The Nasty Style: Why Politicians Use Violent Rhetoric

Thomas Zeitzoff*

February 2020

Book Summary

Why do politicians endorse violence against domestic political opponents? Which politicians employ violent rhetoric, 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. So why do politicians still use it? I investigate the public’s reaction to violent rhetoric and how politicians strategically use it in Ukraine and the U.S. Both countries represent important contexts to explore the dynamics violent political rhetoric. Ukraine has recently emerged from a political revolution and is characterized by personality-driven politics, whereas the U.S. is an established, but politically polarized democracy. I develop a theory of violent political rhetoric that argues that while the public may say they do not like it, violent rhetoric receives outsized attention from the media and voters. It also is a way to signal to certain voters a politician’s steadfastness on policy positions and that they will not “sell out” the ingroup. Thus politicians may be willing to pay the reputational cost for using violent rhetoric in exchange for greater attention and coverage, as well as coalescing core supporters. I test my theory in both the U.S. and Ukraine using 1) observational data of violent rhetoric across time, 2) a series of surveys and survey experiments of the mass public, 3) elite surveys, 4) analysis of politicians’ use of violent rhetoric from news sources and social media accounts, and 5) in-depth interviews with campaign strategists.

*School of Public Affairs, American University. zeitzoff@gmail.com
“He (Zelensky) is a Kremlin candidate, a puppet of Kolomoyskyi.” Former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko accusing now President Volodmyr Zelensky of being a Russian agent and under the control of Ukrainian oligarch Ihor Kolomoyskyi during the 2019 presidential election.

“If you see somebody getting ready to throw a tomato, knock the crap out of them, would you? Seriously, OK? Just knock the hell … I promise you I will pay for the legal fees. I promise, I promise.”-U.S. President Donald Trump at a pre-election campaign rally, February 2016.

1 An Introduction to Nasty Politics

Why do politicians use violent language directed at their domestic political opponents? How does the public respond to such rhetorical appeals? When politicians advocate violence against domestic opponents they violate the norms of democracy (Gibson 1989; Habermas 1996; Sullivan, Pireson and Marcus 1993), and can give rise to movements that challenge the rule of law (Linz and Stepan 1978; Tyler 2003). Given the recent victories of populist leaders and parties, and concerns about democratic erosion (Diamond 2015; Foa and Mounk 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018) these are important and pressing questions.

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 (Glaeser 2005; Kaufman 2001). Violent language serves as a signal to the ingroup to mobilize, and can reduce the taboo of violence against targeted groups (Yanagizawa-Drott 2014). Politicians use these kinds of appeals for both ideological purposes and strategically consolidating their power. Thus the empirical regularity that violence tends to occur around election time (Dunning 2011; Wilkinson 2006). Scholars of U.S. politics view violent rhetoric as a product of partisan political polarization (Abramowitz and Webster 2016) that is heightened during “critical elections” (Shea and Sproveri 2012). Partisan polarization can lead to violent rhetoric due to increased partisan attachments (Kinder and Kalmoe 2017), a tactic of broader negative campaigning (Fridkin, Kahn and Kenney 2004), and a result of greater political sorting between the two parties (Mason 2018). Research in U.S. politics also argues that incivility is a result of increased partisan and social media. Thus uncivil discourse can heighten engagement for certain citizens, it also leads to decreased legitimacy for the opposition (Berry and Sobieraj 2013; Brooks and Geer 2007; Gervais 2014, 2015;
This conventional wisdom is incomplete for four reasons. First, violent rhetoric takes many forms. Much of the research conflates populist appeals and violent appeals, and does not differentiate between explicit calls for violence ("beat them up") versus more implicit violent appeals ("they're animals"). Second, it tends to increase during periods of instability or intense polarization, thus violent rhetoric is hard to divorce from the context (Michelitch 2015; Straus 2007). Third, the assumption in the U.S. is that partisan polarization drives much of the violent rhetoric. Yet, in places such as Ukraine, with weak partisan attachments (D’Anieri 2015), there is as much if not more violent rhetoric and actual violence in politics.\(^1\) Finally, there is an assumption that violent rhetoric works. Yet academic research and polling finds that the public dislikes uncivil political discussions (Frimer and Skitka 2018, 2020).\(^2\)

This is the main puzzle and research question—why do politicians employ violent rhetoric if the public dislikes it so much? I develop a theory of violent political rhetoric that answers this puzzle. While the public may not like it in general, violent rhetoric still captivates and receives outsized attention. It also provides a way to signal to voters a politician’s steadfastness on policy positions and that they will not ‘sell out’ the ingroup. Thus some politicians may be willing to pay the reputational cost for using violent rhetoric in exchange for greater attention and coverage, as well as coalescing core supporters.

I propose to investigate this theory of why some politicians choose to go nasty and the public’s response to it in Ukraine and the U.S. I test my theory using five different approaches. First, I examine how violent rhetoric varies across time in the U.S. and Ukraine. Second, I use a series of surveys and survey experiments to explore how the public responds to different types of violent appeals. I pair nationally representative surveys and survey experiments with those of elites survey to elicit how elites perceive the public would respond to violent. Third, I create a database from news sources in the U.S. and Ukraine of politicians use of violent rhetoric from 2016-2019, and see

---


which types of politicians use it and when. Fourth, I examine the social media accounts of President Donald Trump, and Ukrainian politician Oleh Lyashko. Finally, to better understand the strategies behind violent rhetoric, I conduct elite interviews with both U.S. and Ukrainian politicians and political strategists.

2 Why Do Politicians Say Nasty Things?

Why do politicians use violent rhetoric if the public reduces support for those who use it? To answer this question I first differentiate between extreme rhetoric, populist rhetoric, and violent political rhetoric.

Violent political rhetoric falls into the broader case of extreme political rhetoric. Extreme rhetoric includes language that falls outside the polite norms of discourse including coarse language, bombastic rhetoric, or language that tacitly or explicitly endorses violence. Extreme political rhetoric encompasses populist as well as violent discourse. As Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) and Müller (2017) argue, populists claim to represent the “true will of the people” and promise to get rid of a “corrupt elite.”

![Figure 1: A Typology of Violent rhetoric](image)

I take a broad view of violent, nasty rhetoric. I define it as any type of language that defames, dehumanizes, is derogatory, or threatens opponents. Violent political rhetoric is a spectrum: name-calling and incivility at the lower end, and threats or calls for violence at the upper end (see Discuss the reasons why politicians might use violent rhetoric. Discuss the types of rhetoric used by politicians. Discuss the strategies behind violent rhetoric. Conduct interviews with politicians and political strategists to understand the strategies behind violent rhetoric.}

---

4See discussion of why politicians swear [https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/democrats-swearing-heres](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/democrats-swearing-heres)
6It is important to note two things. First, many populist politicians employ violent rhetoric, and populist rhetoric can sometimes be violent in nature, e.g., a politician imploring his supporters to “take out the corrupt political elite.” Yet, populist rhetoric is not synonymous with violent rhetoric.
Name-calling is when a politician refers to opponents as corrupt, traitors, treasonous, liars, or thieves. Or it could involve using foul language such as suggesting they are assholes, a son of a bitch motherfuckers, bastards, jerks, etc. It also includes dehumanizing language such as calling opponents animals, parasites, or lower than low.

The second type of violent rhetoric—threats—is rarer. It includes explicit threats of violence (very rare), such as saying an opponent should be beaten up, harassed on social media, or thrown in jail. There are also more implicit or veiled threats, such as saying an opponent should be very careful, should watch out, or be afraid. Implicit violent rhetoric is also where politicians use frames or extended metaphors to disparage or describe targeted groups or individuals. These metaphors influence how people make judgments and interpret situations (Kalmoe 2014, 2017; Kalmoe, Gubler and Wood 2018; Lakoff and Johnson 2008). 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.” Even referring to other politicians as enemies sets up the logic that they are not to be bargained with, or accorded normal rights, but rather treated as a threat to be eliminated.

I am interested in when politicians use violent rhetoric against their domestic political opponents. These include other politicians, party leaders, members of the press, voters, supporters, or specific interests or groups that have a say in the political process in the U.S. (African Americans, Immigrants, Latinos, white collar/blue collar, tech companies, etc.) or in Ukraine (Russian-speakers, Ukrainian-speakers, Jews, Roma, LGBT, etc.)

How does the public respond when politicians use violent rhetoric directed towards these domestic opponents? Previous polling and research has shown that the public does not like violent rhetoric, and reduces support for politicians that use it, even when the politician is a member of the party they support (Frimer and Skitka 2018).

In pilot surveys carried out in the U.S. and Ukraine similar findings emerged. In the U.S. the survey was conducted via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) in April of 2018 (N = 240). On a
On a 5-point scale, those who were in the violent rhetoric condition were less likely to agree with what the politician said ($Diff = -2.49, t = 18.30, p < 0.001$), less likely to support them ($Diff = -1.95, t = 15.60, p < 0.001$), would be more threatened ($Diff = 1.56, t = 11.01, p < 0.001$), and would reduce their trust in the political system ($Diff = -1.27, t = 10.68, p < 0.001$) compared to the non-violent condition. In Ukraine the survey was carried out by Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) as part of nationally representative omnibus survey in June of 2018 (N=800).

Yet other research has shown that uncivil rhetoric, contentious political debates, and negative advertising all increase attention and are more memorable than their positive, and more civil counterparts (Groeling 2010; Lau, Sigelman and Rovner 2007; Mutz 2016). As one Ukrainian political activist who participated and supported the 2013-2014 Euromaidan (Maidan) protests said, “The main strategy or goal of such (violent rhetoric) is to get voters attention and attract new supporters. Such name-calling is on purpose, and is pre-planned. The audience (public) like this—it’s like a big show to them.”

A long-time U.S. Democratic strategist further reinforced this point about the benefits of violent rhetoric, “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.”

No 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, authoritarianism, or social dominance orientation, or are distrustful of elites may be especially susceptible to or rewarding of violent appeals (Hetherington and Weiler 2009; Hodson and Costello 2007; Kalmoe 2014; Oliver and Rahn 2016; Stenner 2005; Zeitzoff 2014). Violent appeals can serve as a way of

8 Author interview, February 2019.
9 Author interview, March 2019.
signaling authenticity and toughness. As one Republican strategist put in when discussing President Trump and his rhetoric, “Trump spent a lot of time on construction sites so he knows how these guys talk… He harnessed a market for authenticity. And in political races for the executive branch strength and dominance have always been the currency.”

McDermott (2010, 2018) further argues that one of the key tasks of political leadership is to demarcate and solidify a core ingroup of supporters, and denigrating the outgroup is one strategy to do so.

In sum, voters may say that they do not like violent political rhetoric on principle, but it does increasingly attract their attention, can serve as a signal that a politician will be more willing to fight for their ingroup, and that certain voters may not even punish politicians for using it. This yields four predictions about voter responses to violent rhetoric.

