

## **Channel Surfing: Does Choice Reduce Videomalaise?**

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### ***Abstract***

Political communication researchers study message effects, given exposure. They rarely investigate how reception conditions this process. We consider the hypothesis that televised incivility reduces political trust (Mutz and Reeves 2005), but in a choice environment: Individuals who select political talk shows may be unaffected by uncivil exchanges, while those who dislike them turn away. An experiment allows us to compare participants forced to watch incivility with those permitted to change channels. The negative effects of televised incivility on trust vanish when people can easily avoid it. However, rancorous political programming reduces internal efficacy, even among people who choose it.

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I have privately, amongst my friends and also in occasional newspapers and television shows, mentioned this show as being bad...I felt that that wasn't fair and I should come here and tell you that...it's not so much that it's bad, as it's hurting America...Stop, stop, stop, stop hurting America.

– Jon Stewart to Paul Begala and Tucker Carlson  
on CNN's *Crossfire*, October 15, 2004

When comedian and *Daily Show* host Stewart appeared on CNN's debate show *Crossfire*, he argued that by promoting uncivil debate, the show was undermining democracy. At the time, this may have been the speculation of a keen political observer, but after several years of research, political scientists have lent support to Stewart's thesis. Recent investigations offer evidence that watching uncivil political debate lowers people's trust in the political system (Forgette and Morris 2006, Mutz and Reeves 2005; but see Jordan and Geer 2007). We wonder how generalizable they are to a media environment that is rife with alternatives. It is easy for most people to avoid watching political debate shows, such as *Crossfire*, if they wish. Are the negative effects found in these studies driven by the reactions of those who tend to select out of consuming political debate shows or does incivility in debate harm everyone's view of politicians and the political system?

Answering this question is important. Because the definition of and solutions to social, economic, and political problems are often contested in a heterogeneous society, political debate is a necessary aspect of modern democracies. Ideally, citizens would engage in political debate and help reach a consensus about policies (Gutmann and Thompson 1996). But even if this is usually not the case, at a minimum citizens should pay enough attention to political debates among competing elites and choose the faction that is closest to their preferences (Downs 1957).

The advent of 24-hour cable news channels has led to the proliferation of programs that feature political debate. Yet these shows often showcase shrill arguments that may

understandably lead viewers to conclude that political conflict among elites is a parody of deliberation with little value (cf. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001). While these uncivil political exchanges appear to affect system support among television viewers, they also appear to captivate audiences: Even though people do not like it, they are drawn in, leading to a downward spiral in which uncivil political debate draws in viewers while simultaneously lowering their esteem for politicians and the political process (Cappella and Jamieson 1997, Mutz and Reeves 2005). The normative implications are dire: If citizens are alienated by political conflict, it threatens to vitiate mass-based democracy.

Another possibility is that citizens with little taste for conflict avoid television programs like *Crossfire* and successfully insulate themselves from these *potential* negative effects, leaving those who enjoy political conflict to consume these shows. We know a much about the effects of media messages on political attitudes and decision-making, but almost no political science research contemplates the role citizen agency plays in the selection of political stimuli.<sup>1</sup> People have choice in politics and in the information they consume. This is constrained choice (Downs 1957, Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995), but people have alternatives nonetheless. How does choice, the exercise of free will in attending to political messages, affect political cognition?

Here, we consider whether the choices people make to consume political information or to avoid these messages influence the generalizability of political communication research. We do so by developing a theoretical model that formalizes how the restriction of choice in an experimental setting can affect the observable effects of uncivil political debate. We then test the hypotheses drawn from the model with an experiment that builds on the basic design of mass media research – one group of subjects is randomly assigned to watch a political debate show

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<sup>1</sup> Lau and Redlawsk's Dynamic Information Board does allow for more participant discretion in information use (Lau and Redlawsk 2006:279).

and another group is assigned to a control group. We add a third treatment group where subjects were allowed to change the channel. These subjects could watch the political debate show if they wished or they could watch something else.

### **The Videomalaise Hypothesis**

Robinson describes videomalaise as a diffuse phenomenon, speculating that “our doubts about ourselves and hostility toward our institutions would be far less severe were it not for the images we receive from the electronic media, more specifically, from network journalism” (1975:98). As originally construed, videomalaise involves both individual efficacy (internal and external), as well as evaluations of institutions. With this broad potential criticism of television news in mind, a number of researchers have shown that the content of television news, particularly its focus on strategy and political process, alienates voters and promotes distrust in and negative evaluations of institutions (Cappella and Jamieson 1997, Moy and Pfau 2000). Attention to the argumentative style of Congressional debate has lowered faith in that institution, relative to the judicial and executive branches (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995).

The “new” videomalaise described by Mutz and Reeves (2005) has a more tailored expectation for televised incivility to affect distrust of politicians and institutions. They find that the televised violation of conflict avoidance norms affects negative reactions toward politics and government. They anticipate the effects of incivility on television will be due to emotional reactions to violated social norms rather than cognitive awareness of excessive conflict (Mutz and Reeves 2005). However, they also characterize a paradox: “On the one hand, viewers respond negatively to incivility in the judgments they make about politicians and government. On the other, they are clearly drawn to incivility, and enjoy watching it much more than civil

programming” (Mutz and Reeves 2005: 13). As a result, they anticipate an immediate threat to the effectiveness of U.S. leaders and a long-term threat to the stability of American institutions.

These findings are consistent with a number of complementary studies. Conflict-oriented coverage of the State of the Union address affected evaluation of institutions and lowers government trust (Forgette and Morris 2006). Similarly, the content of coverage of the 9/11 Commission hearings affected trust in government and evaluations of public officials (Cooper and Nownes 2005). However, the experiments that inform these findings, including the experiments Mutz and Reeves employ, deny participants choices other than to remove themselves from the experiment entirely. It could be that the structure of these experiments informs the perceived duality of American reaction to televised incivility – that we are negatively affected by it and cannot look away. We introduce the idea that thus far participants have not been *allowed* to look away. As we note, Mutz and Reeves (2005) anticipate cross-pressures, when it could in fact be the case that some types of people want to watch televised incivility and others do not wish to watch these programs. In the world outside of the lab, when people sit down to watch television, they do have choices and our intuition is that they act on them.

