

Unintended Politics: Opinion Expression and Incivility in Incidental Political Discussion

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Abstract

While substantial research has focused on how political talk can reinforce or undermine democratic norms, relatively little attention has been paid to the role of incidental political discussion in everyday, nonpolitical contexts. Embedded within contexts of shared, nonpartisan identities or preexisting social relationships, existing theory suggests that incidental political discussion will include less political opinion and uncivil expression than purposive political discussion. Analyses of nearly three thousand comments on mass shootings and gun control across both political and nonpolitical communities on Reddit show that, contrary to expectations, incidental political discussions are more likely than purposive political discussions to contain expressions of policy opinion. Additionally, the level of incivility does not differ between the two kinds of discussions.

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In recent years, social media have had a significant impact on political communication. Political discussion previously conducted in offline settings has moved into the public realm of computer-mediated communication. Yet, explicitly political online spaces have become a breeding ground for polarized discourse, which has emerged as a central concern given the perceived fragmentation of political debates and growing hostility among political groups (e.g., Yarchi et al., 2021). Polarization can undermine a number of characteristics of deliberation, such as mutual respect, reasoned argumentation, and the willingness to engage with opposing viewpoints (Cohen, 1997). Explicitly political spaces also have witnessed an increased pervasiveness of incivility, disrespect to interlocutors, and intolerance of minorities, all of which hinder healthy political discussion and undermine democratic values (e.g. Rossini, 2022).

Research on online political polarization has tended to focus on discussion in contexts where people intentionally engage in political discussions, 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). 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). In contrast, a considerable amount of exposure to and engagement with political information takes place in nonpolitical contexts (Rajadesingan et al., 2021). By “nonpolitical contexts,” we refer to discussion contexts primarily centered on personal

and everyday lives, including but not limited to entertainment, lifestyle, local affairs, and the like (e.g., Chen & McCabe, 2022; Rajadesingan et al., 2021; Yan et al., 2018).

Political discussion that occurs in these nonpolitical contexts 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. In stark contrast to instrumental deliberation, incidental political discussion should be understood as a dialogic deliberation process, through which people “construct the concept of the self and other, the sense of community, and public reason” (Kim & Kim, 2008, p. 51). These informal conversations expose participants to diverse perspectives, foster respectful conversations, and encourage them to reflect on their own views. Thus, it stands to reason that by highlighting common ground and promoting empathy and understanding, incidental political discussion can reduce polarization and incivility.

Despite their ubiquity in both online and offline settings (e.g., Boczkowski et al., 2018; Minozzi et al., 2020; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009), incidental political discussion has received very little scholarly attention. While shared interests in nonpolitical contexts can help bridge ideological divides, depolarize political opinions, and lead to less toxic discussion (Balietti et al., 2021; Levendusky, 2023; Rajadesingan et al., 2021), political issues might not be well received by audiences whose primary goal in consuming media is nonpolitical (Harbin, 2023). Prior studies have relied on a limited number of cases of incidental political discussion in one forum (e.g., Chen & McCabe, 2022; Yan et al., 2018).

We look to Reddit as a way of better understanding of incidental political discussion for several reasons. First, unlike most social media platforms, Reddit’s architecture organizes

communities by topic. This provides for a clear way to conceptualize and measure incidental political discussion. Second, with 116 million daily active users (Backlinko Team, 2025), Reddit is one of the most used platforms in the US, and a common setting for incidental political discussion (Rajadesingan et al., 2021). Third, a range of other scholars studying political discussion and nonpolitical discussion have studied Reddit (e.g., Rajadesingan et al., 2021; Waller & Anderson, 2021), which allows us to put our findings directly in conversation with this prior work.

This study empirically tests theoretical claims about incidental political discussion by comparing the opinion and incivility of incidental political discussion versus that found in explicitly political spaces. By determining how thousands of individuals across an expansive array of Reddit communities discuss gun control, a perennially controversial issue, our work seeks to understand how incidental political discussion might impact deliberation and polarization in this era of social media.

Incidental Political Discussion

Political discussion refers to conversations about specific political and public issues that are not constrained by formal procedural rules (Kim & Kim, 2008). As a crucial tool for democracy, political discussion can help individuals exchange 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 such, interlocutors often enter political conversations with the goal of persuading others, seeking validation for their own views, or simply gaining more information and a deeper understanding of the issues at hand. Ultimately, political

discussion enables participants to influence public opinion and contribute to the shaping of societal norms and policy decisions.

Political discussion varies along several dimensions. Notably, Minozzi et al. (2020) differentiate between *purposive political discussion*—sought by those whose primary goal is to engage in political conversations—and *incidental political discussion*—discussion happening in contexts where the aim is not primarily political. Individuals may intentionally seek others to engage in political conversation (online and elsewhere), and there is certainly no dearth of opportunities. The largest political discussion communities online, such as the r/politics community on Reddit, have hundreds of thousands of participants and tens of thousands of posts each month (Marchal, 2022). Despite these opportunities, political discussions in everyday lives are predominantly incidental (Minozzi et al., 2020).

