Engaged and Uncivil?
Incivility and Engagement on Twitter over a
Televised Presidential Debate in Chile

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Although political talk on Twitter has been described as toxic and uncivil, Twitter offers a space for users to engage in deliberative expression during live political events. By relying on a content analysis of 2,000 tweets posted during a televised presidential debate in Chile, this study quantifies the presence of uncivil, humorous/sarcastic, and deliberative expressions in the debate-related live-tweeting, observing how such expression triggers user engagement measured as likes and retweets. Our results suggest that humor/sarcasm is more common than uncivil expression, with users being sarcastic toward candidates and mocking debate-related situations. Surprisingly, we found that male candidates were more likely than female candidates to receive hostile mentions, suggesting that factors other than (or in addition to) gender might explain the extent to which political figures are the target of uncivil speech. We also found that deliberative tweets are more likely to be liked and retweeted by other users. Implications and future research are discussed.

Keywords: incivility, humor/sarcasm, deliberation, user engagement, presidential debates, Twitter

Televised presidential debates are political events that allow for live discussions by interested audiences (Camaj, 2021). Twitter is the preferred social platform for opinion exchange during such events

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(Diakopoulos & Shamma, 2010), with hashtags, likes, and retweets fostering interactions among users who do not necessarily know each other (or do not even follow each other) but share a similar interest in the topic at hand (Bruns & Burgess, 2011). When it comes to politics, studies have shown that Twitter is a meaningful space for online political discussion (Jaidka, Zhou, & Lelkes, 2019).

Televised presidential debates adapt particularly well for users to engage in political talk on Twitter, allowing for three communication forms to take place: precommunication (before the live broadcast), parallel-communication (live broadcast), and follow-up communication (after broadcast; Buschow, Schneider, & Ueberheide, 2014), making it perfect for the audience to react on Twitter as a second-screen activity (Shah et al., 2016). Televised presidential debates are usually broadcast live during prime time and are a fundamental part of the presidential race in many countries (Juárez-Gámiz, Holtz-Bacha, & Schroeder, 2020), with audiences effectively engaging with these live events (Santander, Elórtegui, & Buzzo, 2020).

Although Twitter provides a space for online users to express opinions and impressions during presidential debates (or any live events), the Twitter discussion has been described as toxic, uncivil, and impolite (Oz, Zheng, & Chen, 2018), and flooded by bots (Kosoff, 2018). Incivility, understood as the presence of either profanity, insults, or stereotypical language when referring to a person or situation (Chen, 2017), is usually considered a barrier for a healthy exchange of ideas and arguments, which is desired in a democratic context. Incivility would therefore threaten the ideal of respectful, deliberative conversation. Although uncivil discourse in the context of live-tweeting a presidential debate has been studied by previous research (Robertson, Dutton, Ackland, & Peng, 2019), the extent to which Twitter exchanges provide signs of deliberation during this type of event is yet to be determined. Similarly, whether Twitter users are more likely to reward uncivil language, or whether they prefer to engage with deliberative opinions by liking and retweeting reasoned, argumentative tweets, also remains unclear. This study aims to shed light on these relationships.

Studies have also found that rhetoric tools such as humor, irony, and sarcasm are highly prevalent in the media when discussing politics and "hard news" in general (Anderson & Huntington, 2017). However, most studies focusing on aggressive political talk overlook the role of humor and/or sarcasm in user comments, and there is no research done on how humor/sarcasm relates to user engagement on Twitter. In addition, prior research has found that women are more likely to receive hostility than men on Twitter (Southern & Harmer, 2021), so the presence of uncivil language on debate-related tweets could be associated with presidential candidates' gender, with female candidates receiving more uncivil tweets. This study also tackles these relationships to better understand factors triggering uncivil and deliberative expression on Twitter.

The present study has three goals. First, we aim to quantify the presence of uncivil, humorous/sarcastic, and deliberative expression on Twitter during a presidential debate in Chile in 2017. Second, we aim to identify whether uncivil comments and sarcastic remarks engage users to a greater extent than deliberative tweets. And third, we aim to observe whether female candidates are the target of uncivil expression to a larger extent than their male counterparts, drawing upon previous research on gender and incivility (Murgia, 2018; Rheault, Rayment, & Musulan, 2019). To achieve these goals, 220,000 tweets were collected before, during, and after Chile's presidential debate on November 6, 2017, from which we content analyzed a sample of 2,000 tweets.

Twitter and Deliberative Expression

Ever since social media became a popular means for citizens to engage with one another, scholars have wondered if these new media would encourage deliberation among citizens, something that Papacharissi (2002) labels as the "digital sphere," mirroring Habermas's (1991) concept of a public sphere as a true democratic instance.

From a democratic deliberative perspective, deliberation is one of the main goals of online political discussion, relying on reasoned argumentation and disagreement as key aspects of a healthy citizen debate (Stromer-Galley, 2017). Deliberative democracy places reasoned discussion at the heart of democracy (Willis, Curato, & Smith, 2022). Therefore, the civil/uncivil dichotomy is a construct different from deliberation/reasoned argumentation, and consequently, both constructs can coexist within the same forum. Previous research has found that deliberative messages might rely on uncivil speech to make their content more explicit or more compelling, showing that incivility and deliberation can actually coexist (Chen, Muddiman, Wilner, Pariser, & Stroud, 2019).

