

The Art of the Zinger: How Ad Hominem Attacks and Candidate Identities Affect Viewer Reactions to Political Debates

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Abstract

Questions about the usefulness and ethical implications of personally attacking debate opponents have long existed in non-academic circles. However, political science scholarship has yet to produce empirical conclusions on this topic. Via an original online survey experiment of 335 respondents, I test incivility, humor, and gender as mechanisms for different reactions to ad hominem attacks in political debates. I theorize that attacks using incivility elicit negative reactions, attacks using humor elicit more positive reactions, and gender expectations penalize women candidates more heavily than their male counterparts for acting uncivilly. I find that uncivil attacks, humorous or not, elicit generally negative reactions from survey respondents.

The nature and severity of these negative reactions vary based on the type of ad hominem attack a candidate uses. I also find that gender, surprisingly, has little if any impact on reactions to uncivil ad hominem attacks in my experiment. I recommend several methodological improvements to increase confidence in my results. Additionally, I suggest further investigations into the contexts in which uncivil rhetoric can backfire on political candidates.

Introduction

In an era of political polarization, one point of bipartisan agreement is that politics are becoming less civil. For instance, most Americans agree that incivility is worsening (American Bar Association, 2023). 90% worry about the “uncivil and rude behavior of politicians,” and 85% say that compromise should be the goal of politicians (Kukowski, 2019). Similar results emerge from other democracies, such as Italy (Bentivegna & Rega, 2022). Citizens of democracies seem united in their desires for more civility and less hostility in politics. However, this has not stopped some from engaging in uncivil behavior, as U.S. voters increasingly view the opposing political party unfavorably (Iyengar et al., 2019). Politicians may be undergoing a similar shift, as incivility in tweets by American politicians rose by 23% from 2009 to 2022 (Frimer et al., 2022). Even though scholars have addressed reactions to incivility in general, little detailed information exists about the nature of those reactions.

One notable but understudied manifestation of incivility is *ad hominem* –i.e., personal– attacks. The 2024 U.S. presidential election cycle provided ample examples of verbal or written attacks by and against all major candidates. Personal insults characterized the first debate between Joe Biden and Donald Trump. Biden described Trump as a “whiner” and a “loser.” He declared Trump to have “the morals of an alley cat” and insinuated that his physical fitness was deteriorating when he said, “I’m happy to play golf with you if you carry your own bag. Think you can do it?” (Miller et al., 2024). Trump was also quick to use personal insults. He reciprocated Biden’s attack on his fitness, asserting that “[Biden] can’t hit a [golf] ball 50 yards,” and implied that other leaders did not respect Biden when he argued that “all over the world we were respected. And then he comes in and we’re now laughed at” (Miller et al., 2024).

Trump persisted in using personal attacks when Kamala Harris replaced Biden as the Democratic party’s nominee. In one interview, Trump cast doubt on Harris’s racial identity by saying, “I didn’t know she was Black until a number of years ago when she happened to turn Black and now, she wants to be known as Black. So, I don’t know, is she Indian or is she Black?” (Alfonseca 2024). In a rally speech, Trump described Harris as a “low-IQ individual,” “not mentally or physically able” to be the president, and “lazy as hell” (Gold, 2024). Harris used repeated *ad hominem* attacks of her own. In the second presidential debate in September 2024, she responded to Trump’s accusations of extremism on abortion policy with the line, “This is so rich by someone who has been found liable for sexual assault” (Kurtz, 2024). Attacks from each of the 2024 presidential candidates attracted widespread media attention. However, aside from vague commentary (Gold 2024), little analysis exists on the effectiveness of these attacks. In particular, scholars have not investigated the relative effectiveness of various attack types.

In this paper, I attempt to address this gap in political science scholarship, guided by the following research question: What explains variation in viewer reactions to *ad hominem* attacks in political debates? To do this, I first develop a novel theory on how viewers perceive political debate

participants and rhetoric. This theoretical development is in the sections on political debates and their consequences, attack types, and candidate gender. This section identifies humor and incivility as mechanisms for positive and negative reactions, respectively. I also use literature on incivility to designate three types of ad hominem attacks, theorizing that attacks that blend humor with incivility will elicit more positive reactions than attacks that only use incivility. Additionally, I draw from the literature on gender in politics to develop a theory of unequal penalties for incivility. I predict that women will receive more negative reactions than men for using the same uncivil attacks and that candidates will receive more negative reactions when attacking women opponents.

The “Data and Variables of Interest” section describes how I test my hypotheses. I design an online survey experiment which tests for various reactions to verbal attacks. Each respondent views a vignette describing a verbal attack in a hypothetical debate. I randomize the attack type and both candidates’ genders to test these attributes as treatments. Then, respondents answer questions about their reactions to the debate. These include which candidate the respondent would prefer to vote for, how favorably the respondent views each candidate, how the respondent would describe the verbal attack, and how the respondent would describe the debate. My tests reveal a mix of data, confirming some of my hypotheses and contradicting others.

In the “Results” section, I argue that incivility elicits negative reactions in most scenarios. Specifically, my survey results indicate that attacks that demonize an opponent (individual delegitimization) elicit negative responses to the users and the debate. Candidates using humorous attacks receive adverse reactions, but humor offsets negative feelings toward the debate. Attacks that label opponents as corrupt institutionalists do not penalize candidates using them but cause negative perceptions of the debate overall. I also find that the candidates’ genders do not impact viewer reactions to verbal attacks.

The “Discussion and Conclusions” section offers insights into how some treatments impact viewer reactions. I recommend exploring gender norms as a mechanism for viewer reactions in more depth, testing for general patterns in open-ended responses, and allocating more funding to distribute treatments to a more representative sample.

Political Debates and Consequences for Candidates

Though debates have limited convincing power, they can impact a candidate’s public image. Research shows that viewers of U.S. presidential debates are generally more politically interested and polarized than the general electorate (Rosenburg, 2010). As a result, debates have little influence on viewers’ policy positions since those viewers have more solidified political opinions (Rosenburg, 2010). The convincing effects of debates diminish even further in vice-presidential, Senate, and Congressional races because down-ballot debates attract fewer viewers (DeSilver, 2024; Galliher 2022). However, presidential debates can impact voters beyond individual policy preferences. The

2024 U.S. presidential election cycle provided an extreme example of this. Pressures on incumbent president Joe Biden to resign erupted after his abysmal debate performance in June. Biden, who entered the debate facing criticism in areas like immigration and foreign policy, frequently stumbled over his words, and at times appeared confused and disoriented. A report from NPR News remarked, "Biden often wasn't able to show vigor or consistently convey what he wanted to say. He simply couldn't deliver the kinds of happy-warrior blows with that toothy smile audiences have seen from Biden in years past" (Montanaro, 2024). Such coverage contributed to panic within the Democratic Party over Biden's viability as a presidential candidate. Despite having previously resolved to run for reelection, the pressure from major actors within the Democratic Party establishment led to his withdrawal less than a month after his debate against Donald Trump (White, 2024). The 2024 election cycle suggests that good debate performances have little power to bolster a candidate's electoral chances. However, terrible performances could harm a campaign by coordinating opposition to a candidate, even from within the candidate's party.

