this doesn't necessarily imply that ordinary social media users perceive them this way. Incidental political discussions form a relatively small portion of the total content within a given non-political community, which may cause them to be less noticeable to users. Conversely, purposive political discussions are the predominant type of conversation within political communities, so they naturally carry more weight and visibility, potentially shaping user perceptions more strongly. This contrast might lead to differing levels of engagement and intensity, with purposive discussions drawing more focused and deliberate participation. As a result, future research can examine the perception of polarization in different contexts.

How does the general public express their opinions on political issues? This is the broader question that the current study responds to. Since the advent of digital media for news consumption and political discussion, there have been ongoing debates about whether media

⁴ In order to find out potential mechanisms or alternative accounts for the current results, I have done a post-hoc analysis about discussion depth, details included in supplemental materials.

effects on audiences' political opinions are limited or pronounced. Two primary perspectives have emerged: first, the notion that media effects are mitigated in high-choice environments, where exposure to a diverse array of media content dilutes the impact of any single source (Delli Carpini, 2017); and second, the argument that media effects are pronounced, especially among the general public who engage less frequently in political matters (Prior, 2005). Due to their limited exposure to varied political viewpoints, most of the general public may lack the cognitive elaboration required for processing contrasting discussions, making them more susceptible to the influences of the media content they encounter.

The findings of this study provide support for the latter perspective, suggesting that when news (such as mass shootings in this case) exhibits a bias towards a particular political stance, the general population is more likely to express opinions that align closely with that specific partisan viewpoint, rather than adopting a moderate or nuanced stance. However, it is important to acknowledge the demographic differences between Reddit users and the general population. Reddit users tend to be younger, more male, more likely to self-identify as liberals, and more technologically savvy (Pew Research Center, 2016). These characteristics may influence the features of the discussions on Reddit and may not fully represent the views of the broader public. Therefore, while the study's results highlight the potential impact of non-political contexts and politically disinterested individuals on opinion expression, further research is needed to determine whether these findings are generalizable beyond the Reddit community.

This study highlights the value of analyzing incidental political discussions in non-political contexts, offering a broader view of public opinion. It addresses the limitations of two common approaches in public opinion research: focusing exclusively on explicit political

settings, which often captures only the perspectives of politically interested and engaged individuals (e.g., Marchal, 2022); conducting large-scale surveys, while not all the respondents actually express their opinions (e.g., Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009; Lelkes, 2016). By examining political discussions within non-political contexts, I capture opinions that might otherwise be overlooked. This approach can reveal how political topics emerge organically in everyday discussions and how they resonate with a broader segment of the population. These insights can inform a more nuanced understanding of public opinion dynamics, and I believe digital communities provide researchers with a rich dataset to analyze political discussion happening in various kinds of contexts.

Limitations

This study is limited in several ways that I would like to highlight. First, it only considered one political discussion topic and included comments from a single month on one platform. This makes the results subject to the topical context and the triggering events, and the demographic features of Reddit users. Thus, studies on more political discussion topics and other social media platforms are needed to replicate the conclusions. Second, the sampling process enables me to do a highly accurate analysis of the comments regarding the topic, yet does not capture the reply relationships between different comments in a thread, which might serve as an important predictor of partisan commenting out of disagreement. Third, comments in the dataset are sometimes difficult to categorize in terms of whether it has a clear opinion on either side; and it is difficult to state that the opinion expressed in one comment is aligned with the actual attitude of the commenter due to contextual factors (e.g., irony, satire, metaphor). However, the sense of the coding team is that it is likely that a commenter of neutral/mixed comment would be anti-gun

or pro-gun if I were to survey them, but much less likely that a commenter of anti-gun comment would be either neutral or pro-gun. I believe that this makes the study a conservative estimate of the potential polarization of non-political spaces due to the large proportion of neutral/mixed comments that likely come from partisan commenters.