The most traditional definitions of deliberation, however, require citizens to discuss issues with each other for deliberation to occur, and to agree on possible solutions as the outcome of such discussions. As explained by Gastil and Black (2007), "when people deliberate, they carefully examine a problem and arrive at a well-reasoned solution after a period of inclusive, respectful consideration of diverse points of view" (p. 2). From this perspective, Twitter might not be the best arena for pure deliberation to occur but rather a public space for users to express their opinions in deliberative ways. Previous studies have found that live-tweeting is mostly opinion expression instead of reasoned discussion among Twitter users (Robertson et al., 2019), let alone finding reasoned solutions (or even agreement) for the issues at stake. And although online spaces might lower the barriers for political discussion, they might also create new digital inequalities, failing the goal of becoming digital public spheres (Velasquez, 2012). Consequently, this study does not attempt to identify pure deliberation (i.e., deliberative conversation) on the presidential debate-related discussion on Twitter, but deliberative opinions from users tweeting about a political event. We are closer to what Chen (2017) coined as "deliberative moments"—brief episodes of political talk that may not achieve deliberation in the Habermasian sense, but they still include ideals of public deliberation (such as rational arguments). We follow Chen's (2017) approach to deliberation as reasoned argumentation, with deliberative expression relying on evidence (for instance, including an economic indicator to back up an argument) or asking legitimate questions to find more information or refine one's argument. By considering Chen's (2017) approach to deliberative expression, we ask:

RQ1:   How much deliberative expression is present in presidential debate-related tweets?

Defining Incivility

Over the past three decades, communication scholars and political scientists have concerned about the increase of uncivil speech in online settings (Hutchens, Cicchirillo, & Hmielowski, 2015). However, scholars have not agreed on what exactly uncivil speech is in computer-mediated contexts. There are at

least two distinct perspectives: one approaching incivility as disrespect for the collective traditions of democracy (Papacharissi, 2004), and another one describing incivility "as features of discussion that convey an unnecessarily disrespectful tone toward the discussion forum, its participants, or its topics" (Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014, p. 64). Through an extensive content analysis of news comments, Coe et al. (2014) identified key attributes within the comments, including name-calling, lying, and vulgarity.

Similar to Coe and colleagues' (2014) work, Chen (2017) identifies uncivil speech "based on characteristics of a message" (p. 6), such as profanity, insults, and stereotypical language (usually directed toward minorities). Following Chen's (2017) definition and operationalization of incivility, and unlike Papacharissi's (2004) stance on incivility, we argue that online expression can be uncivil just by using uncivil language (e.g., profanities) in the message.

Online Incivility, Politics, and Debates

Many studies on incivility and politics observe users engaging in uncivil expression when discussing issues related to public life (Stromer-Galley, 2017). According to Mutz (2015), news media, especially television, emphasize dramatic frames based on conflict, game strategies, horse race, personalization, and negativity, which in turn affects how electoral debates are covered (Pingree, Scholl, & Quenette, 2012). This would partially explain why a televised presidential debate generates uncivil expression among users commenting live on Twitter. And while incivility in online public spaces dampen the quality of the overall discussion (Stromer-Galley, 2017), having a "heated" forum with uncivil expressions does not mean a lack of reasoned argumentation. Incivility might even be a necessity for some users to be heard (Chen et al., 2019).

Political issues often polarize users into two opposing sides (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011), making it harder for citizens to consider outgroup arguments, which is essential for deliberation to occur (Ceron & Memoli, 2015). Interestingly, research has shown that incivility on social media (especially on Twitter) is more frequent across heterogeneous audiences than previously thought. After analyzing one year of tweets, Theocharis, Barberá, Fazekas, and Popa (2020) found that high levels of incivility were consistent throughout, with a few events (usually controversial or events involving political figures) increasing the number of users engaged in uncivil behaviors. Our study does not aim to compare political events or measure uncivil speech before or after a specific event; we aim to quantify the extent to which users rely on uncivil language to express their debate-related opinions on Twitter. Therefore, we ask:

RQ2:   How much uncivil expression is present in presidential debate-related tweets?

Humor and Sarcasm as an Alternative Form of Incivility

Although profanities, insults, and stereotypical language are common features of incivility, expressions such as mockery or sarcasm are also considered uncivil (Sydnor, 2019) and might work as a more subtle way for a person to be uncivil (Rowe, 2014).

There is no agreement on what exactly it means to be ironic or sarcastic in online settings. Both concepts are difficult to differentiate, albeit sarcasm is more commonly used (D'Arcey, Oraby, & Tree, 2019).

The *Oxford Dictionary* defines sarcasm as "a way of using words that are the opposite of what you mean to be unpleasant to somebody or to make fun of them" (*Oxford Learner's Dictionaries*, n.d.). Notwithstanding, the lack of social and nonverbal cues makes it very difficult for both humans and machine learning alike to recognize sarcastic messages online (Tsur & Rappoport, 2010).

Freelon and Karpf (2015) measured the presence of humor in tweets related to the 2012 U.S. presidential debates, identifying humorous tweets "against" a candidate. Following Freelon and Karpf's (2015) approach, we look at humor as something that could target a candidate in a negative way. Humorous messages on Twitter are easily perceived as uncivil because a user might feel criticized and mocked even if that was not the intention of the message (Tsur & Rappoport, 2010). Also, humor is highly context-dependent and best understood in a face-to-face setting, where nonverbal and physical cues facilitate comprehension (Wild et al., 2006). Previous research has measured humor to explain incivility—for example, Anderson and Huntington (2017) analyzed a climate change discussion on Twitter and found sarcasm was used as a rhetoric strategy to dislike the opposing side. Similarly, Rosenberg (2020) found that humor was a preferred form of incivility in news comments related to a presidential election in Chile. However, more evidence is needed to account for the presence of humor and sarcasm in tweets and how users engage with such tweets.

RQ3:   *How much humorous/sarcastic expression is present in presidential debate-related tweets?*

Incivility and Gender

A candidate's gender could also play a role in uncivil debate-related talk. Studies on hate speech on social media have found higher engagement from males in terms of posting content (Mislove, Lehmann, Ahn, Onnela, & Rosenquist, 2011), which relates to a lack of representation of women in public discussion (Quinlan, Shephard, & Paterson, 2015), and the feeling from women of being in the receiving end of uncivil attitudes (Murgia, 2018). This would be an extension of gender bias, which is evident in female politicians receiving more uncivil messages from users commenting about an election (Saldaña & Rosenberg, 2020). Valenzuela and Correa (2009) found that gender stereotypes and overall gender bias were transferred from the media to the audience during the 2006 Chilean presidential election, when Michelle Bachelet became the first female president of the country. This is consistent with studies presenting strong evidence of how female politicians are the target of more incivility from the audience than male political figures (Rheault et al., 2019), and receive opinions full of gender stereotypes (Chen, 2017).

