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Sincerity Over Accuracy: Epistemic Preferences and the Persuasiveness of Uncivil and Simple Rhetoric

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This study investigates the preregistered assumption that the persuasiveness of uncivil and simplified political messages is a function of individual epistemic preferences for sincerity rather than accuracy. We argue that individuals preferring sincerity over accuracy are more likely to perceive such messages as more emotionally sincere and thus be persuaded by them. We experimentally tested this on a convenience sample of U.S. respondents (MTurk, *N* = 424), manipulating exposure to persuasive messages characterized by either a low (uncivil/simplified) or a high (civil/elaborate) political style. As hypothesized, persuasiveness was a function of political style and, marginally, of PES. However, contrary to our expectations, a low political style decreased persuasion by decreasing the PES of the sponsor. Furthermore, this effect was independent of epistemic preferences. An exploratory analysis indicated that it was how respondents perceived the argument (rather than the sponsor) that mediated the relationship between political style and persuasion. Furthermore, political ideology significantly moderated the effect of political style.

Keywords: incivility, simple language, persuasion, sincerity, accuracy, experiment

Political discourse is increasingly regarded as more negative and less informative, with politicians standing accused of engaging in uncivil attacks against opponents and presenting their policy stances through simplistic argumentations in the form of slogans or one-liners (Goovaerts & Marien, 2020). If, on the one hand, the public is broadly dissatisfied with the quality of political discourse (Pew Research Center, 2019), on the other, many have voiced their appreciation for "straight-talkers" (i.e., politicians who are willing to disregard the norms of political debate to reveal what everyone is allegedly thinking; Fieschi, 2019; Nunberg, 2015). This became evident during the 2016 U.S. elections when the expression "he tells it like it is" was recurrent in interviews with Trump supporters (Shebaya, 2017). Since then, the political success of candidates who rely on a more crude and unrefined language has made scholars wonder about the persuasive power of this kind of "low" political style.

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This study investigates the hypothesis that in a political environment characterized by a growing skepticism toward expertise and the idea of objective truth (Lewandowsky, Ecker, & Cook, 2017) and by a renewed importance of authenticity in politics (Luebke, 2020), a low political style can be more persuasive than a high political style. We put forward two reasons for explaining this dynamic at both the message and respondents' levels. First, we posit that a low political style conveys a sense of emotional sincerity reflected on the sponsor of the message, which ultimately underlies its persuasive power. More specifically, we expect a mediation path from political style to persuasion via the perceived emotional sincerity (PES) of the sponsor of a persuasive argument.

Second, we claim that this is especially the case for a subset of citizens: those who have a clear preference for sincerity (i.e., the preference for information that authentically represents one's thoughts, over accuracy or the preference for correct and verifiable information; Williams, 2004). We investigate the assumption that in a political environment, where appeals to personal beliefs have become more influential than facts, specific individuals may have developed a different working conception of truth, one in which sincerity primes over accuracy (Green, 2019; Osborne, 2017). Based on this, we expect epistemic preferences to moderate the relationship between political style, PES, and persuasion. Notably, we posit a reinforced moderation effect for respondents preferring the virtue of sincerity over accuracy.

We test these preregistered[1] expectations via a single-factor mixed (between and within-subjects) experimental study on a convenience sample of U.S. citizens (N = 424) surveyed in December 2019 through the online platform Amazon MTurk. Respondents were exposed to a persuasive message that was manipulated as having either a low (i.e., uncivil and simplified) political style or a high (i.e., civil and elaborate) one. Before the experiment, respondents were asked batteries of questions intended to measure their epistemic preference for sincerity or accuracy and their profile.

Theoretical Framework

The "Restyling of Politics:" Low Political Style and Its Effects on Persuasion

In the past decades, the acceleration of the 24-hour news cycle and the subsequent personalization of politics (Garzia, 2014) have created an environment where politicians' style (i.e., the performative acts through which they manifest their stances and build a relationship with their audience) has taken greater relevance (Corner & Pels, 2003). These developments have led to a renewed interest in the concept of political style, with some scholars suggesting that contemporary politics is undergoing a process of "restyling" (Corner & Pels, 2003). Notably, they have highlighted a shift toward a more uncivil and simple political style because of a competitive media structure that rewards personalization, conflict, and political soundbites (Ohr, 2015). However, although politicians are incentivized to engage in uncivil attacks against opponents and simplify their political messages because of the newsworthiness associated with this type of communication (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999), it remains up to debate whether this emerging style of politics is an effective strategy for voters' persuasion.