### **Studying the Reception of Political Information**

In experimental political communication research, most research focuses on understanding media effects *given reception*. Theoretically, persuasion is a function of the probability an individual receives a given communication and their probability of yielding to what is received (McGuire 1968). According to Zaller (1992), an individual’s likelihood of receiving political information is primarily a function of cognitive engagement with politics. People with higher levels of interest in politics, manifested by greater political knowledge, are

more likely to receive information but less likely to yield to it (Zaller 1992). Cognitive engagement in politics should affect people's choice behavior – specifically their willingness to consume political information, including their willingness to watch televised political incivility.

Contemporary experimental designs tell us something about acceptance and use of information in a variety of kinds – considerations, frames, primes, source judgments, etc. (see Iyengar and Simon 2000). However, experimentalists have paid little attention to whether people attend to political information at all, especially given the availability of so many choices. As part of this omission, studies of the effects of televised incivility have not fully entertained the possibility that the ability to avoid watching nasty political debates mutes the negative implications of these programs. Mutz and Reeves (2005) partially anticipate this line of investigation by comparing the effect of their experiments on people with differing levels of tolerance for social incivility. Forgette and Morris (1996:455) also appreciate this limitation:

Laboratory experiments involving responses to carefully manipulated stimuli often illustrate significant attitudinal effects, which is an important (and necessary) first step in understanding how news formats can influence the public. However, in the modern era of the television news 'grazer,' it is increasingly important to focus on experimental studies' external validity...

They envision complementing laboratory experiments with surveys and field experiments.

Political scientists working with observational research designs recognize that new media choices – particularly cable and the Internet – have allowed people with less interest to tune out political information. Prior (2005) shows that people who are interested in entertainment and have access to cable and Internet know less about politics than people who are more interested in news or who watch news programming as a function of their constrained choice, e.g., because their television receives more limited broadcast options. In this vein, we also know presidents are losing audiences to cable and Internet entertainment (Baum and Kernell 1999).

### ***Given the Choice, Who Watches Televised Incivility?***

To help motivate our research design, we consider differences between viewers and non-viewers of contentious political television. For example, we know people who choose to listen to political (usually conservative) talk radio, a different type of broadcast bombast, are different from people who do not listen to it. Compared to non-listeners, talk radio listeners have higher levels of education and income, tend to be older, male, white, Republican, and conservative (Lee and Cappella 2001). To explore differences between people who choose to watch contentious shows and those who do not, we identified survey research data specifically asking people about their viewing habits in this television genre.

In their December 2003/January 2004 political communication survey, the Pew Research Center asked respondents whether they regularly learn about the presidential primary campaign from political talk shows “such as CNN’s *Crossfire* and CNBC’s *Hardball*.” Respondents could indicate that they regularly, sometimes, hardly ever, or never learn from these shows. They were also allowed to volunteer that they do not watch these kinds of shows. Question wordings for the items we use from this survey are reported in an appendix. We follow Forgette and Morris (1996) in using this as a surrogate for decisions to view these shows, but there are limitations to the use of this item. The question is not about viewing, but learning. We anticipate that people who are more likely viewers of these shows will indicate they regularly, sometimes, or hardly ever learn from these shows. For our viewing indicator, we code these as 1. People who volunteer that they do not watch these shows are least likely to view them. We code them as 0 on the viewing indicator. Respondents who said they rarely learn from these shows are more ambiguous in their likelihood of viewing them. For the purposes of this expository exercise, however, we treat them as if they are less likely viewers and code them as 0 also.

Our primary interest is demonstrating that there are systematic differences between viewers and non-viewers that help justify studying the choice to view contentious political television shows. Consequently, this is an abbreviated analysis of the choice to watch *Crossfire* or *Hardball*. The hypotheses we test involve political interest, partisanship, and respondent gender. Based on what we know about listeners of contentious talk radio, people who are more interested in politics and more partisan should be more likely to watch these television shows. We also anticipate men will be more likely than women to watch *Crossfire* and *Hardball*.

We use multiple measures of interest in politics. The survey included indicators for campaign interest and consumption of political news. The wording of these items is in the appendix. We also have an imperfect measure of political knowledge, which relies on two questions about characteristics of Democratic presidential candidates, also in the appendix. For each of these questions, correct responses were coded 1 and all others were coded 0, and these variables were summed for a three-point measure of knowledge. We also include partisanship. Respondents were asked if they identified with the two major parties using a standard question. People who identify themselves as Republicans or Democrats are coded as partisans. Finally, we also include an indicator for the sex of respondents, coded by the survey interviewer.

Table 1 reports the analysis of these dependent variables. As expected, we find that people who are more interested in the presidential campaign and more closely follow political news are more likely to be *Crossfire* or *Hardball* viewers than people with lower levels of interest in politics. Our political knowledge measure fails to reach conventional levels of statistical significance. Major party identifiers are more likely viewers than independents and others. Men are reliably more likely to watch these shows than women.

[Table 1 about here]

If people who are more interested in politics and more partisan are more likely to watch them, the effects of these shows promoting political distrust could be limited by the fact that these people are less likely to yield to this political information – their assessments of politics, politicians, and institutions, will be more fixed than people with lower levels of political knowledge and interest, as anticipated by scholars like McGuire and Zaller. These findings suggest a few alternative possibilities: 1) People who like the shows tend to be partisan and, therefore, relish seeing their side make cutting comments and/or 2) people who like these shows simply like politics and are inured to the histrionic wrangling.