**Prediction 1A:** Voters on average will be less supportive of politicians who use violent rhetoric than those who use non-violent rhetoric.

**Prediction 1B:** Voters will be less supportive of more extreme or explicitly violent rhetoric.

**Prediction 2:** Violent rhetoric will attract more attention and engagement than non-violent rhetoric.

**Prediction 3:** Copartisan politicians that use violent will be rated as tougher and more loyal than those who use non-violent rhetoric.

**Prediction 4:** Those scoring higher on trait aggression, social dominance orientation, and authoritarianism more likely to tolerate violent rhetoric.

There are several open questions to understanding the public’s appetite for violent rhetoric that this study will answer. 1) Which kinds of implicit violence appeals perceived as most threatening? Which are the most persuasive? 2) Previous research has suggested that emotions and threat

---

10 Author interview, June 2019.
perceptions are important in shaping political attitudes (Albertson and Gadarian 2015; Druckman et al. 2018). How do emotions and threat perceptions drive the evaluation of violent rhetoric? 3) How do conflicting messages from elites (media and partisans) influence the evaluation of elite rhetoric?

Given the public’s response, how do politicians strategically use violent rhetoric? Understanding why politicians choose to use violent rhetoric and language is an important and understudied aspect of political violence. I argue a politician’s use of violent rhetoric depends upon on four factors: 1) the ideological extremity of the politician or their party; 2) whether they are in a leadership position or not; 3) whether this is in the run-up to an election or in the context of political instability; and 4) the composition of a politician’s core constituency—what kinds of issues do their voters care about?

Outsiders and extremists may 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 conventional politicians (Bawn et al. 2012; Nielsen 2017). Second, extreme rhetoric puts ingroup moderates in a tricky bind. Either they denounce their own group’s rhetoric, or they permit it to go on. Likewise, party leaders will be less likely to employ violent rhetoric than their rank-and-file peers who may use rhetoric as a way to challenge leaders or make a name for themselves (Gervais and Morris 2018; Williamson, Skocpol and Coggin 2011).

**Prediction 5A:** More extreme partisans, and those members of marginal parties are more likely to engage in violent rhetoric, than centrists, or members of centrist parties.

**Prediction 5B:** On average, politicians who use violent rhetoric will get more media coverage than those who don’t. **Prediction 5C:** Party leaders are less likely to engage in violent rhetoric compared to party rank-and-file.

During periods of instability, political entrepreneurs may seek to exploit ethnic or religious grievances to bolster their own support via emotional appeals (McDermott 2010), or outright calls for violence (Glaeser 2005; Kaufman 2001; Wilkinson 2006). These are especially likely to occur
around election time or periods of conflict.

**Prediction 6:** Violent rhetoric will increase during election time and periods of heightened conflict.

**Prediction 7:** Politicians whose core constituency consists of voters that score high on aggression, social dominance orientation, or authoritarianism will be more likely to use higher amounts of violent rhetoric.

There are several open questions that this study will also be able to answer about the use of violent rhetoric by politicians. 1) Do politicians evolve their rhetorical strategies in response to new events (dynamic adjustment story)? 2) Or, do new politicians who use more violent rhetoric emerge (selection story)? 3) How do politicians calibrate their use of implicit versus explicit calls for violence? 4) And in particular how does this change following ingroup partisans’ or the media’s response to past rhetoric?

# 3 Nasty Politics in the U.S. and Ukraine

The research examines the strategic choices of politicians in Ukraine and the U.S. to go nasty or not, and the public’s response to it. The decision to compare two very different contexts—Ukraine and the U.S. was intentional. The general strategy behind my theory of nasty politics is not context dependent. The U.S. is an increasingly polarized, but stable democracy. In contrast Ukraine is a flawed democracy emerging from political revolution and has recently elected a novice politician and comedian, Volodymyr Zelensky, as president.\footnote{See https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/ukraine-votes-as-actor-turned-president-hopes-for-mandate-to-back-his-reforms/2019/07/21/36a0bcea-a7cb-11e9-8733-48c87235f396_story.html?utm_term=.097ba505c682} The two countries differ across their level of democracy, level of partisanship, and political stability. A concern might be that there is too much variation between Ukraine and the U.S. to provide a meaningful comparison (Seawright and Gerring 2008). Yet, my theory presents a generalized strategic logic of violent
political rhetoric. By examining violent rhetoric in two very different contexts, and showing a similar strategy—politicians are using it to attract attention and to solidify core supporters—I provide a strong test of the generalizability of the theory. By testing the theory in Ukraine where there are weak partisan attachments, it also provides a counterpoint to U.S.-focused theories of violent rhetoric which point to partisan polarization as the main explanatory factor for nasty politics. In Ukraine strong partisanship is absent, but yet there’s still plenty of violent language from politicians. Preliminary evidence from a survey of elites in the U.S. and Ukraine suggests a similar strategy governs politicians’ use of violent rhetoric.

Trust in institutions influences a politician’s incentive to use violent rhetoric. The public’s trust in politics and institutions is quite low in the U.S., and extremely low in Ukraine. Pilot surveys conducted in the U.S. (68%) and Ukraine (87%) showed that a majority “somewhat” or “strongly agree” with the statement that most politicians are crooked. Only 11% of Americans have “great deal” and “quite a lot” of trust in Congress, and only 7% of Ukrainians approve of the Rada.

The level of violent political rhetoric and the public’s receptivity to it depend upon the political context, and in particular the level of violence and political stability. Ukraine is emerging from a political revolution and reforms stemming from protests in 2013 and 2014 (Foxall and Pigman 2017). Since gaining its independence from the Soviet Union, Ukraine has faced periodic political turmoil related to two interrelated causes: 1) endemic corruption and the influence of oligarchs on its economy and political system (Darden 2009), and 2) its relationship with Russia. The Euromaidan (Maidan) Protests of 2013-2014 against President Viktor Yanukovych followed his decision to spurn closer economic relations with the European Union (E.U.), and instead move closer to Russia (Onuch 2015). The protests spiraled into broader issues of corruption and eventually led to Yanukovych’s ouster. Post-Maidan Ukraine has been defined by tensions between Eastern Ukraine, with its closer cultural and historical ties to Russia, and Western Ukraine and Ukraine which has sought closer relations with the E.U, as well as concerns about corruption. (Way 2019). The Russian annexation of Crimea in March of 2014 has further highlighted the East-West internal divide. Since April of 2014, the Ukrainian government has fought Russian-backed rebels in Donetsk and Luhansk (Donbas region), leading to over 13,000 deaths and more than 1 million
displaced. More recently actor and political novice Volodymyr Zelensky marshaled widespread anger at endemic corruption to win the presidency in May of 2019, beating incumbent Petro Poroshenko by more than 50 percentage points. And in July of 2019 Zelensky’s “Servant of the People” party swept parliament winning close to 60% of the seats, as well as winning across both Eastern and Western Ukraine.

In contrast to Ukraine, the U.S. is a stable, developed democracy, with strong a two party-system and a highly institutionalized legislative rules and norms (Krehbiel 1998). Yet partisan polarization in the U.S. has steadily grown since the late 1980’s (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2016). Many consider the 2016 presidential election and the Trump presidency as portending a sharp increase in partisanship. Research shows that polarization leads to discrimination against outgroup partisans in everyday economic behavior (McConnell, Margalit, Malhotra and Levendusky 2018). Scholars and pundits connect President Trump’s hyperbolic, and violent rhetoric towards Democrats and his perceived political opponents as portending future increases in polarization and potential for political violence (Kalmoe and Mason 2020). For instance over 45% of Republicans and 41% of Democrats think the other party “is so dangerous that it is a threat to the health of the nation”.

Previous research finds that different electoral systems provide different electoral incentives and can create lead to different kinds of political crises (Linz 1990). Electoral systems also influence politicians’ incentives to cultivate a personal vote. Do politicians choose to build their own brand and pitch directly to the voters (i.e., voters directly electing candidates), or do they owe their loyalties to parties as in proportional representation systems (Carey and Shugart 1995)? Ukraine is a semi-presidential system with one half of the 450 seats in the Rada allocated via a closed party list proportional representation, and the other half elected in first-past-the-post in single-member districts. The U.S. is a fully presidential system, with legislators chosen via open primaries, then general elections with first-past-the post voting and contains an upper house the US Senate (100 members, 2 per state), and the lower US House of Representatives (435 members) representing...
single member districts.

Ukrainian political parties are ephemeral, weak, highly personalized, and serve as vehicles for individual politicians (D’Anieri 2015). Political parties compete in what is considered a flawed democracy, or hybrid regime, with the concentration of oligarchic wealth, widespread corruption, and biased media preventing truly free and fair elections (Knott 2018). Echoing this institutional weakness, in several debates in the Ukrainian Parliament (Verkhovna Rada, or Rada for short) politicians have traded insults which have descended into brawls. For instance, in November of 2016, Oleh Lyashko, the populist leader of the right-wing Radical Party, accused Opposition Bloc leader Yurii Boyko, an ally of former President Yanukovych of being a Russian agent. Lyashko said, “Boyko travels to Moscow to get instructions from the Kremlin... why [do] they visit Moscow and are not yet in jail (for treason)?” Boyko responded by punching and starting a brawl in the Rada. There is evidence that these legislative brawls relate to the weakness of institutional norms in the Rada, where various factions (pro-Europe vs. pro-Russia) suspect the other side of rigging the rules in their favor (Gandrud 2016).

In the U.S., increasing violent political language can be traced to three factors 1) heightened partisan media (Mutz 2016; Sydnor 2019), 2) the arrival of Tea Party (Gervais and Morris 2018), and 3) the election of President Trump and his prolific use of Twitter to attack political opponents and the media. In a survey conducted in January of 2018 by The Economist/YouGov, 52% of Americans view President Trump’s use of Twitter to “mostly attack those who disagree with him,” compared to 31% who see his tweets as a way to explain his point of view. Yet these numbers are moderated by partisanship. 77% of Democrats view Trump’s use of Twitter as a means to attack those who disagree with, compared to only 22% of Republicans. And only 13% of Democrats, compared to 65% of Republicans view his tweets as a way to explain his point of view. Other politicians have also used violent rhetoric. Republican Rep. Steve King of Iowa shared a meme on his Facebook page saying that red (Republican-leaning) states would win a civil war with

---


Democratic-leaning states because red states have “8 trillion bullets”.\textsuperscript{19} Democrats have not been shy from using harsh language in the Trump era. Former Democratic presidential candidate Beto O’Rourke in August of 2019 said in response to the mass shooting El Paso, “What do you think? You know the shit he’s (Trump’s) been saying. He’s been calling Mexican immigrants rapists and criminals. I don’t know, like, members of the press, what the fuck?”\textsuperscript{20} Democratic presidential candidate and senator from New Jersey, Cory Booker, called President Trump a “physically weak specimen” and that he sometimes felt like “punching him in the face.”\textsuperscript{21}

3.1 Violent Rhetoric in the U.S. Across Time

What does violent rhetoric in the U.S. look like across time? Prediction 6 argues that violent rhetoric will peak across elections and periods of conflict. Politicians respond to periods of heightened political conflict with increased use of nasty politics.