[1] Details available at the following OSF repository: https://osf.io/eykdm/?view_only=267905601a854633a48e889f857a2554

The concept of political style has been particularly fruitful for the study of populism (Aslanidis, 2015; Moffit, 2016; Ostiguy, 2017). From a political style perspective, the essence of populism lies in the disruption of sociopolitical political norms. This is enacted using "bad manners" and unsophisticated expressions meant to pull away from the lexicon of mainstream politicians to signal closeness to "the people" (Moffitt & Tormey, 2013). In line with this, the concepts of "high" and "low" in politics were introduced to identify an emerging dimension of the political competition built around "ways of appealing, and thus relating, to people in sociologically differentiated ways" (Ostiguy, 2009, p. 1). If a "high" style reflects politicians that are composed in their behavior, well-mannered, and show high respect for institutional life, politicians on the "low" end of the low-high continuum are more direct, their language is simple, and features down-to-earth and uncouth expressions.

Building on this literature, we test the persuasive power of a low political style (i.e., political messages characterized by uncivil or disrespectful expressions; e.g., insults, name-calling, ad-hominem attacks) and simplistic argumentations. Two aspects of this definition should be kept in mind. First, although we borrow from scholarly work on populist style, this is not a study about populism. Instead, we focus on an emerging style of politics that is often associated with populists but that can be employed by political actors considered "mainstream" as well (Bossetta, 2017). Second, although we resort to Ostiguy's (2017) definition of a "low political style," we focus only on one dimension of his high and low continuum (p. 77). High and low are much broader concepts that have to do with "ways of relating to people" and "include issues of accents, level of language, body language, gestures, ways of dressing [. . .]" (Ostiguy, 2017, p. 5). In this study, we focus on one aspect of this definition, namely the use of uncivil expressions and simplistic argumentations.

Arguments have been made that a low political style can be more persuasive than a high political style. Though the literature on negative campaign offers mixed results (Lau, Sigelman, & Rovner, 2007), studies showed that incivility is more entertaining (Mutz & Reeves, 2005), shocking, and attention-grabbing (Soroka & McAdams, 2015). These characteristics facilitate message comprehension and retention (Fridkin & Kenney, 2011), which are determining factors in increasing persuasion (McGuire, 2013). At the same time, prior research generally confirms that simple messages are easier to process and more likely to be remembered (Cobb & Kuklinski, 1997; McGuire, 1989). In line with this, we posit a direct positive effect from political style to persuasion, such that (H1) messages with a low (vs. high) political style are more persuasive.

Mediator: Perceived Emotional Sincerity

To better understand the cognitive processes accounting for the hypothesized direct effect of political style on persuasion, we evaluate the role played by perceived sincerity. As early as 1986, philosopher Harry Frankfurt (2005) described a process of gradual retreat from the value of "correctness" toward the "alternative ideal of sincerity," which he partially explains with a growing skepticism toward "the possibility of knowing how things truly are" (p. 65). In his words, "rather than seeking primarily to arrive at accurate representations of a common world, the individual turns toward trying to provide honest representations of himself" (Frankfurt, 2005, p. 65).

This is in line with two trends characterizing contemporary politics; on the one hand, a growing skepticism toward experts and traditional media (Gottfried, Walker, & Mitchel, 2020), and on the other, a renewed importance of authenticity in politics (Luebke, 2020). The declining trust in traditional media and the advent of social media, where politicians can directly communicate with their followers, have led to a greater focus on political personalities (McGregor, 2017). In a context where individuals do not trust information from experts and traditional media and have direct access to political information through politicians' social media channels, being perceived as an "authentic politician" (i.e., as one that offers a sincere representation of oneself) has gained greater relevance (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018).

A few scholars have started investigating what makes politicians be perceived as more authentic. Notably, some have suggested that politicians who break the norms of political debate gain authenticity (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018; Rosenblum, Schroeder, & Gino, 2019). A low political style not only indicates that the speaker comes from a different breed of politicians, one that does not hide behind etiquette and shows their true self (Fieschi, 2019), but it can also be justified as "spontaneous outbursts" signaling that the culprit is a sincere person (Benson, 2011). In this regard, scholars posited that the persuasive power of populist politicians, who are associated with a more transgressive political style, rests on their authentic communication style, which ultimately resonates with ordinary people (Shane, 2018; Theye & Melling, 2018).