Regarding my ability to distinguish between incidental and purposive political discussion, I understand that there are multiple valid approaches to understanding the ‘political’ nature of contexts, given the blurring boundaries between political and non-political contexts. Studies with different approaches to infer political subreddits may get different outcomes (for example, the comparison between Hofmann et al. with a stricter criterion and Rajadesingan et al. with a relatively less strict criterion). While there isn’t agreement on any rule to follow in this regard, I believe that decisions on this measurement challenge should be subject to two major considerations: (1) how commenters themselves understand and define their discussion spaces; (2) what is the aim of researchers. For (2), for example, even with a low threshold of defining political subreddits that means more subreddits are categorized as political, Rajadesingan et al. still found more than 40% of political discussion came from outside of these settings⁵. That said, a stricter criterion will find stronger evidence for their conclusion that incidental political discussion is abundant. In the current study, I adopted Hofmann et al.’s definition and category outcomes, for two reasons: (1) Hofmann et al.’s definition is more general and systematic, and close to the incidental vs. purposive distinction; (2) Hofmann et al.’s definition and results are

⁵ In their approach, they first estimated the proportion of political comments in each subreddit by machine learning, and then set political subreddits as those with no less than 25% of whole comments are political (or, in their term, ‘not nonpolitical’) in each of them.

closer to the scope of these subreddits defined by moderators and members, which is aligned with ordinary people's understanding about political and non-political contexts.

Conclusion

This study challenges notions derived from polarization theory about political engagement and media effects. The findings reveal that non-political online communities, often overlooked but abundant, are significant arenas for political discussion, particularly among the politically disengaged. This research calls attention to the need for a more nuanced understanding of how digital media environments and major news events shape public opinion. It also highlights the importance of context in the study of political communication and suggests that theoretical models should adapt to the evolving landscape of media consumption and public discourse.

References

- An, J., Kwak, H., Posegga, O., & Jungherr, A. (2019). Political Discussions in Homogeneous and Cross-Cutting Communication Spaces. *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, 13, 68–79. <https://doi.org/10.1609/icwsm.v13i01.3210>
- Baliatti, S., Getoor, L., Goldstein, D. G., & Watts, D. J. (2021). Reducing opinion polarization: Effects of exposure to similar people with differing political views. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 118(52), e2112552118. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2112552118>
- Banks, A., Calvo, E., Karol, D., & Telhami, S. (2021). #PolarizedFeeds: Three Experiments on Polarization, Framing, and Social Media. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 26(3), 609–634. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220940964>
- Baumgartner, J., Zannettou, S., Keegan, B., Squire, M., & Blackburn, J. (2020). The Pushshift Reddit Dataset. *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, 14, 830–839. <https://doi.org/10.1609/icwsm.v14i1.7347>
- Beel, J., Xiang, T., Soni, S., & Yang, D. (2022). Linguistic Characterization of Divisive Topics Online: Case Studies on Contentiousness in Abortion, Climate Change, and Gun Control. *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, 16, 32–42. <https://doi.org/10.1609/icwsm.v16i1.19270>
- Boczkowski, P. J., Mitchelstein, E., & Matassi, M. (2018). “News comes across when I’m in a moment of leisure”: Understanding the practices of incidental news consumption on social media. *New Media & Society*, 20(10), 3523–3539. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817750396>
- Chen, A., & McCabe, K. T. (2022). Roses and thorns: Political talk in reality TV subreddits. *New Media & Society*, 14614448221099180. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221099180>
- Coe, K., Kenski, K., & Rains, S. A. (2014). Online and Uncivil? Patterns and Determinants of Incivility in Newspaper Website Comments. *Journal of Communication*, 64(4), 658–679.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12104>

