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The Nasty Style: Why Politicians Use Violent Rhetoric

Why do politicians endorse violence against domestic political opponents? Which politicians choose to 'get nasty,' and when is the public receptive to these appeals? These questions are puzzling, because survey data suggests the public reacts negatively to the use of violent rhetoric and incivility in politics. So why do politicians still use it? The central argument of my book is that politicians use violent rhetoric because it draws outsized media and voter attention, and it signals to voters their steadfastness on policy positions. Some politicians are willing to pay the price of being nasty in order to receive more attention and consolidate support from their base.

It is important to understand the puzzle of violent rhetoric for two reasons. First, there has been a resurgence of populist, nationalist parties and politicians worldwide,[1] many of which have embraced violent political rhetoric. Second, many point to social media as a tool that allows politicians to exploit and upend the traditional norms and means of political communication, and as a cause of worsening political discourse, there is pressing need to understand the strategy behind violent political language.

The conventional wisdom about politicians' use of violent language is that it polarizes the populace, exacerbates existing ethnic and political tensions, and paves the way for future violence. Politicians use these kinds of appeals for both ideological purposes and to strategically consolidate their power. Yet this conventional wisdom is incomplete. First, violent rhetoric takes many forms. Much of the research conflates populist appeals and violent appeals, and does not differentiate between explicit calls ("beat them up") for violence versus more implicit violent appeals ("they're animals"). Second, violent rhetoric tends to increase during periods of violent conflict or intense polarization, thus it is hard to know if violence is a side effect of the violence and polarization or a direct contributor to it. Finally, and perhaps more importantly, media pundits and campaign strategists assume that violent rhetoric 'works'—yet survey and polling show that the public negatively responds to it.

This is the main puzzle of my book—why do politicians employ violent rhetoric if the public dislikes it so much? I develop a theory of what I dub "nasty politics" that answers this question. While the public may state their aversion to it, violent rhetoric still captivates and receives outsized attention. It also allows politicians to signal their steadfastness to voters on policy positions and that they will not 'sell out' the ingroup. Thus politicians may be willing to pay the reputational cost for being nasty and using violent rhetoric in exchange for greater attention and coverage, as well as coalescing core supporters.

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[1] An incomplete list of such leaders includes Viktor Orban in Hungary, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, Recep Tayip Erdogan in Turkey, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Narendra Modi in India.

In this book I investigate the strategy and public reaction to nasty politics in Ukraine and the U.S. Both countries represent important contexts to explore the dynamics of violent rhetoric. Ukraine recently emerged from a political revolution, and its political environment reflects this. Frequent fights in the Ukrainian parliament (Verkhovna Rada, or Rada for short) between politicians, and personality-driven political parties characterize politics in Ukraine. Ukrainian has recently entered a new era with the election of comedian and novice politician Volodymyr Zelensky as president in 2019. In contrast the U.S. is an established democracy increasingly polarized by partisanship that has worsened since the 2016 election of Donald Trump as president. The choice of two very different contexts is intentional. By showing that politicians are using a similar strategy in both Ukraine and the U.S.—to attract attention and to solidify core supporters—I provide a strong test of the generalization of the theory.

As part of the book, I will use a series of surveys and survey experiments in the U.S. and Ukraine to show that the public in general reacts negatively to politicians who use violent rhetoric. Yet certain types of voters—those higher in trait aggression and authoritarianism—are more receptive and do not punish politicians who use it. I also show that voters are more likely to pay attention to politicians who engage in nasty politics, and more likely to consider ingroup partisan politicians who use it more trustworthy and "tougher." Using elite surveys in both countries I further show that politicians and elites are aware of this trade-off involved in using violent rhetoric. To see which politicians engage in nasty politics, I will construct a dataset from media sources of Ukrainian and U.S. politicians' use of different types of violent rhetoric (name-calling, threats, and in the case of Ukraine, fights) from 2016-2019. I will use text analysis via supervised machine learning to measure the kind (implicit vs. explicit) and level of violent rhetoric used in each of these incidents. I will show that challengers—those from more extreme parties—and those in the midst of elections are more likely to use violent rhetoric. To better understand nuances and strategies behind violent rhetoric, I will include in-depth interviews from campaign strategists in both the U.S. and Ukraine and two case studies of politicians who are known to purveyors of violent rhetoric—Oleh Lyashko in Ukraine, and President Trump in the U.S.