Against this backdrop, we contend that insofar as politicians pull away from the norms of political debate (i.e., they employ a low political style), their perceived authenticity increases, strengthening the persuasive power of their message. Authenticity is associated with sincerity and spontaneity, and it refers to the alignment between one's self-presentation and one's self-concept (Erickson, 1995). In line with this definition, we operationalize it as the extent to which a speaker is perceived as emotionally sincere (i.e., he provides a sincere representation of their internal affective experience; Salmela, 2020). Hence, we expect that (H2) the persuasiveness of a low (vs. high) political style is mediated by the PES of the candidate in such a way that (H2a) a low (vs. high) political style makes that the candidate is perceived as more emotionally sincere; and (H2b) messages from candidates that are perceived as more emotionally sincere are more persuasive.

Moderator: Individual Epistemic Preferences

Hitherto, effects were posited for the general population without accounting for individual differences. However, we raise questions about whether this first explanation "across the board" is satisfactory. It is widely accepted that persuasion is not only a function of the characteristics of a message but also of the characteristics of its receivers (Haugtvedt & Petty, 1992; Rucker, Tormala, & Petty, 2004). Hence, we advance the hypothesis that in a political environment where authenticity has become more relevant, it is worth considering individuals' dispositions toward the notion of truth.

Philosopher Bernard Williams (2004) conceptualized truthfulness as a combination of two epistemic virtues: accuracy and sincerity. The former refers to factual, correct, and verifiable information; the latter relates to information that honestly and authentically represents one's thoughts. Building on this philosophical work, scholars posited that individuals' growing preference for politicians' willingness to "tell it

like it is" might result from a general disaffection toward expertise and a renewed relevance of authenticity in politics. Notably, it has been suggested that the liberal conception of truth based on evidence and scientific inquiry has been challenged by a different one valuing personal sincerity over factual accuracy (Green, 2019; Osborne, 2017).

In Green's (2019) account, accuracy is an intellectual value based on investigation and expertise and, as such, the domain of the elites. In contrast, sincerity is the value of the common person who reveals their true beliefs. Discussing the Trump case, he posits that Trump's supporters prefer sincerity over accuracy and that "when [they] declare 'he tells it like it is,' what they may mean is some approximation of 'he provides a sincere version of his thoughts and feelings,' and emphatically not that 'he provides an accurate representation of the world'" (Green, 2019, p. 8).

Based on this, we posit that individuals' epistemic preferences for these two competing epistemic virtues (i.e., accuracy and sincerity) partake in processing messages with a low political style. Notably, we expect that (H3) the persuasiveness of low (vs. high) political style depends on individual epistemic preferences, in such a way that, (H3a) for those individuals who prefer sincerity over accuracy, messages with a low (vs. high) political style are more persuasive, whereas (H3b) for those individuals who prefer accuracy over sincerity, messages with a low (vs. high) political style are more persuasive.

We also expect a similar dynamic concerning the candidate's PES. Notably, we posit that (H4) the effect of a low (vs. high) political style on the candidate's PES is moderated by individual epistemic preferences in such a way that (H4a) for those individuals who prefer sincerity over accuracy, a low political style increases the candidate's PES, whereas (H4b) for those individuals who prefer sincerity over accuracy, a high political style decreases the candidate's PES. The whole model encompassing all hypothesized relationships is summarized in Figure 1.