Based on these findings, we expect female candidates to be more prone to receiving online incivility than their male counterpart:

H1:   *Female candidates will receive (a) more uncivil tweets and (b) more humorous/sarcastic tweets than male candidates.*

Engagement Through Uncivil, Humorous/Sarcastic, and Deliberative Tweets

Social media foster citizen engagement through connective and participative features (Feroz Khan, Young Yoon, Kim, & Woo Park, 2014; Zheng & Zheng, 2014). There are several ways in which

users interact with content on Twitter. Most popular forms of engagement include *liking* a user's post, *replying* to that message, or *retweeting* it (most referred to as RT), which means sharing a specific tweet for the user's followers to see it. In the context of this study, we understand engagement as user attention and involvement with media content (Napoli, 2011), expressed as interactivity in the form of likes and retweets.

A few studies have successfully measured these features as forms of citizen engagement. For example, Park, Reber, and Chon (2016) registered *likes* and *retweets* from three American health organizations and described different levels of engagement between them. Although on a different platform, Ksiazek, Peer, and Lessard (2016) studied commenting and replying on YouTube and found these features work as different measures of conversational behaviors on social platforms. Specifically for live political debates, viewers are most likely to retweet comments of elite users, including political figures (Hawthorne, Houston, & McKinney, 2013), and to highlight a particular moment on the event, which is usually done by liking a tweet (Mascaro & Goggins, 2015).

Borah (2014) found that the exposure to online incivility increases willingness to engage in commenting or liking/disliking a comment. However, highly polarized and heated discussions might not foster user engagement (Rosenberg, 2020).

The connection between engagement and humor/sarcasm is much less developed than other forms of incivility. Holton and Lewis (2011) found that journalists use humor on their Twitter accounts as a means of engagement and connectiveness with their audience, while Fernández Gómez and Martín Quevedo (2018) found that Netflix Spain used humor, among other rhetoric strategies, to also engage with their audience.

This study also looks at the relationship between deliberative expression and engagement. Engagement is a vital part of any deliberative process (Stromer-Galley, 2017); however, there is still not much work done connecting deliberative expression and engagement on Twitter. Therefore, we ask:

RQ4:   *What's the relationship between (a) uncivil expression and engagement, (b) humorous/sarcastic expression and engagement, and (c) deliberative expression and engagement?*

The Candidates

Chile has a multiparty presidential system where several coalitions run for national elections (Porath, Gunckel, & Soto, 2019). The usual debate format follows what Porath et al. (2019) have coined as "the Chilean debate model"—a panel of news anchors representing the four national TV networks conducts the debate, and all candidates participate in it (not just the two main candidates, as in the United States).

Eight candidates ran for president in 2017 and participated in the debate observed in this study. Most of them were well-known political figures, while a few (Beatriz Sánchez and Eduardo Artés) did not have any previous political experience. Below, we describe each of the presidential candidates and their political leaning:

1. Sebastián Piñera (male, right wing): Former president of Chile between 2010 and 2014.
2. Alejandro Guillier (male, left wing): Former journalist and senator at the time of the election, portrayed as President Bachelet's political heir.
3. Beatriz Sánchez (female, left wing): Political journalist and leader of the country's new left wing at the time of the election.
4. Marco Enríquez-Ominami (male, left wing): Former deputy and two-time presidential candidate.
5. Carolina Goic (female, center): Senator at the time of the election.
6. José Antonio Kast (male, right wing): Former deputy and ultraconservative political figure.
7. Alejandro Navarro (male, left wing): Senator at the time of the election.
8. Eduardo Artés (male, left wing): School teacher.

Methods

This study relies on a data set of 220,000 tweets posted on November 6, 2017, the day of Chile's National Television Association (ANATEL) presidential debate. We retrieved tweets using the Twitter Application Programming Interface (API) through Sifter (a paid service to retrieve tweets) and DiscoverText (a text-analysis software) searching for #DebateAnatel, the official hashtag of the event.[3] We collected tweets during a six-hour span, starting two hours before the debate, and ending two hours after the event.

Sample and Coding

We conducted a content analysis to answer and test the research questions and hypotheses posed by this study. Out of the 220,000-tweet data set, we identified 102,610 tweets and 117,390 retweets. We randomly selected a sample of 2,000 tweets to be content analyzed for incivility, humor/sarcasm, and deliberation attributes. Once we deleted spam tweets (tweets using the hashtag #DebateAnatel to sell products or discuss other issues[4]), the final sample was comprised of 1,966 tweets.

Two coders were trained to analyze the data following Chen's (2017) definition of incivility and deliberation. The codebook[5] included three attributes of uncivil expression (insulting language, stereotypical language, and profanity/vulgarity) and two attributes of deliberative expression (asking legitimate questions, and providing evidence to support an argument). When a tweet was uncivil, we coded for who was the target of the incivility. We also coded for humorous/sarcastic expression, as well as the target of said humor/sarcasm. Candidate mention (if the tweet mentioned any of the eight candidates participating

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[3] #DebateAnatel is the official hashtag used in every political debate organized by Anatel since 2009 (Emol, 2009). Even if other hashtags emerge (for instance, hashtags supporting a specific candidate), tweets still include the official #DebateAnatel hashtag to be part of the conversation.

[4] A tweet like "Hey—follow me on Instagram! I'm selling cute baby clothes #DebateAnatel" would be coded as a spam tweet, as it's using the debate hashtag to call Twitter users' attention for something other than debate discussion.

[5] Codebook: https://bit.ly/3ZgJxus

in the debate) was also coded for. User engagement was measured as likes and retweets (data provided by Sifter also relying on the Twitter API).

