

Identifying Predictors of Congressional Incivility: An Individual-level Analysis

Nicholas Casas

Dr. Scot Schraufnagel

Department of Political Science, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Northern Illinois University



Northern Illinois University

Abstract

This research explores what background characteristics are more closely associated with uncivil acts by members of Congress, while serving in Congress. Put differently, the research seeks to identify biographical attributes that predict uncivil member behavior. The time period of the study is the 45th (1877-78) through the 113th Congress (2013-14). Each implicated member is compared, randomly, with another member from their political party, their chamber, and their Congress, holding constant these factors as possible explanations for uncivil acts. Independent variables tested include: legal education and experience, judicial experience, state legislature experience, ideological alignment, congressional leadership, being the chair of a standing committee, and gender. The analysis suggests both leadership roles, state legislative experience, and gender associate with civility in the hypothesized manner. However, our test of legal background confirms the null hypothesis; there is no difference between those implicated and their matched pair.

Aim and Expectations

Recent studies suggest more uncivil breaks in congressional debate rules and attacks on fellow members are associated with more polarized Congresses. Polarized Congresses are unable to reach timely compromises, which leads to legislative delays and difficulties filling federal and judicial positions. Being able to predict member incivility based on their background gives voters a tool to influence periods of congressional partisanship more effectively. Informed voters can determine if a candidate or current representative is more likely to exhibit uncivil behavior, thus leading to a more polarized Congress and more resulting political inefficiencies.

Due to their environments placing similar priority on ceremonious and calm debate as the U.S. Congress, lawyers, judges and state-level legislators are expected to hold individual preferences for civility. Research suggests women are "less belligerent" in their professional natures than men, especially when serving in government, so they are expected to perform accordingly in the tests. Based on the bias of newspaper reporting placed on prominent chamber leaders and chairs, these variables are expected to associate highly with implication. These are all expected to be more significant predictors of incivility than a member's ideological alignment.

Method

Members were implicated in an uncivil act by reading their mentions in articles published by *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* dating back to 1877. Using the biographical directory of the United States Congress tool on *Congress.gov*, implicated members were matched, randomly, with a non-implicated member from their political party, their chamber, and their Congress, holding constant these factors as possible explanations for uncivil acts. The search delivered 790 total members available to confidently study. Using the same tool, all members' pages were analyzed to determine whether they were educated in law, practiced as a full-time lawyer, held judicial seats, and were elected as state-level legislators. Further analysis determined years held in a position before their election to the Congress when the uncivil act occurred. The biographical directory entries also provided which party and chamber of which the member was part during the act and whether they were a leader or committee chair. Members' individual and the aggregate chamber and party DW-Nominate scores describing their roll-call voting behavior compared to peers' provided variables to test ideological influence on incivility. Individuals scoring further from the median chamber and party DWN values are considered more ideologically extreme. Implication acted as the dependent variable and was measured against all variables to identify predicting attributes.

Further Research

This research is foundational for answering a variety of questions regarding partisanship and civility. Continued research could provide further answers by studying a number of variables unaccounted for in this research. The most significant addition to this study is more consideration of media preference for chairs and leaders. High-profile members not holding these positions could be similarly preferred by media outlets because of name recognition by readers. A politician's motive to attract more media attention near elections could also be studied by comparing their most recent election margin of victory and days between the act and their next election.

Results

The Absolute Value of the Difference between the Chamber Median DW-NOMINATE Score and the Scores of Implicated Members and their Matched Pair

Implicated Members		Matched Pairs (Control Group)	
.333; n = 395		.343; n = 395	
Republicans Only		Democrats Only	
Implicated Members	Matched Pairs	Implicated Members	Matched Pairs
.295; n = 181	.310; n = 181	.365; n = 214	.371; n = 214

Table 1. Test for ideological extremism as a predictor of implication based on chamber