To test whether this is the case, I created a time series measure of yearly violent rhetoric using historical newspaper coverage. I searched The New York Times Historical Database (1851-2016) and current archive (2017-October 1, 2019) in ProQuest. I searched for all news article (not opinion pieces) using the following search terms: \texttt{united states AND congress AND (violent language, violent rhetoric, political insult, political smear, political duel, political brawl, OR political slander)}. I manually removed any news stories that were on foreign policy. To account for the fact that the number of news articles published by The New York Times has changed across years, I scaled the number of articles flagged for violent rhetoric by the total number of articles published that year. I created a yearly measure of articles containing violent rhetoric per 100,000 articles.

\textsuperscript{19}See https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/03/18/steve-king-posts-meme-warning-that-red-states-have-trillion-bullets/
\textsuperscript{20}See https://www.cnn.com/2019/08/05/politics/beto-orourke-donald-trump-mass-shootings/index.html
\textsuperscript{21}See https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/454311-cory-booker-my-testosterone-sometimes-makes-me-want-to-punch-t...
Figure 2: Violent Rhetoric Across Time in the U.S. (NYTimes 1851-2019). Red shaded regions correspond to the U.S. Civil War (1861-1865) and the election of President Trump (2016)
The findings in Figure 2 are stark. Violent rhetoric peaked during the Civil War, with mini-peaks during the McCarthy-era of the 1950s, and during the Clinton impeachment (1998-1999). Then following the election of Trump in 2016, there is very sharp spike.

One concern might be that perhaps The New York Times coverage of violent rhetoric during the Trump administration is simply an outlier compared to other media. To check whether the spike in rhetoric following the election of Trump is an artifact of The New York Times coverage, or more widespread, I use the Media Cloud platform to replicate The New York Times analysis from January 1, 2011-October 1, 2019. I used the same search terms, but searched other major U.S. newspapers: USA Today, The Washington Post, New York Post, Wall Street Journal, The Boston Globe, San Francisco Chronicle, Houston Chronicle, and Chicago Tribune. I created a monthly measure of violent rhetoric stories per 10,000 stories. The results are presented in Figure 3. While the spike is not as sharp as in Figure 2, the results do show a large uptick in stories about violent rhetoric since the election of Trump—more than doubling since 2011.

---

22President Trump has notoriously attacked the paper as the “Failing New York Times” numerous times on Twitter. See https://www.vox.com/2019/8/15/20807294/trump-new-york-times-jonathan-weisman-demoted

23“Media Cloud is an open source platform for studying media ecosystems. By tracking millions of stories published online, our suite of tools allows researchers to track how stories and ideas spread through media. Our tools are designed to aggregate, analyze, deliver and visualize information, answering complex quantitative and qualitative questions about the content of online media.” See https://mediacloud.org/.

24united states AND congress AND (violent language, violent rhetoric, political insult, political smear, political duel, political brawl, OR political slander).
Figure 3: Violent Rhetoric Across Time in the U.S. (Media Cloud 2011-October 1, 2019). Red shaded regions correspond to the election of President Trump (2016)
3.2 Violent Rhetoric in Ukraine Across Time

What does the variation in violent rhetoric in Ukraine look like? Does it also peak around key time periods in Ukrainian politics? To examine whether this is true, I collected a sample of 30 examples of violent rhetoric by politicians in Ukraine across time.\(^{25}\) Working with a native Russian and Ukrainian-speaking, RA we used a keyword detection algorithm to identify initial seed words across the stories.\(^{26}\) We then used Word2Vec (Mikolov, Sutskever, Chen, Corrado and Dean 2013) to find similar co-occurring words, and phrases, and ended with a final violent keyword corpus.\(^{27}\) The keyword corpus was translated into both Russian and Ukrainian. We then searched for “politician” + “[final violent keyword corpus]” to identify variation across time in violent rhetoric in different Ukrainian media sources.

One of the difficulties in measuring violent rhetoric in the Ukrainian media is the fact that there does not exist one single authoritative news source (such as The New York Times) and the fact that much of the media is controlled (at least tacitly) by oligarchs.\(^{28}\) To deal with this fact, I used three different sources to put together data on the presence of violent rhetoric in the media in Ukraine from 2001-October 1, 2019: the pro-Russian/pro-Yanukovych website Korrespondent, the pro-Ukrainian website Ukrayinska Pravda, and the news aggregator Ukr.net. It should be noted that Ukr.net does not begin until October 2009. Also, I stop using the Korrespondent time series in February of 2014, when one of its founders, Serhiy Kurchenko, fled Ukraine to Russia following the ousting of Yanukovych when there was a warrant out for his arrest.\(^{29}\) Following Kurchenko’s exile, the coverage of Korrespondent political section dramatically changed.\(^{30}\)

\(^{25}\) These stories were both in Russian and Ukrainian.

\(^{26}\) These key words in English are as follows: “cattle offender litter bastard imbecile prostitute muzzle scumbag bastard robber bandit devil moron stinking ass idiot plague traitor scoundrel abomination bastard hypocritical creature ghoul devil moral fag offender sick creature idiot scarecrow pathological liar self-assured shit degenerate to threaten snake bitch prostitute a traitor immoral six scoundrel looter Judas defector hating nit paranoid to beat shock filth.”

\(^{27}\) These include: “cattle offender litter bastard imbecile prostitute muzzle scumbag bastard robber bandit devil moron stinking ass idiot plaque traitor scoundrel abomination hypocritical creature ghoul moral fag sick creature scarecrow pathological liar self-assured shit degenerate to threaten snake bitch prostitute a traitor immoral six scoundrel looter Judas defector hating nit paranoid to beat shock filth a criminal litter mask damn it moron ramminsh ass you idiot abomination hypocritical face ghoul moral fag a sick creature stuffed false pathological liar self-righteous shit immoral the six huckster he called called got into a fight scuffled liar stuffed animal turned off got his head out cut off fagots bye.”

\(^{28}\) See https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/will-ukraine-s-oligarchs-ever-get-challenged/


In Figures 4 and 5, I present quarterly time series data that show the prevalence of violent political rhetoric scaled by the number of total stories. Figure 4 shows the results disaggregated by media sources. Figure 5 shows the same sources aggregated together and normalized.

While there is quite a bit of variation, the overall trend in the data suggests that the violent political rhetoric in Ukraine increases 2009-2013 following the trial, arrest and imprisonment of former President Yulia Tymoshenko\(^{31}\) and in the lead up to the Euromaidan protests.

---

Figure 5: Violent Rhetoric Across Time in Ukraine Aggregated (2011-October 1, 2019). Red shaded regions correspond to the Orange Revolution (2004-2005), the trial of former President Yulia Tymoshenko (2010-2011), and the Euromaidan Revolution (2013-2014).
4 How Does The Public Respond to Violent Rhetoric?

4.1 Acceptability of Different Types of Rhetoric

How does the public react to violent rhetoric? My theory and argument make three predictions. First, more violent and inflammatory rhetoric will be less acceptable than civil or neutral rhetoric. Second, certain personality types and individuals will be more likely to supporter violent rhetoric. Third, the context in which violent rhetoric matters is important—who said it, who is the target, what happened, and what was the reaction of the media and political leaders?

To test these predictions, I turn to a series of surveys and survey experiments I conducted in the U.S. and Ukraine. The first Ukraine survey (N=1,030) was a module that was part of a face-to-face omnibus survey carried out by the Kyiv International Institute for Sociology (KIIS) from October 27-November 9, 2018. The U.S. data was collected via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) in early November 2018. Respondents were paid $0.60 for a brief 5-7 minute survey.

Each of the surveys began by measuring basic demographic information including political identity. In the U.S. I use partisanship—whether someone is a self-identified Republican or not—to identify their political identity. As discussed previously, in Ukraine partisanship is comparatively much weaker, with individuals having loose attachments to parties. Yet there are still polarized opinions related to the Euromaidan Protests of 2013-2014, that better capture political identity. In consultation with experts and those at KIIS, I use whether a respondent agreed with statement that the Euromaidan (Maidan) Protests of 2013-2014 were a popular protest movement, as opposed to a nationalist coup d’état as measure of political identity. Those who agreed with the statement were coded as pro-Maidan. I assume that those who viewed Maidan as a nationalist coup d’état, or given social desirability bias, refused to answer, were coded as anti-Maidan.

Following the basic demographics, respondents were randomly assigned to a section that was...
designed to measure how acceptable it was for politicians to refer to their opponents by different phrases that varied in their levels of violence, and hence acceptability. A corpus of 42 different types of phrases was constructed from existing news sources and examples of past things politicians have said. The same corpus was used in the U.S. and Ukraine for comparability. The rhetoric was divided between 23 examples of name-calling that included calling a political opponent a “traitor,” “corrupt,” “animal,” or a “parasites.” And 19 examples threats, which include saying their opponent should be “harassed on social media,” “be very afraid,” “be protested,” or “they should be crushed.” A few positive or neutral phrases were included as well, including saying that their opponent should “be respected” or “is honorable.”

Respondents were randomly shown 3 examples of threats and 3 of name-calling. Each respondent was presented with a prompt that asked them to suppose “a politician said the following about their political opponent”:

“They’re a thief.”[Name-calling example]

OR

“They should be harassed on social media.”[Threat example]

They were then asked how acceptable, how violent, how threatening, and how disgusting they found this type of speech. This was then repeated five more times. Tables 1 and 2 provide sample summary statistics for the two surveys.

\[34\] For the purposes here I focus on the level of acceptability, but Cronbach’s α in the U.S. (0.84) and in Ukraine (0.85) suggest that acceptability, violent, threat, and disgust perceptions are positively correlated and picking up similar variation.
<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td>18-29 13.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30-44 28.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>45-59 27.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>60+ 29.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td>Male 39.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td>65.1% completed secondary school and have vocational, or some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>higher education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Views on</strong></td>
<td>48% supporters of Maidan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Maidan</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Language</strong></td>
<td>Ukrainian 49.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Russian 38.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mix of Ukrainian Russian 11.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Region</strong></td>
<td>West 27.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Center 35.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>South 11.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>East 19.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Donbas 6.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Sample Characteristics National Ukraine Survey (October-November, 2018)
Table 2: Sample Characteristics US MTurk Survey (November 2018)

Figures 6 and 7 present the average level of acceptability for different types of name-calling (6) and threat (7) in the U.S. and Ukraine.