Related Books

Given that my book will touch on American and Ukrainian politics, populism and political violence, and political psychology, this book has a broad audience for both academics and a general audience.

My book is related to several recent books in American politics that have explored the roots of partisan polarization including Lilian Mason's *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (2018, University of Chicago Press), Alan Abramowitz's *The Great Alignment: Race, Party Transformation, and the Rise of Donald Trump* (2018, Yale University Press), and John Sides, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck's *Identity Crisis: The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America* (2018, Princeton University Press). Many of these books show that partisanship is increasing, is increasingly tied to identity, and is the driving force behind many of the increasingly bitter and nasty politics. My book is also related to books that

have looked at Ukrainian politics including Paul D'Anieri's *Understanding Ukrainian Politics: Power, Politics, and Institutional Design* (2006, Routledge), and Tara Kuzio's *Ukraine: Democratization, Corruption, and the New Russian Imperialism* (2015, Praeger International Security), as well as post-Communist politics in Grigore Pop-Eleches and Joshua Tucker's *Communism's Shadow: Historical Legacies and Contemporary Political Attitudes* (2017, Princeton University Press). These books have argued that legacies of communism and corruption have led to voter distrust and dysfunctional party politics. By documenting and showing how strategies of nasty politics are used in both contexts, my book will be of interest to both scholars and students of American politics and post-Soviet politics.

This book will also speak to several recent books on populism and political violence. Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser's *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (2016, Oxford University Press) and Jan-werner Müller's *What is Populism?* (2016, University of Pennsylvania Press) both discuss the ways in which populism and its rhetoric are distinct from other ideologies and political practices. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's *How Democracies Die* (2018, Broadway Books) further argues that one of the warning sides of democratic erosion is the outright denigration of political opponents. In terms of political violence, books such as Steven Wilkinson's *Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Ethnic Riots in India* (2006, Cambridge University Press); Richard Nielsen's *Deadly Clerics: Blocked Ambition and the Paths to Jihad* (2017, Cambridge University Press); and Stuart J Kaufman's *Nationalist Passions* (2015, Cornell University Press) all examine the incentives for various political or religious leaders to foment violence against outgroups. My book will build upon these by showing when violent appeals are listened to, and when they fall on deaf ears, and which politicians are most likely to try and stoke outrage.

Finally, my book is related to several books in political psychology. Books such as Diana C. Mutz's *In-Your-Face Politics: The Consequences of Uncivil Media* (2015, Princeton University Press); Tali Mendelberg's *The Race Card: Campaign Strategy, Implicit Messages, and the Norm of Equality* (2001, Princeton University Press); Karen Stenner's *The Authoritarian Dynamic* (2005, Cambridge University Press); Marc J. Hetherington and Jonathan D. Weiler's *Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics* (2009, Cambridge University Press); and Joshua D. Kertzer *Resolve in International Politics* (2016, Princeton University Press) all show how certain individuals are more susceptible to political appeals that emphasize threats, racial appeals, or express resolve. Bethany Albertson and Shana Kushner Gadarian's *Anxious Politics: Democratic Citizenship in a Threatening World* (2015, Cambridge University Press) show how perceptions of threat and anxiety influence policy, and in particular how politicians may stoke them. Finally a recent book by Gwyneth H McClendon's *Envy in Politics* (2018, Princeton University Press) uses a similar paired comparison (South Africa and the U.S.) to show how concerns over status lead to envy and spite and can drive suboptimal political policies.

Outline of the Book

Overview
Some Like it Nasty: *Why Politicians Use Violent Rhetoric* will focus on the use of violent rhetoric by national-level politicians in Ukraine and the U.S. from 2016-2019. My book will construct a theory of why some politicians may be willing to pay the reputational price for using violent

rhetoric, and when and why certain individuals respond to it. As part of the book I will use a mixed methods approach. I will use a series of surveys and survey experiments in Ukraine and the U.S. to causally measure how the public reacts to different kinds of appeals (implicit and explicit violence). I will pair these national surveys with a survey of elites in the U.S. and Ukraine to see how elites perceive the public's response to violent rhetoric. To see which politicians are using violent rhetoric and when, and what kind of things they are saying, I will also construct separate databases of violent political rhetoric from news sources in the U.S. and Ukraine (2016-2019). I will then use supervised machine learning algorithms to classify the different kinds of appeals. To expand upon the nuances and use of violent rhetoric, I will employ case studies of Oleh Lyashko, leader of the Radical Party in Ukraine, and notable purveyor of insults and violent rhetoric, and U.S. President Donald Trump. Finally, I will also include a number of interviews with Ukrainian and U.S. political party operatives and campaign strategists.