### **Theory and Hypotheses**

By formalizing the reception process, we can elucidate the observable implications that allowing or disallowing choice has for the effect of televised incivility on political attitudes. Without loss of generality, we will consider the effect of reception on political trust in order to make the exposition clearer. We model people's level of trust in government as a function of their baseline level of political trust plus or minus the effect of watching televised incivility. We allow uncivil debate to have different effects on those who like and dislike these shows:

$$E[T] = f([T_{like} + \alpha q] + [T_{dislike} + \gamma r]), \quad (1)$$

where  $T$  = level of political trust for a population,  $T_{like}$  = baseline political trust among those in the population who like political debate shows,  $T_{dislike}$  = baseline political trust among those in the population who dislike political debate shows,  $\alpha$  = weight measuring the amount of exposure to such shows among those who like them,  $\gamma$  = weight measuring the amount of exposure to such shows among those who dislike them,  $q$  = effect of exposure to the show among those who like them, and  $r$  = effect of exposure to the show among those who dislike them.

By making different assumptions about the values of  $q$  and  $r$ , we can derive different expectations about the effects of choice on the relationship between consuming political incivility and political trust. The videomalaise hypothesis, as it is currently articulated, makes the implicit assumption that  $q < 0$  and  $r < 0$ . In this sense, watching uncivil political debate is akin to smoking cigarettes: It is bad for you whether you enjoy consuming it or not. We offer an alternative possibility. Perhaps, watching incivility is not bad for everyone – only those who dislike it. As such, we predict that  $q \geq 0$ , while  $r < 0$ .

To understand the implications of these different definitions for  $q$  and  $r$ , imagine three populations that are identical save for their consumption of vituperative debate shows.<sup>2</sup> The individuals in the first population are forced to watch these shows (i.e.,  $\alpha = \gamma > 0$ ); those in the second population are allowed to choose, with those who like the shows consuming them at a higher level than those who do not (i.e.,  $\alpha > \gamma$ ); and, finally, individuals in the third population do not see these shows (i.e.,  $\alpha = \gamma = 0$ ). Using the model in Equation 1, the videomalaise thesis leads to the expectation that  $E[T_{forced}] \leq E[T_{choice}] < E[T_{no\ shows}]$ . In contrast, our thesis predicts that  $E[T_{forced}] < E[T_{no\ shows}] \geq E[T_{choice}]$ . Accordingly, we derive the following hypothesis:

H<sub>1</sub>: If those who would typically opt out of watching political debate shows are the ones adversely affected by them, the average level of political trust will be lower for a group that is forced to watch such shows than it is for a group in which individuals are allowed to watch something else.

In addition to contending that  $q \geq 0$  and  $r < 0$ , we also expect that those who like political debate shows will spend more time watching them (i.e.,  $\alpha > \gamma$ ). Consequently, it also follows from our thesis  $E[T_{choice} | \text{exposure}] > E[T_{forced} | \text{exposure}]$ . In other words:

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<sup>2</sup> Because these groups are identical save for consumption, baseline levels of political trust will cancel out when comparing the two groups, leaving differences between the groups attributable to the effects of watching political debate shows. In our study, which is discussed in greater detail below, we are able to meet this assumption by randomly assigning subjects to the three experimental conditions.

H<sub>2</sub>: Those who choose to expose themselves to political debate will have higher levels of political trust when compared to a group in which people, whether they want to or not, are forced to view political debate.

Note that because both of these hypotheses are true even when viewing political debate does not affect the attitudes of those who enjoy these shows, the negative effects of forced exposure can be completely driven by the negative reactions of those who would normally avoid watching these shows.

## **Study Design**

### ***Participants***

Participants were recruited from upper division political science classes at a large public university in the western U.S., during August 2006. Students were offered extra credit in the course to participate in a “research on political communication; in particular the television shows people watch.” They were informed “This project involves an experiment that will take 20-40 minutes for each participant. Your participation will be confidential and anonymous.” Students who wanted extra credit, but did not want to participate in the experiment were allowed to complete an alternative task of reading news magazines in the laboratory for 30 minutes. A total of 45 students participated in the experiment. The gender breakdown of participants was even: 23 females and 22 males. The ages of participants ranged from 20 to 40 years old, but most participants were either 21 (17 participants) or 22 (12 participants). Only three participants were over the age of 24. The ethnicity of participants reflects a diverse student body: 27 participants (60 percent) identified themselves as Asian-American, 4 (9 percent) identified themselves as Latino or Hispanic, 4 said they were Black or African American (9 percent), 3 indicated they

were White or Anglo (7 percent), 2 (4 percent) said they were Arab American, and 5 said they were a member of some other racial or ethnic group.

### ***Protocol***

These participants were randomly assigned to one of three treatments. Students assigned to the first treatment, a control condition, watched no television programming ( $n = 11$ ). In the second treatment, participants completed a pretest and then were *forced* to watch approximately 10 minutes of a composite broadcast of the Fox News Channel political commentary show, *Hannity & Colmes* ( $n = 16$ ). This stimulus is described in detail below. Participants in the third treatment condition were allowed them to watch *Hannity & Colmes*, or change the channel to other options and to change the channel as they wished, throughout roughly 10 minutes in which they watched television ( $n = 18$ ). These alternative programs are described below as well.<sup>3</sup> All subjects completed a pre-viewing and post-viewing questionnaire that measured a number of relevant attributions. Subjects in the control group, of course, completed both questionnaires without the intervention of a viewing stimulus.

All television programming was captured from live television and edited into short segments for replay for participants. In the television-watching treatments, programming was played for respondents on a normal television via DVD players concealed in an adjacent control

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<sup>3</sup> We performed a randomization check by regressing treatment assignment on measures collected in the pre-test instrument (self esteem, interpersonal trust, aversion to political disagreement, aversion to conflict, evaluation of congress, partisanship, age, race, and gender). A joint-hypothesis test fails to reject the null hypothesis that treatment assignment was random (assignment to the forced condition,  $F[10, 34] = 1.06, p = 0.419$ ; assignment to the choice condition,  $F[10, 34] = 0.51, p = 0.871$ ). However, we do find an imbalance on the interpersonal trust measure for the forced treatment condition ( $t = 2.58, p = 0.015$ , two-tailed). Imbalances can happen by chance, especially in small samples. The fact that we only find one imbalance out of 10 strongly suggests that the integrity of the random assignment is sound. To account for the imbalance on the interpersonal trust measure, we include it as a covariate in all of the analyses.

room. In the choice/channel-changing condition, participants were allowed to move among the three available television channels using a remote control for a multi-channel component video/audio switch. The switch had two outputs, one of which went to the television.