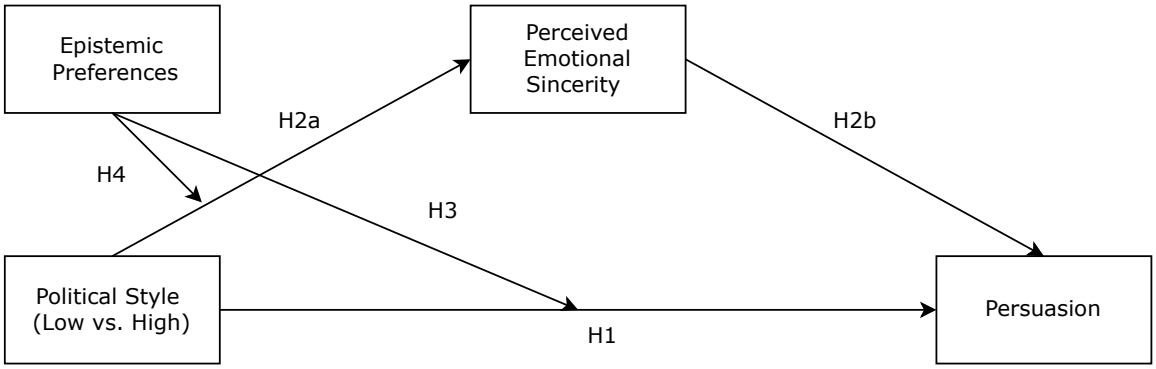

Figure 1. Conceptual model.

Method

Sample

A convenience sample of U.S. citizens was surveyed via the online platform Amazon MTurk (Paolacci & Chandler, 2014) in mid-December 2019. Participants were offered $0.70 for their participation. Based on the result of an a-priori power analysis (effect size = .15, alpha = .05, power = .80) for four experimental conditions, a target sample size was set to 480 participants. We recruited 498 participants, of which 15 did not complete the survey. To account for potential inattentiveness, respondents who failed an attention check (n = 17), those who spent less than five seconds on the treatment page (n = 23), and straight-liners (n = 19) were excluded.

The final sample of 424 participants comprised 51% of women, with an average age of 32.6 (SD = 12.24); 42.2% held a bachelor's degree, 14.2% held a master's degree, 18.6% attended some college but did not hold a degree, and 10.8% held a high school diploma or an equivalent qualification. Caucasians formed most of the sample (80.4%), followed by African Americans (8.5%) and Asians (4.7%). Most respondents were interested in politics (51.9% were somewhat interested, 38.7% were very interested, whereas only 2.1% were not at all interested). The sample was somewhat skewed to the left (0–10 left-right scale: M = 4.53, SD = 2.87). Additionally, 46.7% of the respondents identified as Democrats (29.0% as Republicans and 21.9% as independents).

Experimental Design and Procedure

All the effects postulated, including the research design and materials, were preregistered on December 22, 2019. A single-factor (political style: low vs. high) mixed (between and within-subjects) design was conducted to investigate the direct effect of political style on persuasion, the mediating effect of PES, and the moderating effect of epistemic preferences. The setup for measuring persuasion was created following a previous study (Nai, Schemeil, & Marie, 2017; see Figure A1).

The starting point of the experimental component is an opinion question. All respondents indicated to what extent they supported the setting up of supervised injection sites (SIS) in their city (1 = "Absolutely no," 10 = "Absolutely yes": M = 4.54, SD = 3.22). Initially, 57.6% of the respondents were in favor of SIS, whereas 42.4% were against them. Based on their answer, respondents were presented with tailored counterarguments, that is, persuasive messages that showed a position that contrasted their own; respondents that initially supported SIS were exposed to arguments against SIS, and vice versa for those who initially opposed them.

These persuasive messages took the form of a statement from a political candidate, experimentally manipulated using either a low or high political. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of these two conditions, then asked again about their opinion on the same issue. Before answering this second opinion question, a manipulation check was conducted, and respondents were asked to rate items relating to the candidate's PES. Before this experimental component, all participants answered a series of questions measuring their epistemic preferences and personal profile.

Manipulation of Independent Variable

Each respondent was presented with a screenshot of an online article showing the opinion of a fictive candidate on a controversial issue, namely the setting up of SIS. The article introduced the politician as a running ward candidate for a fictive forthcoming city council election in a British county. To exclude partisanship effects, no indication of party affiliation was provided. By setting the stage of the experiment within the British electoral context, we minimized respondents' associations with specific U.S. candidates—and, likely, the association between the candidate and their position on the issue—which would have likely acted as excessively strong confounders. At the same time, a U.K. setting is probably familiar enough to respondents to avoid losing too much in external validity.