Incidental political discussion brings with it significant democratic consequences as it impacts how a large number of ordinary people without strong political interests or frequent exposure to political talk encounter others' political opinions. For example, in an online group that formed to discuss popular reality-TV shows, most members were moderately tolerant of political debate (Chen & McCabe, 2022). Similarly, a sports-oriented online forum can be the venue for diverse modes of deliberative discussion, including liberal individualist and communitarian forms of communication (Yan et al., 2018). Incidental political discussion offline enjoys similar outcomes. For example, cross-cutting political discussion that can foster political tolerance among friends, families, and coworkers (Mutz, 2006). Incidental political discussion also can be followed by a greater frequency and higher quality of civic engagement (Minozzi et al., 2020) as well as decreased opinion polarization (Levendusky, 2023).

Incidental political discussion is widespread and occurs more often than purposive political discussion. In a panel survey data set of 114 networks from 14 geographical locations between 2008 and 2016, political discussion was found to be incidental more often than purposive, and appears to be driven more by opportunity than intent (Minozzi et al., 2020). People discuss politics with their friends, families, coworkers, or others with whom they have other social relationships—not with dedicated political discussion partners (Minozzi et al., 2020)—and typically do so in online spaces not explicitly oriented toward the political (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). Observational data from social media platforms echo these results: for example, on Reddit, nearly half of political discussions are estimated to happen in nonpolitical communities (Rajadesingan et al., 2021).

Though incidental political discussion is common in the everyday political communicative practices of ordinary people and may have important consequences for democratic society, its characteristics are not well understood. Existing studies of political discussion are overwhelmingly focused on purposive political discussion, such as those happening in politics-themed online communities (e.g., Marchal, 2022) or in social media posts with political hashtags (e.g., Zhang et al., 2019). The rare studies of incidental political discussion have focused on only a few entertainment or sports forums (Chen & McCabe, 2022; Yan et al., 2018).

This study aims to enhance the scholarly understanding of incidental political discussion by comparing it with purposive political discussion, focusing on two characteristics critical for civic expressive engagement: content and style. Content encompasses the political topics discussed and the opinions expressed toward these topics. Analysis of content can provide valuable insight into public concerns and opinions. 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.

Opinion Expression in Political Discussion

Existing literature on political discussion suggests that purposive political discussion is particularly conducive to the expression of opinions on public policy or with partisanship (e.g., Yarchi et al., 2021). Partisan opinions are frequently expressed in purposive political discussion because it typically occurs 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. Similarly, policy opinion expression is also prevalent in purposive political discussion as it often serves as proxy for political behavior, such as voting or joining social movements. Individuals in these spaces frequently reinforce existing beliefs and rally support for their political group—actions that can intensify partisan divisions, reduce the likelihood of encountering diverse or moderate perspectives, and resulting in opinion polarization (Lelkes, 2016; Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016).

In contrast, incidental political discussion may cause opinion expression to become less partisan due to there being more explicit common ground between discussants. Previous studies show that discussions with people who have shared nonpolitical characteristics were associated with decreased levels of opinion polarization (Balietti et al., 2021; Levendusky, 2023), partly because people feel less of an “us vs. them” dualism and are more influenced by their professional, avocational, or social commonalities. Much of the literature on incidental political discussions has focused on discussion in nonhome and nonwork settings that Oldenburg (1989) calls “third places” (often referred to as “spaces” in online contexts) (Chen & McCabe, 2022; Yan et al., 2018).

Although third spaces are understood as nonpolitical, political discussions often emerge within them. Individuals in these spaces 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).

Additionally, the reduced salience of partisan identity in incidental political discussion speaks to the possibility of depolarization. According to social identity theory, people tend to conform to group norms when group identity cues are prominent and when they identify themselves as group members (e.g., Chen & McCabe, 2022; Gibbs et al., 2019). In political discussion, partisan identity often plays a role in group identification (Marchal, 2022), leading to a norm of expressing partisan-leaning voices. Because incidental political discussion occurs in spaces that are not explicitly political, the salience of partisan identity may be diminished. This reduced emphasis on partisan identity could result in individuals feeling less pressure to conform to partisan political norms (Minozzi et al., 2020; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009) and therefore a greater willingness to express their opinions in a nuanced and thoughtful manner.

This is not to say that incidental political discussions are always associated with a lower level of polarization or clear-cut partisan or policy claims. Three countervailing factors suggest that political claims may be common in incidental political discussions. First, nonpolitical spaces usually do not foster deep conversations about politics. This is partly because speakers are introduced to political topics unexpectedly and without opportunities for deep engagement (Prior, 2007). A lack of deep cognition might lead to clear-cut claims that contain partisan opinion. Second, familiarity or identification among users may play a role in prompting political claims. Because political contexts usually offer cues to help people identify others' opinions, users may

not need to explicitly state their opinion. When online chat users have identifiable partisan cues, their discussion is marked by greater rationality and less polarization (Jaidka et al., 2022). In contrast, people in nonpolitical contexts might state their political position clearly to justify their engagement with politics in an unusual (nonpolitical) context. Third, significant portions of political expressions might merely come from limited “supercommenters” who participate disproportionately (Graham & Wright, 2014) and who make claims that are more partisan or extreme (Yang & Hsiao, 2023).