Intercoder reliability (ICR) was calculated on a subsample of 200 tweets (not contained in the final sample) using the ReCal2 software (Freelon, 2013). ICR levels ranged from 85% agreement (Krippendorff's alpha = .68) to 100% agreement (Krippendorff's alpha = 1). Table 1 describes ICR levels for each variable individually.

Table 1. Twitter Codebook and Intercoder Reliability.

Coding categories	Description	Agreement	Krippendorff's alpha
Profanity	A tweet was considered as profane (coded as 1) when using obscene or vulgar language. When there was no presence of this kind of language, it was coded as 0.	99%	.94
Insulting language	A tweet was considered as insulting (coded as 1) when using any name-calling or pejorative terms (e.g., you are so stupid!). Otherwise, it was coded as 0.	97%	.85
Stereotypical language	Stereotypes are words or expressions negatively portraying a group of people (women, immigrants, racial minorities, or sexual minorities). If there was stereotypical language in the tweet, it was coded as 1. If not, as 0.	99.5%	.80
Evidence	If the tweet provided numeric or statistical evidence to support a fact, or if it included links to access additional information, it was coded as 1. Otherwise, as 0.	99%	.85
Legitimate question	Any nonrhetorical question in the tweet that prompted a reasoned, deliberative answer was coded as 1. If not, as 0.	97%	.70
Humor/sarcasm	If the tweet used a humorous or sarcastic tone (e.g., mocking one of the candidates) it was coded as 1. Otherwise, as 0.	86%	.68
Sebastián Piñera	If the tweet mentioned Sebastián Piñera, it was coded as 1. Otherwise, as 0.	97%	.90
Alejandro Guillier	If the tweet mentioned Alejandro Guillier, it was coded as 1. Otherwise, as 0.	98.5%	.92
Beatriz Sánchez	If the tweet mentioned Beatriz Sánchez, it was coded as 1. Otherwise, as 0.	99%	.93
Marco Enríquez-Ominami	If the tweet mentioned Marco Enríquez-Ominami, it was coded as 1. Otherwise, as 0.	98.5%	.94

Carolina Goic	If the tweet mentioned Carolina Goic, it was coded as 1. Otherwise, as 0.	99.5%	.96
José Antonio Kast	If the tweet mentioned José Antonio Kast, it was coded as 1. Otherwise, as 0.	99.5%	.98
Alejandro Navarro	If the tweet mentioned Alejandro Navarro, it was coded as 1. Otherwise, as 0.	99.5%	.95
Eduardo Artés	If the tweet mentioned Eduardo Artés, it was coded as 1. Otherwise, as 0.	98%	.85
Incivility target	If the tweet was uncivil to a candidate, it was coded as 1. If the target of uncivil language was a Twitter user, it was coded as 2. Any other target (e.g., the government, the press) was coded as 3. When this variable was coded as 1, coders were prompted to identify which candidate was the target of incivility. We created individual variables for each candidate, as we observed that some tweets were uncivil to more than one candidate.	93%	.88
Incivility target: Sebastián Piñera	If the tweet was uncivil to Sebastián Piñera, it was coded as 1. Otherwise, as 0.	95.7%	.90
Incivility target: Alejandro Guillier	If the tweet was uncivil to Alejandro Guillier, it was coded as 1. Otherwise, as 0.	100%	1
Incivility target: Beatriz Sánchez	If the tweet was uncivil to Beatriz Sánchez, it was coded as 1. Otherwise, as 0.	100%	1
Incivility target: Marco Enríquez-Ominami	If the tweet was uncivil to Marco Enríquez-Ominami, it was coded as 1. Otherwise, as 0.	98.6%	.90
Incivility target: Carolina Goic	If the tweet was uncivil to Carolina Goic, it was coded as 1. Otherwise, as 0.	100%	1
Incivility target: José Antonio Kast	If the tweet was uncivil to José Antonio Kast, it was coded as 1. Otherwise, as 0.	97.1%	.74
Incivility target: Alejandro Navarro	If the tweet was uncivil to Alejandro Navarro, it was coded as 1. Otherwise, as 0.	98.6%	.70
Incivility target: Eduardo Artés	If the tweet was uncivil to Eduardo Artés, it was coded as 1. Otherwise, as 0.	97.1%	.82
Humor/sarcasm target	If the tweet was meant to be sarcastic toward a candidate, or aimed to mock a candidate, it was coded as 1. If the target of the humor/sarcasm was a Twitter user, it was coded as 2. Any other target (e.g., the government, the press) was coded as 3.	90%	.84

	When this variable was coded as 1, coders were prompted to identify which candidate was the target of humor/sarcasm. We created individual variables for each candidate, as we observed some tweets were humorous/sarcastic toward more than one candidate.		
Humor/sarcasm target: Sebastián Piñera	If the tweet was humorous/sarcastic toward Sebastián Piñera, it was coded as 1. Otherwise, as 0.	89%	.76
Humor/sarcasm target: Alejandro Guillier	If the tweet was humorous/sarcastic toward Alejandro Guillier, it was coded as 1. Otherwise, as 0.	95.7%	.70
Humor/sarcasm target: Beatriz Sánchez	If the tweet was humorous/sarcastic toward Beatriz Sánchez, it was coded as 1. Otherwise, as 0.	98.6%	.79
Humor/sarcasm target: Marco Enríquez-Ominami	If the tweet was humorous/sarcastic toward Marco Enríquez-Ominami, it was coded as 1. Otherwise, as 0.	94.3%	.77
Humor/sarcasm target: Carolina Goic	If the tweet was humorous/sarcastic toward Carolina Goic, it was coded as 1. Otherwise, as 0.	100%	1
Humor/sarcasm target: José Antonio Kast	If the tweet was humorous/sarcastic toward José Antonio Kast, it was coded as 1. Otherwise, as 0.	95.7%	.70
Humor/sarcasm target: Alejandro Navarro	If the tweet was humorous/sarcastic toward Alejandro Navarro, it was coded as 1. Otherwise, as 0.	100%	1
Humor/sarcasm target: Eduardo Artés	If the tweet was humorous/sarcastic toward Eduardo Artés, it was coded as 1. Otherwise, as 0.	94.3%	.70

Main Variables

Deliberative expression was measured by coding for two deliberative attributes: presenting evidence and asking legitimate questions (described in Table 1). We computed a dichotomous variable by assigning 1 (deliberative) to a tweet if it presented one or both of these attributes. If no attributes were present, we assigned 0 (nondeliberative).