All participants were informed that they were “engaged in a study of information processing.” Those who watched television were given additional instructions. People assigned to the forced viewing condition were told:

We now ask you to watch a segment of a television program. Pay attention to the program. Do not wander around the room or disturb any of the equipment here. Please just watch the program. I will then ask you to complete another brief questionnaire.

Participants in the treatment allowing channel surfing were given more detailed instructions about the programming available to them.

We now ask you to watch television for a short time. Pay attention to what you watch. You may change the channel while you watch television. We will be able to monitor your program choices, but you should feel free to watch whatever you like. There are shows on channels 1, 2, and 3. Do not wander around the room or disturb any of the equipment here. Please just watch television. After you watch television for a while, I will ask you to complete another brief questionnaire.

The programs included a composite portion of *Hannity & Colmes*, a current events talk show concerning political and social news broadcast on Fox News Channel; *Overhaulin'*, an automobile-improvement show broadcast on The Learning Channel (TLC); and *The 50 Cutest Child Stars All Grown Up*, a show about celebrities broadcast on Entertainment Television (E!). The cable networks were chosen at random from among the cable channels excluding all broadcast networks, news and sports channels, and premium channels. In the channel-changing treatment, these three programs were assigned at random to a position in the three-channel line-up, to avoid any primacy effect with having a consistent program on channel number 1. The audio/video switcher did have a fourth channel, which was left without programming – simply a

black screen. The remote control was handed to the participant with this black screen, channel number 4, on the television. This allowed each participant to find his or her own way into the program offerings.

The *Hannity & Colmes* program was a composite built from episodes that aired in April 2006. It begins with a 6-minute segment from April 13, which features hosts and political commentators Sean Hannity and Alan Colmes, along with Republican strategist Karen Hanretty and Democratic strategist Bob Beckel. The four pundits engage in a frequently hostile conversation about illegal immigration, rallies promoting immigration reforms, a proposed amnesty program for illegal immigrants in particular, as well as appearances by U.S. Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-NY) and U.S. Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-MA) at one of these protests/rallies. Several minutes into the segment Hanretty tells Colmes, “You should be ashamed.” The commentators shout over each other during the discussion. The next segment was taken from an April 12 broadcast and begins with former House Speaker Newt Gingrich discussing immigration and Republican reactions to President Bush’s performance on the issue. Approximately 2 minutes into the interview, Colmes shifts the discussion to the trial of former senior White House official I. Lewis “Scooter” Libby and his alleged leaking of a CIA operative’s name to news reporters. During Colmes’ questioning of Gingrich, both men become agitated.

The alternative television programs are more civil. The automobile improvement show *Overhaulin’* features a team of restorers refurbishing a 1964 Chevrolet Impala and playing gentle pranks on them over the course of the show. The episode we edited for our participants aired April 11, 2006. The *Child Stars* program aired April 16, 2006. It describes the current careers of actors who first became famous for their work as children.

In each session involving choice, the television viewing choices of participants were unobtrusively recorded. One the component video/audio switch outputs was attached to the television and the other was attached to a computer in the control room. This allowed us to capture the digital video signal of the participants' channel-changing behavior. These video files were analyzed and coded for the total time spent watching *Hannity & Colmes*. On average, participants in the channel-changing condition watch *Hannity & Colmes* for 5 minutes and 22 seconds. This ranged from just over 8 seconds to approximately 10 minutes. Figure 1 shows a histogram of time spent watching *Hannity & Colmes*. First, we consider the duration of time spent watching *Hannity & Colmes* in the choice condition. Then, we focus on cell differences between channel-changers, those forced to watch, and control group participants.

[Figure 1 about here]

## **Findings**

### ***Time Spent Watching Hannity & Colmes, Given a Choice***

We have demonstrated that there are relevant differences between people who watch televised incivility and those who do not. Does this inference extend to the amount of time someone would choose to watch a contentious political television show in a controlled laboratory environment? Can we identify correlates of time spent watching *Hannity & Colmes* in our choice condition? Again, we turn to the set of hypotheses drawn on above. We investigate the relationship between time spent viewing *Hannity & Colmes* and political knowledge, partisanship, and gender. We add, however, comfort with interpersonal conflict, which Mutz and Reeves (2005) find to be correlated with effects from their forced-viewing design. We anticipate that watching this program will be associated with higher levels of political knowledge

– as a surrogate for a behavioral tendency to consume political news – and having a strong partisan identification. We also expect men will be more likely to watch *Hannity & Colmes*, as well as people more comfortable with interpersonal conflict.

The specific question wordings for each of these measures are included in an appendix. We measure political knowledge as the additive score on a six-item civics test included in the experiments' post-test. These questions included items about people, process and institutions. We are able to measure the strength of each respondent's partisan identification using a survey item asked of partisan identifiers about whether they think of themselves as strong partisans or not. Participant gender was included on the pre-test questionnaire. Comfort with interpersonal conflict is measured using five items included on the pretest which asked participants to agree or disagree on a six-point scale. They focus on interpersonal argument and conflict, including "I find conflicts exciting."

Because we have 18 participants in the choice condition, we can provide only the leanest model of correlates of *Hannity & Colmes* viewing, reported in Table 2. We model the amount of time our participants in the choice condition watched the show in seconds using Weibull regression. As expected, we find that participants with higher levels of political knowledge and stronger party identification (at  $p \sim .12$ ) spent more time watching the political talk show. Male participants watched for longer periods of time. Important, subjects with a higher level of comfort with interpersonal arguing spent more time on the Fox News pundit show than people with less tolerance for conflict.