- Delli Carpini, M. X. (2017). The Political Effects of Entertainment Media. In K. Kenski & K. H. Jamieson (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication* (p. 0). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199793471.013.30>
- Demszky, D., Garg, N., Voigt, R., Zou, J., Shapiro, J., Gentzkow, M., & Jurafsky, D. (2019). Analyzing Polarization in Social Media: Method and Application to Tweets on 21 Mass Shootings. *Proceedings of the 2019 Conference of the North American Chapter of the Association for Computational Linguistics: Human Language Technologies, Volume 1 (Long and Short Papers)*, 2970–3005. <https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/N19-1304>
- Eveland, W. P., Jr., Morey, A. C., & Hutchens, M. J. (2011). Beyond deliberation: New directions for the study of informal political conversation from a communication perspective. *Journal of Communication*, 61(6), 1082–1103. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2011.01598.x>
- Freelon, D. (2015). Discourse architecture, ideology, and democratic norms in online political discussion. *New Media & Society*, 17(5), 772–791. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444813513259>
- Gaertner, S. L., & Dovidio, J. F. (2011). Common Ingroup Identity Model. *The Encyclopedia of Peace Psychology*.
- Goovaerts, I., & Turkenburg, E. (2022). How Contextual Features Shape Incivility Over Time: An Analysis of the Evolution and Determinants of Political Incivility in Televised Election Debates (1985–2019). *Communication Research*, 00936502221135694. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00936502221135694>
- Graham, T. (2012). Beyond “Political” Communicative Spaces: Talking Politics on the Wife Swap Discussion Forum. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 9(1), 31–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2012.635961>
- Graham, T., & Wright, S. (2014). Discursive Equality and Everyday Talk Online: The Impact of

- “Superparticipants”*. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 19(3), 625–642.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12016>
- Hansen, R. W. (2023). You’ve never been welcome here: Exploring the relationship between exclusivity and incivility in online forums. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 20(2), 139–153.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2022.2069180>
- Harbin, M. B. (2023). Don’t Make My Entertainment Political! Social Media Responses to Narratives of Racial Duty on Competitive Reality Television Series. *Political Communication*, 40(4), 464–483.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2023.2195365>
- Hofmann, V., Schütze, H., & Pierrehumbert, J. B. (2022). The Reddit Politosphere: A Large-Scale Text and Network Resource of Online Political Discourse. *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, 16, 1259–1267.
- Hutchens, M. J., Hmielowski, J. D., & Beam, M. A. (2019). Reinforcing spirals of political discussion and affective polarization. *Communication Monographs*, 86(3), 357–376.
- Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N., & Westwood, S. J. (2019). The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22, 129–146.
- Jigsaw. (2021). *Perspective API*. <https://www.perspectiveapi.com/>
- Kim, J., & Kim, E. J. (2008). Theorizing Dialogic Deliberation: Everyday Political Talk as Communicative Action and Dialogue. *Communication Theory*, 18(1), 51–70.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2007.00313.x>
- Ksiazek, T. B. (2018). Commenting on the News: Explaining the degree and quality of user comments on news websites. *Journalism Studies*, 19(5), 650–673.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2016.1209977>
- Lane, D. S., Do, K., & Molina-Rogers, N. (2022). What is political expression on social media anyway?:

- A systematic review. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 19(3), 331–345.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2021.1985031>
- Lelkes, Y. (2016). Mass Polarization: Manifestations and Measurements. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 80(S1), 392–410. <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfw005>
- Levendusky, M. (2023). *Our Common Bonds: Using What Americans Share to Help Bridge the Partisan Divide*. University of Chicago Press.
- Levendusky, M., & Malhotra, N. (2016). Does Media Coverage of Partisan Polarization Affect Political Attitudes? *Political Communication*, 33(2), 283–301.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2015.1038455>
- Marchal, N. (2022). “Be Nice or Leave Me Alone”: An Intergroup Perspective on Affective Polarization in Online Political Discussions. *Communication Research*, 49(3), 376–398.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00936502211042516>
- Minozzi, W., Song, H., Lazer, D. M. J., Neblo, M. A., & Ognyanova, K. (2020). The Incidental Pundit: Who Talks Politics with Whom, and Why? *American Journal of Political Science*, 64(1), 135–151. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12469>
- Peterson, E., & Muñoz, M. (2022). “Stick to Sports”: Evidence from Sports Media on the Origins and Consequences of Newly Politicized Attitudes. *Political Communication*, 39(4), 454–474.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2022.2039979>
- Pew Research Center. (2016). Reddit News Users More likely to be Male, Young and Digital in Their News Preferences. *Pew Research Center - Reports*.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2016/02/25/reddit-news-users-more-likely-to-be-male-young-and-digital-in-their-news-preferences/>
- Prior, M. (2005). News vs. Entertainment: How Increasing Media Choice Widens Gaps in Political Knowledge and Turnout. *American Journal of Political Science*, 49(3), 577–592.