Uncivil expression was measured by coding for three uncivil attributes: profanity, insults, and stereotypical language (described in Table 1). We computed a dichotomous variable by assigning 1 (uncivil) to a tweet if it presented one or more of these attributes. If no attributes were present, we assigned 0 (civil).

Humorous/sarcastic expression was measured as a dichotomous variable based on tone—if the tweet used a humorous or sarcastic tone (e.g., mocking one of the candidates) it was coded as 1. Otherwise, as 0.

User engagement was measured with two items: *likes* (M = 284, SD = 5,748, range = from 0 to 194,466, number of tweets with zero likes = 1,173) and *retweets* (M = 3.7, SD = 26.7, range = from 0 to 805, number of tweets with zero retweets = 1,404). Data for these variables was provided by Sifter (relying on the Twitter API).

Data Analysis

We computed the percentage of deliberative tweets, uncivil tweets, and humorous/sarcastic tweets in the sample to answer RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3, respectively.

To test H1a and H1b, we computed the number of times each candidate was mentioned in the sample and the percentage of tweets containing uncivil and humorous/sarcastic expressions directed to each candidate. Then, we calculated one-sample Chi-square tests to identify which candidates received significantly more uncivil language and humorous/sarcastic tweets than the mean proportion in the sample. We also compared female and male candidates with each other, as we expected female candidates to receive more hostility and mockery than their male counterparts.

To answer RQ4a, RQ4b, and RQ4c, we ran linear regression models with likes and retweets as dependent variables, and candidate mention as well as uncivil, humorous/sarcastic, deliberative expression as predictors. As both likes and retweets presented highly skewed distributions, we log-transformed both variables before running the regression models.[6]

Results

RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3 asked how much deliberative, uncivil, and humorous/sarcastic expressions was present in presidential debate-related tweets, respectively. As illustrated in Figure 1, we found that 11% of the tweets used uncivil expression (such as profane, insulting, and/or stereotypical language), which is substantially lower than the presence of incivility found in studies conducted in the Global North looking at uncivil comments posted to news stories (20%, according to Coe et al., 2014) as well as studies conducted in Chile, also in the context of a presidential election (29%, according to Saldaña & Rosenberg, 2020). In contrast, we found high levels of humor/sarcasm, as one of four tweets (25.4%) was meant to be sarcastic or to mock a debate-related person or situation. Yet, these levels are slightly lower than other studies looking at humor/sarcasm in online political talk in Chile (30.8%, according to Rosenberg, 2020). In terms of deliberative tweets, our results are consistent with studies indicating low levels of deliberative expression on social media (Quinlan et al., 2015), as we found that only 6.5% of the tweets had deliberative traits.