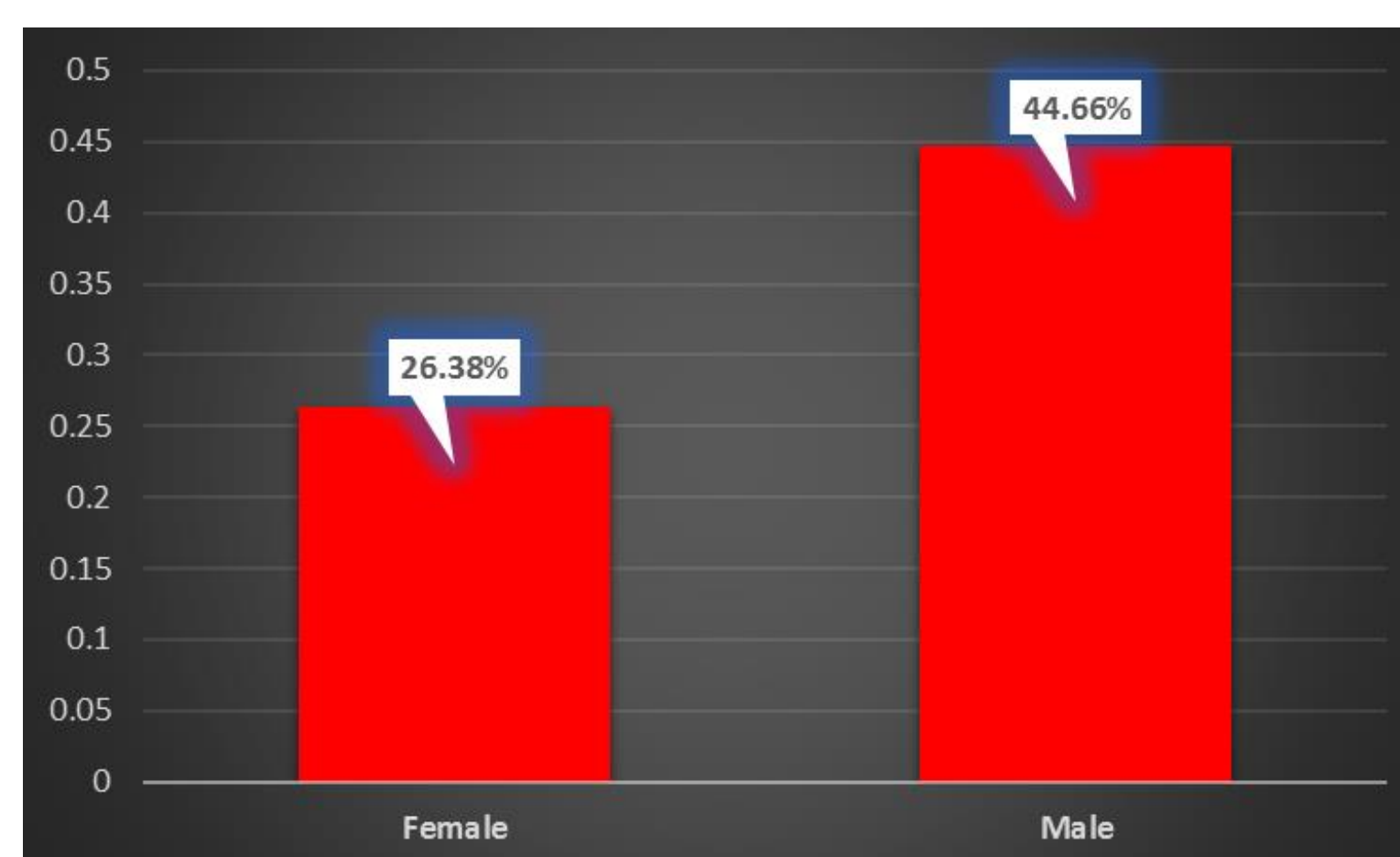


Figure 1. The Predicted Probability of being Implicated in an Uncivil Act by Gender