[Table 2 about here]

### ***Testing the Videomalaise Hypothesis in a Choice Environment***

In light of our discussion above, we expect that subjects who were given a chance to select the television program they preferred to watch to have more trust in politicians, government, the media, and internal efficacy than those who are forced to watch uncivil political debate. We expect the control group to behave as an anchor with attitudes of untreated subjects falling somewhere in between the two treatment groups. Because control group subjects did not watch any of the television programming during the study, their attitudes cannot be affected by any of the television shows, giving us a baseline.

To investigate the various facets of the videomalaise hypothesis, we included a battery of questions on the post-test instrument to measure subjects' trust in politicians, government, and the media, as well as political efficacy. The trust-in-politicians battery consists of seven items and has a Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.86$ . These questions asked subjects to use a 6-point Likert scale to register the degree to which they agreed with various statements about politicians' trustworthiness. For the trust-in-government scale we borrowed the standard survey item, which asks, "How much can you trust [government institution] to do the right thing? All of the time, most of the time, or just some of the time." Using this question wording, we asked subjects to rate the trustworthiness of the presidency, Congress, the Supreme Court, and the "government in Washington" ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ).

With respect to trust in the media, we asked subjects to evaluate how much they trust the television news media with two items ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ). Finally, we measure internal and external political efficacy with a standard battery of questions that ask subjects to express their views on the general responsiveness of the political system (external efficacy) and their level of competence to effectively participate in politics (internal efficacy). A factor analysis confirmed

that these items load on separate dimensions and the resulting scales have a high level of internal consistency (external efficacy  $\alpha = 0.80$ , internal efficacy  $\alpha = 0.65$ ). The question wording for all of these scale items and the summary statistics for these measures are shown in an appendix.

We test Hypothesis 1 by simply comparing the average level of trust and political efficacy across our groups. This analysis, displayed in Table 3, was accomplished by regressing our various dependent measures on indicators for treatment assignment (*forced* and *choice*), leaving the control group as the baseline condition. The results provide support for the hypothesis. Compared to subjects in the forced condition, subjects in the choice condition are more trusting of politicians ( $F[1, 41] = 6.58, p = 0.014$ ) and more trusting of television news ( $F[1, 41] = 4.20, p = 0.046$ ). Although the effects of choice on trust in government are in the correct direction, the difference in means misses the standard level of statistical significance ( $F[1, 41] = 1.95, p = 0.17$ ). We also find a clear null result with respect to external efficacy ( $F[1, 41] = 0.001, p = 0.973$ ). Yet, because the subjects in the choice condition tend to have higher levels of political trust relative to those in the control group, it is evident that watching political debate shows does not harm the political trust of those who willingly watch them.

[Table 3 about here]

Taken together, these findings strongly suggest that the lower levels of political trust in the forced condition are explained by the negative effect that watching debate shows has on those who would typically avoid or minimize their viewing. Intriguingly, subjects in both the forced and choice conditions have lower levels of internal efficacy than control group subjects. Perhaps, even among those who like vituperative political exchanges, viewing uncivil political debate lowers the degree to which they feel competent to understand and participate in politics.

In order to test Hypothesis 2, we must estimate the effect of exposure to *Hannity & Colmes* on political trust and efficacy. Because subjects in the choice condition were allowed to determine their amount of exposure and there is reason to believe that political attitudes are endogenous to the selection process, a single-equation approach to estimating the effects of exposure will yield biased and inconsistent estimates. Since subjects were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions, the only way subjects could watch *Hannity & Colmes* in our study is through random assignment, we can use it as an instrument for exposure (Angrist, Imbens, and Rubin 1996).<sup>4</sup> The resulting estimand is the average treatment effect on the treated and it provides a linear estimate for the causal relationship between amount of time (measured in seconds) devoted to watching uncivil political debate and our dependent variables of interest.<sup>5</sup> The results are reported in Table 4.

[Table 4 about here]

Consistent with our expectations, relative to the forced condition, exposure to *Hannity & Colmes* increases trust in politicians ( $F[1, 41] = 5.45, p = 0.025$ ), trust in government ( $F[1, 41] = 2.55, p = 0.118$ ), and trust in television news ( $F[1, 41] = 2.53, p = 0.119$ ). Substantively, a trust-

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<sup>4</sup> Angrist, Imbens, and Rubin (1996) identify five assumptions underlying the instrumental variable approach to estimating causal effects. Two of the five are met by design: random assignment and the exclusion restriction. We did randomly assign subjects to the treatment conditions and only subjects in the treatment conditions could see *Hannity & Colmes*. The other three were also met during the implementation of the experimental protocol. The stable unit treatment value assumption (SUTVA), which states that outcomes are not affected by the treatment status of other subjects, was met by having subjects watch the television programs and complete the survey instruments in isolation. Because subjects in both treatment conditions did in fact watch *Hannity & Colmes* we ensure that treatment assignment has a nonzero causal effect on exposure (assumption 4), and because no subjects in the control group were exposed to the television programs we meet the monotonicity assumption (assumption 5).

<sup>5</sup> Subjects in the forced group were coded as watching 655 seconds of *Hannity & Colmes*. We also measured exposure as the proportion of time that subjects spent watching *Hannity & Colmes*, and the results are substantively identical.

in-politicians score for those who chose to watch 10 minutes of *Hannity & Colmes* is, on average, nearly 1.5 standard deviations above the trust-in-politicians score for subjects who were forced to watch the show for 10 minutes. Furthermore, subjects who chose to watch the show for 10 minutes were nearly one standard deviation above the mean score on the trust-in-politicians scale, whereas subjects who were forced to watch the show were, on average, about a half of a standard deviation below the mean on the scale. The findings corroborate our thesis that the negative effect of uncivil political debate on political trust vanishes when people can choose to avoid watching it. Among those who choose to watch political talk shows, incivility in the discussion does not appear to have a negative effect on their level of political trust.