We designed four articles that differed only in the reported candidate's statements. In two of them, the candidate advocated for the setting up of SIS (counterargument 1), whereas in the other two, he opposed it (counterargument 2). Each set of counterarguments included one article in which the candidate displayed a low political style and one in which he exhibited a high political. Statements of the former kind were characterized by uncivil expressions conveying disrespect to political opponents (e.g., "My opponent and his friends must be nuts to think this is a good idea") and simplified argumentations (e.g., "More SIS equals more crimes"), whereas statements of the latter kind acknowledged competing opinions without devaluing them (e.g., "My opponent and I have different opinions on SIS"), and presented elaborate argumentation in support of the counterargument (e.g., "Studies have shown that SIS may bring crime to surrounding communities, such as arrests for drug trafficking, assaults, or robberies"). The complete stimulus material is included in online Appendix A.

Mediator: PES

PES was measured employing two items adapted from a scale by Caza, Zhang, Wang, and Bai (2015) developed to measure leaders' emotional sincerity. Respondents indicated on a scale from 1 (= "Disagree strongly") to 7 (= "Agree strongly") whether they agreed with the following statements: (1) "The candidate was sincere about his emotions regarding SIS," (2) "The candidate put on an act about his emotions regarding SIS." The two items were strongly and negatively correlated, $r = -.53$, $p < .001$. The negatively phrased item was reverse coded, and the PES scale was computed (rs= .69, $M = 4.90$, $SD = 1.41$).

Moderator: Epistemic Preferences

We employed vignettes to evaluate individual epistemic preferences for sincerity over accuracy. Drawing insights from the scholarly work on epistemic cognition (Chinn, Buckland, & Samarapungavan, 2011; Hofer & Pintrich, 2002), we designed an original vignette question contrasting two prototypical epistemic preferences for either sincerity or accuracy (see online Appendix B). This was pretested on a convenience sample ($N = 96$) collected in early December among the researcher's networks.

Respondents read a discussion between two characters discussing what being truthful means and then asked with whom they agreed the most (1 = "Disagree strongly" to 7 = "Agree strongly"). The first character argued in favor of a definition of truth as sincerity (e.g., "To me being truthful means always

saying what you think, no matter the consequences. There is no other 'truth' than being sincere end express yourself"), whereas the second in favor of a definition of truth as accuracy (e.g., "I think that being truthful means sticking to the facts, regardless of your personal opinions"). To account for primacy effects, arguments were presented in random order. As effects were postulated only for individuals preferring one virtue over the other, respondents who had not shown any preference (n = 38, 9%) were excluded. The final 6-point scale measuring epistemic preferences was computed, with higher values indicating a stronger preference for sincerity (M = 2.73, SD = 1.31).

Vignettes' Validation

In addition to our vignettes, we designed and pretested (N = 96) a 7-item original battery containing statements reflecting both epistemic virtues (e.g., accuracy: "I believe only a statement if it is based on empirical evidence"; sincerity: "The fact that a person is genuine is enough for me to believe what he/she says"; 1 = "Disagree strongly" to 7= "Agree strongly"). An exploratory factor analysis was conducted. Two factors with an Eigenvalue higher than 1 were extracted, explaining 57.11% of the variance (see online Appendix C). The preference for sincerity scale (PSS, α = .66, M = 4.24, SD = 1.50) and the preference for accuracy scale (PAS, α = .70, M = 5.72, SD = 1.12) were built by averaging their items. In each case, the higher the score, the stronger the preference for either sincerity or accuracy.

These scales were used to validate our vignette. As expected, the epistemic preferences scale positively correlated with the PSS, r = .46, p < .001, and negatively with the PAS, r = −.36, p < .001. The two scales were also moderately and negatively correlated with one another, r = −.21 p < .001; individuals scoring higher on the PSS also scored lower on the PAS. The PSS and PAS were also employed to conduct a robustness check on our findings—obtaining consistent results (see online Appendix E).

Dependent Variable: Persuasion

Persuasion was measured by comparing respondents' answers to the opinion questions before and after exposure to the counterargument. The difference between the initial and final opinions was calculated so that a positive number reflected a change toward the counterargument (i.e., the respondent was persuaded; a negative number reflected a change against the counterargument; i.e., the respondent's initial opinion was reinforced; and a null value indicated no change; i.e., the respondent's opinion remained stable). Given our interest in persuasion, respondents with a reinforced opinion (n = 44) were excluded from the analysis, and the final variable, persuasion, was computed as a count variable. Only 33.2% of the sample was persuaded. Among them, 51.6% flipped their opinion (M = 3.22, SD = 2.21), meaning that if they were in favor of SIS before exposure to the counterargument, they were against it afterward—and vice versa. The average magnitude of persuasion was 2.39 (SD = 1.88).