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[6] As we had tweets with zero likes and/or zero retweets, we log-transformed the DVs with log (y+1).
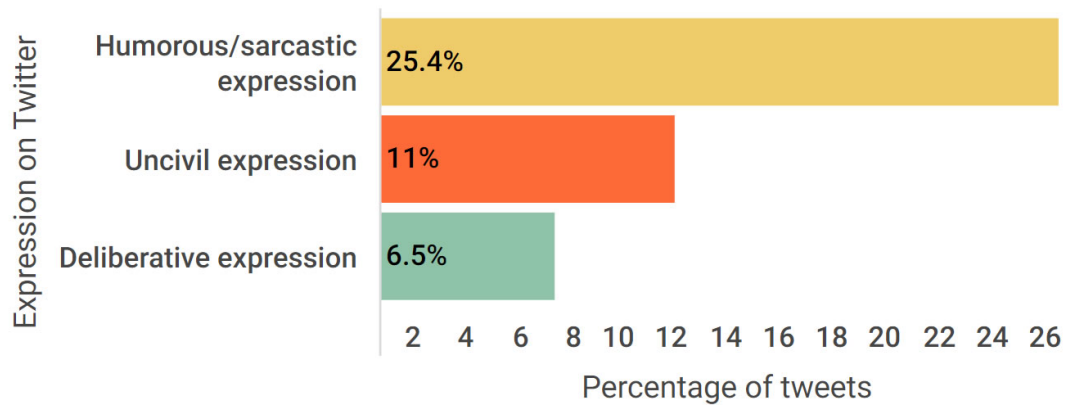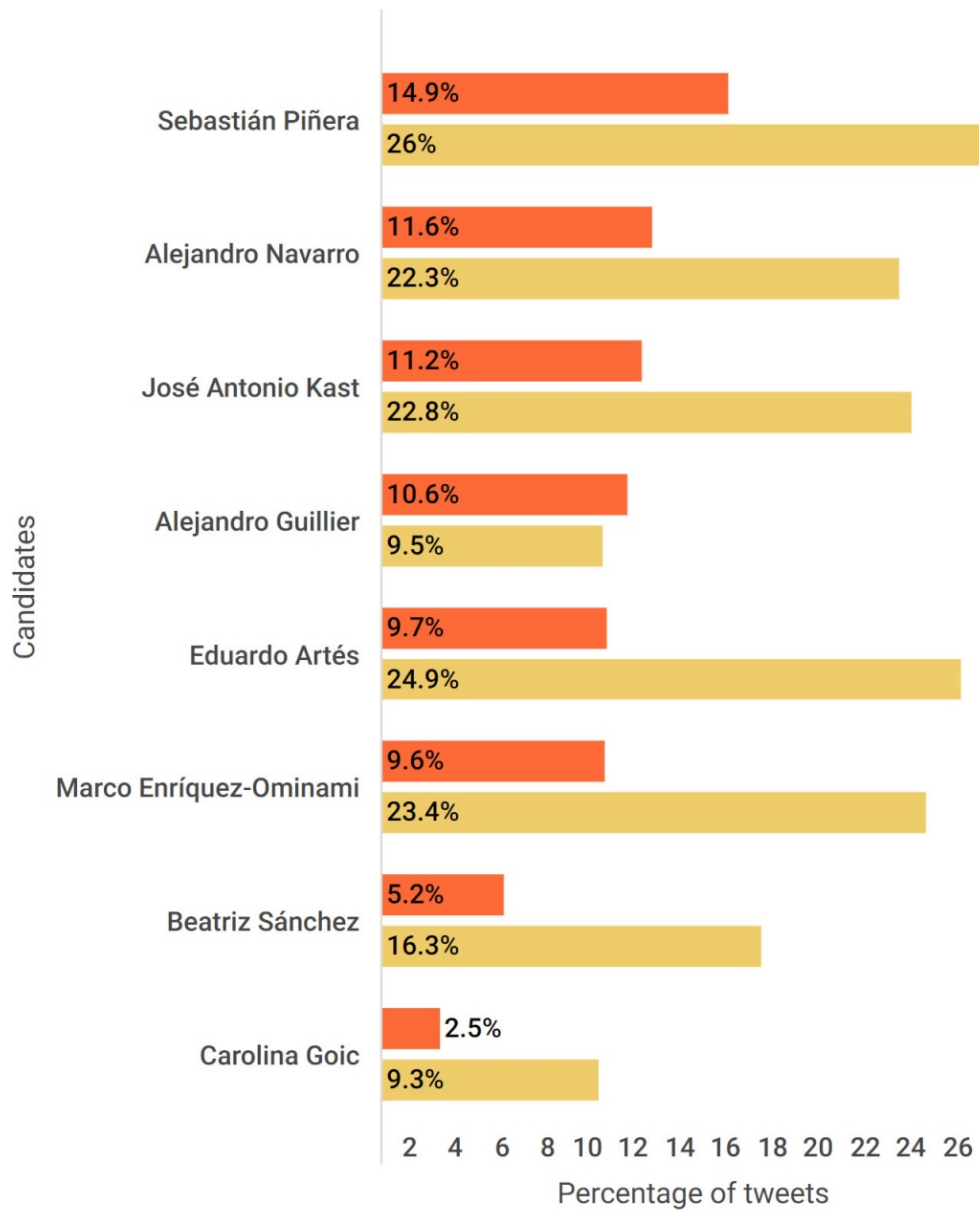
Figure 1. Presence of humorous/sarcastic, uncivil, and deliberative expression in the debate-related tweets.

H1 suggested that female candidates would be the target of uncivil language and humorous/sarcastic tweets at a higher rate than male candidates. Figure 2 illustrates the levels of uncivil and humorous/sarcastic expressions directed to each candidate participating in the debate. Table 2 provides absolute frequencies as well as one-sample Chi-square tests comparing the distribution of both variables in the sample with the distribution of the variables in each candidate's subsample (tweets mentioning each candidate).

Figure 2. Uncivil and humorous/sarcastic expressions targeting each candidate.

Although most of the candidates received a proportion of uncivil tweets very close to the sample proportion of uncivil tweets (i.e., the observed values were very close to the expected values under the null hypothesis), female candidates received significantly fewer uncivil tweets than the mean proportion, which is the opposite of what we predicted: Carolina Goic received 2.5% uncivil tweets, while Beatriz Sánchez received 5.5% uncivil tweets, significantly fewer than the 11% uncivil tweets found in the sample ($\chi2_{(1)}$ = 8.62, p < .01 for Goic, and $\chi2_{(1)}$ = 4.66, p < .05 for Sánchez). In contrast, Sebastián Piñera was the only candidate receiving significantly more uncivil tweets than the sample proportion— 14.9% versus 11% ($\chi2_{(1)}$ = 6.63, p < .01). To assess the proportion of incivility by gender (H1a), we compared the distribution of uncivil tweets targeting female candidates as a whole (4%) with the distribution of uncivil tweets targeting male candidates as a whole (13.4%) and found that female candidates received significantly fewer uncivil tweets than male candidates ($\chi2_{(1)}$ = 15.98, p < .001). Based on these results, H1a is not supported.

About humor/sarcasm directed to the candidates, we found that three candidates received significantly fewer humorous/sarcastic tweets than the mean proportion—16.3% of tweets addressed Beatriz Sánchez in humorous/sarcastic ways, 9.5% of tweets addressed Alejandro Guillier humorously/sarcastically, and 9.3% of tweets addressed Carolina Goic using a humorous/sarcastic tone. These proportions are significantly lower than the 25.4% humorous/sarcastic tweets found in the sample ($\chi2_{(1)}$ = 5.45, p < .05 for Sánchez, $\chi2_{(1)}$ = 22.94, p < .001 for Guillier, and $\chi2_{(1)}$ = 15.47, p <. 001 for Goic). The rest of the candidates, all male, received humor/sarcasm in a similar proportion to the sample mean (around 25%). To assess the proportion of humor/sarcasm by gender (H1b), we compared the distribution of humorous/sarcastic tweets targeting female candidates as a whole (13.8%) with the distribution of humorous/sarcastic tweets targeting male candidates as a whole (26.3%). Similar to our findings about incivility, we found that humor/sarcasm was used significantly less when referring to female candidates, as compared with male candidates ($\chi2_{(1)}$ = 17.22, p < .001). Consequently, H1b is not supported.

Taken together, these findings reject H1a and H1b and challenge the literature about females and incivility, as women are usually the target of uncivil comments, especially in online contexts (Murgia, 2018).