On balance, the prior literature suggests that incidental political discussion is less likely to contain political opinion expression than purposive discussion. This suggestion is supported by the presence of nonpolitical commonalities among discussants and the diminished emphasis of political or partisan cues, which significantly influence the nature of the political opinions expressed. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that incidental political discussion is less likely to contain political opinion expression compared to purposive discussion. Accordingly, our first hypothesis posits:

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

Incivility of Political Discussion

Civility in political discourse—a persistent concern for politicians, academics, and the public—is closely associated with the health of public dialogue. While sometimes reduced to “politeness,” civility serves as a democratic norm, representing respect for individuals and their identities (Papacharissi, 2004). In contrast, incivility deviates from this norm, characterized by disrespect and rudeness (Coe et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2021). Although its conceptualizations have

varied, incivility is generally understood as a multidimensional concept with antidemocratic potential, including elements such as impolite tone (e.g., insults, vulgarity; Coe et al., 2014), norm-violating delivery (e.g., shouting; Goovaerts & Turkenburg, 2022), and identity-based hostility (Rossini, 2022). To assess the democratic potential of incidental political discussion, we follow Kim et al. (2021) and Hansen (2023) and adopt incivility as an umbrella term comprising these three dimensions.

Why might incidental political discussions be more civil and social compared to purposive ones? Affective polarization describes how partisans tend to view those from opposing parties negatively and those from their own party positively (Hutchens et al., 2019). Increasing rates of affective polarization is often cited as one major contributor to the hostility frequently observed in online political discussions (Iyengar et al., 2019). It is considered inappropriate, and often illegal, to express hostility to others based on a range of protected identities including gender and race. There are no comparable social or legal prohibitions on hostility towards members of an opposing political party (Iyengar et al., 2019).

Researchers have examined ways to reduce partisan animosity, often drawing on studies of intergroup conflict. One effective strategy involves highlighting a shared superordinate identity. For example, Levendusky (2023) demonstrated that encouraging Republicans and Democrats to see each other as fellow Americans, rather than as political opponents, helped participants recategorize themselves into a common ingroup, thereby reducing animosity and fostering more positive attitudes. While we do not directly test this mechanism, we propose that discussions in nonpolitical contexts may emphasize shared identities in ways that may lead to more civil dialogue.

Built on the presence of shared identities, a key distinction between political and nonpolitical contexts lies in their different norms. In nonpolitical communities, the predominant norm is sociability, an orientation to maintaining interpersonal harmony, common interests, and social cohesion (Levendusky, 2023; Yan et al., 2018). Within these spaces, participants often prioritize polite interaction, seek to avoid conflict, and treat aggressive confrontation as counter-normative. In contrast, incivility and contentious debate do not necessarily violate norms within political contexts, regardless of whether participants share partisan identification. Uncivil rhetoric may serve strategic functions, such as garnering attention or advancing unpopular political objectives (Masullo Chen et al., 2019), suggesting that it should not be automatically problematized. This divergence helps explain why empirical studies consistently document higher levels of incivility in political discussions compared to nonpolitical ones in online settings (Coe et al., 2014; Rajadesingan et al., 2021), situating these findings within different expectations on group norms about how incivility should be evaluated in different contexts.

Our second hypothesis sets forth expectations regarding the levels of civility in incidental and purposive political discussion:

H2: Comments in incidental political discussion are less uncivil than those in purposive political discussion.

Empirical Setting

To empirically test our two hypotheses, we draw from Reddit, one of the largest social media platforms where people talk with one other and form communities (Beel et al., 2022; Marchal, 2022). Reddit is structured by tens of thousands of communities, referred to as subreddits, with each subreddit having a particular discussion scope. Users may subscribe to, post in, or

comment in, any subreddit. All discussion in Reddit happens within a specific subreddit. At the platform level, Reddit has content moderation policies preventing harassment, bullying, and threats of violence. Subreddits typically have specific community rules to regulate discussions happening there.

Reddit offers an ideal venue exploring features of incidental political discussion in terms of polarization or deliberation for several reasons. Not only does Reddit accommodate a multitude of political discussions that offer rich material for study (Rajadesingan et al. 2021), but its communities focus on both political discussion (defined here as “political communities,” to be described in the following measures) as well as nonpolitical topics. Most important for this study, Reddit as a platform includes a broad swath of salient partisan opinion expression and ideological divergence (Waller & Anderson, 2021).