Control Variables

Attitudes toward drugs are, to some extent, shaped by political alignment (Moore, 2016); hence we controlled for political ideology (Left-Right 11-point scale; M = 4.53; SD = 2.87) and political interest (1 = "Not at all interested" to 4 = "Very interested"). To further control for individuals' attitudes toward drugs,

we asked them to indicate whether they supported the legalization of marijuana (0–10 scale: M = 6.96; SD = 3.31). As there is some evidence of the moderating effect of personality traits on persuasion (Gerber, Huber, Doherty, Dowling, & Panagopoulos, 2013), respondents were also asked to fill out the short version of the Big Five questionnaire (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003). Finally, considering that religiosity predicts negative attitudes toward scientific knowledge (McPhetres & Zuckerman, 2018)—a relevant component of accuracy—we asked participants about their religiousness (1 = "Not at all religious" to 4 = "Very religious"). Gender and education were also included as controls.

Results

Manipulation Checks

Most respondents correctly identified the direction of the counterargument, notably 90.3% of those exposed to the pro-SIS counterargument and 83.9% of those exposed to the against-SIS counterargument, $X^2(1, N = 407) = 226.16$, $p < .001$. Moreover, according to a result of an independent t-test, respondents in the low condition were significantly more likely to rate the language as not poised (M = 3.55, SD = 3.05) than respondents in the high condition (M = 7.13, SD = 1.88), $t(418) = 14.45$, $p < .001$. The manipulation of our main independent variable was deemed successful.

Main Analysis

All the hypotheses were tested with Hayes's (2018) PROCESS macro for multiple logistic regression, using 5,000 bootstrapped samples to generate 95% confidence intervals. The results of 12 independent samples t-tests—one for each identified control variable—showed no statistically significant difference between experimental conditions (see online Appendix D). Hence, for the sake of presentation, control variables were not included in the regression models. Full models with the inclusion of control variables are presented in online Appendix D, showing consistent results.

From Political Style to Persuasion Through PES

We expected a low political style to be more persuasive than a high one (H1) and that this direct effect was positively mediated by PES (H2). We test these hypotheses with a regression-based mediation analysis predicting persuasion based on political style and its interaction with PES. Numerical results for both the total effect model and the direct effect model are presented in Table 1.

According to the results of our total effect model, political style was only a marginally significant predictor of persuasion, $b = -0.31$, se = 0.16, $p = .054$, 95% CI [−0.62, 0.00]. Contrary to our expectations, a low political style was less persuasive than a high political style, decreasing the magnitude of persuasion by a factor of 0.31—although this effect was only marginally significant. H1 was not supported. When adding the mediator, political style decreased its influence and turned insignificant, $b = -0.25$, $t = -1.57$, $p = .117$, 95% CI [−0.57, 0.06], suggesting the existence of a full mediation path.

Table 1. Total and Direct Effect Models Predicting Persuasion From Political Style and PES (N = 380).

	Persuasion					
	Total Effect Model†			Direct Effect Model**		
	Coeff.	se	*p*	Coeff.	se	*p*
Political style	−0.31	0.16	†	−0.25	0.16	
PES				0.15	0.06	*
Constant	0.94	0.11	***	0.18	0.32	
R^2	.01			.03		
F	3.74			5.13		

Notes. ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05, †p < .1.

There was a small, negative, statistically significant indirect effect from political style to persuasion through PES, b = −0.06, se = 0.03, 95% CI [−0.13, −0.01]. Messages with a low political style decreased PES (a-path: b = −0.38, se = 0.14, p = .006, 95% CI [−0.66, −0.11]), whereas higher PES increased persuasion (b-path: b = 0.15, se = 0.06, p = .011, 95% CI [0.03, 0.26]) (see Table 2 and Figure 2). These results partially supported H2; although a mediation effect was found, its direction was reversed compared with the expected one. The total effect model explained only 1% of the variance in persuasion (R^2 = .01), whereas in the direct effect model, this value increased by only two percentage points (R^2 = .03).