Political candidates may feel incentivized to make an opponent's performance seem worse by attacking perceived political vulnerabilities. Indeed, many noteworthy moments from American political debates have included ad hominem attacks, which I define as strategic attacks on the character, likability, or credibility of an opponent independent of their substantive policy positions (Clayman, 1995, p. 135). Well-known examples include Lloyd Bentsen's 1988 declaration to Dan Quayle that "Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy," and Ronald Reagan's tongue-in-cheek promise to not make Walter Mondale's "youth and inexperience" an issue of his campaign in 1984 (MPR News Staff, 2006; PBS News Hour, 2000). However, existing research disagrees on the circumstances under which viewers react negatively, neutrally, or positively to ad hominem attacks.

Additionally, the ad hominem attack's normative and strategic implications are the subjects of a fierce ongoing debate in non-academic circles. On one hand, academics and debate coaches sometimes dismiss ad hominem as fallacious and liable to elicit backlash from an audience. Texas State University's philosophy department defines ad hominem as "irrelevantly [attacking] the person or some aspect of the person who is making the argument. The fallacious attack can also be directed to membership in a group or institution" (Hanks, 2024). The perception of ad hominem arguments as fallacious is common in high schools, college classes, and extracurricular activities using Socratic discourse. In debate competitions, personal attacks may be discouraged if not explicitly forbidden (Agora Speakers International, 2024). Students of argumentation are understandably taught to attack their opponents' ideas instead of their character or credibility.

On the other hand, many "real world" debaters see the ad hominem attack as a useful rhetorical tactic. Politicians, commentators, and debaters frequently verbally attack their opponents when they deem it useful for winning over an audience. In the book *Win Every Argument* (2023), journalist Mehdi Hasan argues that attacking an opponent's past affiliations, moral character, or lack of expertise can help convince an audience of one's position. He includes examples from his interviews, including probing climate change-denying scientists on their affiliations with fossil fuel

companies and casting doubt on opponents' moral objections to the Quran by pointing out that those opponents do not speak Arabic or study Middle Eastern history. Hasan admits that personal digs do not always lead to a productive dialogue, but he defends his usage of such techniques by declaring that "all's fair in love and war" (Hasan, 2023). Given the competing assumptions about how ad hominem attacks affect listeners' attitudes, I next advance an original theory about the conditions in which people will respond more or less favorably to ad hominem attacks in the context of political debates.

Types of Ad Hominem Attacks

To link ad hominem attacks to viewer reactions causally, I identify incivility as a mechanism for negative reactions and humor for positive reactions. Past research provides a rough framework for which types of remarks are considered uncivil and how viewers tend to react to incivility in politics. Bentivegna & Rega (2022) identify three categories of incivility: (1) impoliteness, such as making fun of or belittling an opponent; (2) individual delegitimization, which can include stereotypes, othering, slander, or intentionally exaggerating an opponent's views; and institutional delegitimization, like denigrating national symbols or disrespecting democratic institutions. That paper's survey found that respondents tend to react negatively to all three types of behaviors. More specifically, impoliteness elicits less of a reaction than individual or institutional delegitimization (Bentivegna & Rega 2022, p. 9). The relative perceived incivility of individual and institutional delegitimization suggests that candidates could face penalties for engaging in these behaviors. After all, 95% of Bentivegna & Rega's respondents agreed with the notion that "there is a lack of politeness and reciprocal respect and it is often impossible to compare and debate different proposals and ideas" (Bentivegna & Rega 2022, p. 7). A 2019 survey found that 77% of Americans felt similarly about the political discourse in the U.S. (Lake et al. 2019, p. 2). Public opinion on incivility in democracies suggests that viewers will punish individual delegitimization in debates. However, several facts about Bentivegna & Rega's research and related studies cloud the discussion on impoliteness and institutional delegitimization.

First, it is difficult to make specific claims about viewers' reactions to institutional delegitimization. While Bentivegna and Rega argue that respondents view all three types of incivility poorly, their sample only includes responses from college students, which limits the applicability of the findings (Bentivegna & Rega 2022, p. 2). Higher education is associated with greater trust in government in countries where levels of political corruption are relatively low. This means that, for example, college students generally have more trust in the government, have more respect for democratic institutions, and identify less with anti-establishment political ideologies than those who have not attended college (Anderson et al., 2003, p. 97). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, people who have never attended college represent roughly 36% of American adults. I suspect, therefore,

that college students likely do not accurately represent the sentiments of all adults in advanced democracies toward institutional delegitimization (U.S. Census Bureau 2022). A more representative sample could show less of an aversion to debate participants being unpatriotic, meaning institutional delegitimization may receive a more muted negative reaction.

Second, even if the previous findings on citizens' attitudes toward incivility hold in a broader sample, positive reactions to incivility are still possible. Indeed, humor may positively affect viewers' perceptions of political candidates in debates enough to offset the penalties of attacking an opponent. In the 2008 presidential debates, Senators Barack Obama and John McCain received generally positive responses to jokes they made. Viewers reacted positively to both candidates' self-deprecatory jokes and other deprecatory jokes (Stewart, 2011). The fact that other deprecatory humor elicited positive reactions challenges the notion that viewers will always punish "impolite" behaviors such as making fun of an opponent. Viewers' tendency to reward humor merits testing it as another causal mechanism for viewer reactions. The favorability of well-delivered impoliteness – that is, funny jokes at the expense of an opponent – could exceed adverse reactions to incivility. I include humor in my typology of ad hominem attacks to test this. Literature on humor in politics, combined with the insights mentioned above about the impacts of institutional and individual delegitimization, inspires the following hypotheses on the relative effectiveness of different types of attacks:

H1: *Respondents will view humor favorably relative to the control and the other types of ad hominem attacks.*

H2: *Respondents will view individual delegitimization unfavorably relative to the control and less favorably than other types of ad hominem attacks*

H3: *Respondents will view institutional delegitimization unfavorably relative to the control and more favorably than individual delegitimization.*

Humor, individual delegitimization, and institutional delegitimization appear to be appropriate independent variables to test the causal mechanisms linking ad hominem attacks to viewer reactions. In addition, I include a non-ad hominem control attack which focuses on a candidate's policies instead of personal attributes. The control attack allows analysis of the effects of the ad hominem attacks individually as well as compared to each other. Table 1 compiles the resulting typology of attacks. This framework guides my manipulation of the attack input, but candidate identities require a separate theoretical basis. For this, I examine relevant literature on gender expectations in electoral politics.