Because political discussion is rarely about politics in an abstract sense, we focus on one political issue: gun control. Recent political communication studies have shown that gun control is a pervasive, salient, and divisive topic in online political discussion (Beel et al., 2022; Demszky et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2023). Democrats typically support gun control while Republicans advocate for gun rights. To ensure sufficient examples of incidental political discussions, we chose October 2017 as our time window, the month following the mass shooting in Las Vegas, Nevada on October 1, 2017. With nearly five dozen people killed and more than 400 injured, this shooting reignited national debate on gun control, leading to widespread discussions on related issues such as mental health and public safety in a range of venues—including in many different communities within Reddit.

Methods

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, to October 31st, 2017. Data were collected from Pushshift.io (Baumgartner et al., 2020). Among the 130,854,211 comments posted to Reddit and available in our full data set within this specified timeframe, 611,889 comments were selected for further analysis because they contained at least one of the predefined search strings: "gun," "shooter," "shooting," "firearm," "second amendment," "2nd amendment," "nra," "national rifle association," and "control laws." This set of keyword search strings is a union set derived from pertinent research on political discourse on gun control and mass shootings within social media, specifically on Twitter and Reddit (Beel et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022).

Although drawn from previous work, this keyword-based approach resulted in many comments that did not reflect political expression about gun control or mass shootings. Because our data set contains discussions from a plethora of contexts, a keyword could mean starkly different things in different contexts. For example, the term “shooting” in a video game or basketball community does not usually involve political conversations about gun control. Additionally, we identified conversations that pertained to guns or gun sales that were not related to public policy and should also not be viewed as political discussions.

To further refine our data set and to remove false positives, we leveraged an LLM-assisted framework to discern whether a given Reddit comment could be categorized as political in the context of gun control and mass shootings. Similar LLM-based approaches are increasingly being used to conduct content analyses of large amounts of data (e.g., Hou et al., 2024). We began with our keyword-based sample of comments (N=611,889) potentially related to gun control and mass

shootings. Next, we supplied all of these comments to the GPT-3.5-turbo model by OpenAI's ChatGPT API and solicited binary responses ("yes" or "no") as to whether each comment was of political nature. Evaluation of the model's performance, based on a random sample of 100 hand-coded comments, yielded a precision of 100%, a recall of 95.24%, and an F1 score of 97.56%. To further assess recall, we randomly selected 50 comments from r/progun and 50 from r/shitguncontrollerssay, both subreddits characterized by predominantly political discussions. Human-coded validation of this targeted sample showed a precision of 100%, a recall of 97.96%, and an F1 score of 98.97%.¹ These results indicate that the model performs consistently and effectively across different samples.

The LLM-assisted labeling process, applied to the entire collection of comments, resulted in the identification of 187,581 comments as related to gun and mass shooting (31.6% of the keyword based sample). This collection of comments came from 2,016 subreddits. Among these subreddits, 158 contained more than 100 comments on gun and mass-shooting issues. Because we are interested in political and nonpolitical contexts, we next restricted our data set to the 102,601 comments from these 158 communities.

Given the limitations of using automated approaches to classify social-media discourse into "gun-control" and "gun-rights" opinion categories after mass shootings (Zhang et al., 2019, 2023), we conducted a human-based content analysis against a sample from the entire data set.² To construct a sample that would be both manageable for hand-coding and that included a diverse

¹ Further details, including the prompts that were used to interact with the LLM, are provided in Section 2 in supplementary materials.

² We have tested four approaches of automated content analysis to our full dataset, yet none of which reached satisfactory accuracy to measure policy opinion expression in comments. The evaluation details are included in Section 1 in supplemental materials.

range of discussion contexts (thereby eliminating bias from particular forums or topics), we adopted a stratified random sampling strategy used by Rossini (2022). Specifically, we first categorized our 158 subreddits with over 100 comments into two groups: political and nonpolitical (the criteria to code political and nonpolitical subreddits are discussed below in the “Incidental Political Discussion” section of Measurement). From each group, we randomly selected 15 subreddits, resulting in a total of 30 subreddits. We then randomly selected 100 comments from each subreddit, producing a final sample of 3,000 comments.³

Measurement

Policy Opinion Expression

Beyond widespread expressions of sympathy for the victims, opinions on the issue of mass shooting and gun control 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. Zhang et al. (2023) found similar results in their analysis of online discussion. The two main U.S. political parties have long been divided on this issue, with Republicans usually pro-gun and Democrats anti-gun.

Comments that did not include an explicit opinion (e.g., language on gun control and mass shootings without a clear stance on policy) were categorized as “neutral.” In contrast, other comments presented arguments for both sides without a definitive conclusion, and therefore were classified as “mixed.” Finally, comments that did not substantively talk about gun control were coded as “irrelevant” and excluded from further analysis. The coding of comments therefore

³ The materials for replication can be found on this Open Science Framework page: <https://osf.io/x7hgb/>. Due to user privacy concerns, the text of comments and other identification strings are made available only upon request.

classified them as having a clear policy opinion (18.9% “pro-gun” and 24.7% “anti-gun”) or not (42.5% “neutral” and 13.9% “mixed”) in the binary outcome variable *policy opinion expression*. The codebook with examples is included in Section 3 in supplemental materials.