A few things to observe from these results. In Figure 6 most Ukrainians and U.S. respondents believe that for most examples of name-calling it is never, rarely, or only sometimes acceptable, but there is considerable variation. U.S. respondents seem slightly more accepting of negative rhetoric—though this may be more of mode effect. With the exception of calling an opponent a “terrorist,” most of the least acceptable terms are those that are considered dehumanizing, “animal,” “rat,” or “parasite.” Finally there a few terms which have very different levels of acceptability (more acceptable in the U.S. than Ukraine), and these include calling an opponent “disgusting,” “a joke,” or “average.”

In contrast, there is more agreement on threats (see Figure 7). Most threats, are considered never or only rarely acceptable, though there is some disagreement over how acceptable it is call for their opponent to “be protested.” On average, U.S. respondents also seem slightly more accepting

35The surveys were conducted online in the U.S. and face-to-face in Ukraine.
of violent threats.

The results from these studies support the idea that the public generally does not find either threats or name-calling acceptable. But perhaps certain people do, under certain circumstances? The next subsection explores who might support violent rhetoric and under what conditions.

4.2 Other Factors that Influence How The Public Views Violence Rhetoric

4.2.1 Who Supports Violent Rhetoric in the U.S.?

As part of the MTurk U.S. national survey, I measured respondents’ personality traits across a host of psychological measures that others researches have suggested might make someone more amenable to violent rhetoric. These include a 3-question measure of preferences for a tough leader ($\alpha =0.53$); 36 the standard authoritarianism child-rearing scale ($\alpha=0.73$) (Hetherington and Weiler 2009); 3 questions from social dominance orientation scale (SDO, $\alpha=0.74$); 37 and 3 from the Buss-Perry trait aggression scale (Kalmoe 2014) ($\alpha=0.74$). 38 I also had a single item drawn from the American National Election Study question to measure their belief in violence: “How often do you feel it is justified for people to use violence to pursue their political goals in this country?” (1-Never to 5 Always). All of these measures were then rescaled to lie between 0-1 for comparability purposes.

I then constructed a general measure of acceptance of violent rhetoric from a subset of the larger 42 items measured in the national survey. These include 8-item (4 threats and 4 name-calling) that were used in both the national surveys in Ukraine and the US, and the elite surveys discussed in next section. These include how acceptable it is for a politician to say/call their political opponent: 1) “traitor,” 2) “parasite,” 3) “be harassed on social media,” 4) “corrupt,” 5) “be protested,” 6) “be crushed,” 7) “be afraid,” and 8) “animal.” I standardized the response acceptability to these

36 Whether they would prefer to have a leader who: 1) Takes quick action OR Works through the system; 2) Tough OR Diplomatic; and 3) Doesn’t follow the usual rules OR Follows the usual rules.

37 “Show how much you favor or oppose each idea below by selecting a number from 1 (Strongly Oppose) to 7 (Strongly Favor) on the scale below. You can work quickly; your first feeling is generally best.” 1) Some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups; 2) No one group should dominate society (Reverse Coded); and 3) Group equality should not be our primary goal.

38 “Please rate each of the following statements in terms of how characteristic they are of you, where 1 is extremely uncharacteristic of me, and 7 is extremely characteristic of me:” 1) Given enough provocation, I may hit another person; 2) I have threatened people I know; and 3) My friends say I somewhat argumentative.
Figure 6: Acceptability of Different Types of Name Calling in the U.S. and Ukraine (General Public). Means with associated 95% Confidence Intervals
Figure 7: Acceptability of Different Types of Threats in the U.S. and Ukraine (General Public). Means with associated 95% Confidence Intervals.
8 items and created an additive index from how much each respondent though it was more or less acceptable than the mean response for each item to use this language. The Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.88$ from this additive index suggests that responses to different items about acceptability of rhetoric have fairly high consistency. I then scaled this index to lie between to lie between 0-1 to create the measure of general acceptance of violent rhetoric.

The regression results are presented in Table 3. The results do find that certain individuals are more predisposed to accept violent rhetoric. Controlling for other factors, those who have a preference for tough leaders, are more accepting of politicians using harsh language. Scoring higher on trait aggression and belief that violence can sometimes be justified are weakly more accepting. In contrast, neither the traits of social dominance or authoritarianism, or partisanship appear to have a separate and significant effect on the acceptability of violent political language.
### Table 3: Personality Correlates of Support for Violent Rhetoric (U.S. MTurk Sample)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
<th>(3)</th>
<th>(4)</th>
<th>(5)</th>
<th>(6)</th>
<th>(7)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dependent variable:</td>
<td>General Acceptance of Violent Rhetoric (0-1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tough Leader</td>
<td>0.068***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.054***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.017)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.019)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authoritarian</td>
<td>0.008</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.016)</td>
<td>(0.016)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>0.084***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.053*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.025)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.027)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Dominance</td>
<td>0.070***</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.023)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.028)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence Justified</td>
<td>0.087***</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.047</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.027)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.029)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.020*</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.012)</td>
<td>(0.013)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.394***</td>
<td>0.413***</td>
<td>0.397***</td>
<td>0.397***</td>
<td>0.403***</td>
<td>0.408***</td>
<td>0.375***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.008)</td>
<td>(0.008)</td>
<td>(0.008)</td>
<td>(0.008)</td>
<td>(0.007)</td>
<td>(0.007)</td>
<td>(0.011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>457</td>
<td>457</td>
<td>457</td>
<td>457</td>
<td>457</td>
<td>457</td>
<td>457</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.034</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.024</td>
<td>0.020</td>
<td>0.022</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>0.059</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>0.031</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.022</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>0.019</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>0.046</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
4.2.2 Who supports violent rhetoric in the Ukraine?

I was able to field several questions on a nationally representative KIIS Omnibus survey (N=1,010) that was conducted face-to-face from September 8-20, 2019. Baseline demographics are shown in Table 4. The main question was to determine what are the personality and partisan correlates of individuals who support the use of violent political rhetoric in Ukraine? Do they match the findings from the U.S.? To answer this question, I asked several of the similar psychological questions from the U.S. sample to those presented in Table 3. I then correlated these personality characteristics with the main dependent variable, which was willingness to vote for a politician who uses threats and name-calls, but gets things done. Of those who answered the question, (78%), 16% would definitely vote for, 31.7% probably would vote for, 18.4% probably would not vote for, and 34% definitely would not vote for a name-caller/politician who uses threats but got stuff done, rescaled to lie between 0 (definitely would not vote) to 1 (definitely would vote).

These personality correlates included 4-questions to measure preferences for a tough leader ($\alpha=0.37$); the standard authoritarianism child-rearing scale ($\alpha=0.46$) (Hetherington and Weiler 2009); 3-items from the Buss-Perry trait aggression scale ($\alpha=0.64$); as well as the single item drawn from the American National Election Study question to measure their belief in the acceptability of political violence: “How often do you feel it is justified for people to use violence to pursue their political goals in this country?” (1-Never to 5-Always). All of these measures were then rescaled to lie between 0-1 for comparability purposes. I also included whether an individual was a supporter of the Maidan protests, and of President Zelensky.

The results are presented in Table 5. Overall we see a similar pattern in Ukraine compared to the U.S. Certain psychological characteristics and political attitudes are correlated with a greater willingness to support a politician who engages in name-calling and threats (but also gets things done).

---

39 “Suppose a politician is known for sometimes making violent threats and calling his opponents names, but they are also known as a politician that gets things done—fixes roads, builds hospitals, and attracts investments. How likely would you be to vote for such a politician?”

40 1) Takes quick action vs. Is patient? 2) Is diplomatic vs. Is tough? 3) Is willing to compromise vs. Stands firm on their positions? 4) Doesn’t follow the usual political rules vs. Follows the usual political rules?. Given the low $\alpha$, I included each item separately.

41 “Please rate each of the following statements in terms of how characteristic they are of you, where 1 is extremely uncharacteristic of me, and 7 is extremely characteristic of me?” 1) Given enough provocation, I may hit another person; 2) I have threatened people I know; and 3) My friends say I somewhat argumentative.
done). For instance those who prefer a leader that takes quick action, stands firm, and doesn’t follow the usual rules are more supportive of a name-calling politician. One curious exception is that individuals who prefer a tough leader (to one who is diplomatic) are less supportive of a politician who uses name-calling and threats.\(^{42}\) Those who hold more aggressive traits and believe that violence is sometimes justified are both more likely to support a politician who uses violent rhetoric. Finally, Maidan supporters are less likely to support a politician who engages in violent rhetoric.

\(^{42}\) Nearly 81% of the sample preferred a tough to diplomatic leader. This findings may in part be due to Ukraine’s idiosyncratic political culture, whereby Ukrainians have been found to hold both democratic and authoritarian values (Katchanovski 2012).
| Age       | 18-29 13.2%  
|           | 30-44 24.7%  
|           | 45-59 28.2%  
|           | 60+ 33.9%    |
| Gender    | Male 40.4%   |
| Education | 75.3% completed secondary school and have vocational, or some higher education |
| Views on Maidan | 48.6% supporters of Maidan |
| Support Zelensky | 76% strongly or somewhat support President Zelensky |
| Language  | Ukrainian 54.2% |
|           | Russian 41.0%  
|           | Mix of Ukrainian Russian 4.8%  |
| Region    | West 27.7%    
|           | Center 34.3%  
|           | South 24.7%   
|           | East 7.0%     
|           | Donbas 6.3%   |