Table 1

Typology of verbal attacks and expected viewer reactions. Table created by the author, modeling ad hominem types after Bentivegna & Rega (2022).

Type of Attack	Description/Examples	Expected Viewer Reaction (vs. Control)
Humorous (ad hominem)	Lighthearted, funny remarks at an opponent's expense. For example, Reagan in 1984: "I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I will not exploit, for political purposes, my opponent's youth and inexperience."	Positive
Individual delegitimization (ad hominem)	Delegitimizing other political subgroups, including stereotyping, slandering, demonizing or exaggerating their positions. Examples include slurs or politically charged insults such as "Nazi," "extremist," or "unpatriotic."	Negative
Institutional delegitimization (ad hominem)	Delegitimizing or disrespecting democratic institutions, such as encouraging unlawful protests, denigrating national symbols, or suggesting the government is broken or corrupt.	Slightly Negative
Control (policy-based)	Attacking an opponent's policy agenda rather than personal character or credibility. For example, Barack Obama telling Mitt Romney "the 1980s are now calling to ask for their foreign policy back."	N/A

Candidate Gender and Reactions to Ad Hominem Attacks

Candidate gender may condition public reactions to ad hominem attacks. Analysis of facial expressions, vocal pitch, and speech sentiment has shown that respondents tend to reward female candidates for emotional expressions that align with gendered social norms (Boussalis, 2021). Women receive incentives to show less emotion, avoid expressions of anger, and increase their displays of joy to a greater extent than their male counterparts (Boussalis, 2021). Women also face an unequal burden of civility in politics compared to men, often receiving disproportionately negative media coverage for attacking male opponents (Cameron 2022, p. 30). This is also true in some cases of women defending themselves against uncivil behaviors from male opponents. One example is Senator Kamala Harris's declaration to incumbent Vice President Mike Pence during the 2020 U.S. vice presidential debate "Mr. Vice President, I am speaking" (O'Kane, 2020). In the wake of that remark, some commentators described Harris's behavior as "aggressive and disrespectful" while Pence received less attention for interrupting her (Cameron 2022, p. 31). These findings align with well-documented expectations of women to be warmer and more civil. From these studies, a hypothesis on the relationship between candidates' gender identities and political favorability emerges:

H4: *Respondents will view ad hominem attacks from male-presenting candidates more favorably than attacks from female-presenting candidates.*

Although men face lower costs for incivility in general, legislators tend to attack women less frequently than they attack men. Additionally, attacks against female opponents feature incivility less often than attacks against men (Poljak 2022, p. 293). These trends also follow gendered conceptions of dependency, as Western social norms tend to dictate that women are dependent upon men. One consequence of this image of dependence is that women require protection, and attacks against women violate this norm (Kittay & Feder 2003, p. 10). Therefore, attacks targeting female candidates could elicit negative reactions compared to those targeting male candidates. This social expectation to “never attack a woman” motivates another hypothesis on gender and debate attacks:

H5: *Respondents will view ad hominem attacks against male-presenting candidates more favorably than attacks against female-presenting candidates.*

Scholars have differing views about the effects of ad hominem attacks on public attitudes and have, to date, paid little attention to the different types of ad hominem attacks or how they might interact with the genders of political candidates who give or receive them. Having outlined my novel theory to resolve these ambiguities, I next present an experiment to test my hypotheses.

Data and Variables of Interest

To test my hypotheses, I create a survey experiment to estimate the causal relationship between the treatment variables (candidate gender and type of ad hominem attack) and various outcome variables measuring viewer reactions. The following subsections outline my choices for which data to collect and how to measure them. Later, in the “Experimental Design” section, I describe the experiment I use to test my hypotheses.

Sample

I use Prolific to distribute my survey to its proprietary panel of U.S.-based participants. My sample includes 335 respondents from this panel. Budgetary constraints prevent me from guaranteeing a representative sample. Therefore, I include a comparison of the demographic breakdowns of my sample and the U.S. adult population, per the U.S. Census Bureau and American National Election Surveys. This comparison includes the demographic attributes that I request in the survey (See Appendix A). My sample is proportionally similar to the U.S. adult population in terms of race, education, and religion (See Appendix C). It seems to differ from U.S. adults in age, party affiliation, and ideology. My sample also deviates from the gender breakdown from the 2020 U.S. Census, but the Census’s current lack of non-binary or gender-nonconforming reporting options could contribute to this disparity (US Census Bureau, 2019). I welcome the possibility of future research using my methods on a more representative sample to resolve some of these concerns.

Treatment

I test the effects of three treatments on public reactions to political debates: (1) the gender identity of the candidate using an ad hominem attack (whom I refer to as Candidate A); (2) the gender identity of the targeted candidate (Candidate B); and the types of verbal attack I identified earlier—humor, institutional delegitimization, and individual delegitimization. Table 2 lists all possible levels of these variables.

Table 2

Attribute values for candidate gender, candidate ethnicity, and attack type. Table created by the author, drawing on Gaddis (2017a & 2017b) for candidate names.

<i>Attribute</i>	<i>Levels (with Displayed Text in Quotes)</i>
Candidate A Gender/Ethnicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Men: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ White: “Hunter Becker” ○ Black: “DaShawn Washington” ○ Hispanic: “Alejandro Orozco” ● Women: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ White: “Katelyn Becker” ○ Black: “Tanisha Washington” ○ Hispanic: “Mariana Orozco”
Candidate B Gender/Ethnicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Men: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ White: “Jake Meyer” ○ Black: “Tremayne Jefferson” ○ Hispanic: “Pedro Velazquez” ● Women: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ White: “Claire Meyer” ○ Black: “Lakisha Jefferson” ○ Hispanic: “Guadalupe Velazquez”
Type of Ad Hominem Attack	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Humor: “I appreciate your time tonight, but I feel guilty having a battle of wits with an unarmed opponent.” ● Institutional Delegitimization: “You are a corrupt establishment politician who represents everything broken in our government.” ● Individual Delegitimization: “You can’t hide your extremism behind all that hair gel and makeup.” ● Control: “You may mean well, but your policy agenda will do absolutely nothing to address the real problems facing our city.”

Type of Ad Hominem Attack

I classify ad hominem attacks as one of three types I described earlier: humor, individual delegitimization, and institutional delegitimization. Participants in my experiment respond to one of these types of attacks chosen at random. I craft one hypothetical quote to map onto each type of attack, giving attention to the characteristics for each type outlined by Bentivegna & Rega (2022, p. 5-6).