Table 2. Summary of Total, Direct and Indirect Effects of Political Style on Persuasion Through PES (N = 380).

Total effect of Political Style on Persuasion (c)		Direct effect of Political Style on Persuasion (c')		Indirect effects of Political Style on Persuasion via PES (c' + ab)			
						Percentile bootstrap [a] 95% confidence interval	
Coeff.	se	Coeff.	se	Coeff.	se	Lower	Higher
−0.31†	0.16	−0.25	0.16	−0.06*	0.03	−0.13	−0.01

Notes. ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05, †p < .1.
[a]5,000 bootstrap samples.

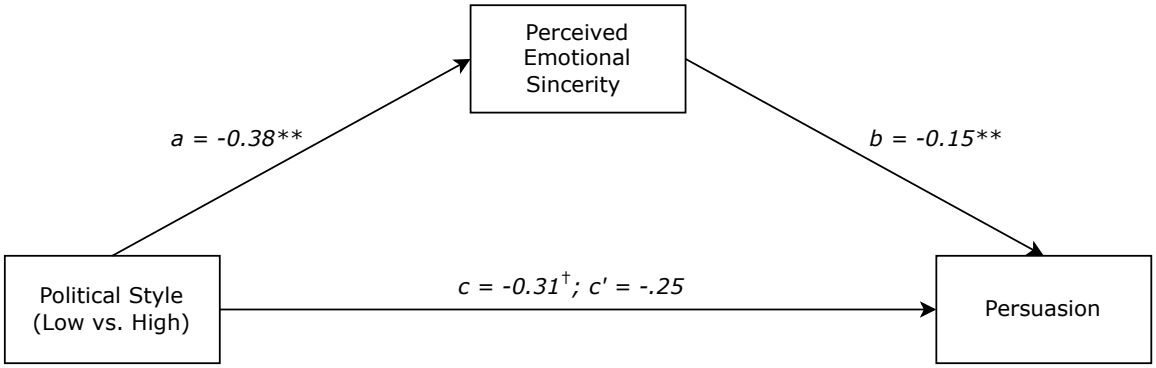

Figure 2. Simple mediation analysis: Path coefficients.
Notes. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, † $p < .1$.

The Moderating Effect of Epistemic Preferences

We hypothesized that the effect of political style on both persuasion and PES was a function of respondents' epistemic preferences. On the one hand, we postulated that individuals who prefer sincerity over accuracy were more persuaded by a low political style (H3a), whereas individuals who prefer accuracy over sincerity were more persuaded by a high political style (H3b). On the other hand, we hypothesized that for those individuals who prefer sincerity, a low political style increased PES (H4a), whereas a high political style decreased it (H4b). We ran two separate regression-based analyses to test the moderating effect of epistemic preferences on the relationship between political style and persuasion and between political style and PES.

In both cases, the interaction coefficient (political style × epistemic preferences) was insignificant (see Table 3). This implies that, contrary to our assumptions, the effect of political style on persuasion and PES was not dependent on individuals' epistemic preferences. Both H3 and H4 were not supported. Results were replicated when replacing the epistemic preferences scale with the scales separately measuring preference for sincerity and preference for accuracy (see online Appendix E).

Table 3. Simple Moderation Models Predicting Persuasion and PES From Political Style and Its Interaction With Epistemic Preferences (N = 345[a]).

	Persuasion			PES		
	Coeff.	se	*p*	Coeff.	se	*p*
Political style	−0.14	0.40		−0.40	0.35	
Epistemic preferences	0.09	0.09		−0.02	0.08	
Political Style × Epistemic preferences	−0.07	0.13		0.03	0.12	
Constant	0.75	0.27	**	5.19	0.23	***
R^2	.01			.01		
F	1.63			1.46		

Notes. ***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$, †$p < .1$.
[a]Some missing values, respondents with no epistemic preferences were excluded from the analysis.

The Role of Message Perceptions: Exploratory Analysis

The results of the preregistered confirmatory analysis broadly disproved our hypotheses. This section attempts to provide alternative explanations based on exploratory analyses beyond our preregistered framework. The starting point is the realization that the use of fictive candidates most likely weakened the empirical relevance of their PES. Respondents were provided with no information about the candidate whose message they read, which may account for a marginal role of sponsor perceptions in our models. Bearing this in mind, we assessed the possibility that argument perceptions were more influential than sponsor perceptions in affecting persuasive outcomes.