Table 4: Sample Characteristics National Ukraine Survey (September 2019)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
<th>(3)</th>
<th>(4)</th>
<th>(5)</th>
<th>(6)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dependent variable:</strong></td>
<td>Vote for politician who uses violent rhetoric (0-1)</td>
<td>0.123***</td>
<td>0.116***</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.129***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.026)</td>
<td>(0.027)</td>
<td>0.116***</td>
<td>(0.027)</td>
<td>0.129***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader Takes Quick Action</td>
<td>-0.129***</td>
<td>-0.109***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.129***</td>
<td>-0.109***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.026)</td>
<td>(0.027)</td>
<td>0.043</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.033)</td>
<td>(0.033)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader Stands Firm</td>
<td>0.057**</td>
<td>0.043</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.057**</td>
<td>0.043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.026)</td>
<td>(0.027)</td>
<td>0.043</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.026)</td>
<td>(0.027)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader Doesn’t Follow Rules</td>
<td>0.095***</td>
<td>0.054*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.095***</td>
<td>0.054*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.028)</td>
<td>(0.029)</td>
<td>(0.028)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.028)</td>
<td>(0.029)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authoritarian</td>
<td>0.032</td>
<td>0.063</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.032</td>
<td>0.063</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.044)</td>
<td>(0.045)</td>
<td>0.044</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.044)</td>
<td>(0.045)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.235***</td>
<td>0.235***</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.235***</td>
<td>0.219***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.064)</td>
<td>(0.065)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.064)</td>
<td>(0.065)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence Justified</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.386***</td>
<td>0.386***</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.386***</td>
<td>0.333***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.043)</td>
<td>(0.044)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.043)</td>
<td>(0.044)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zelensky Supporter</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.053</td>
<td>0.053</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.053</td>
<td>0.053</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.042)</td>
<td>(0.039)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.042)</td>
<td>(0.039)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro-Maidan</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.036</td>
<td>-0.061**</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.036</td>
<td>-0.061**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.028)</td>
<td>(0.026)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.028)</td>
<td>(0.026)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.425***</td>
<td>0.415***</td>
<td>0.391***</td>
<td>0.370***</td>
<td>0.418***</td>
<td>0.307***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.038)</td>
<td>(0.027)</td>
<td>(0.017)</td>
<td>(0.015)</td>
<td>(0.042)</td>
<td>(0.060)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>789</td>
<td>789</td>
<td>789</td>
<td>743</td>
<td>705</td>
<td>667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R^2</td>
<td>0.999</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>0.097</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>0.196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R^2</td>
<td>0.095</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>0.015</td>
<td>0.095</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.185</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01*

Table 5: Personality Correlates of Support for Violent Rhetoric (Ukraine KIIS sample)
4.2.3 Conjoint Analysis in Ukraine

To explore whether the context for violent rhetoric determines its acceptability and how citizens respond to it, as part of the national Ukraine survey carried out by KIIS in November of 2018, I also included a conjoint experiment. In the conjoint experiment, respondents were randomly presented with one of the following scenarios that varied the context across the following dimensions in which different types of violent rhetoric appear. This conjoint was only asked once, and not repeated multiple times.
Conjoint Attributes

1. Suppose a anti-Maidan; pro-Maidan; or (nothing)* Party Affiliation

2. first-term member of; party leader in; member of the Rada*... said at a political rally (Type of Politician)

3. “I’m not going to lie, some of these” politicians*; oligarchs; violent criminals; Russian separatist rebels; or Ukranians fascists (Target of Speech)

4. Are just animals; are our enemies; need to have the crap beaten out of them; or still need to be treated fairly* (Argument)

5. (Nothing)*; Following the speech there were violent clashes in the street; Following the speech there were peaceful protests in the street. (Following, what Happened in the Street)

6. (Nothing)*; Pro-Maidan party leaders in the Rada criticized the speech; Anti-Maidan party leaders in the Rada criticized the speech; Both pro- and anti-Maidan leaders in the Rada criticized the speech (Political Elite Criticism)

7. (Nothing)*; Pro-Maidan media argued that the rhetoric would lead to more violence in the streets; Anti-Maidan media argued that the rhetoric would lead to more violence in the streets; Both pro-and anti-Maidan media argued that the rhetoric would lead to violence in the streets (Media Criticisms)

The following is an example of one of the scenarios:

Suppose a pro-Maidan party leader in the Rada said at a political rally, “I’m not going to lie, some of these oligarchs need to have the crap beaten out them.” Following the speech there were violent clashes in the street. Anti-Maidan party leaders in the Rada criticized the speech. Both pro and anti-Maidan media argued that the rhetoric would lead to more violence in the streets.

Afterwards, respondents were asked how much they agree with what the politician said (1-strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree), how much they would support them (1-not at all to 5-a
great deal). The results of the Average Component Marginal Effect (ACME) are presented in Figures 8 (level of agreement) and 10 (level of support). Baseline categories are those marked with (*) in the Conjoint Attributes list.

The main takeaways from Figures 8 and 10 is that on average, not that many things sway voters agreement with (8) or support for (10) a politician. The main determinants of how much someone agrees with the politician said are whether they used violent rhetoric or not, and the target of that rhetoric. On average, saying that a targeted group should be beaten, are enemies, or animals reduces respondent’s agreement with the politician, and their level of support (compared to calling for tolerance). Specific targets such as Russian separatists, violent criminals, and oligarchs increase the level of agreement with what the politician said— but have no effect on support. None of the other factors such as media coverage, elite criticisms, the level of experience of the politician, or their political identity on average sway support.

Perhaps Maidan supporters and opponents react differently to the treatment? Figures (9) and (11) split the sample between pro- and anti-Maidan respondents. There does not appear to be much heterogeneity across partisanship.
Figure 8: Ukraine Conjoint Experiment “Agree with what the politician said?” (General Public, 1-Strongly Disagree to 5-Strongly Agree). AMCE 95% Confidence Intervals
In sum voters have consistent attitudes towards violent rhetoric in both the U.S and Ukraine—they generally don’t find it acceptable, and seem to reduce support for politicians who use it.
Figure 9: Ukraine Conjoint Experiment “Agree with what the politician said?” Comparing Pro- vs. Anti-Maidan Respondents (General Public, 1-Strongly Disagree to 5-Strongly Agree). AMCE 95% Confidence Intervals
Figure 10: Ukraine Conjoint Experiment “How much would you support the politician?” (General Public, 1-Not at All to 5-A Great Deal). AMCE with associated 95% Confidence Intervals
Figure 11: Ukraine Conjoint Experiment “How much would you support the politician?” Comparing Pro- vs. Anti-Maidan Respondents. (General Public, 1-Not at All to 5-A Great Deal). AMCE 95% Confidence Intervals
5 How The Public Associates Violent Rhetoric with Toughness?

5.1 Survey Experiment in U.S. on Toughness (December 2019)

Much of the previous data shows how much the public dislikes rhetoric. And this is a puzzle, given that politicians use it repeatedly. I argue that politicians use violent rhetoric as a signal of toughness and their willingness to fight for the ingroup. To test, this I conducted a series of short vignette survey experiments to look at whether people do indeed equate violent rhetoric with perceived toughness, and whether they are willing to reward individuals who do this.

The U.S. data was collected via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) in mid-December 2019. 4320 respondents started the survey but 40 respondents were dropped for using virtual private servers (VPSs), or whose IP address indicated that were outside the US for a total N=480. 44 The sample characteristics are presented in Table 6.

---

43 Respondents were paid $0.75 for a brief 4-6 minute survey.
44 Identifying those using VPSs or who had IP addresses that were known to cause issues was done using the technique in Kennedy et al. (2018).
45 I included an attention check which 95% of respondents passed. “Many people get their news from various sources, these include radio, local TV, national TV, social media, friends, and family, and other sources. Please check all the sources where you get your news from. To show that you have read the question fully, regardless of where you get your news from just select local TV and other. Yes, ignore the question and just select these two options instead.” Restricting respondents to simply those 455 who passed the attention check does not change any of the results presented here.
<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age 18-29</td>
<td>29.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 30-44</td>
<td>47.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 45-59</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 60+</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisanship</td>
<td>35.2% Republican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>57% Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>71.3% non-Hispanic White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>56.1% Have graduated college or have a graduate degree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Sample Characteristics US MTurk Survey (December 2019)

At the beginning of the survey respondents were elicited whether they self identified as Republicans or Democrats.\(^{46}\) I also wanted to measure psychological traits and predispositions that are thought to be correlated with acceptability of violent rhetoric. Using the same scales from the previous surveys on Acceptability of Violent Rhetoric, pre-treatment I also measured 1) their baseline levels of preferences for a tough leader (\(\alpha =0.53\)); 2) the standard authoritarianism child-rearing scale (\(\alpha =0.76\)) (Hetherington and Weiler 2009); 3) 3-items from the Buss-Perry trait aggression scale (Kalmoe 2014) (\(\alpha =0.84\)); and 4) the single item drawn from the American National Election Study question to measure their belief in acceptability of violence\(^{47}\) All of these measures were then rescaled to lie between 0-1 for comparability purposes. Then respondents were randomly assigned to different vignette experiments such that approximately 400 of the 480 respondents were in each vignette. I present results from each of the vignettes below.

\(^{46}\) Not even those who identified were forced to choose, “We know some people identify as independent, but do you think of yourself as closer to the Democratic or Republican party?”

\(^{47}\) “How often do you feel it is justified for people to use violence to pursue their political goals in this country?” (1-Never to 5 Always).
5.1.1 Vignette 1: Support for Politician who Attacks the Outgroup

Vignette 1 was designed to show that respondents are more likely to tolerate and vote for a politician (Representative A) that is attacking the outgroup compared to the ingroup. Respondent were randomly assigned to either to a violent rhetoric attacking the ingroup or the outgroup. Table 7 shows the different treatments self-identified Democratic respondents received. Self-identified Republicans received the exact same treatments just with partisanship switched (Democrat for Republican and vice versa). After the treatment, respondents evaluated how likely they were to vote for Representative A (0-not likely to 100-very likely), how strong of a leader they thought Representative A was (0-very weak to 100-very strong) was, and how much they would trust Representative A (0-not trust a to 100-trust a lot).

The findings in Table 8 are striking. The average treatment effects (ATE) presented in Columns 1, 3, and 5, and with controls (Columns 2, 4, and 6) all show that respondents were more likely to vote for, believe they are a strong leader, and trust Representative A when they use violent rhetoric targeted against an outgroup (compared to an ingroup). Regardless of the treatment condition, respondents who have a preference for a tough leader and score higher on trait aggression, and to a lesser extent believe violence is justified, are also more likely to vote, believe they are strong, and trust a politician who uses violent rhetoric in general. I do not find any partisan differences across any of the dependent variables.

---

48 This was signaled by partisanship
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attack Ingroup</th>
<th>Representative A, a Democratic member of Congress said the following during an interview to the press: “We’re trying to pass important laws that will protect ordinary Americans. But some Democratic politicians are preventing it. They’re scum. I know it’s not nice to say, but it’s the truth.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attack Outgroup</td>
<td>Representative A, a Democratic member of Congress said the following during an interview to the press: “We’re trying to pass important laws that will protect ordinary Americans. But some Republican politicians are preventing it. They’re scum. I know it’s not nice to say, but it’s the truth.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: Vignette 1 Example Treatments for a Democratic respondent. US MTurk Survey (December 2019)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable:</th>
<th>Willingness to Vote for Representative A (0-100)?</th>
<th>How Strong of a Leader Representative A (0-100)?</th>
<th>How Much Trust in Representative A (0-100)?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment: Attack Outgroup</td>
<td>11.889*** (2.995)</td>
<td>12.939*** (2.778)</td>
<td>8.027*** (2.926)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tough Leader</td>
<td>21.592*** (5.131)</td>
<td>17.427*** (5.163)</td>
<td>19.623*** (5.092)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authoritarian</td>
<td>5.130 (3.934)</td>
<td>6.266 (3.959)</td>
<td>8.004** (3.904)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>21.939*** (6.752)</td>
<td>17.076** (6.795)</td>
<td>22.042*** (6.701)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>-1.602 (3.158)</td>
<td>0.446 (3.178)</td>
<td>-0.926 (3.134)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>38.609*** (2.102)</td>
<td>21.300*** (2.917)</td>
<td>45.072*** (2.053)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>408</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.037</td>
<td>0.190</td>
<td>0.018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>0.035</td>
<td>0.178</td>
<td>0.016</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01*

Table 8: Vignette 1 Attacking Outgroup vs. Ingroup (US MTurk sample)
5.1.2 Vignette 2: Support for A Streetfighter

Vignette 2 stems from the idea that violent rhetoric is more attractive to an ingroup when it’s framed as protecting the ingroup from the outgroup. Groups are more willing to tolerate a firebrand, or “streetfighter” who uses harsh rhetoric when the outgroup is viewed as threat. The exact wording for this treatment comes from a tweet (see Figure 12) that was circulated by prominent Christian conservative Jerry Falwell Jr.⁴⁹

Figure 12: Tweet justifying “streetfighter” politicians from Jerry Falwell Jr.