Hypothetical Candidates' Genders

While I recognize the wide and growing range of gender identities in human populations, I classify candidates in my experiment as either male- or female-presenting for two reasons. First, much of the existing political science research on political debates and civility has relied on a binary representation of candidates, perhaps due in part to the lack of representation of other genders in many countries' national politics (Cameron, 2022; Boussalis, 2021; Rojas, 2021). In the interest of replicating sound methods from other works, I will do the same but welcome the possibility of future research applying similar methods to gender-nonconforming candidates. Second, past research has produced a robust methodological framework for testing gender norms in electoral politics. These methods often rely on a gender binary. In the section "Candidate Gender and Reactions to Ad Hominem Attacks," I pointed out that women generally face higher expectations to show civility, calmness, and joy compared to men and proposed this difference as a causal mechanism influencing viewers' reactions to ad hominem attacks in political debates (Boussalis, 2021). Additionally, behaving uncivilly to women tends to yield worse reactions than doing so to men (Cameron, 2022). Representing candidates as either male or female is the best way to test these particular mechanisms. My use of candidate gender in this experiment leaves open many possibilities for further exploration in political science and gender studies scholarship but adequately addresses the causal relationships of interest for my experiment.

Candidates' Ethnicities

I code candidates as White, Black, or Hispanic to guard against racial biases in respondents. As with gender, I imply candidates' ethnicities via first and last names. I choose names using two studies conducted by S. Michael Gaddis which test names' recognizability as identifying with one ethnic group. One study surveys respondents on the races they associate with common Black and White names and the other does the same for Hispanic names (Gaddis, 2017a; Gaddis, 2017b). Both studies find that many first names receive 95% congruency or higher with the expected ethnic group when combined with common last names from the same ethnic group. For my experiment, I use the two highest-congruency male and female names from each ethnic group. I also choose the two most common last names from each ethnic group. This gives me enough information to randomize ethnically congruent names for Candidates A and B.

Outcomes

I use two primary outcome measures to test my hypotheses: candidate choice and incumbent favorability. I measure candidate choice by asking respondents to choose the candidate they would most likely vote for and incumbent favorability by asking respondents to rate their perception of the incumbent on a scale of 1 (least favorable) to 5 (most favorable). These two outcomes will most directly address the effectiveness of each verbal attack and are relatively simple to measure. Statistical significance in either of the primary outcomes would provide the clearest indication that an attack benefits the user. To add more detail to my analysis, I add various other outcome measures (See Appendix B). These include an open-ended question asking respondents to elaborate on their candidate choice, a 1-5 rating of the challenger, whether the attack was inappropriate, whether the attack was effective, whether or not the debate was productive, and whether the debate reflected well on democracy. I also ask whether respondents think the attack was funny, which serves as an additional outcome measure as well as a manipulation check for the humorous ad hominem attack. The outcome variables I measure make possible both generalized answers to my hypotheses and more detailed insights.

Experimental Design

I use Qualtrics to create my survey experiment in which respondents answer demographic questions about themselves, respond to a vignette containing the treatments, and then answer the outcome questions (see Supplemental Documents). Each respondent sees one vignette which includes a random combination of an incumbent and challenger's ethnicity, each candidate's gender, and the type of attack the incumbent uses. The vignette template contains a hypothetical yet realistic news story about a debate ahead of a runoff election. The description of the circumstances around the debate makes the story seem plausible for respondents in the U.S. who participated in this experiment shortly after the 2024 election. Figure 1 shows a sample vignette. In this case, incumbent Tanisha Washington, a Black woman, uses institutional delegitimization against challenger Guadalupe Velazquez, a Hispanic woman.

I use hypothetical candidates and fabricated quotes to minimize the impact of respondents' biases toward individuals or recognition of actual quotes. Using the names of known politicians or identifying candidate parties and ideologies could bias responses and prevent me from isolating treatment effects. Additionally, fabricating quotes minimizes the chance of a respondent having heard an attack in a vignette before and imparting previous reactions or political biases into their response. My experiment will not perfectly represent viewers' reactions to ad hominem attacks in real political debates, however, my experimental design balances realism with isolating gender identity and attack type.

Figure 1
Example vignette

Local Candidates Face off in Heated Debate

While most voters already cast their ballots in the general election last November 5th, some local elections were delayed due to hurricanes and legal challenges. Voters in some communities will return to the polls in the next few months.

In the meantime, candidates continue campaigning. Front runners in Paxville, South Carolina's municipal race met in a debate last week. While opening remarks struck a friendly tone, the debate quickly became heated, with candidates trading verbal attacks. In one exchange, incumbent Tanisha Washington told challenger Guadalupe Velazquez, "You are a corrupt establishment politician who represents everything broken in our government."

I use linear regression models to test the vignette treatment's effect on multiple outcome variables. Of immediate interest is the effect of all ad hominem attacks on incumbent choice and favorability versus the control attack. In this test, I code ad hominem as a dichotomous variable, which identifies an attack as either ad hominem or not. I also run a test comparing the effects of the different types of ad hominem attacks. In this case, I code ad hominem as a nominal variable, which expresses each type of ad hominem attack as a unique input. I also examine variable interaction between the gender of the incumbent and the dichotomous and nominal ad hominem tests. Additionally, I run a manipulation check by testing the humorous ad hominem attack's effect on respondents seeing the attack as humorous. These tests accompany various post hoc analyses to add depth to my findings.

Results

Regression tests of my hypotheses reveal a mix of expected and unexpected results. The subsections below show the linear regression results for a few generalized findings, each hypothesis test, a manipulation check for humor, and some post hoc tests that begin to paint a picture of the

impacts of ad hominem attacks and candidate identities on viewer reactions to political debates. Not all analyses yielded statistically significant results, and tests that do show significance support some of my hypotheses but compel me to reject others.

Table 3
Primary Outcomes and Ad Hominem

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Choose Incumbent <i>logistic</i> (1)	Incumbent Rating <i>OLS</i> (2)
Ad Hominem	-0.855** (0.267)	-0.471*** (0.131)
(Intercept)	0.711** (0.235)	3.110*** (0.114)
Observations	334	334
R ²		0.037
Adjusted R ²		0.034
Log Likelihood	-225.990	
Akaike Inf. Crit.	455.979	
Residual Std. Error		1.033 (df = 332)
F Statistic		12.859*** (df = 1; 332)
<i>Note.</i>	*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001	

How Do Respondents React to Ad Hominem Attacks?

A test of the effect of all ad hominem attacks as a dichotomous DV indicates that viewers react negatively to ad hominem attacks overall. Ad hominem attacks are associated with statistically significant decreases in the log odds of choosing the incumbent and the rating

respondents give the incumbent. Table 3 shows a change of -0.855 in the log odds of choosing the incumbent, significant at the $p < 0.01$ level. Incumbent rating decreased by -0.471 when respondents saw an ad hominem attack, significant at the $p < 0.001$ level. While this test does not necessarily apply to any of my hypotheses, it does begin to address the broader dialogue on ad hominem arguments I mentioned previously. My results seem to favor the “anti-ad hominem” assertion that viewers punish debate participants who use such attacks.