We continue to find null effects for external efficacy and negative effects in both conditions for internal efficacy. Note that once the treatment effects are adjusted to account for the variation in exposure in the choice condition, exposure to *Hannity & Colmes* has roughly the same negative effect on internal efficacy in the choice condition as it does in the forced condition. It appears that while uncivil political debate does not negatively affect views toward the political system among those who willingly watch political debate shows, it may negatively effect how they view their own level of competence to navigate the system.

### **Conclusion**

Classic experimental research on political communication fails to provide experimental subjects choices over their consumption of political information, potentially distorting findings about the effects of this information. It assumes that the reception of political communication has equivalent effects across viewers, including those who would select out of the audience if they were given a choice. We address this blind spot in the empirical work by building choice over stimuli into the experimental design. Our findings suggest that, at least with respect to the

effects of incivility in political debates, the ability to opt out of receiving political communicate leads to dramatically different conclusions.

Uncivil exchanges in political debate shows do not diminish confidence in public officials, government institutions, and the media *among those who choose to watch them*. Evidence of videomalaise found in previous studies appears to be driven by the reactions of those who would avoid these shows in the real world. Moreover, keep in mind that the negative effects of televised incivility dissipate in a setting of highly limited choice. Subjects only had three channels from which to choose and all of the subjects watched the *Hannity & Colmes* show for at least a brief period. In an even more realistic setting, where subjects have as many options available as the typical American television viewer, it is quite possible that uncivil political debate shows typically have little to no direct negative effects on political trust.

Yet while our findings offer an important modification of the conventional wisdom on this topic, we do not believe that they undermine the empirical findings of previous research. Compared to the choice condition, which is closer to a realistic viewing situation, the forced viewing condition does significantly lower subjects' esteem for politicians and the media. These findings echo previous work and suggest that in those instances where observing political conflict is unavoidable, it may have a deleterious effect on political trust. Although people may be able to change the channel most of the time, we suspect there are instances in which political debate reaches even those who prefer to avoid it. For instance, when shrill political conflict over highly salient issues, like immigration, abortion, or war, reach a fevered pitch it is possible that uncivil political exchanges are difficult to tune out, as they may spill over into television shows that are typically not overtly political. If this is true, it suggests that many Americans may have difficulty dealing with political conflict at crucial moments (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002).

Furthermore, we do find that uncivil political debate reduced internal efficacy in both the forced and choice condition *to the same degree*. Although we did not anticipate this finding, it deserves more attention in future research. It is entirely possible that even among those who enjoy political debate shows, that the level of rancor leads to a feeling that politics is just too difficult to understand. Perhaps political bickering leads people to believe that public discourse is a disingenuous show that produces an impenetrable fog.

We could especially see this as a side effect among those who like watching these shows. Because these individuals tend to be partisan, they likely already have strongly held views on many of the topics discussed, and the inability of the opposing side to see the folly of their ways may lead them to believe that working through the political system to change hearts and minds is a hopeless endeavor. Such an attitude may lead them to leave the dirty business of politics to the partisan political elites whom they trust and eschew becoming more personally involved in politics. If this is the case, then videomalaise may continue to be a negative externality of uncivil political debate in a hyper-choice media environment even if the causal mechanism is different from the one articulated in the original model.

In sum, we believe that a fruitful research agenda lies ahead of this topic. Our study here gives clear indication that choice affects the impact of political communication and future research will allow us to more fully investigate the conditions under which self-selection into political stimuli matters.

## ***Appendix: Item Question Wording, Pew Data and Experiment Pre/Post-tests***

Pew Research Center for the People & the Press; Political Communications Study, January 2004

### ***Dependent Variable***

Now I'd like to ask you about some specific ways in which you might be getting news about the presidential campaign. For each item that I read, please tell me how often, if ever, you learn something about the presidential campaign or the candidates from this source. Political talk shows on cable TV, such as CNN's *Crossfire* and CNBC's *Hardball*. 1 Regularly, 2 Sometimes, 3 Hardly ever, 4 Never, 5 Don't watch that (volunteered).

**Likely Watches Debate Show** codes Regularly, Sometimes, and Hardly ever responses (1-3) as indicating a respondent who likely watches debate talk shows such as *Crossfire* and *Hardball*. Respondents who "never" learn from the shows (4) or volunteer that they do not watch (5) are coded as not watching.

### ***Independent Variables***

#### **Campaign Interest**

How closely have you been following news about the race for the Democratic presidential nomination... very closely, fairly closely, not too closely, or not at all closely? 1 Very closely, 2 Fairly closely, 3 Not too closely, 4 Not at all closely. This item was reversed so that higher numbers correspond with more interest.

#### **Follow Political News**

And how much do you enjoy keeping up with political news about campaigns and elections – a lot, some, not much, or not at all? 1 A lot, 2 Some, 3 Not much, 4 Not at all. This item was reversed so that higher numbers correspond with more interest.

#### **Political Knowledge**

Do you happen to know which of the presidential candidates: a. Served as an Army general (Correct answer, Wesley Clark), b. Served as the Majority Leader in the House of Representatives (Correct answer, Richard Gephardt). Indicator sums items coded 1 for correct answer given, 0 for all other responses.

#### **Partisans**

In politics today, do you consider yourself a Republican, Democrat or Independent? 1 Republican, 2 Democrat, 3 Independent, 4 No Preference, 5 Other, 9 Don't know/Refused (volunteered). Respondents who self-identified as Republican or Democrat were coded as partisans (1) others were coded 0.

#### **Male**

ENTER RESPONDENT'S SEX: 1 Male, 2 Female. Recoded Male=1, Female=0.

## Channel-changing experiment

### **Political Knowledge**

Sums correct responses to the following questions (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.59$ ).