Table 9 shows different treatments self-identified Democratic respondents were randomly assigned: one in which a politician said it is necessary for politicians who are “streetfighters” to deal with members of the other party, and one in which they said the same thing, but also emphasized that the other side “wants to destroy us.” After the treatment, respondents evaluated how likely they were to vote for Representative A (0-not likely to 100-very likely), how strong of a leader they thought Representative A was (0-very weak to 100-very strong), and how much they would trust Representative A (0-not trust a to 100-trust a lot).

The findings in Table 10 show the effects of the treatment framing that the other side wants to destroy them on support for a streetfighter. The ATE in Columns 1, 3, and 5, and with controls (2, 4, and 6) all show that respondents were more likely to vote for, believe they are strong leader, and trust Representative A when violent rhetoric is framed in this existential way. Across both treatment conditions respondents who have a preference for a tough leader and score higher on trait aggression are more likely to vote for, believe they are strong, and trust a politician that says they need streetfighters. Those who believe violence is more justified, are also more likely to vote, and, and trust a politician who advocates for a street fighting style of politics.

[50] Self-identified Republicans received the exact same treatments just with partisanship switched (Democrat for Republican and vice versa).
Table 9: Vignette 2 Example Treatments for a Democrat respondent. US MTurk Survey (December 2019)
Table 10: Vignette 2 Violent Rhetoric + “Other Side Wants to Destroy Us” (US MTurk sample)
5.1.3 Vignette 3: Threat and Support for Harsh Rhetoric

Vignette 3 explores how threat moderates support for violent rhetoric. Respondents could be randomly assigned to one of two treatments—one in which outgroup partisans are peacefully protesting (low threat), or one in which outgroup partisans are violently protesting (high threat). Across both treatments, one candidate advocated conciliation (Candidate A), whereas the other advocated harsh rhetoric against the outgroup (Candidate B).

Table 11 shows the text of the low threat and high threat treatments that self-identified Democratic respondents received. After the treatment, respondents evaluated would vote for Candidate A (0=no, 1=yes), how strong of a leader they thought Candidate A was (0-very weak to 100-very strong), how strong of a leader they thought Candidate B was (0-very weak to 100-very strong), and a manipulation check how big of a threat they thought leftwing (self-identified Republicans) or rightwing (self-identified Democrats) (0-not a threat at all to 100-very big threat).

The findings in Table 12 present the effects of high threat treatment compared to the low threat. Columns 7 and 8 show that the high threat treatment did induce higher perceptions of threat compared to the low threat—so the treatments were effective. The ATE in Columns 1 and 2 show that the threat condition has no effect on the likelihood of supporting Candidate B. However, respondents were more likely to view that Candidate A was weaker in the high threat treatment (Columns 3 and 4), and that Candidate B was stronger (Columns 5 and 6). Across both treatment conditions, those who support tougher leaders were more likely to vote for Candidate B, view Candidate A as weaker, and Candidate B as stronger. Those who score higher on trait aggression were also more likely to vote for Candidate B and view Candidate B as a strong leader.

51Self-identified Republicans received the exact same treatments just with partisanship switched (Democrat for Republican and vice versa).
| Low Threat | Several right-wing activists held signs silently protesting outside the headquarters of the Democratic Party. After the protests two Democrats running for the same Congressional seat said the following to reporters: Candidate A: “I wish we could all just get along.” Candidate B: “Some of these Republicans are animals who deserve to be roughed up.” |
| High Threat | Several right-wing activists threw Molotov cocktails through the windows of the headquarters of the Democratic Party. After the attack two Democrats running for the same Congressional seat said the following to reporters: Candidate A: “I wish we could all just get along.” Candidate B: “Some of these Republicans are animals who deserve to be roughed up.” |

Table 11: Vignette 3 Example Treatments for a Democrat respondent. US MTurk Survey (December 2019)
### Table 12: Vignette 3 Violent Rhetoric + Level of Threat (US MTurk sample)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treatment: High Threat</th>
<th>Willingness to Vote for Candidate B (0=no, 1=yes)?</th>
<th>How Strong of a Leader Candidate A (0-100)?</th>
<th>How Strong of a Leader Candidate B (0-100)?</th>
<th>How Big of a Threat is leftwing/rightwing violence (0-100)?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>(4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment: High Threat</td>
<td>0.029</td>
<td>0.038</td>
<td>-4.054*</td>
<td>-4.213*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.038)</td>
<td>(0.035)</td>
<td>(2.382)</td>
<td>(2.348)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence Justified</td>
<td>-0.010</td>
<td>-9.673*</td>
<td>0.744</td>
<td>-2.390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.084)</td>
<td>(5.585)</td>
<td>(6.287)</td>
<td>(6.440)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tough Leader</td>
<td>0.370***</td>
<td>-13.735***</td>
<td>18.975***</td>
<td>0.498</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.066)</td>
<td>(4.369)</td>
<td>(4.918)</td>
<td>(5.037)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authoritarian</td>
<td>0.010</td>
<td>3.822</td>
<td>9.445**</td>
<td>5.264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.051)</td>
<td>(3.404)</td>
<td>(3.832)</td>
<td>(3.925)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>0.251***</td>
<td>1.370</td>
<td>28.802***</td>
<td>3.722</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.085)</td>
<td>(5.654)</td>
<td>(6.364)</td>
<td>(6.519)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>-0.592</td>
<td>1.002</td>
<td>-2.177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.041)</td>
<td>(2.730)</td>
<td>(3.073)</td>
<td>(3.148)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.161***</td>
<td>-0.040</td>
<td>64.317***</td>
<td>69.454***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.027)</td>
<td>(0.038)</td>
<td>(1.684)</td>
<td>(2.516)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.141</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>0.052</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R2</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>0.128</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>0.038</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
5.1.4 Vignette 4: Explanations for Violent Rhetoric

Vignette 4 explores different explanations for why politicians would use violent rhetoric (“colorful language”). Respondents could be randomly assigned to one of three treatments—a control condition in which Representative A justifies violent rhetoric by saying that’s the “nature of politics”, a condition in which Representative A justifies their violent rhetoric as coming from a place of honesty (honesty treatment), and a treatment in which a Representative A justifies violent rhetoric by appealing to toughness.

Table 13 shows the text of the control, honesty, and toughness treatments that self-identified Democratic respondents received. After the treatment, respondents evaluated how likely they were to vote for Representative A (0-not likely to 100-very likely), how strong of a leader they thought Representative A was (0-very weak to 100-very strong) was, and how much they would trust Representative A (0-not trust a to 100-trust a lot).

The findings in Table 14 present the honesty and toughness treatments compared to the low threat. The ATE in Columns 1, 3, and 5, and those with controls (2, 4, and 6) show that both the honesty and toughness conditions increased the likelihood that a respondent would vote for, how strong of a leader they thought, and how much they would trust Representative A relative to the control condition. Across all treatment conditions, those who support tougher leaders and score higher in trait aggression were more likely to vote for, believe they are strong, and trust a politician who uses violent rhetoric. Those who are more likely to believe violence is justified are more likely to vote for and trust a politician who uses violent rhetoric. Republicans, as compared to Democrats, are more likely to vote for and believe a politician who uses violent rhetoric is a strong leader.

52Self-identified Republicans received the exact same treatments just with partisanship switched (Democrat for Republican and vice versa).
Representative A is a Democratic member of Congress who is known to name-call and occasionally make threats against their political opponents. When asked why they talk the way they do, Representative A responded: “Look I may use colorful language, but that’s the nature of politics.”

Representative A is a Democratic member of Congress who is known to name-call and occasionally make threats against their political opponents. When asked why they talk the way they do, Representative A responded: “Look I may use colorful language, but that’s how you know I’m honest. I don’t talk like other politicians.”

Representative A is a Democratic member of Congress who is known to name-call and occasionally make threats against their political opponents. When asked why they talk the way they do, Representative A responded: “Look I may use colorful language, but I’m fighting for our values. I have to be tough.”

Table 13: Vignette 4 Example Treatments for a Democrat respondent. US MTurk Survey (December 2019)
### Table 14: Vignette 4 Explanations for Violent Rhetoric (US MTurk sample)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable:</th>
<th>Willingness to Vote for Representative A (0-100)?</th>
<th>How Strong of a Leader for Representative A (0-100)?</th>
<th>How Much Trust in Representative A (0-100)?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Treatment: Honesty</td>
<td>9.323*** (3.371)</td>
<td>8.227*** (3.113)</td>
<td>7.738** (3.300)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment: Toughness</td>
<td>11.823*** (3.371)</td>
<td>11.158*** (3.089)</td>
<td>11.113*** (3.300)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence Justified</td>
<td>15.500** (6.014)</td>
<td>9.207 (5.895)</td>
<td>14.335** (5.858)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tough Leader</td>
<td>19.601*** (4.704)</td>
<td>23.142*** (4.611)</td>
<td>22.595*** (4.582)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authoritarian</td>
<td>3.861 (3.651)</td>
<td>7.275** (3.579)</td>
<td>5.949* (3.557)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>11.310* (6.035)</td>
<td>10.184* (5.915)</td>
<td>15.999*** (5.878)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>7.636*** (2.840)</td>
<td>5.436* (2.784)</td>
<td>4.540 (2.766)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>39.971*** (2.370)</td>
<td>23.493*** (2.891)</td>
<td>45.446*** (2.320)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Observations        | 411                                           | 411                                            | 411                                          |
| R²                  | 0.033                                         | 0.205                                         | 0.028                                        |
| Adjusted R2         | 0.028                                         | 0.191                                         | 0.024                                        |

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
In sum the findings from the Vignettes 1-4 suggest that respondents are more likely to support and view politicians as strong leaders 1) when it’s directed against the outgroup, 2) the rhetoric is justified because the other side is viewed as a threat, and 3) it is seen as the politician being honest or tough. The findings further suggest that those who score higher on trait aggression, believe violence is sometimes justified, and supportive of a tough leader are more supportive in general of politicians who use this kind of rhetoric.