Do Different Attack Types Yield Different Results?

Before testing each of the attack types in my hypotheses, I run a manipulation check on humor. Seeing the humorous attack is associated with a 1.051 increase in the log odds of agreeing that the remark was funny, significant at the $p < 0.001$ level (see Table 4). This strongly suggests that the “Humor” attack in my experiment tests humor as a causal mechanism for higher incumbent ratings. This successful manipulation check contributes to the unexpectedness of my test result for H1. Humor, which I hypothesized would receive favorable reactions overall and to a greater extent than any other attack, significantly correlates with decreased odds of candidate choice and lower rating. Table 6 reveals a -1.027 change in the log odds of incumbent choice significant at the $p < 0.01$ level and a -0.616 change in incumbent rating significant at the $p < 0.001$ level. Humor seems to have little power to cancel out incivility, compelling me to reject H1.

However, tests of other attack types also call into question incivility’s predicting power for viewer reactions. Based on Table 5, I can accept H2, which predicted that individual delegitimization would receive unfavorable reactions compared to other attack types. Individual delegitimization is associated with decreases of 1.117 in log odds of choosing the incumbent and 0.580 in incumbent rating, both of which are significant at the $p < 0.001$ level. Results are slightly more complicated for H3, which said that institutional delegitimization would receive negative reactions overall but more positive than individual delegitimization. Institutionally delegitimizing attacks correlate with negative changes in log odds of choosing the incumbent and incumbent rating, but neither finding is statistically significant. Therefore, I partially reject H3 since it is not clear that respondents react poorly to institutional delegitimization relative to the control. However, it does appear that institutional delegitimization receives lighter penalties than individual delegitimization, which is consistent with H3. As I theorized, a lack of consensus among adults in democracies concerning institutional respect could explain the less intense reaction to institutional delegitimization.

Table 4
Humor manipulation check

<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
Saw Attack as Humorous	
Saw Humor	1.051*** (0.274)
(Intercept)	-1.416*** (0.159)
Observations	334
Log Likelihood	-180.088
Akaike Inf. Crit.	364.175

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 5
Primary Outcomes and Attack Type

<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Choose Incumbent <i>logistic</i> (1)	Incumbent Rating <i>OLS</i> (2)
Humor	-1.027** (0.323)	-0.616*** (0.159)
Ind. Delegitimizing	-1.117*** (0.323)	-0.580*** (0.158)
Inst. Delegitimizing	-0.424 (0.322)	-0.217 (0.159)
(Intercept)	0.711** (0.235)	3.110*** (0.113)
Observations	334	334
R ²		0.060
Adjusted R ²		0.051
Log Likelihood	-223.039	
Akaike Inf. Crit.	454.079	
Residual Std. Error		1.024 (df = 330)
F Statistic		6.962*** (df = 3; 330)

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

What is the Role of Gender?

Next, I investigate how reactions to ad hominem treatment effects change when the challenger or incumbent is a woman. My results do not provide sufficient evidence to confirm either of my hypotheses on this front. Table 6 shows my test of the ad hominem dichotomous variable's effect on incumbent choice and rating when the incumbent is a woman, which does not rise to statistical significance for either outcome variable. I also test the interaction effect of a woman incumbent on outcomes associated with ad hominem attacks, which also fails to show significance. This compels me to reject H₄'s assertion that female incumbents would receive greater penalties for using ad hominem attacks. Similar results emerge when I test the interaction effects of the challenger being a woman. Female challengers did not significantly correlate with changes in incumbent choice or rating in either direction. Table 7 shows no statistically significant interaction effect of female challengers on the outcomes of ad hominem attacks, which also leads me to reject H₅. Based on these results, I can reject H₄ and H₅, but I am unable to provide many other insights on gender in this context.

Table 6
Ad Hominem (Dichotomous) With Woman Incumbent

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Choose Incumbent <i>logistic</i> (1)	Incumbent Rating <i>OLS</i> (2)
Ad Hominem	-0.800* (0.350)	-0.368* (0.172)
Woman Incumbent	-0.107 (0.480)	0.179 (0.234)
Ad Hominem: Woman Incumbent	-0.096 (0.543)	-0.247 (0.268)
(Intercept)	0.754* (0.303)	3.040*** (0.146)
Observations	334	334
R ²		0.040
Adjusted R ²		0.031
Log Likelihood	-225.642	
Akaike Inf. Crit.	459.284	
Residual Std. Error		1.035 (df = 330)
F Statistic		4.558** (df = 3; 330)

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 7
Ad Hominem (Dichotomous) With Woman Challenger

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Choose Incumbent <i>logistic</i> (1)	Incumbent Rating <i>OLS</i> (2)
Ad Hominem	-0.682 (0.383)	-0.310 (0.188)
Woman Challenger	-0.038 (0.470)	0.117 (0.228)
Ad Hominem:Woman Challenger	-0.340 (0.534)	-0.314 (0.262)
(Intercept)	0.731* (0.338)	3.050*** (0.163)
Observations	334	334
R ²		0.045
Adjusted R ²		0.036
Log Likelihood	-224.876	
Akaike Inf. Crit.	457.753	
Residual Std. Error		1.032 (df = 330)
F Statistic		5.147** (df = 3; 330)

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Additional Tests

In addition to the hypothesis tests, I perform several post hoc analyses using other outcome measures. First, I examine responses to an open-ended question asking respondents to briefly explain their candidate choice (See Supplemental Documents). One identifiable trend is that some respondents associated ad hominem attacks, particularly institutional delegitimization, with Republicans or conservatives. This included Democratic respondents choosing the challenger and Republicans choosing the incumbent, each justifying their choice with the instinct that the incumbent's remark made them sound like a Republican. Second, several respondents choosing the challenger cited perceiving the incumbent as rude, arrogant, unprofessional, or nasty. Third, a handful of female respondents chose the incumbent or the challenger primarily because the candidate was a woman. Fourth, a group of respondents choosing the incumbent described them as confident or capable. This was true for incumbents using multiple different attack types. Finally, some respondents reported choosing the incumbent because the verbal attack was funny. This includes respondents who read the humorous and individually delegitimizing attack. My analysis of these findings does not justify any generalized conclusions. However, it reveals opportunities to use more sophisticated techniques to test for generalizability in these trends.

In addition to the incumbent rating, I test the changes in the challenger rating associated with the different types of attacks. This serves as an additional measure of verbal attacks' usefulness. When ad hominem attacks are present, regression analysis of change in challenger rating shows a negative coefficient but no statistical significance compared to the control (See Tables 8 and 9). Similarly, no individual ad hominem attack type resulted in a statistically significant change in challenger favorability.