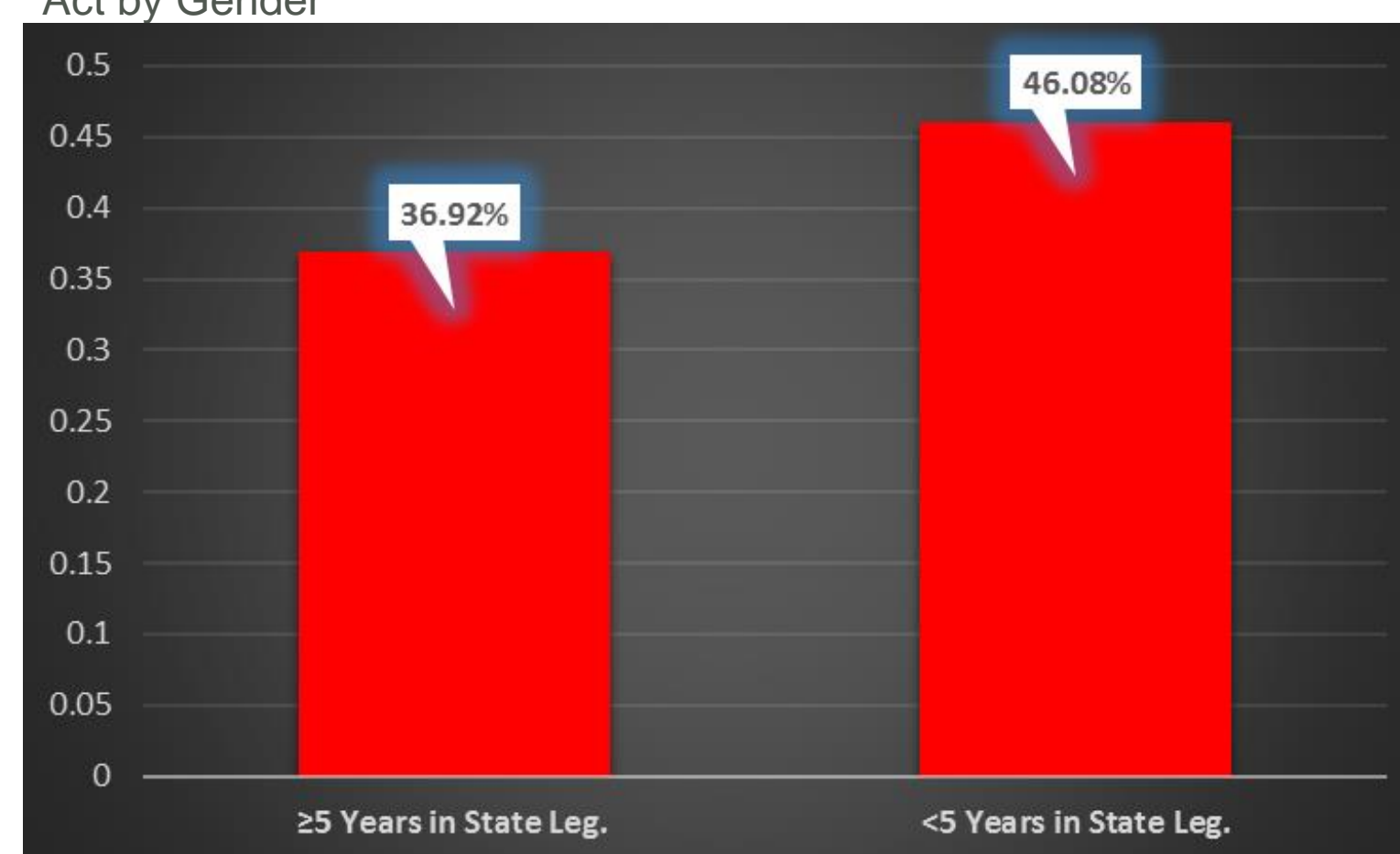


Figure 3. The Predicted Probability of being Implicated in an Uncivil Act by State Legislature Experience

The Absolute Value of the Difference between the Party Median DW-NOMINATE Score and the Scores of Implicated Members and their Matched Pair

Implicated Members		Matched Pairs (Control Group)	
.137; n = 395		.125; n = 395	
Republicans Only		Democrats Only	
Implicated Members	Matched Pairs	Implicated Members	Matched Pairs
.123; n = 181	.112; n = 181	.148; n = 214	.137; n = 214

Table 2. Test for ideological extremism as a predictor of implication based on political party