Target Audience
Given recent concerns in the U.S. and abroad about a return of nationalist, violent rhetoric, and incivility, this book will be of interest to both academic and general audiences. This book will appeal to academics studying post-Soviet and American politics and campaigns, political violence, and those interested in political psychology. Campaign strategists and policymakers will be particularly interested in the case studies and detailed data on how politicians use violent rhetoric, and how the public responds to it. The methods used in my book include surveys, survey experiment, text, analysis, case studies and in-depth interviews—all of which will be written at an accessible level, making the book of interest to a wider audience.

Chapter 1 An Introduction to Nasty Politics

This chapter will serve as the introduction to violent rhetoric and the puzzle. Why do politicians use violent rhetoric if the public reduces support for those who use it? What explains the strategic logic of nasty politics? Violent political rhetoric is part of extreme political rhetoric and includes language that falls outside the polite norms of discourse including coarse language, bombastic rhetoric or language that implicitly or explicitly endorses violence. Implicit violent is more common, and includes rhetoric where politicians use frames or extended metaphors to disparage or describe targeted groups or individuals. Many of these metaphors can be dehumanizing where politicians describe certain individuals or groups as animals, cockroaches, rats, or a cancer. By framing their opponents in terms of an infestation or health concern, those labeled ought to be exterminated, eliminated, or cut out and removed to keep the body politic "healthy." This chapter will situate the use of violent rhetoric within recent developments in U.S. and Ukrainian politics. In addition to defining violent rhetoric, this chapter will provide survey data from national surveys conducted in the U.S. and Ukraine that shows the public's aversion to politicians' violent rhetoric. It will also provide some prominent examples of politicians using this rhetoric.

Chapter 2 Why Do Politicians Say Nasty Things?

Chapter 2 introduces the main argument of the book. Bridging the literatures of political violence, political psychology, and campaigning, I use four assumptions to build my argument about nasty politics. 1) Voters have a general aversion to violent rhetoric. 2) Violent and extreme political appeals receive more attention from voters, than their non-violent counterparts. 3) Ingroup partisans that use violent rhetoric will be seen as tougher than those that don't. 4) Moreover, not all voters have an equal aversion to the use of violent rhetoric by politicians. Research suggests that those who score higher on certain psychological traits, such as aggression or authoritarianism, may be especially susceptible to or rewarding of violent appeals. While voters may say that they do not like violent political rhetoric on principle, it can serve as credible strategy to attract their attention, it serves as a signal that a politician will be more willing to fight for their ingroup, and certain voters may not even punish politicians for using it. Given the public response to this kind of rhetoric, how do politicians strategically use nasty politics? Outsiders and extremists have more to gain by campaigning from the periphery, and polarizing the debate in exchange for media attention, as they lack the resources of more mainstream politicians. During elections or periods of conflict, political entrepreneurs may seek to exploit ethnic or religious grievances to bolster their own support via emotional appeals, or outright calls for violence.

Chapter 3 How Does the Public Respond to Nastiness?

The focus of this chapter will be to test the theory from Chapter 2 on how the public responds to violent rhetoric. Using a series of national surveys in the U.S. and Ukraine conducted in August and September of 2018, I construct a rank-ordering in both countries of the perceived nastiness of and the public's aversion to different kinds of violent and non-violent political appeals. These surveys show that those scoring higher on aggression and authoritarianism are more receptive to these appeals. In March and April of 2019 I fielded surveys to gauge elite opinion on the acceptability of and strategies behind violent rhetoric in the U.S. and Ukraine. The U.S. data stems from an online survey conducted in March of 2019 by CivicPulse of 520 state and local politicians and elected officials across the U.S. The Ukraine data stems from an online survey conducted in March and April of 2019 by CSI/KIIS of 165 civic activists and politicians across Ukraine. On average, Ukrainian elites think voters are more tolerant of different violent appeals (calling their opponents "traitors." "corrupt," etc.) compared to U.S. elites. Yet when it comes to explaining the use of violent name-calling or threatening language and why politicians use it, the results are strikingly similar in the U.S. and Ukraine. Elites in both countries think violent rhetoric is driven by politicians trying to attract media attention and coalesce core supporters. Follow-up survey experiments to be conducted in September of 2019 will test whether voters are likely to pay attention than non-violent rhetoric, and more likely to view ingroup partisans politicians who use violent rhetoric as tougher and more trustworthy.