Table 8

Ad Hominem and Challenger Rating

Dependent variable:

	Challenger Rating
Ad Hominem	-0.051 (0.110)
(Intercept)	2.963*** (0.095)
Observations	334
R ²	0.001
Adjusted R ²	-0.002
Residual Std. Error	0.862 (df = 332)
F Statistic	0.214 (df = 1; 332)

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 9

Attack Type and Challenger Rating

Dependent variable:

	Challenger Rating
Humor	0.157 (0.133)
Ind. Delegitimizing	-0.246 (0.132)
Inst. Delegitimizing	-0.059 (0.132)
(Intercept)	2.963*** (0.094)
Observations	334
R ²	0.028
Adjusted R ²	0.019
Residual Std. Error	0.853 (df = 330)
F Statistic	3.198* (df = 3; 330)

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

The final outcome measure I test is agreement with statements about the remark the incumbent uses and the debate generally. The first statement, “The remark in the debate was inappropriate,” elicited “agree” responses significantly more often when respondents viewed an ad hominem attack. Ad hominem attacks in general correlate with a 0.311 increase in the log odds of agreeing that the attack was inappropriate, significant at the $p < 0.001$ level. Humorous attacks see an increase of 1.333 significant at the $p < 0.001$ level, individual delegitimization sees a 1.886 increase at the $p < 0.001$ level, and institutional delegitimization sees a 0.827 increase at the $p < 0.05$ level (See Tables 10 and 11). Respondents view humor and individual delegitimization as inappropriate more often than the control with a stronger correlation than institutional delegitimization. These associations show a similar pattern to the hypothesis tests and bolster confidence in uncivil remarks’ tendency to elicit negative reactions.

Table 10

Ad Hominem and Inappropriateness

Dependent variable:

View Attack as Inappropriate

Ad Hominem	0.311*** (0.061)
(Intercept)	0.256*** (0.053)

Observations	334
R ²	0.072
Adjusted R ²	0.069
Residual Std. Error	0.483 (df = 332)
F Statistic	25.703*** (df = 1; 332)

Note. *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 11

Attack Type and Inappropriateness

Dependent variable:

View Attack as Inappropriate

Humor	1.333*** (0.336)
Ind. Delegitimizing	1.886*** (0.346)
Inst. Delegitimizing	0.827* (0.335)
(Intercept)	-1.066*** (0.253)

Observations	334
Log Likelihood	-213.421
Akaike Inf. Crit.	434.841

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

The next statement is “The candidate’s remark in the debate was funny.” Other than the humorous attack, no ad hominem attacks correspond with a significant change in agreement. Table 12 shows that ad hominem attacks in general produce a positive coefficient of 0.401, but this change does not reach statistical significance. Consistent with the manipulation check result, Table 13 demonstrates that humor produces a 0.215 increase in the log odds of agreeing compared to the control. Both individual and institutional delegitimization correlate with small, statistically insignificant changes in agreement. The lack of statistically significant change in this outcome measure based on both types of delegitimization indicates another failure of these attack types to benefit the candidates using them.

Table 12
Humor (Ad Hominem)

<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
View Attack as Funny	
Ad Hominem	0.401 (0.313)
(Intercept)	-1.417*** (0.279)
Observations	334
Log Likelihood	-186.408
Akaike Inf. Crit.	376.816
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 13
Humor (Attack Type)

<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
View Attack as Funny	
Humor	0.215** (0.066)
Ind. Delegitimizing	0.064 (0.065)
Inst. Delegitimizing	-0.064 (0.066)
(Intercept)	0.195*** (0.047)
Observations	334
R ²	0.057
Adjusted R ²	0.048
Residual Std. Error	0.422 (df = 330)
F Statistic	6.655*** (df = 3; 330)
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

The third statement, “The candidate’s remark in the debate was effective,” received “disagree” responses more often when ad hominem attacks were present. According to Table 14, Ad hominem attacks generally correlated with a decrease of 0.232 in the log odds of agreeing, significant at the $p < 0.001$ level. As Table 15 shows, respondents viewing the humorous attack showed a 0.212 decrease in the log odds of agreeing with the statement, significant at the $p < 0.01$ level. Viewing the individually delegitimizing attack correlates with a decrease of 0.314, significant at the $p < 0.001$ level. The institutionally delegitimizing attack correlates with a decrease of 0.168, which is significant at the $p < 0.05$ level. This corroborates ad hominem attacks’ lack of effect on perceptions of the challenger.

Table 14
Ad Hominem and Effectiveness

<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
View Attack as Effective	
Ad Hominem	-0.232*** (0.061)
(Intercept)	0.573*** (0.053)
Observations	334
R ²	0.042
Adjusted R ²	0.039
Residual Std. Error	0.481 (df = 332)
F Statistic	14.400*** (df = 1; 332)
<i>Note:</i>	* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Table 15
Attack Type and Effectiveness

<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
View Attack as Effective	
Humor	-0.212** (0.075)
Ind. Delegitimizing	-0.314*** (0.074)
Inst. Delegitimizing	-0.168* (0.074)
(Intercept)	0.573*** (0.053)
Observations	
	334
R ²	
	0.053
Adjusted R ²	
	0.045
Residual Std. Error	
	0.479 (df = 330)
F Statistic	
	6.210*** (df = 3; 330)
<i>Note:</i>	
	*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Similar results emerge from responses to the statement, “The debate overall was productive” (See Table 16). Ad hominem attacks generally correlate with a decrease of 0.169 in the log odds of agreeing, significant at the $p < 0.001$ level. Humor correlates with a decrease of 0.111 significant at the $p < 0.05$ level, individual delegitimization with a decrease of 0.224 at the $p < 0.001$ level, and institutional delegitimization with a decrease of 0.168 significant at the $p < 0.01$ level (See Table 16). The tendency of uncivil attacks to correlate with debates’ perceptions as unproductive adds detail to the hypothesis tests’ results.

This pattern emerges to a lesser extent in reactions to the final statement: “The debate overall reflected positively on the health of democracy.” Table 17 shows that ad hominem attacks overall correlate with a decrease of 0.166 in the log odds of agreeing, significant at the $p < 0.01$ level. Similar findings emerge from individual delegitimization, which shows a decrease of 0.216 significant at the $p < 0.001$ level, and institutional delegitimization, which correlates with a decrease of 0.183 significant at the $p < 0.01$ level. Humor, however, shows a negative correlation that does not rise to statistical significance (Table 19). This suggests that humor may improve viewers’ perceptions of the debate overall, even if it does not improve perceptions of the candidate using it.