To ensure accuracy, the first author and an undergraduate research assistant independently evaluated all 3,000 comments in the data set. Coding was conducted over ten weeks, with 300 comments coded each week. After each weekly coding session, the coders met to discuss discrepancies, resolve disagreements through consensus, and refine their shared understanding of the coding criteria. After the first two weeks, the codebook was finalized (see supplemental materials), and the remaining comments were coded accordingly. Measures of intercoder reliability were robust (Cohen’s Kappa = .759, Krippendorff’s alpha = .758, and .851 percentage agreement), calculated based on the binary coding outcome of whether a comment expressed a clear policy opinion. These metrics were computed across all coded comments. After coding, 34 comments were excluded because they were too short or unrelated to gun control, resulting in a final analytic sample of 2,966 comments for hypothesis testing.

Comment Incivility

To measure incivility in terms of impoliteness, violation of discussion norms, and intolerance toward other social groups, all comments in the stratified sample were evaluated in three dimensions by Perspective API (Jigsaw, 2021): insult (indicating impoliteness); 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); 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 as toxic, an insult, or an identity

attack. While Perspective API recommends .7 as the threshold by which to identify “uncivil” posts, other scholars have relied on different thresholds (e.g., Muddiman et al., 2019), or opting to directly use it as a continuous variable (e.g., Hansen, 2023). We selected a threshold of 0.5, following research showing that Facebook posts with toxicity scores around .5 “are often quite rude and inflammatory,” a perspective validated by both crowd-sourcing and dictionary-based classifications (Kim et al., 2021). We gain additional confidence from the fact that Facebook and Twitter posts scoring at least .5 on any of the three dimensions of toxicity, insult, and identity-attack aligned strikingly well (more than 95%) with human coding judgments (Hopp et al., 2020). Following Hopp et al., we coded a binary outcome variable, *incivility*, by assigning each comment a “1” if any of its three dimensions met the .5 threshold, and 0 otherwise. 7.4% of all comments were classified as uncivil, while the vast majority, 92.6%, were considered civil. We ran robustness checks using different thresholds and operationalizations of incivility, and logistic regression results were substantially similar across a reasonable range of thresholds. These checks are in Section 4 in the supplemental materials.

Incidental Political Discussion

To determine whether the community in which comments were expressed could be classified as political or nonpolitical, we relied on the list of 605 political communities on Reddit created by Hoffman et al. (2022), who defined and operationalized online political communities in Reddit as those that focus on authentic political discussion. Communities that were not listed on Hoffman’s list were treated as nonpolitical. We validated this coding by reviewing the webpage of each community for: (1) its introduction and scope; and (2) community rules, to determine if there is a focus on authentic political discussion. In all cases involving the 30 selected subreddits,

our coding aligned with Hoffman et al.'s (2022) list. In addition, we referred to the proportion of political discussions from a study on Reddit by Rajadesingan et al. (2021) to ensure that each political subreddit contained at least a quarter of discussions as political by their estimation. Accordingly, comments were coded as “1” in the binary independent variable *political subreddit* if they were expressed in a political subreddit (i.e., purposive political discussion) and “0” if in a nonpolitical subreddit (i.e., incidental political discussion).

Control Variables

We included a series of control variables or random effects at the level of comment, subreddit, and author. Details on these measures are in Section 6 in our supplementary materials.

Analytical Plan

To test H1, which predicts that incidental political discussion will be less likely to include political opinion expression (i.e., pro-gun or anti-gun policy expression in this study), we fit a multilevel logistic regression model with *policy opinion expression* as the dependent variable. In this model, we include: random intercept terms for *subreddit* to account for different baseline levels of policy opinions and incivility across subreddits, and for *author* to account for how unique authors vary in their policy opinion expression and comment incivility when making multiple comments regarding gun control. To test H2, which predicts that incidental political discussion would involve comments that are more civil than those found in purposive discussion, we fit a similar multilevel logistic regression model predicting incivility.

Results

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of policy opinion expression about gun control and mass shootings across our 15 political and 15 nonpolitical subreddits. The distribution of policy opinion

proportion varies more among the political subreddits, ranging from 62% in subreddit “r/progun,” which lists its scope online as “Posts must be related to Firearms & Second Amendment Politics. Please engage in Civil Discussion,” to 15% in “r/askaliberal,” which tells interested parties: “This online community is a dedicated space for individuals to ask liberals questions about their beliefs and engage in insightful discussions.” Nonpolitical subreddits, on the other hand, ranged from 60% in “r/wisconsin” (“A local subreddit for the State of Wisconsin. Post news and interesting links about the greatest state in the Union!”) to 35% in “r/slatestarcode,” which describes itself as “a blog by Scott Alexander about human cognition and medicine.”