What job or political office is currently held by Bill Frist? 1. Secretary of the Treasury, 2. U.S Senate Majority Leader, 3. Prime Minister of Canada

Whose responsibility is it to determine if a law is constitutional or not? 1. President, 2. Congress, 3. Supreme Court

How much of a majority is required for the U.S. Senate and House to override a presidential veto? 1. Unanimous, 2. Two-Thirds, 3. One-Fifth, 4. Simple majority

Do you happen to know which political party currently has the most members in the U.S. House of Representatives? Please write your answer

How long is a U.S. Senate term? Please write your answer  
Can a communist run for president? 1. Yes, 2 No

### **Strength of Party Identification**

If you said you were a Republican or Democrat, would you say your party affiliation is strong or not very strong? 1. Strong, 2. Not very strong. Responses coded with Strong=2, Not strong=1, and not Democrat/Republican=0.

**Male** indicates participants who identified themselves as male in the pre-test: What is your gender? 1 Male, 2 Female

### **Comfortable with Social Arguing**

Factor scores from the analysis of the following items (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.75$ ).

I hate arguments. (flipped)

I find conflicts exciting.

I enjoy challenging the opinions of others.

Arguments don't bother me.

I feel upset after an argument. (flipped)

All items have the same response set: 1 Strongly agree, 2 Agree, 3 Slightly Agree, 4 Slightly Disagree, 5 Disagree, 6 Strongly Disagree

### **Trust in Politicians**

Average of response to the following items (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.86$ ). All items have the same response set: 1 Strongly agree, 2 Agree, 3 Slightly Agree, 4 Slightly Disagree, 5 Disagree, 6 Strongly Disagree. The values of reverse-coded items were flipped before taking the average. Higher values on the scale indicate higher levels of trust.

Politicians generally have good intentions.

Politicians in the U.S. do not deserve much respect.

When politicians make statements to the American people on television or in the newspapers, they are usually telling the truth.

Most politicians can be trusted to do what is right.

Despite what some people say, most politicians try to keep their campaign promises.

Most politicians do a lot of talking but they do little to solve the really important issues facing the country.

Most politicians are dedicated people and we should be grateful to them for the work they do.

### **Trust in Government**

Average of response to the following items (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.84$ ). All items have the same response set: 1 Just about always, 2 Most of the time, 3 Some of the time. Because these responses are reverse-coded, the values were flipped. Higher values on the scale indicate higher levels of trust.

How much of the time do you think you can trust members of the U.S. Congress to do what is right?

How much of the time do you think you can trust the President to do what is right?

How much of the time do you think you can trust members of the Supreme Court to do what is right?

How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?

**Trust in the TV News Media**

Average of response to the following items (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.93$ ). All items have the same response set: 1 Just about always, 2 Most of the time, 3 Some of the time. Because these responses are reverse-coded, the values were flipped. Higher values on the scale indicate higher levels of trust.

How much of the time do you think you can trust television news reporters to do what is right?

How much of the time do you think you can trust television news commentators to do what is right?

**External Efficacy**

Average of response to the following items (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.80$ ). All items have the same response set: 1 Strongly agree, 2 Agree, 3 Slightly Agree, 4 Slightly Disagree, 5 Disagree, 6 Strongly Disagree. The values of reverse-coded items were flipped before taking the average. Higher values on the scale indicate higher levels of trust.

As far as the people running Congress are concerned, you have a great deal of confidence at all in them.

At present I feel very critical of our political system.

People who hold public offices are generally well-qualified to make government decisions.

Whatever its faults may be, the American form of government is still the best for us.

There is not much about our form of government to be proud of.

It may be necessary to make some major changes in our form of government in order to solve the problems facing our country.

I would rather live under our form of government than any other I can think of.

**External Efficacy**

Average of response to the following items (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.65$ ). All items have the same response set: 1 Strongly agree, 2 Agree, 3 Slightly Agree, 4 Slightly Disagree, 5 Disagree, 6 Strongly Disagree. Higher values on the scale indicate higher levels of trust.

People like me don't have any say about what the government does.

Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on.

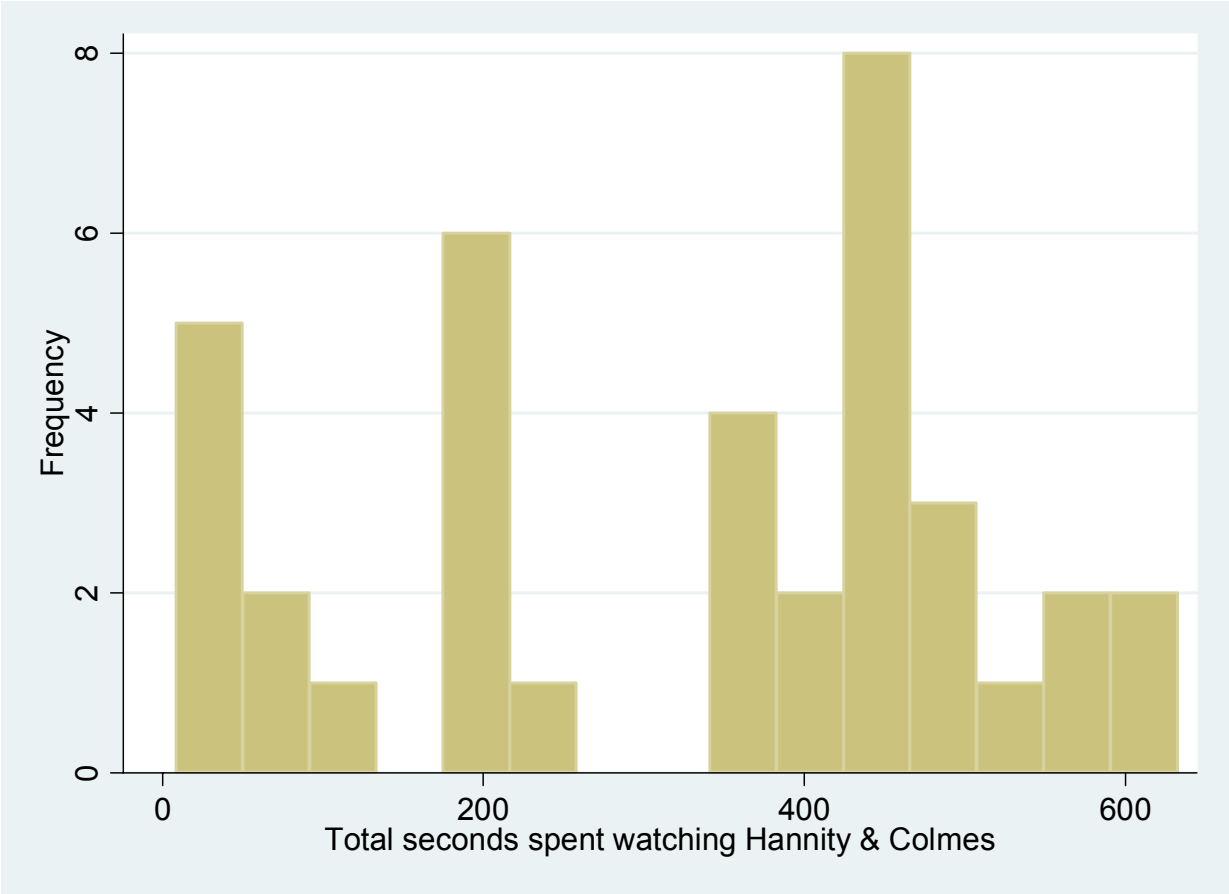
Public officials don't care much what people like me think.