Table 16

Ad Hominem and Debate Productivity

Dependent variable:

View Debate as Productive

Ad Hominem	-0.169*** (0.044)
(Intercept)	0.250*** (0.039)
<hr/>	
Observations	291
R ²	0.048
Adjusted R ²	0.045
Residual Std. Error	0.318 (df = 289)
F Statistic	14.731*** (df = 1; 289)

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 17

Attack Type and Debate Productivity

Dependent variable:

View Debate as Productive

Humor	-0.111* (0.054)
Ind. Delegitimizing	-0.224*** (0.053)
Inst. Delegitimizing	-0.168** (0.053)
(Intercept)	0.250*** (0.038)
<hr/>	
Observations	291
R ²	0.064
Adjusted R ²	0.054
Residual Std. Error	0.317 (df = 287)
F Statistic	6.552*** (df = 3; 287)

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Discussion and Conclusion

Despite the normative debate about personal attacks in debates, political science scholarship has yet to address their effectiveness directly. I find evidence that viewers react negatively to ad hominem attacks depending on the attack and reaction type. Humorous ad hominem attacks provide little benefit for users but may cause uncivil debates to be less discouraging to viewers. Individually delegitimizing attacks present significant risks for candidates using them with little upside potential. Institutionally delegitimizing attacks neither benefit nor hurt candidates using them but worsen viewers' perceptions of debates. Though specific reactions differ by attack type, the findings suggest that uncivil speech is a liability for debate participants.

Humor elicits the most complicated reactions of the three attack types. Respondents view candidates using humorous attacks less favorably than those using the control attack. Humorous attacks elicit adverse reactions despite strong indications that viewers find them funny. Respondents also view humorous attacks as inappropriate and ineffective. However, humor's dulling effect on negative reactions to incivility may still apply to other outcome measures. Humorous attacks see a decrease in agreement that the debate was productive. However, this correlation is weaker than in the cases of the other ad hominem types. Additionally, the humorous attack does not drive respondents' opinions on how well the debate reflected on democracy, whereas other ad hominem types correlate with disagreement. Therefore, despite rejecting the hypothesis that humor would elicit positive reactions overall, my theory that humor can mitigate penalties for incivility may be true in other contexts. Future research should evaluate the interaction between humor and incivility in greater depth and different political settings.

Table 18

Debate & Democracy (Ad Hominem)

Dependent variable:

Believe Debate Reflects Well on
Democracy

Ad	-0.166** (0.050)
(Intercept)	0.268*** (0.045)
<hr/>	
Observations	282
R ²	0.038
Adjusted R ²	0.034
Residual Std. Error	0.336 (df = 280)
F Statistic	10.955** (df = 1; 280)

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 19

Debate & Democracy (Attack Type)

Dependent variable:

Believe Debate Reflects Well on
Democracy

Humor	-0.101 (0.059)
Ind. Delegitimizin	-0.216*** (0.059)
Inst. Delegitimizin	-0.183** (0.060)
(Intercept)	0.268*** (0.045)
<hr/>	
Observations	282
R ²	0.054
Adjusted R ²	0.044
Residual Std. Error	0.334 (df = 278)
F Statistic	5.300** (df = 3; 278)

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Consistent with the theory of civility advanced by Bentivegna & Rega, individually

delegitimizing ad hominem attacks elicit negative reactions from viewers. This conclusion emerges from the primary outcome measures and post hoc tests. Candidates using individual delegitimization hurt their own favorability and do not affect their opponents'. This type of attack is also liable to come across as inappropriate and ineffective, with no noticeable perceptions from viewers that the remark is funny. Additionally, it is more likely to correlate with viewers describing the debate as unproductive and reflecting poorly on the health of democracy. Individual delegitimization elicits significant negative reactions based on nearly every outcome measure in my experiment.

Viewer reactions to institutional delegitimization were either neutral or negative. Unlike the other two ad hominem attacks, institutional delegitimization does not significantly change viewers' perceptions of the user. As mentioned earlier, this attack also does not affect perceptions of the target. Respondents describe institutionally delegitimizing attacks as inappropriate and ineffective, but both correlations are weaker than those with humor and individual delegitimization. However, institutional delegitimization leads respondents to view the debate as unproductive and reflecting poorly on the health of democracy. Overall, institutional delegitimization elicits less intense reactions than other attack types in some cases but similar reactions in others.

The results on gender are perhaps the biggest surprises of this research. In my analysis, neither the challenger's nor the incumbent's gender has any significant interaction effect on viewer reactions to ad hominem attacks. Gender's insignificance in this result unambiguously contradicts my hypotheses and underscores the need for more research. In discussing the results of my gender tests, I do not intend to upend the volumes of research in fields like gender studies and gender in politics, which have provided contrary analyses. However, my results seem to contradict the literature on women and gender in politics that I cite in this paper. It is unclear how my findings fit the existing literature on social norms, gender stereotypes, and gender in politics. Future investigations might replicate my test of women candidates' interaction effects with viewer reactions in other political contexts. Different contexts for this type of research could include campaign speech rhetoric, other campaign communications, or legislative debates. My analysis should serve as a pathway to more research into how gender norms interact with different underlying mechanisms influencing viewer reactions to political rhetoric.

One limitation of this work lies in the open-ended question, which represents an opportunity to deepen my results on ad hominem attacks and candidate identities. Given time constraints, I only use open-ended responses to supplement the generalized findings from testing my hypotheses. However, many scholars have used text analysis techniques to identify patterns across written responses (See, for instance, Boussalis, 2021). These could include analyses of emotional expression and social and political implications of a candidate's word choice. Further research could analyze a dataset similar to the one I collect and employ these methods for open-ended responses. For instance, the connection between candidates using institutionally delegitimizing attacks and viewers perceiving those candidates as conservative merits more examination. Studies could also

examine the perceived rudeness, unprofessionalism, or arrogance of candidates who use verbal attacks. Methodological improvements like these could yield more detailed results.

The other major limitation of my experiment is funding. Budgetary limits force me to distribute my survey to a relatively small sample without guaranteeing representativeness. As a result, my sample only partially mirrors the U.S. adult population. As discussed earlier, my sample mirrors U.S. adults by some demographic measures and differs in others. For example, my sample's racial and religious breakdowns closely resemble those of the U.S. adult population, but the distributions of several other demographic attributes are much less accurate. Some other survey experiments have achieved better representation with smaller sample sizes than mine, such as Chow and Levin (2024). However, that experiment and others have counteracted concerns over the size of their samples by paying an extra fee for a guaranteed representative sample. Future research should allocate funding to recruit more participants or ensure a representative sample. Although my analyses offer several statistically significant results, employing one of these approaches would reinforce confidence in my findings. The theoretical framework, methodological innovations, and results outlined in this paper should catalyze more thorough analyses of the topics I explore.