- <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2005.00143.x>
- Prior, M. (2007). *Post-Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections*. Cambridge University Press.
- Rajadesingan, A., Budak, C., & Resnick, P. (2021). Political Discussion is Abundant in Non-political Subreddits (and Less Toxic). *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, 15, 525–536. <https://doi.org/10.1609/icwsm.v15i1.18081>
- Rossini, P. (2022). Beyond Incivility: Understanding Patterns of Uncivil and Intolerant Discourse in Online Political Talk. *Communication Research*, 49(3), 399–425. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650220921314>
- Rossini, P. (2023). Reassessing the Role of Inclusion in Political Communication Research. *Political Communication*, 40(5), 676–680. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2023.2220666>
- Waller, I., & Anderson, A. (2021). Quantifying social organization and political polarization in online platforms. *Nature*, 600(7888), 264–268. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-021-04167-x>
- Wojcieszak, M. E., Menchen-Trevino, E., Clemm von Hohenberg, B., de Leeuw, S., Gonçalves, J., Davidson, S., & Gonçalves, A. (2023). Non-News Websites Expose People to More Political Content Than News Websites: Evidence from Browsing Data in Three Countries. *Political Communication*, 0(0), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2023.2238641>
- Wojcieszak, M. E., & Mutz, D. C. (2009). Online Groups and Political Discourse: Do Online Discussion Spaces Facilitate Exposure to Political Disagreement? *Journal of Communication*, 59(1), 40–56. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2008.01403.x>
- Wright, S. (2012). From “Third Place” to “Third Space”: Everyday Political Talk in Non-Political Online Spaces. *Javnost - The Public*, 19(3), 5–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2012.11009088>
- Yan, W., Sivakumar, G., & Xenos, M. A. (2018). It’s not cricket: Examining political discussion in nonpolitical online space. *Information, Communication & Society*, 21(11), 1571–1587.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1340499>