Regarding the distribution of author frequency, 30 of the 2,966 comments were from individuals who had deleted their accounts by the time of data collection and were labeled as “N/A” for the author variable. The remaining 2,936 comments came from 2,225 unique authors: 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.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

The logistic regression results to test H1 are presented in the left columns of Table 1 and Figure 2. Contrary to what H1 posits, the odds of gun-related comments expressing a policy opinion if it occurs in politically oriented online contexts is half the odds of an otherwise similar comment occurring in a nonpolitical context ($\beta=-0.708$; $e^{\beta}=0.49$; $p < 0.001$). The left column of Figure 2 helps visualize these results by showing model-predicted probabilities for prototypical comments. With all other variables (including the random intercept terms) set to the sample mean, our model predicts that 51% of these comments in nonpolitical contexts (i.e., incidental political discussions) will include policy opinion expression. In comparison, 34% of otherwise similar

comments in political contexts (i.e., purposive political discussions) will contain policy opinion. These results thus serve as counterevidence to the argument that the potential common ground in nonpolitical contexts may mitigate policy opinion expression.

[Insert Table 1 here]

[Insert Figure 2 here]

The regression results to test H2 are presented in the right columns of Table 1 and Figure 2. Our results suggest that there is no significant difference in incivility between incidental and purposive political discussion settings in our sample. The right column of Figure 2 shows that with all other variables held at their sample mean, our model predicts that 6.4% of comments in incidental political discussions will be uncivil while 6.0% of otherwise similar comments in purposive political discussions will be; this estimated 0.4% difference is both very small and not statistically significant. In other words, the context of political discussion—whether incidental or purposive—does not appear to affect the level of incivility. This finding suggests that the context of political conversations might not play a significant role in shaping the civility of the discussion, and also challenges the expectation that nonpolitical contexts would naturally foster more civil discourse due to the presence of common ground and shared nonpolitical identities.

Discussion

Although previous research has suggested that incidental political discourse has the potential to mitigate opinion polarization, very few studies have attempted to examine this claim rigorously. Across a range of political and nonpolitical discussion groups, we extend existing literature by providing a systematic analysis on characteristics of incidental political discussion (Chen & McCabe, 2022). Our findings indicate that incidental political discussions exhibit a

greater prevalence of policy commentary when compared to their purposive counterparts, which challenges the premise that incidental political discussions will decrease opinion polarization drawn in experimental studies like Balietti et al. (2021). In addition, we found no significant difference in comment incivility. This is also surprising given work by Rajadesingan et al. (2021) showing that comments in nonpolitical subreddits are less toxic than in political ones. How can we explain these results?

One potential explanation relates to context. Namely, the incidental political discussions in our dataset occur in contexts where there is less focus and depth than in other forms of structured, purposive political discussions (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). In incidental political discussion, participants may lack the time, interest, or motivation to engage deeply with the topic, leading to less mindful engagement and increased pre-existing partisan biases.

This is aligned with findings from studies on political information exposure and processing. This line of research has long shown that more frequent and intentional engagement usually stimulates a higher level of cognitive elaboration on consumed news and political information, thus associated with more reflective and complex than polarized opinions (Shah et al., 2017). Otherwise, incidental exposure to political news can polarize audiences' opinions when they lack motivation to cognitively engage with the information or seek opportunities to discuss politics (Chen et al., 2022). Without the depth of engagement or the presence of deliberate viewpoints that often characterize purposive political discussion, individuals in nonpolitical contexts may default to expressing opinions that align with their ideological predispositions. On the other hand, our observational data may be a more realistic picture of incidental political discussion than experimental setups. Our results might be interpreted as suggesting that current theories on

incidental political discussion may overestimate the role of common interests or identities, but underestimate the impact of motivation and discussion depth on political opinion expression happening there. To test the role of discussion depth in the current study, we conducted a post-hoc analysis and found nonpartisan comments usually see keywords on some other related social issues (e.g., healthcare, racial discrimination). Details are included in Section 5 in the supplemental materials.

Another important point is the fact that although incidental political discussion contains more policy opinion expression than purposive discussion, social media users might not necessarily perceive it this way. Because incidental political discussion constitutes a relatively small portion of the total content within a given nonpolitical community, users may process these messages in a passing fashion or to overlook them altogether. Conversely, purposive political discussions are the predominant type of conversation within political communities, so it stands to reason that they may be more visible and salient. This contrast might lead to differing levels of engagement with political messages, with purposive discussion drawing more focused and deliberate participation. Exploring this possibility is left for future work.

One potential explanation for our null results in our test of H2, related to comment incivility, lies with community norms. With self-organizing moderation structures, subreddits typically enforce explicit rules against uncivil comments, applicable in both political (e.g., r/askaliberal) and nonpolitical (e.g., r/wisconsin) contexts. Given our dataset contains only comments after at least some vetting by moderators, our measures of incivility may be lower overall, making it more difficult to estimate differences.