6 What Do Elites Think About Violent Rhetoric?

The national surveys show that voters in Ukraine and the U.S. find violent name-calling and threats unacceptable. It raises the question, why then do politicians use it? One argument may be that politicians and elites overestimate voters appetite for nasty politics, and that explains the paradox (Broockman and Skovron 2018; Rosenzweig 2017). I fielded elite surveys in March and April of 2019 to better understand if there is indeed an acceptability gap on violent rhetoric between elites and voters in the U.S. and Ukraine. I also asked questions to measure how elites view the strategy of name-calling and threats by politicians against their political opponents.

The U.S. elite survey was fielded by the CivicPulse, a non-profit organization of researchers that runs online national surveys of local and municipal officials via email. The survey was fielded as a module as part of an omnibus survey between March 12-April 12, 2019. 520 respondents completed the survey. The Ukrainian survey was fielded by KIIS. I worked with KIIS to create a diverse database of both pro- and anti-Maidan elites (activists, politicians, and political consultants) across the various regions of Ukraine. The survey was emailed out to nearly 2,000 activists, politicians, and political consultants, and was completed between March 5-April 19, 2019. 165 individuals completed the elite survey in Ukraine.

Summary statistics for the two elite surveys are shown in Tables 15 and 16.

---

53 See https://www.civicpulse.org/.
54 Along with reminder emails.
| Age          | 18-29 32.7%  
|             | 30-44 43.6%  
|             | 44-59 23.6%  
|             | 60+ 3.1%     |
| Gender      | Male 52.7%   |
| Position    | Member of a local NGO 50.9%  
|             | Member of National NGO 20.0%  
|             | Member of an Int’l NGO 3%     
|             | Politician (local politics) 15.2% 
|             | Politician (national politics) 2.4%  
|             | Political consultant 12%     
|             | Journalist/activist 1.2%    |
| Views on Maidan | 69.7%Maidan supporters |
| Language    | Ukrainian 37.6%  
|             | Russian 37.6%   
|             | Mix of Ukrainian and Russian 24.8% |
| Region      | West 13.9%   
|             | Center 45.5%   
|             | South 21.8%    
|             | East 12.1%     
|             | Donbas 6.5%    |

Table 15: Summary Statistics of KIIS Elite Ukraine Survey (March-April, 2019)
<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Age**        | 21-55 21.5%  
56-70 43.8%  
71-95 26%  
Didn’t say 8.7% |
| **Gender**     | 72.1% Male                                                      |
| **Education**  | Have graduated college or have a graduate degree                |
| **Race**       | 85.3% Non-Hispanic White                                        |
| **Republican** | 47%                                                             |
| **Type of Government** | County 14.7%  
Municipal 65.3%  
Township 19.6% |
| **Elected official** | 94%                                                            |
| **Average Gov’t Experience** | 14 years                                                      |
| **Census Region** | Midwest 38.1%  
Northeast 24.7%  
South 20.6%  
West 16.4%     |

Table 16: Summary Statistics CivicPulse Elite U.S Survey (March-April, 2019)
In Figure 13 I compare elite perceptions of what the general public finds acceptable to actual levels of acceptability general public. For a subset of name-calling and threats from Figures 6 and 7, I asked elites how often they thought the public would find it acceptable for a politician to say or call their opponent a: 1) “traitor,” 2) “parasite,” 3) “be harassed on social media,” 4) “corrupt,” 5) “be protested,” 6) “be crushed,” 7) “be afraid,” and 8) “animal.” I then compared these to what the public actually thought. The results suggest first that for most of the items there is a broad agreement about the level acceptability with most falling within a point on the five-point scale. The only notable exception are calls for protest and which is viewed as perceived as rarely acceptable by the U.S. elites and Ukraine general public, but somewhat acceptable by Ukraine elite and U.S. general public. Also, for many of the items the U.S. public is more accepting than the U.S. elites perceived, suggesting that at least in the U.S. elites are not overestimating the general public’s appetite for violent rhetoric.

I also examined whether political identity shaped perceptions of acceptability of rhetoric in elites, and actual levels in the masses. Among the Ukrainian general public, there are no statistically differences between pro- and anti-Maidan supporters. For the elite Ukrainian sample, Maidan supporters have significantly lower perceptions of the public’s acceptability of calling an opponent a parasite ($Diff = -0.47, t = 2.15, p = 0.035$). In contrast, in the U.S. Republicans (compared to Democrats and Independents) are significantly less likely to view calls for protesting an opponent as acceptable ($Diff = -0.831, t = 3.20, p = 0.002$); more likely to view it as acceptable to say an opponent “should be crushed” ($Diff = 0.479, t = 2.29, p = 0.026$); and more likely to view calling an opponent an “animal” as acceptable ($Diff = 0.910, t = 2.77, p = 0.0095$). In the U.S. elite sample, Republicans are less likely to perceives that the public thinks it is acceptable to say an opponent “should be protested” ($Diff = -0.19, t = 2.03, p = 0.04$).
Figure 13: Acceptability of Different Types of Rhetoric in the U.S. and Ukraine. Compares Elite Perceptions of the Masses to the actual Mass levels of Acceptability (Elite and Mass). Means with associated 95% Confidence Intervals from 10,000 bootstraps.
Figure 14: Explanations for Name-Calling in the U.S. and Ukraine (Elites). Means with associated 95% Confidence Intervals from 10,000 bootstraps. In response to the question: “Some of the examples you saw previously are types of name-calling. For example, a politician calling opponents ‘traitors,’ ‘corrupt,’ ‘animals,’ or ‘parasites.’ How much does each of the following reasons explain why a politician may engage in name-calling of their political opponents?”
I also asked elites why they thought politicians engaged in name-calling (Figure 14) and threats (Figure 15) in both a closed-ended, and open-ended format (see word clouds in Figures 16a and 16b). While elites perceive some differences in the perceptions of the acceptability of violent rhetoric in the U.S. and Ukraine, there is strong agreement on what are the strategies for politicians using name-calling and threats. Elites in both countries think violent rhetoric is about media attention and core supporters, and much less about politician sending a message to members of their own party. These results are also reflected in the free responses shown in the word clouds (Figures 16a and 16b), where both in the U.S. and Ukraine elites believe the main motive behind politicians using violent rhetoric is to attract media and attention (two of the most repeated, and largest words in the free response).
Figure 15: Explanations for Threats in the U.S. and Ukraine (Elites). Means with associated 95% Confidence Intervals from 10,000 bootstraps. In response to the question: “Some of the examples you saw previously are types of threatening language. For example, a politician saying their opponents should be ‘harassed on social media,’ ‘be very afraid,’ ‘be protested,’ or ‘they should be crushed.’ How much does each of the following reasons explain why a politician may use threatening language against their political opponents?”
7 Trump and Tweets of Violence

Do politicians that use violent rhetoric get more attention? President Donald Trump’s prolific use of Twitter via his @realDonaldTrump account is one of the core features presidency. Many observers have argued that Trump uses his Twitter account to distract, reach out to his base, and intimidate opponents. Another key aspect of his Tweets have been the nasty and violent rhetoric he has used on Twitter to disparage political opponents: such as mocking U.S. Representative Adam Schiff (e.g., “Liddle”), disparaging the media (e.g., “Fake News”, “corrupt”, and “Enemy of the People”), and Democrats (e.g., “Radicals”).

President Trump’s Twitter feed represents both an important as well as a tough case for testing the theory of violent rhetoric. It’s an important case since as president his use of Twitter has attracted a great deal of attention, with his Twitter feed all but replacing press briefings. But it’s also a tough case because the time period I examine is from April 15, 2019-October 3, 2019. This is the third year of his presidency, where much of the novelty of Trump’s language and Twitter feed have worn off. Data seems to back this up, with interactions with his Tweets sliding significantly (almost 70%) since he was elected.

I used the retweet package in R to collect 3,509 tweets from the @realDonaldTrump account for 172 days of his presidency (April 15-October 3, 2019). I then manually went through each of Trump’s tweets, and flagged as violent any tweet that 1) used disparaging or dehumanizing remarks to refer to his opponents (“radical,” “corrupt,” “lying,” or “crazy”); 2) promulgated conspiracy

---

56 See [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trumps-tweets-are-a-distraction-for-something-else-he-doesnt-want-us-to-see/2019/07/16/4274a34c-a811-11e9-9214-246e594de5d5_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trumps-tweets-are-a-distraction-for-something-else-he-doesnt-want-us-to-see/2019/07/16/4274a34c-a811-11e9-9214-246e594de5d5_story.html)
63 “The (interaction) metric measures retweets and likes per tweet divided by the size of his following.” See [https://www.axios.com/president-trump-tweets-engagement-4c6067a8-734d-4184-984a-d5c9151a339.html](https://www.axios.com/president-trump-tweets-engagement-4c6067a8-734d-4184-984a-d5c9151a339.html) It is worth noting that the tweet with the highest interaction of his presidency is a violent tweet containing a clip of him doing a pro-wrestling bodyslam on a man with the CNN logo in place of his head and calling it “Fake News” from July of 2017. This tweet 315,000 retweets and more than 535,000 likes/favorites. See [https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/881503147168071680](https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/881503147168071680)
Figure 16: Explanations for Violent Rhetoric (Elites). Size, position, and color of word indicates frequency of this term mentioned in free response questions for “what do you think best explains why a politician may engage in name-calling or use threatening language against their political opponents?”
theories ("Witch Hunt"); 3) disparaged the media ("Failing NYT" or "Fake News"); or 4) used all caps or exclamation marks ("PRESIDENTIAL HARASSMENT!"). For any tweets that were less than 25 characters (usually retweets, video clips or photos), I examined any URLs included in the tweet and followed the same coding procedure. I also collected data to measure attention including retweets and favorites that his Tweets received. 1,131, or about 32% of his tweets were classified as containing violent rhetoric.

In Figure 17 I plot time series of weekly counts of Trump’s violent tweets (bottom) and retweets in millions (top) over the 24 and a half-week period. I also include vertical red lines which correspond with key events during this time period including the publishing of the Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election also known as the “Mueller Report” (April 18, 2019); President Trump telling four Democratic congresswomen (known as “the Squad”), Reps. Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, Rashida Tlaib of Michigan and Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts to “go back to where they came from” (July 14, 2019);64 and the breaking of the scandal over allegations President Trump withheld military aid from Ukraine unless they investigated former Vice President Joseph Biden and his son Hunter Biden (September 18, 2019).65

There are four key takeaways from the time series plots. First, nearly a third of Trump’s tweets during this time period were violent. Second, President Trump’s propensity to tweet violent rhetoric varies across time. Third this variation is systematic. Trump sends out more violent tweets around these key events. Finally, trends in Trump’s retweet counts closely tracks with his violent tweets. His peaks of engagement via retweets matches peaks in his violent tweet usage.