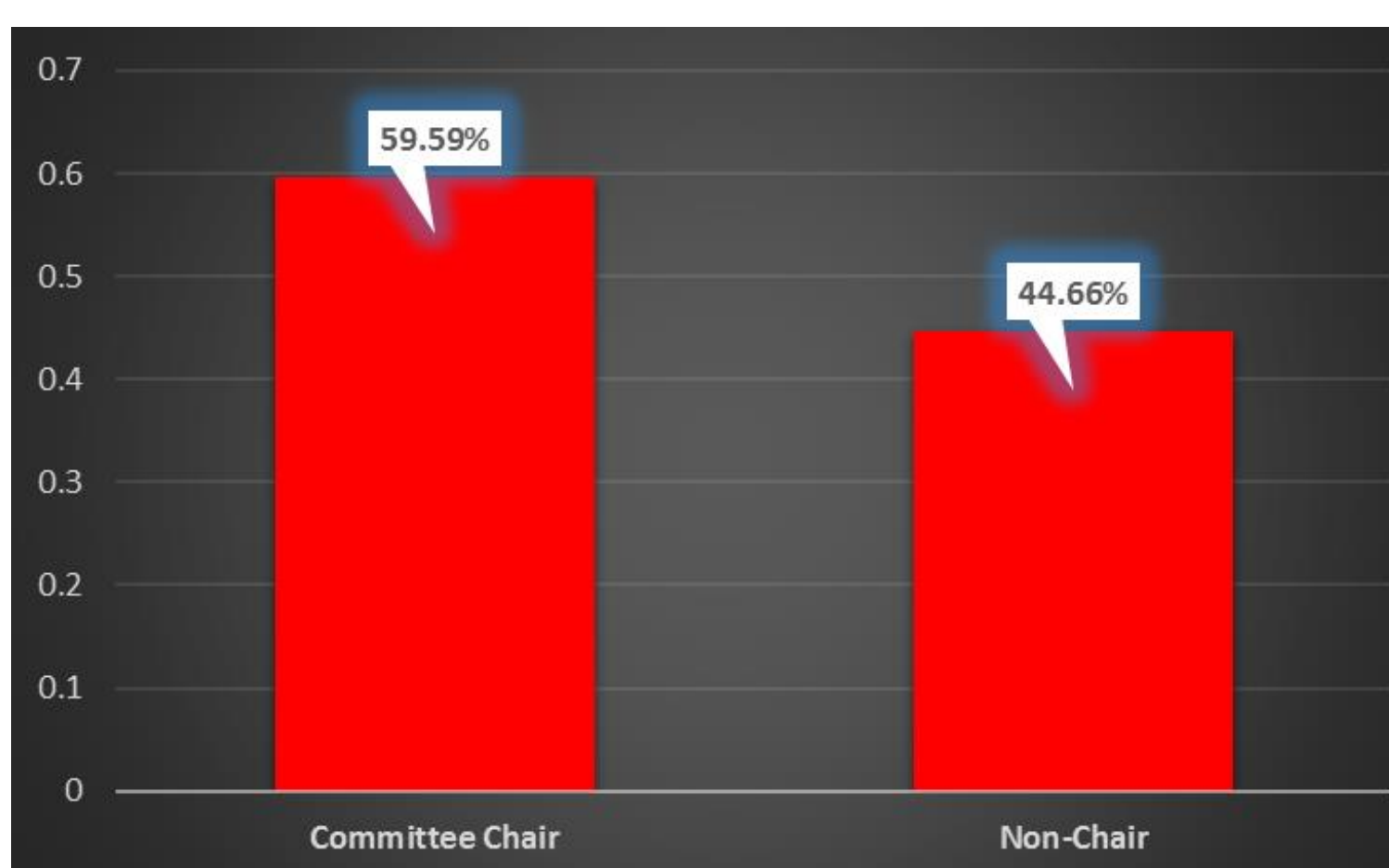


Figure 2. The Predicted Probability of being Implicated in an Uncivil Act by Chairing of a Standing Committee