Although our study examined political and nonpolitical communities only on Reddit, our results have broader implications. The mechanisms through which incidental political discussion emerges are common to many digital and social environments. Incidental political talk on digital platforms, where users primarily engage in personal or entertainment-related content, might similarly foster partisan expression. For instance, on X (formerly Twitter), discussions can quickly shift due to trending topics or viral content; the resulting lack of contextual cues or balanced discourse might also lead to a higher prevalence of partisan opinion expressions. Similar dynamics might be at play in less anonymous contexts, like Facebook or digital social group discussions, and in face-to-face settings like social gatherings or workplace conversations where political discussions arise incidentally. In these everyday social interaction settings, the lack of a structured, purposive context may encourage individuals to agree with, or be influenced by, frequently present partisan opinions—particularly when these discussions are sparked by controversial events. These similarities provide reason to believe that the pattern observed on Reddit could extend to a range of environments where political discussions occur as part of nonpolitical interactions.

Our method of using computational methods to identify a corpus of political messages in nonpolitical settings, has the potential to address 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); and conducting large-scale surveys, wherein not all the respondents express their opinions (e.g., Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009; Lelkes, 2016). Our approach has two comparative methodological advantages. First, it allows us to capture political opinions expressed in real-world conversations providing observable behavioral data. Second, it makes it possible to quantify differences in

characteristics of incidental vs. purposive political discussion by comparison across a range of political and nonpolitical forums.

Limitations

Of course, our work comes with its own caveats. First, our study design does not capture the reply relationships between different comments and the overall opinion climate in a thread. This may introduce confounders. For example, the order in which a comment appears as a reply might influence opinion expression if replies are more polarized than non-replies. Subsequent comments also tend to be more uncivil after exposure to uncivil comments (Kim et al., 2021). Our results might also be shaped by our setting’s high levels of anonymity or varying degrees of familiarity between interlocutors across political and nonpolitical spaces.

Relatedly, examining comments out of context may lead to more uncertainty in the LLM-assisted filtering process for identifying political discussion, despite validation demonstrating high accuracy. Of course, LLMs are advancing very rapidly in their ability to conduct content analyses. We found that GPT-3.5-turbo was excellent at identifying topics in these texts, while poor at classifying opinion expression. Newer LLMs should perform better in this job. We have released our human-coded dataset alongside our replication material in the hope that others can use to improve the performance of future classifiers—perhaps as part of a few-shot fine-tuning process.

Additional challenges related to any observational data collection effort arise in discerning whether the opinion expressed in a comment aligns with a commenter’s true attitude. Contextual factors such as irony, satire, or metaphor could also contribute to difficulties in interpreting “stand-alone” comments. With respect to alignment between comment and attitude, we believe it is far less likely that the writer of an anti-gun comment would be pro-gun or neutral, particularly

compared to a neutral commenter who really holds clear policy views on the matter. Because a proportion of neutral/mixed comments may come from commenters with policy opinions, our study offers a conservative estimate of the potential polarization of nonpolitical spaces.

Finally, this study is limited by its focus on a single major public event related to one issue. The inherently polarizing nature of mass shootings and gun control suggests at least two avenues for future research. First, conceptually, scholars should examine whether incidental political discussion is particularly common around polarizing issues, given that such issues are more likely to capture the attention of politically inattentive individuals. Second, future studies should empirically investigate whether these findings can be extended to other political issues, and how characteristics of incidental political discussion may vary across different issues.

Conclusion

Our findings reveal that nonpolitical online communities, often overlooked but abundant, are significant arenas for political discussion, particularly among the politically disengaged. This underscores the characteristics of incidental political discussion, especially in reaction to major news events. By revealing that these nonpolitical spaces can foster policy opinions at levels comparable to, or exceeding those, in explicitly political arenas, this research highlights the dynamic and context-dependent nature of political communication (for example, Kim et al., 2021) and challenges notions derived from polarization theory about political engagement and media effects.

Our surprising results suggest the need for a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between digital media environments, incidental engagement, and public opinion formation. Furthermore, they emphasize the need to refine theoretical models of political communication to

better account for the ways in which evolving media consumption patterns and non-traditional discussion spaces influence ideological polarization. As the boundaries between political and nonpolitical contexts continue to blur (Eveland et al., 2011), future research should explore how these hybrid environments affect democratic discourse and political expressive behavior.