Table 2. Frequencies and Proportions of Uncivil and Humorous/Sarcastic Tweets Mentioning Each Candidate.

	Number of tweets mentioning the candidate	Uncivil tweets mentioning the candidate	Uncivil tweets targeting the candidate	One-sample Chi-square	Humorous/sarcastic tweets mentioning the candidate	Humorous/sarcastic tweets targeting the candidate	One-sample Chi-square
Sebastián Piñera	430	73 (17%)	64 (14.9%)	6.63**	127 (29.5%)	112 (26%)	0.25 n.s.
Alejandro Guillier	179	24 (13.4%)	19 (10.6%)	0.03 n.s.	30 (16.8%)	17 (9.5%)	22.94***
Beatriz Sánchez	135	9 (6.7%)	7 (5.2%)	4.66*	30 (22.2%)	22 (16.3%)	5.45*
Marco Enríquez-Ominami	239	27 (11.3%)	23 (9.6%)	0.46 n.s.	60 (25.1%)	56 (23.4%)	0.31 n.s.
Carolina Goic	118	4 (3.4%)	3 (2.5%)	8.62**	16 (13.6%)	11 (9.3%)	15.47***
José Antonio Kast	250	33 (13.2%)	28 (11.2%)	0.01 n.s.	61 (24.4%)	57 (22.8%)	0.65 n.s.
Alejandro Navarro	112	14 (12.5%)	13 (11.6%)	0.04 n.s.	30 (26.8%)	25 (22.3%)	0.43 n.s.
Eduardo Artés	185	27 (14.6%)	18 (9.7%)	0.31 n.s.	51 (27.6%)	46 (24.9%)	0 n.s.
Female candidates (aggregate)[7]	224	11 (4.9%)	9 (4%)	15.979***	40 (17.9%)	31 (13.8%)	17.217***
Male candidates (aggregate)[8]	1,108	159 (14.4%)	148 (13.4%)	252.650***	292 (26.4)	291 (26.3%)	138.403***

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[7] As compared to male candidates.

[8] As compared to female candidates.

RQ4 asked about the relationship between (a) uncivil expression and engagement, (b) humorous/sarcastic expression and engagement, and (c) deliberative expression and engagement. A first glance at the data indicates the distribution of likes and retweets is highly skewed, as only six tweets (out of approximately 220,000 tweets) got 54% of the retweets and 82% of the likes. Interestingly enough, four of the six most-retweeted tweets (which are also the most liked tweets) are deliberative tweets—statements providing evidence about candidate Sebastián Piñera being wrong about his claims. These fact-checking tweets were highly liked and retweeted, suggesting that deliberative expression engages users at a higher rate than uncivil or sarcastic tweets. In fact, none of the six most liked/retweeted tweets featured uncivil or humorous/sarcastic expression. These findings show users do not reward offensive speech, and instead they value and share messages contributing to deliberative forms of speech.

Results from the regression models (not including the six outliers) confirm this trend—while deliberative expression significantly increases the chances of a tweet being liked (B = .11, $p < .05$) and retweeted (B = .09, $p < .01$)[9], uncivil and humorous/sarcastic expressions does not. Additionally, when a tweet mentions certain candidates, the chances of receiving likes and retweets also increase. Results in Table 3 indicate that tweets mentioning Sebastián Piñera (B = .11, $p < .001$), Marco Enríquez-Ominami (B = .18, $p < .001$), and Carolina Goic (B = .28, $p < .001$) significantly increase the number of likes a tweet could get.[10] Same thing with retweets—mentioning Piñera (B = .07, $p < .001$), Enríquez-Ominami (B = .13, $p < .001$), and Goic (B = .19, $p < .001$) significantly increases the chances of a tweet being retweeted.[11] As such, well-reasoned tweets, as well as tweets featuring certain candidates, might be more effective to engage users than using offensive speech.

Table 3. Regression Models to Explain User Engagement.

	Likes B (standard error)	*Retweets* B (standard error)
Intercept	.13*** (.02)	.12*** (.01)
Uncivil expression	−.06 (.04)	−.04 (.03)
Deliberative expression	.11* (.06)	.09** (.03)
Humorous/sarcastic expression	.02 (.03)	.01 (.02)
Mention: Sebastián Piñera	.11*** (.03)	.07*** (.02)
Mention: Alejandro Guillier	.07 (.05)	.05 (.03)
Mention: Beatriz Sánchez	−.02 (.05)	−.03 (.03)
Mention: José Antonio Kast	.03 (.04)	.04 (.02)

[9] To obtain the correct interpretation of Beta coefficients given our log-transformed DVs, we have to exponentiate the Beta coefficient, subtract one from this number, and multiply by 100. This gives us the percent increase (or decrease) in the DV for every one-unit increase in the independent variable, holding all other predictors constant (Ford, 2018). As such, one-unit increase in deliberation increases the chances of a tweet being liked by about 12%, and the chances of a tweet being retweeted by about 9%.

[10] Tweets mentioning Piñera, Enríquez-Ominami, and Goic have a 12%, 20%, and 32% more chances of being liked, respectively.

[11] Tweets mentioning Piñera, Enríquez-Ominami, and Goic have a 7%, 14%, and 21% more chances of being retweeted, respectively.

Mention: Carolina Goic	.28*** (.06)	.19*** (.03)
Mention: Marco Enríquez-Ominami	.18*** (.04)	.13*** (.02)
Mention: Eduardo Artés	−.02 (.05)	−.02 (.03)
Mention: Alejandro Navarro	−.08 (.06)	−.03 (.03)
R² = .038, **F** = 7.08***		**R²** = .054, **F** = 10.1***

Notes. N = 1,960
* *p* < .05, ** *p* < .01, *** *p* < .001

Discussion

This study explored how citizens engage with a relevant democratic event on Twitter. As shown by previous studies, Twitter is the go-to platform when it comes to live-tweet political debates—a prominent "backchannel" for this type of event (Kalsnes, Krumsvik, & Storsul, 2014). However, such citizen engagement is not necessarily conducted in civil ways and opens venues for users to share jokes and negative sentiments instead of reasoned political talk (Robertson et al., 2019).