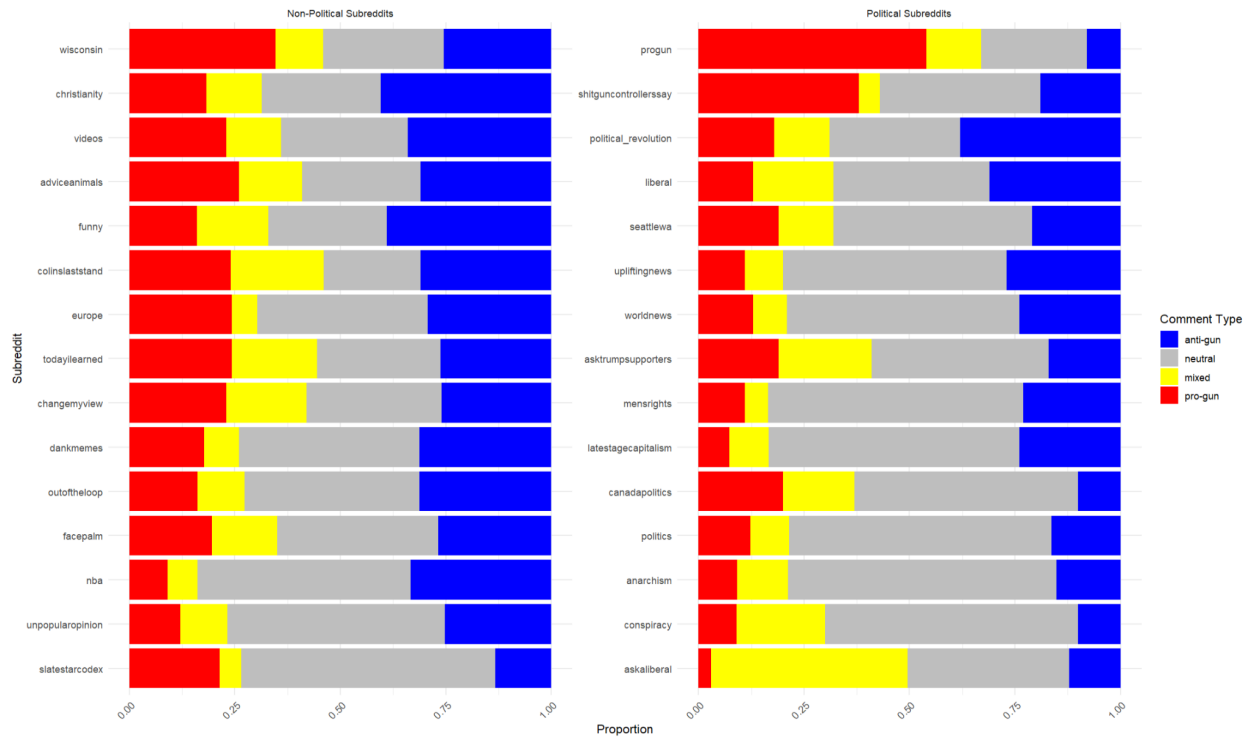
Yang, Y., & Hsiao, Y. (2023). *How participatory propaganda operates through superusers: The effects of super commenters on Breitbart News*. 73th Annual Conference of International Communication Association, Toronto, Canada. <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/9xjtk>

Yarchi, M., Baden, C., & Kligler-Vilenchik, N. (2021). Political Polarization on the Digital Sphere: A Cross-platform, Over-time Analysis of Interactional, Positional, and Affective Polarization on Social Media. *Political Communication*, 38(1–2), 98–139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2020.1785067>

Zhang, Y., Shah, D., Foley, J., Abhishek, A., Lukito, J., Suk, J., Kim, S. J., Sun, Z., Pevehouse, J., & Garlough, C. (2019). Whose Lives Matter? Mass Shootings and Social Media Discourses of Sympathy and Policy, 2012–2014. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 24(4), 182–202. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcmc/zmz009>

Zhang, Y., Shah, D., Pevehouse, J., & Valenzuela, S. (2023). Reactive and Asymmetric Communication Flows: Social Media Discourse and Partisan News Framing in the Wake of Mass Shootings. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 28(4), 194016122110727. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612211072793>

Figure 1. Descriptive graph of proportion of four kinds of comments in 30 subreddits (ordered by proportion of partisan comments)⁶.



⁶ Partisan comments refer to the sum of anti-gun and pro-gun comments.

Table 1. Multilevel logistic regression model results.

	Comment with a partisan opinion (anti-/pro- gun)	Incivility of comment
	Log Odds (β) [2.5% CIs, 97.5% CIs]	Log Odds (β) [2.5% CIs, 97.5% CIs]
(Intercept)	0.237 [-0.249, 0.722]	-2.410*** [-3.312, -1.508]
political_context	-0.627*** [-0.983, -0.271]	0.001 [-0.568, 0.569]
$\log_{10}(\text{word_count})$	-0.096 [-0.309, 0.118]	-0.274 [-0.695, 0.147]
reply	-0.097 [-0.308, 0.114]	-0.194 [-0.579, 0.192]
SD (Intercept subreddit)	0.437	0.628
SD (Intercept author)	0.576	
Num.Obs.	2936	2966
R2 Marg.	0.025	0.005
R2 Cond.	0.158	0.111
ICC	0.1	0.1
RMSE	0.44	0.22

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