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Figure 1. Time spent watching *Hannity & Colmes*, choice condition



**Table 1. Logit Analysis of Watching, Avoiding Television Debate Shows**

	<u>Watches Debate Shows</u>
Campaign Interest	0.260 (0.072)
Follows Political News	0.506 (0.072)
Political Knowledge	0.037 (0.079)
Partisan	0.328 (0.200)
Male	0.269 (0.115)
Constant	-1.275 (0.206)
N	N = 1,485
$\chi^2$ [5 d.f.]	154.16
pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.08

Source: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Early January 2004 Political Communications Study, December 19, 2003 - January 4, 2004; Entries are maximum-likelihood coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.

**Table 2. Weibull Analysis of Time Spent on *Hannity & Colmes*, Channel-Changing Condition**

	ML estimates (robust s.e.)
Political Knowledge	0.48 (0.12)
Strength of Party Identification	0.30 (0.19)
Male	0.81 (0.29)
Comfortable with Social Arguing	0.60 (0.25)
Constant	3.48 (0.43)
$\alpha$	1.58 (0.39)
N	18
$\chi^2$ [4 d.f.]	34.18

Source: Channel-changing experiment sessions August 8-30, 2006; Entries are maximum-likelihood coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.

```
Weibull regression -- entry time 0
accelerated failure-time form
Log pseudolikelihood = -21.522856
Number of obs = 18
Wald chi2(4) = 34.18
Prob > chi2 = 0.0000
```

totalhan	Coef.	Robust Std. Err.	z	P> z	[95% Conf. Interval]
polknow	.4770215	.1198074	3.98	0.000	.2422035 .7118396
pidstrength	.3019652	.1940155	1.56	0.120	-.0782982 .6822285
male	.8128328	.2947834	2.76	0.006	.2350679 1.390598
socargok	.6019917	.2522416	2.39	0.017	.1076074 1.096376
_cons	3.480185	.4303145	8.09	0.000	2.636784 4.323586
/ln_p	.4544707	.2467654	1.84	0.066	-.0291805 .9381219
p	1.575339	.3887392			.9712411 2.555178
1/p	.6347839	.1566427			.3913622 1.02961

**Table 3. The Effects of Being Assigned to Watch Uncivil Political Debate on Political Trust and Efficacy**

	<b>Trust Politicians</b>	<b>Trust Government</b>	<b>Trust TV News</b>	<b>Internal Efficacy</b>	<b>External Efficacy</b>
Forced Condition	-0.201 (0.252)	-0.013 (0.187)	-0.249 (0.238)	-0.987 (0.417)	0.055 (0.303)
Choice Condition	0.370 (0.233)	0.218 (0.173)	0.181 (0.220)	-0.528 (0.385)	0.046 (0.280)
Interpersonal Trust	0.772 (0.210)	0.219 (0.156)	0.115 (0.198)	0.711 (0.348)	0.475 (0.253)
Constant	0.919 (0.654)	0.914 (0.486)	1.112 (0.617)	1.878 (1.081)	2.388 (0.785)
N	45	45	45	45	45
R <sup>2</sup>	0.29	0.09	0.09	0.15	0.10
F	5.60	1.29	1.41	2.50	1.46

*Note:* OLS estimates in cells; standard errors in parentheses.

**Table 4. The Effects of Exposure Uncivil Political Debate on Political Trust and Efficacy**

	<b>Trust Politicians</b>	<b>Trust Government</b>	<b>Trust TV News</b>	<b>Internal Efficacy</b>	<b>External Efficacy</b>
Forced Exposure	-0.0003 (0.0004)	0.0000 (0.0003)	-0.0004 (0.0004)	-0.0015 (0.0007)	0.0001 (0.0005)
Choice Exposure	0.0014 (0.0009)	0.0008 (0.0006)	0.0007 (0.0008)	-0.0019 (0.0015)	0.0002 (0.0010)
Interpersonal Trust	0.8000 (0.2127)	0.2359 (0.1531)	0.1286 (0.1956)	0.6708 (0.3667)	0.4785 (0.2529)
Constant	0.8341 (0.6727)	0.8645 (0.4843)	1.0709 (0.6187)	1.9988 (1.1599)	2.3775 (0.7999)
N	45	45	45	45	45
R <sup>2</sup>	0.28	0.13	0.12	0.06	0.10
F	5.50	1.34	1.45	2.25	1.46

*Note:* Exposure measured in seconds. Two-stage Least Squares estimates in cells; standard errors in parentheses. Random assignment to forced and choice condition are instruments for exposure.