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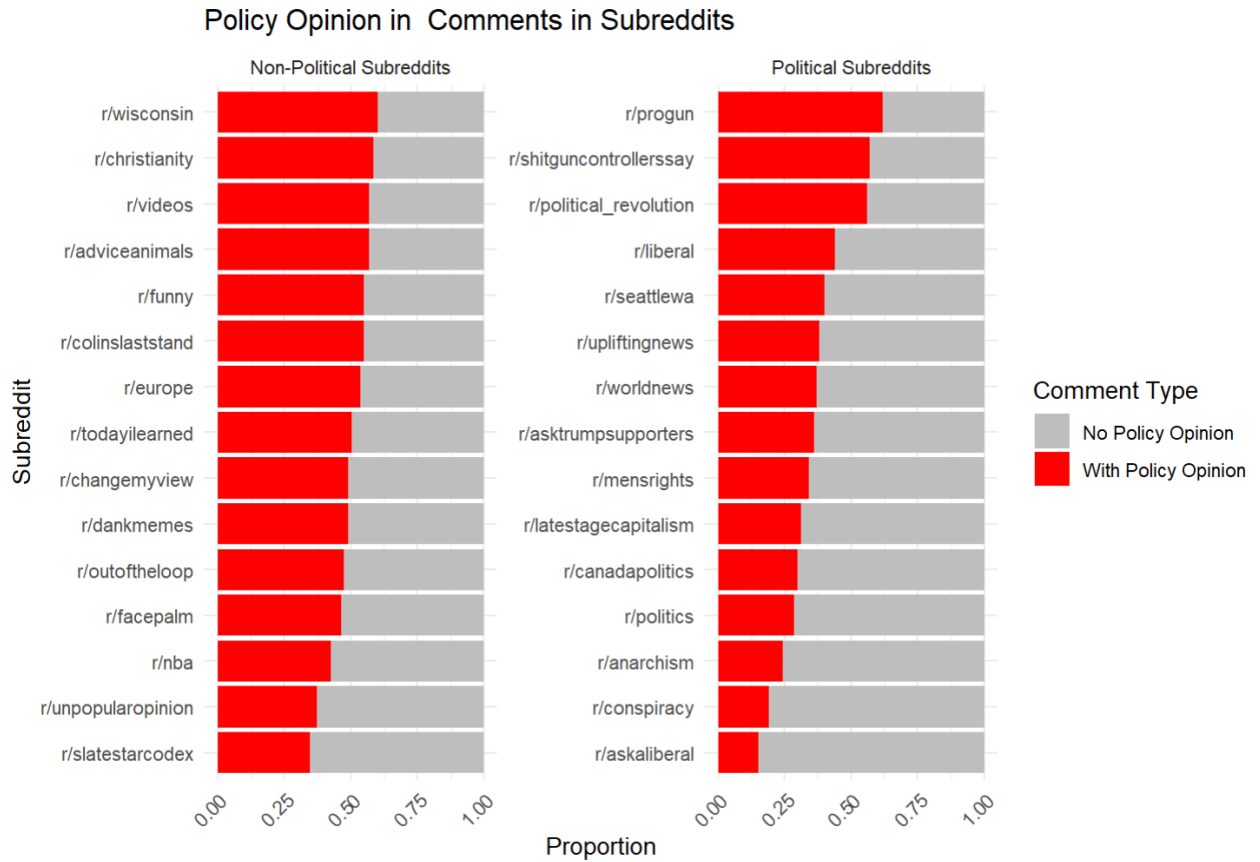
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Figure 1. Distribution of comments in political and nonpolitical subreddits⁴.



⁴ Policy opinion refers to the sum of anti-gun and pro-gun comments.

Table 1. Multilevel Logistic Regression Results

	Policy opinion expression		Comment incivility	
	Log Odds (β)	[2.5% CI, 97.5% CI]	Log Odds (β)	[2.5% CI, 97.5% CI]
Intercept	0.632 ⁺	[-0.092, 1.355]	-2.085***	[-3.255, -0.915]
Political subreddit	-0.708***	[-1.115, -0.302]	-0.075	[-0.666, 0.516]
Comment-level controls				
Word count	-0.042	[-0.135, 0.051]	-0.149 ⁺	[-0.309, 0.011]
Reply	-0.098	[-0.309, 0.113]	-0.134	[-0.476, 0.207]
Subreddit-level controls				
Comment removals by moderators	-0.346	[-1.371, 0.680]	-0.049	[-1.475, 1.378]
Comment removed in Oct 2017	0.350	[-0.689, 1.390]	-0.112	[-1.574, 1.351]
Author-level controls				
Total comment history	-0.056	[-0.107, -0.004]	-0.027	[-0.111, 0.057]
Comments in political subreddits	0.003	[-0.006, 0.012]	-0.003	[-0.017, 0.012]
Comments in Oct 2017	0.022	[-0.053, 0.097]	0.119 ⁺	[-0.009, 0.247]
Comments in political subreddits (Oct 2017)	0.002	[-0.005, 0.009]	0.005	[-0.006, 0.017]
Random Effects				

SD (Intercept subreddit)	0.446	0.587
SD (Intercept author)	0.568	0.57
R² Marginal	0.028	0.017
R² Conditional	0.161	0.11
ICC	0.1	0.1
RMSE	0.44	0.26

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

Figure 2. Visualizing regression model results for H1 and H2.