Our results showed that uncivil expression was lower than other studies measuring incivility under similar circumstances (e.g., Oz et al., 2018). One possible explanation for this difference is the content we analyzed—while most of the studies about online incivility look at news comments (Coe et al., 2014), we observed tweets using a specific hashtag. It might be the case that users participating in news-comment threads are more likely to engage in passionate (and potentially uncivil) discussions, while users tweeting their opinions are not necessarily interacting with each other, reducing the probability of uncivil talk. In fact, while coding for who was the object of uncivil expression, we did not find a single tweet aiming to insult or mock another user—most uncivil tweets were directed to the candidates. A second explanation could be the features of Twitter use in Chile. Although Twitter is not the most popular social media platform in the country (14% of Chilean social media users are on Twitter) it is highly influential in terms of political discussion: it is mostly used by educated users (Sepúlveda, 2018), and is said to be the preferred platform for political elites to discuss the news and, in some cases, set the public agenda (Jara, Faure, Beltrán, & Castro, 2017). In fact, Valenzuela, Puente, and Flores (2017) found that Twitter can influence the news media agenda more so than the other way around. These audience features could explain why the conversation might be more civil than, for instance, news comments on Facebook. A third explanation could be the nature of the debate—according to Porath and colleagues (2019), the 2017 presidential debate in Chile featured fewer candidates verbally attacking each other, and fewer uncomfortable questions from the moderators.

The presence of humorous/sarcastic expression was higher than uncivil expression, consistent with previous research that also measured sarcasm and uncivil speech simultaneously (Rosenberg, 2020). As stated before, humor/sarcasm seems to be gaining momentum as an alternative form for social media users to be uncivil. In this particular case, political candidates can be the subject of mockery (McClennen & Maisel, 2016), and the use of swearing or insults could be considered confrontational. In contrast, humor/sarcasm could be a suitable option for the public to express their disaffection "when more direct means either are too dangerous or require a greater degree of political awareness than is currently available" (Herzfeld, 2001, p. 64).

Surprisingly, we found that the two female candidates, Carolina Goic and Beatriz Sánchez, received significantly fewer uncivil and fewer humorous/sarcastic tweets than their male counterparts, which contradicts previous literature about negative bias toward prominent female figures (Krook & Sanín, 2020). A few reasons could explain this finding. First, neither candidate was expected to advance to a runoff, so users could have neglected them altogether. Second, the attention was directed to Sebastián Piñera, who was the most likely candidate to win the election, and who, in fact, received more uncivil and more humorous/sarcastic tweets. A third explanation could be the moderate tone of the female candidates' performance. Because females have been found to be more conflict-avoidant than males (Sydnor, 2019), and because incivility usually invites more incivility (Hutchens et al., 2015), users probably had no reason to address female candidates in uncivil ways. A recent study looking at user interactions on Facebook comments found that males received more uncivil comments that females mostly because males were more likely to initiate uncivil conversations (Proust & Saldaña, 2022).

In terms of engagement, this study provides evidence that likes and retweets are not necessarily related to uncivil or humorous/sarcastic speech, but have a direct relationship with deliberative expression. We found that four of the six most-retweeted tweets were deliberative, and the regression models showed that deliberative expression increases the chances of a tweet being liked and retweet.

This study advances our understanding of how Twitter relates to political media effects by providing three main takeaways. First, we found that common forms of uncivil speech, such as insults and stereotypical language, were not as abundant as previous studies have found, which might suggest live-tweeting presents a different pattern of expression, as compared with conversations in which users interact with each other at higher rates. Second, humor/sarcasm proved to be a popular device to comment on the presidential debate, suggesting Twitter users are likely to use more subtle ways to be uncivil. And third, this study shows how deliberative expression about a political event can foster more user engagement than uncivil expression, even in the midst of important levels of humor/sarcasm. This is a promising finding, considering that deliberation is usually labeled as a key goal in any healthy democratic society (Papacharissi, 2002).

Limitations and Future Research

This study is not without limitations. The selected sample of tweets came from a single hashtag. Although such single hashtag was the official hashtag of the event (and, consequently, the most popular trending term throughout the debate), there could be debate-related tweets using a different hashtag, or no hashtag at all, that did not make it into the sample.

Also, we operationalized user engagement as the count of likes and retweets a tweet might receive. However, liking and retweeting are positive endorsements, and users who disagree with a tweet might prefer to engage through replies, still boosting the visibility of a tweet. We did not have the count of replies, unfortunately, so we invite researchers to consider user engagement in the form of replies in future studies. Similarly, incivility is more likely to be embedded in replies than in original tweets (Borah et al., 2022; Theocharis et al., 2020), so future research could look at users' interactions to identify potential patterns of uncivil language in live-tweeting conversations.

We did not code for any content from the debate itself, as we did not aim to establish a direct relationship between the candidates' arguments and the users' tweets. Future research could delve into this relationship, and observe whether certain interventions in the debate could trigger more (or less) uncivil, sarcastic, or deliberative expression.

Sarcasm and the overall use of humor as an alternative way to be uncivil should also be further discussed. Future studies should account for different types of humor, from the one that aims to attack, to the "I'm just having fun" naïve one, in accordance with Robertson and colleagues' (2019) description (p. 8).

Finally, future studies should further question the extent to which political talk on social media mirrors the general citizen discussion about politics, especially when there is a high prevalence of sarcastic expression mixed with few comments with valuable deliberative characteristics. Since deliberative tweets rectifying a candidate's statements fostered more user engagement than other type of messages, more research should be done examining how fact-checking accounts relate to both uncivil and deliberative expression when analyzing political candidate's remarks.

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