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Appendix A

Demographic Questions

I collect demographic information based on the relevant factors identified in the theory sections. Respondents check one answer to each question that best describes them. The questions and possible responses I employ come from large demographic surveys such as the United States Census (Blakeslee, 2023, p. 2; US Census Bureau, 2022; US Census Bureau, 2024) and the ANES (American National Election Surveys, 2021). Other scholars may reasonably argue that other demographic information could be useful in clarifying the relationship between viewer identities and their responses to candidates using ad hominem attacks. This is likely true, but all of the questions I ask respondents correspond to potential links with reactions to the causal mechanisms I lay out in the above sections. While almost certainly not exhaustive, the demographic information I collect provides a general idea of the representativeness of my sample and could provide a foundation for other work on types of ad hominem attacks in the future. Below is a list of demographic questions respondents answer and the possible responses.

Gender

“How do you describe yourself?”

Possible responses: male, female, non-binary, prefer not to say, prefer to self-describe (fill in blank).

Race

“Choose one or more races you consider yourself to be”

Possible responses: American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; Black; Native Hawaiian or other Pacific islander; White.

Age

“How old are you?”

Possible responses: Under 18, 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65+.

A response of “Under 18” automatically ends the survey.

Ideology

“Where would you place yourself on this scale?”

Possible responses: extremely liberal, liberal, slightly liberal, moderate, slightly conservative, conservative, extremely conservative.

Education level

“What is the highest level of education you have completed?”

Possible responses: Some high school or less, high school diploma or GED, some college, associate or technical degree, bachelor’s degree, graduate or professional degree, prefer not to say.

Employment status

“What best describes your employment status over the last 3 months?”

Possible responses: Working full-time, working part-time, unemployed and looking for work, a homemaker or stay-at-home parent, student, retired, other.

Appendix B

Outcome questions

Also crucial to my empirical strategy are the outcome questions I ask after showing respondents a randomized vignette. I choose a variety of questions to provide multiple outcome measures to analyze. Candidate choice, choice justification, and incumbent rating are the most direct assessments of attacks’ likelihood to backfire on candidates using them. Challenger rating measures an attack’s ability to damage viewers’ perceptions of targeted candidates. The democracy grid prompts about appropriateness, humor, and effectiveness gauge respondent reactions to the attacks. The grid prompts about the debate test for other (likely unintended) consequences of candidates using verbal attacks. Due to time constraints, I do not analyze the questions about the 2024 debates, but I welcome the possibility of future research to test my inputs against these questions as well. I list all questions and possible responses below.

Candidate Choice

“If you were voting in this election, which candidate would you choose based on this news story?”

Possible responses: The incumbent, the challenger.

Choice Justification

“Briefly explain your choice above.”

Open-ended; respondent prompted to type an answer.

Incumbent Rating

On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is the least favorable and 5 is the most favorable, how do you feel about the incumbent?

Possible responses: 1 (least favorable), 2, 3 (neutral), 4, 5 (most favorable).

Challenger Rating

On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is the least favorable and 5 is the most favorable, how do you feel about the challenger?

Possible responses: 1 (least favorable), 2, 3 (neutral), 4, 5 (most favorable).

Democracy Grid Prompts

Statements:

“The candidate’s remark in the debate was inappropriate.”

“The candidate’s remark in the debate was funny.”

“The candidate’s remark in the debate was effective.”

“The debate overall was productive.”

“The debate overall reflected positively on the health of democracy.”

Possible responses (one per prompt): Strongly disagree, disagree, somewhat disagree, unsure, somewhat agree, agree, strongly agree.

2024 U.S. Debates (not tested)

Questions:

“Did you watch the 2024 presidential debate between Donald Trump and Joe Biden?”

“Did you watch the 2024 presidential debate between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris?”

“Did you watch the 2024 vice presidential debate between J.D. Vance and Tim Walz?”

Possible responses (one per question): Yes, no.

Appendix C

Demographic Breakdown of Sample vs. U.S. Adults

The table below shows demographic summaries of my sample and U.S. adults based on race, age, education, gender, religion, party ID, and ideology. Due to rounding, race data including mixed races, and omitting “prefer not to say” responses, percentages of identities in each attribute category may not total 100%. I compile results from various US Census Bureau reports and ANES question data (American National Election Surveys, 2021; Blakeslee, 2023, p. 2; US Census Bureau, 2022; US Census Bureau, 2024).

<i>Attribute</i>	<i>Sample</i>	<i>U.S. Adult Population</i>
Race	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> White: 69.4% Black: 18.1% Native American/Alaska Native: 0.6% Asian: 6.5% Native Hawaiian/Other PI: 0.3% Other: 3.9% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> White: 71.0% Black: 14.2% Native American/Alaska Native: 2.9% Asian: 7.2% Native Hawaiian/Other PI: 0.5% Other: 15.1%
Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 18-24: 18.8% 25-34: 32.5% 35-44: 22.4% 45-54: 16.1% 55-64: 6.6% 65+: 3.6% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 18-24: 10.2% 25-34: 13.9% 35-44: 12.7% 45-54: 12.1% 55-64: 13.0% 65+: 16.8%
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some HS or less: 1.5% HS diploma or GED: 13.6% Some college, no degree: 23.5% Associates/technical degree: 11.7% Bachelor's degree: 32.5% Graduate/professional degree: 16.6% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some HS or less: 9.8% HS diploma/GED: 27.8% Some college, no degree: 17.5% Associates/technical degree: 10.1% Bachelor's degree: 22.1% Graduate/professional degree: 12.7%
Gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Male: 38.8% Female: 57.9% Non-binary/third gender: 2.7% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Male: 49.1% Female: 50.9% Non-binary/third gender: not recorded
Religion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Protestant: 17.9% Roman Catholic: 15.8% Orthodox Christian: 4.8% Latter-Day Saints: 0.6% Jewish: 0.9% Muslim: 1.2% Buddhist: 0.9% Hindu: 0.6% Atheist: 11.6% Agnostic: 16.7% Other: 10.4% Nothing in particular: 18.5% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Protestant: 23.6% Roman Catholic: 20.3% Orthodox Christian: 2.09% Latter-Day Saints: 1.38% Jewish: 2.0% Muslim: 0.7% Buddhist: 0.7% Hindu: 0.5% Atheist: 4.1% Agnostic: 5.4% Other: 20.0% Nothing in particular: 18.5%
Party ID	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Democrat: 37% Republican: 24.4% Independent: 35.8% Other: 2.7% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Democrat: 46.1% Republican: 42% Independent: 11.8%
Ideology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Liberal: 50.4% Moderate: 26.6% Conservative: 23.0% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Liberal: 27.2% Moderate: 22.4% Conservative: 33.2% Unsure: 17.2%