

Destructive or Deliberative? An Investigation of the Evolution, Determinants and Effects of the Quality of Political Debate

PhD by Ine Goovaerts (KU Leuven), supervisors: Sofie Marien and Anna Kern (Ghent University)

Andre Bächtiger*

The quality of public and political discourse has moved to the forefront of current debate and academic research in recent years. Indeed, the fact that we are currently experiencing a crisis of public communication (Dryzek et al., 2019) – including the rise in simplifying and disrespectful populist language – has turned high-quality argumentation and respectful listening not only into a desirable feature of well-functioning democracies but also into an ‘early warning sign’ when democracies are ‘backsliding’. Ine Goovaerts’ dissertation explores the question of reasonability and civility of political discourse both at a theoretical and at an empirical level.

To my knowledge, she is the first to combine the deliberative and the communication literature to provide a comprehensive and in-depth look of what argument quality and civility really mean (for instance, she convincingly demonstrates that civility comprises both an explicit and an implicit dimension, i.e. civility can either involve words that signal explicit respect or in-

volve neutral ways of communicating, whereby other positions are criticised but not devaluated). Indeed, the theoretical part of the dissertation should be essential reading for those interested in conceptualising as well as measuring the quality of public and political discourse.

The empirical focus of the cumulative dissertation comprises three research questions: (1) the evolution of argument quality and civility over time; (2) the determinants of politicians’ uses of incivility and ill-justified arguments; and (3) citizens’ reactions to different types of justifications and different degrees of respect.

Regarding the evolution of argument quality and civility over time, Ine Goovaerts breaks new ground on the issue in a publication in *Political Studies* by focusing on televised election debates in Belgium between 1985 and 2019 (Turkenburg & Goovaerts, 2022). The stunning result of the nicely conducted content analyses is that there is no rise in politicians’ use of ill-justified arguments or of incivility. This raises the question of whether we are really observing a *general* crisis of political communication (as proposed by Dryzek et al., 2019).

* André Bächtiger is Professor of Political Theory and Empirical Democracy Research at the University of Stuttgart (Germany). His research focuses on the quality of deliberation in politics and the civic sphere.

Andre Bächtiger

Regarding the determinants of politicians' uses of incivility and ill-justified arguments, the author focuses on twelve televised election debates in the United Kingdom, Germany and the Netherlands. The results of this study, published in *West European Politics*, show that while electoral rules have little impact on the quality of debate, the presence of right-wing populist leaders conduces to increased use of incivility and ill-justified arguments (Marien et al., 2019). The author also uses the data set on televised Belgian election debates to perform an in-depth study on the determinants of incivility, showing, through a sophisticated statistical analysis, that populist politicians, male politicians and politicians in opposition show the highest use of uncivil statements. These findings not only corroborate the (little) previous research on this topic (see, e.g., Wyss et al., 2015) but also essentially nuance our understanding of argument quality and civility in political discourse (underlining that incivility is a phenomenon driven by certain and not all political actors).

The highlight of the dissertation is the study on citizens' reactions in two survey experiments (text and audio) with a sample of Flemish citizens to different types of justifications and different degrees of respect published in *Political Communication* (Goovaerts & Marien, 2020). To my knowledge, this is the first article that puts various deliberative qualities – justification rationality and civility – to a causal test with citizens. While the results on civility confirm the pioneering study of Mutz and Reeves (2005) on the link between (in-)civility and trust – showing that incivility fosters distrust – the ones on justification rationality break entirely new ground: they suggest that

in the eyes of citizens the deliberative standard of justification rationality matters only for their trust evaluations in conjunction with civility. A further spectacular result is that politically cynical citizens react differently to variations in deliberative quality: their trust evaluations are unaffected by civility and are even slightly enhanced by ill-justified statements. Not only are these findings only critical for our understanding of how political discourse is optimally structured in order to reach out to (heterogeneous) citizens, but they also have large normative ramifications (how do we 'democratically' re-include politically cynical citizens?).

The dissertation ends with a fabulous catalogue of how to improve the quality of public and political communication. Recommendations such as "give criticism and challenge your opponent, but do so respectfully" or "remember that uncivil, ill-justified statements may not persuade citizens" may look like tips in a guidebook, but here they are a product of diligent and meticulous scientific work rather than drawn from anecdotal evidence.

While it is almost impossible to spot weak points of the dissertation, I nonetheless list three small criticisms that I see more as points for a future research agenda than actual challenges. First, it would be interesting to track the evolution of argument quality and civility cross-nationally, especially by comparing political systems with multiple systemic deficiencies and high levels of polarisation (such as the United States) versus political systems with still healthy democratic systems (such as Germany). Second, future research on citizens' trust evaluations should include more communicative acts besides

justification rationality and civility, especially narratives as well as various types of rhetoric. Research has shown that narratives are essential drivers of opinion change. Third, a future research agenda might also focus even more strongly on citizen heterogeneity with regard to persuasive communication strategies: for instance, how do sophisticated and critical citizens react to different types of communication strategies? Overall, it is extremely rare that young scholars not only 'dare' to engage both with normative *and* empirical dimensions of political communication (usually they concentrate on either normative or empirical aspects) but also do this in such an impressive and convincing way as Ine Goovaerts. The dissertation is truly a masterpiece that deserves a broad readership, both in academic and in non-academic circles.

References

- Dryzek, J. S., Bächtiger, A., Chambers, S., Cohen, J., Druckman, J. N., Felicetti, A., Fishkin, J. S., Farrell, D. M., Fung, A., Gutmann, A., Landemore, H., Mansbridge, J., Marien, S., Neblo, M. A., Niemeyer, S., Setälä, M., Slothuus, R., Suiter, J., Thompson, D. & Warren, M. E. (2019). The Crisis of Democracy and the Science of Deliberation. *Science*, 363(6432), 1144-1146. doi: 10.1126/science.aaw2694.
- Goovaerts, I. & Marien, S. (2020). Uncivil Communication and Simplistic Argumentation: Decreasing Political Trust, Increasing Persuasive Power? *Political Communication*, 37, 768-788. doi: 10.1080/10584609.2020.1753868.
- Marien, S., Goovaerts, I. & Elstub, S. (2019). Deliberative Qualities in Televised Election Debates: The Influence of the Electoral System and Populism. *West European Politics*, 43, 1262-1284. doi: 10.1080/01402382.2019.1651139.
- Turkenburg, E. & Goovaerts, I. (2022). Food for Thought: A Longitudinal Investigation of Reflection-Promoting Speech in Televised Election Debates (1985-2019). *Political Studies*, 1-23. doi: 10.1177/00323217221090102.
- Wyss, D., Beste, S. & Bächtiger, A. (2015). A Decline in the Quality of Debate? The Evolution of Cognitive Complexity in Swiss Parliamentary Debates on Immigration (1968-2014). *Swiss Political Science Review*, 21, 636-653. doi: 10.1111/spsr.12179.