Do President Trump’s violent tweets garner more audience engagement? Figure 18 plots the average number of retweets non-violent (red) and violent tweets (blue) receive. Violent tweets get on average 3,976 more retweets than violent ones ($t = 10.347, p < 0.001$). Substantively this is a big effect—approximately a 26% increase in retweets compared to non-violent tweets. Figure 19 plots the average number of favorites non-violent (red) and violent tweets (blue) receives and matches this pattern. Violent tweets get 9,721 more retweets on average ($t = 5.5813, p < 0.001$), or a 12%

increase in favorites compared to non-violent tweets.

How does the content that appears in non-violent and violent tweets differ? Figures 20a (non-violent) and 20b (violent) explore the word frequency differences between violent and non-violent tweets. The high frequency of “thanks” and “great” in President Trump’s non-violent tweets echo the fact that many are shout-outs, or acknowledgements to his supporters and promises to “make” or “keep America great.” In contrast, the most common words in the violent tweets are “democrats,” “media,” “fake,” and “news” a list of the President Trump’s favorite targets.
Figure 17: Weekly Time Series of Trump’s Violent Tweets (bottom) and Retweets (top). Note: Vertical red lines correspond with significant events including (left-right, oldest-newest) the publishing of the “Mueller Report” (April 18, 2019), President Trump telling four first-term, Democratic congresswomen to “go back where they came from” (July 14, 2019), and the breaking of the Trump-Ukraine “quid-pro-quo” scandal (September 18, 2019).
Figure 18: Number of Retweets Comparing Non-Violent and Violent Tweets of @realDonaldTrump. Means with associated 95% Confidence Intervals bars.
Figure 19: Number of Favorites Comparing Non-Violent and Violent Tweets of @realDonaldTrump. Means with associated 95% Confidence Intervals bars.
Figure 20: Rhetoric Trump Non-Violent (top) and Violent (bottom) Tweets. Size, position, and color of words indicates frequency of the term mentioned in tweets.
8 Oleh Lyashko: The Ukrainian firebrand

Across my in-depth interviews in Ukraine, no politician was signalled out more than right-wing firebrand Oleh Lyashko, who’s name is synonymous with violent and inflammatory rhetoric. Lyashko started as an MP in former President Yulia Tymoshenko’s Batkivshchyna (Fatherland) party in 2007. In August of 2011 he formed his own party, the Radical Party of Oleh Lyashko, or simply the Radical Party.\(^66\) Lyashko was still a bit player in Ukrainian politics. He rose to prominence as one of the loudest and brashest voices during the Euromaidan protests, with his omnipresent cry of “Glory to Ukraine, death to the occupiers”.\(^67\) When war broke out in Donbas, he even formed his own volunteer battalion (militia) where he and its members were accused of kidnapping, torturing, and even executing suspected separatists in Eastern Ukraine.\(^68\)

He parlayed his notoriety and nationalist appeal amidst the war to a third place showing in the 2014 presidential election.\(^69\) At his political height Lyashko’s party held 22 seats and was part of former President Petro Poroshenko’s governing coalition from 2014-2015, and then in the opposition. He ran for president in March of 2019 (receiving only 5.5% in the first round), and his Radical Party was voted out of the Rada (failing to clear the 5% threshold) in July 21, 2019 parliamentary elections.\(^70\)

His antics in the Rada included callings his politicians from the anti-Maidan Opposition Bloc “traitors,”\(^71\) and starting fights with his sharp barbs.\(^72\) For instance, he’s referred to rival lawmakers as “parasites,”\(^73\) and foreign NGOs as “spies.”\(^74\) There’s even a particular variation of the term *skotyna*, which translates as “animal-bastard” that has become synonymous with Lyashko since he calls his opponents it so much.\(^75\)

\(^{69}\) See [https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-ukraine-crisis-idUKKCN0I80AP20141019](https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-ukraine-crisis-idUKKCN0I80AP20141019)
\(^{72}\) See [https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/10/09/thug-politics-kiev/](https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/10/09/thug-politics-kiev/)
\(^{75}\) See [https://day.kyiv.ua/en/article/topic-day/liashko-phenomenon](https://day.kyiv.ua/en/article/topic-day/liashko-phenomenon)
Working with two of my Russian and Ukrainian RAs we were able to code all of Oleh Lyashko’s Facebook posts to his more than 280,000 followers from March 1, 2019 through October 1, 2019. That time period covers the first (March 31) and second round (April 21) of the 2019 presidential elections, as well as parliamentary elections to the Rada (July 21, 2019).

This resulting dataset contains a total of 742 posts. Similar to the manner I coded President Trump’s Twitter feed, with the help of my RAs I identified all posts that included violent rhetoric, such as those that engaged in 1) name-calling of opponents (“skotyna/animals bastards”), and especially President Zelensky (“green plague”); 2) accusing political opponents of being “puppets” or “stooges”; 3) off being “morally corrupt”; 4) “Kremlin spies” or “traitors” to the nation; or 5) attacks on NGOs and the news media such as “FEYKOVI ZMI/FAKE NEWS.” We then recorded the amount of Likes, Comments, and Shares that each post received as a measure of engagement.

Of the 742 posts, nearly one-third were violent (31%), echoing President Trump’s rate. Other types of posts included praise for “ordinary Ukrainians” and idyllic Ukrainian village life, as well as Lyashko’s love for animals, and in particular dogs. Figure 21 presents the weekly time series count of his violent posts across critical junctures (two presidential elections and the parliamentary elections). A couple of things stand out. First, the rate Lyashko’s violent posts is not constant. It peaks in the lead up the first round of presidential elections, and then also in between the second round of the presidential election and parliamentary election. Second, there were no posts on his page from March 27th through May 6th—a period of 40 days. It’s unclear if this is because he deleted old posts or was temporarily banned by Facebook. It should be noted that during this time period, Lyashko posted on his Facebook account the alleged personal phone numbers of President Volodymyr Zelensky and his oligarchic patron Ihor Kolomoisky.

Do more violent posts garner more engagement from users? The answer is yes. Figure 22 shows that violent posts get five times more comments (t = 2.28, p < 0.023). As shown in Figure 23 also gets more than two and half times more shares (t = 3.33, p < 0.001). Finally, Figure 24 shows that

---

76Twitter is not nearly as popular in Ukraine
77Native Russian and Ukrainian speakers
78This is in reference to the green color of Zelensky’s Servant of the People Party.
79Note, if the post only contained an image or video clip, we watched those as well.
it gets about fifty percent more likes ($t = 3.39, p < 0.001$).  

What kind of rhetoric does Lyashko use in its post? I used Google Translate to translate the text of his posts from Ukrainian to English. While not perfect, Google Translate has been verified to be fairly accurate and is used extensively in political science (De Vries, Schoonvelde and Schumacher 2018). In Figures 25a (non-violent) and 25b (violent) I present the word cloud frequencies of Lyashko’s posts. Echoing the pattern of President Trump’s Tweets, his non-violent posts are largely thanks and shout-outs to his supporters (rural Ukrainians), while the most prominent word used in his violent posts, is Zelensky—his main enemy and political opponent.

---

81While not as common, Facebook also allows users to respond with other emoji reactions. Lyashko’s violent post were more ten times more likely to be responded to with an “angry” face ($t = 4.81, p < 0.0001$) and a two and half times as likely with a “haha” face ($t = 3.19, p < 0.01$) than a non-violent post. But they are no different in terms of their “wows” ($t = 0.65, p < 0.51$), “sad” face ($t = -1.24, p < 0.21$), or “loves” ($t = -0.10, p < 0.92$). between violent and non-violent posts.
Figure 21: Weekly Time Series of Oleh Lyashko’s Violent facebook Posts

Note: Vertical red lines correspond with significant events including first round of presidential voting (March 31, 2019), second round of presidential voting (April 21, 2019), and the July 21, 2019 parliamentary election.
Figure 22: Number of Comments Comparing Non-Violent and Violent Facebook Posts of Lyashko. Means with associated 95% Confidence Intervals bars.
Figure 23: Number of Shares Comparing Non-Violent and Violent Posts of Lyashko. Means with associated 95% Confidence Intervals bars.
Figure 24: Number of Likes Comparing Non-Violent and Violent Facebook Posts of Lyashko. Means with associated 95% Confidence Intervals bars.
Figure 25: Rhetoric in Lyashko Non-Violent (top) and Violent (bottom) Posts. Size, position, and color of words indicates frequency of the term mentioned in his Facebook posts.
9 Research in Progress

The following are several parts of the research that are still works in progress.

9.1 Follow-Up Survey Experiments

A series of follow-up surveys and survey experiments in the U.S. and Ukraine are planned. The goal of these experiments is to test if violent rhetoric signals certain positive things to voters about politicians who use it: 1) are they more likely to fight for the ingroup, 2) tougher, 3) more trustworthy, 4) or more likely to get things done?

9.2 Databases of Violent Rhetoric

I am currently working with several of my RAs to construct a database of violent rhetoric by national politicians in the U.S. and Ukraine from 2016-2019. In both countries I have collected news stories of approximately 35-40 separate instances of violent rhetoric from across the political spectrum, as well as by leaders and everyday lawmakers. I am using keyword detection algorithms including Textrank and the rapid automatic keyword extraction (RAKE) to identify key words and phrases associated with violent political rhetoric in the U.S. and Ukraine. I will then use these keywords to identify similar stories involving violent rhetoric in existing media aggregator websites.\(^\text{82}\)

Given the history of brawling and parliamentary disruption, and how it’s tied into violent rhetoric,\(^\text{83}\) I’m also putting together a database of violent brawls (2001-2019) and parliamentary disruption in Ukraine to further measure contention in Ukraine.

9.3 What do the Campaign Experts Think?

Since 2018, I have conducted over 61 in-depth interviews with campaign strategies, political consultants, activists, and journalists in the U.S. (22) and Ukraine (39). I plan to use these interviews

\(^{82}\text{https://mediacloud.org/}\) in the U.S. and the following websites which make up the top news websites in Ukraine: ukr.net, obozrevatel.com, znaj.ua, politeka.net, korrespondent.net, tsn.ua, and segodnya.ua.

\(^{83}\text{See https://www.rferl.org/a/fighting-ukraine-politics-in-pictures/28771390.html}\)
to contextualize and provide insights into how strategists think about the use of the “nasty style” by politicians.
References


URL: https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/699912


**URL:** https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2013.852642


**URL:** https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2017.1341965