Chapter 4 Which Politicians Choose to get Nasty and When?

This chapter will examine how politicians use violent political rhetoric, I will construct a dataset of incidents of violent rhetoric including threats and name-calling from Ukrainian and U.S.

media aggregation sources for national-level politicians from 2016-2019. This covers several elections in the U.S. (2016, 2018 congressional elections, and the 2016 as well as parts of the 2020 presidential elections) and in Ukraine (2019 presidential and 2019 parliamentary elections). It also encompasses important events in the U.S. (election of Donald Trump in 2016) and Ukrainian politics (War in Donbass and election of Volodymyr Zelensky as president).The separate datasets for the U.S. and Ukraine will contain the following for each instance of violence rhetoric: 1) the name of politician, 2) the date, 3) the context (on social media, TV, speech, etc.), 4) what was said, 5) who the target was, and 6) whether it was implicit or explicit violence. I will use supervised machine learning techniques to classify and construct a violence metric for each politician as well as political parties across time. In addition to collecting a dataset on violent rhetoric, I will also collect biographical data on each politician in the database. What is their party affiliation? Are they part of a majority party, or in the ruling coalition (Ukraine)? Are they in a centrist party or fringe party (Ukraine)? In the U.S., I can also examine their measured ideology using existing Database on Ideology, Money in Politics, and Elections (DIME) score (Bonica 2018). How long have they been a legislator? Do they hold any positions of power in in their party or the legislature? How do they compare to those who use violent rhetoric less, or not at all?

Chapter 5 *What do the Experts Think About Violent Rhetoric*

Throughout 2018-2019 I have conducted interviews in both the U.S. and Ukraine with campaign strategists and party operatives. These interviews have further illuminated the strategic logic of violent rhetoric. As previously alluded to, the political contexts are different. Ukraine has more personalized oligarchic politics, and the U.S. is beset by strong partisanships. Yet the campaign strategists in both countries pointed to the similarities in tactics and effectiveness. The two themes emphasized by strategists are attention and coalescing of the ingroup. Those interviewed in the U.S. and Ukraine have pointed out that while the public may bemoan nasty politics, they pay attention and have a tendency to even support it. As one Democratic strategist said in a March 2019 interview, "People decry all sorts of things they actually reward. They reward gutter politics, outrageous promises, etc. …Ultimately we are all political animals that respond to stimuli."

Chapter 6 Profiles in Nastiness: Case Studies of Oleh Lyashko and Donald Trump

The penultimate chapter will focus on two politicians who have frequently employed nasty politics in Ukraine and in the U.S. Oleh Lyashko is a Ukrainian nationalist politician who founded the Ukrainian Radical Party in 2011. Notable for his staunch nationalist views, Lyashko has been controversial in Ukrainian politics for his extreme anti-Russian rhetoric, calling to "shoot" or "hang" those who attended Russian separatist rallies, and accusing allies of the former President Viktor Yanukovych of being "Kremlin agents," "assholes," and "brutes" leading to several fistfights in the Rada. He later lost his seat in Rada in the July 2019 parliamentary elections. Donald Trump's path from real estate mogul and reality television star to the presidency was built off of his controversial statements about then-President Obama, immigrants, and general bombastic and violent rhetoric driving media coverage. While Trump and Lyashko held vastly different positions in vastly different political systems, they both used nasty politics as a means to attract attention and coalesce their support from their ingroup, as

well as provoke rivals. These case studies will trace the strategic logic of their use of nasty rhetoric and how it played out politically.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

The concluding chapter will summarize the book's main arguments and evidence. In particular it will provide some evidence on how social media may be changing the incentives and strategies for violent political rhetoric. It will also provide suggestions on how to blunt the effects as well as the effectiveness of nasty politics.