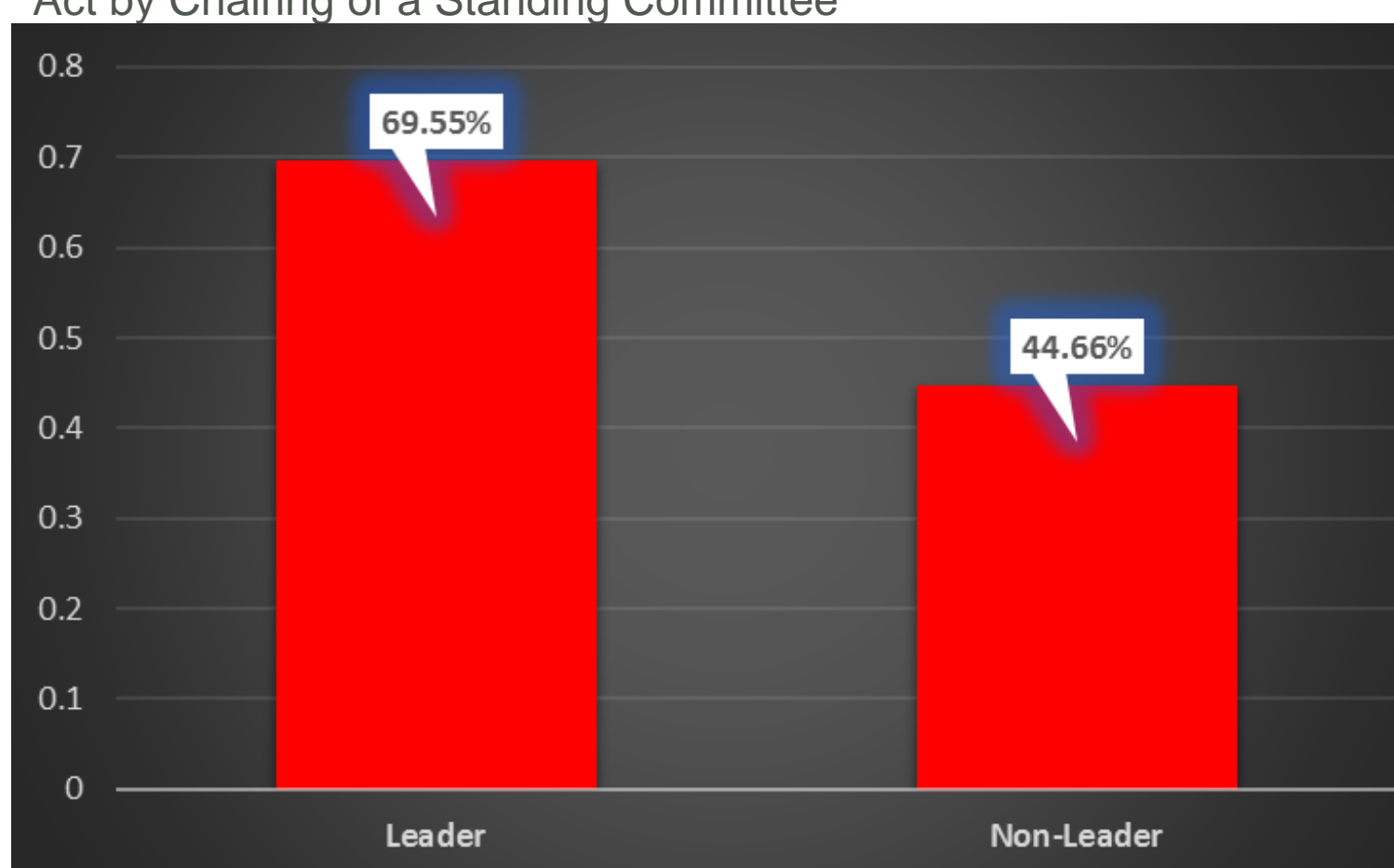


Figure 4. The Predicted Probability of being Implicated in an Uncivil Act by Chamber Leadership

Conclusions

The results performed as expected with some variables, yet not with all, such as legal background. As hypothesized, common suggestions that more partisan politicians are more likely to be uncivil during legislative procedures are not supported by the test's results. Based on the test, members more ideologically extreme are no more statistically associated with incivility than moderate members. Gender was a determining factor for uncivil behavior, females being far less likely to be implicated. Chairs and leaders are more likely to be implicated, however due to their status, it is not certain what weight to place on any media preference to place them in the spotlight. While state legislative experience did not perform as an expected predictor, after a five-year tenure in a state body, members showed significantly less association with uncivil acts. Having studied law did not associate with a lower probability of implication, just as with years practiced, being a sitting judge, and years as a judge. Nevertheless, the research conducted answered numerous questions regarding incivility for constituents afraid of the effects of partisan politics. The analysis serves as a beneficial finding to voters intending to influence polarization in Congress by referencing a candidate's background characteristics as predictors of incivility.

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