Additionally, we investigated the impact of political ideology as potentially moderating the relationship between political style, argument perceptions, and persuasion. Several studies suggest that political ideology drives different reactions to political style. For example, the literature on moral foundations indicates that, because of their differences in moral principles (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009), liberals may be more sensitive to an uncivil political style being harmful, hence less persuaded by it (Rosenblum et al., 2019). Similarly, because liberals and conservatives differ in their appreciation of political incorrectness (Lalonde, Doan, & Patterson, 2000), conservatives may evaluate uncivil and simplified messages more positively than liberals and, in turn, be more persuaded by them.

Against this background, we conducted an exploratory analysis to investigate whether argument perceptions were a better mediator of the relationship between political style and persuasion and to test whether and how this relationship was moderated by political ideology. Argument perceptions were operationalized as the perceived reasonableness (PR) of the counterargument, measured by asking respondents how "reasonable" they considered the candidate's way of looking at the issues of SIS (0 "very unreasonable" to 4 "very reasonable": M = 2.44, SD = 0.80). The conceptual model for this exploratory analysis is presented in Figure 3.

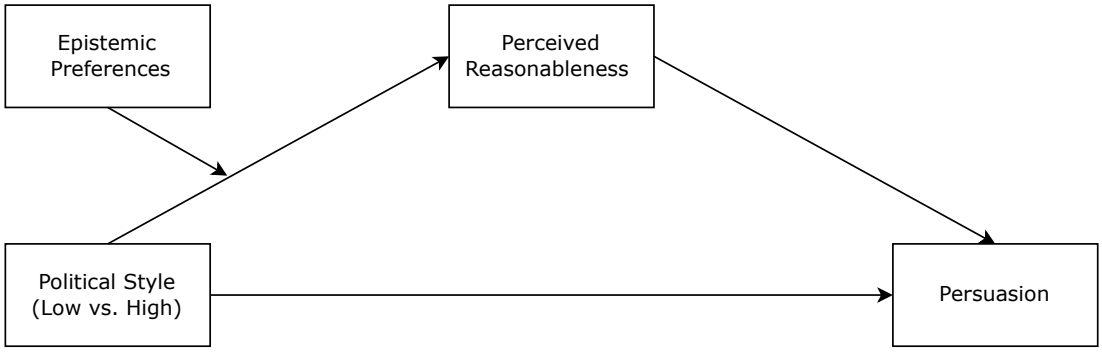

Figure 3. Exploratory analysis; conceptual model.

Results

From Political Style to Persuasion Through PES & PR

We ran a regression-based parallel mediation analysis including PES and PR as mediators of the relationship between political style and persuasion. The results of the direct effect model, including PES, PR, and political style as predictors of persuasion, showed that, when PR is accounted for, both political style (c'-path: b = 0.13, se = 0.15, p = .390, 95% CI [−0.17, 0.44]) and PES (b1-path: b = 0.05, se = 0.05, p = .361, 95% CI [−0.06, 0.16]) are no longer significant predictors of persuasion. On the contrary, the effect of PR on persuasion was strong and statistically significant (b2-path: b = 0.81, se = 0.10, p < .001, 95% CI [0.61, 1.00]). Additionally, the model was significant and explained up to 17% of the variance in persuasion (see Table 4).

These results indicated not only the existence of a full mediation path but also that PR performed much better than PES as a mediator of the relationship between political style and persuasion, accounting for almost the entire total indirect effect of political style on persuasion, a2b2-path: b = −0.42, se = 0.09, 95% CI [−0.61, −0.27]. A low political style decreased PR by a factor of 0.52 (a2-path: b = −0.52, se = 0.08, p < .001, 95% CI [−0.68, −0.37]), whereas higher PR increased persuasion by a factor of 0.81 (see Table 5 and Figure 4).

Table 4. Direct Effect Model Predicting Persuasion From Political Style, PES, and PR (N = 380).

	Persuasion***		
	Coeff.	se	*p*
Political style	0.13	0.15	
PES	0.05	0.05	
PR	0.81	0.10	***
Constant	−1.49	0.36	***
R^2	.17		
F	25.90		

Note. ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05, †p < .1.

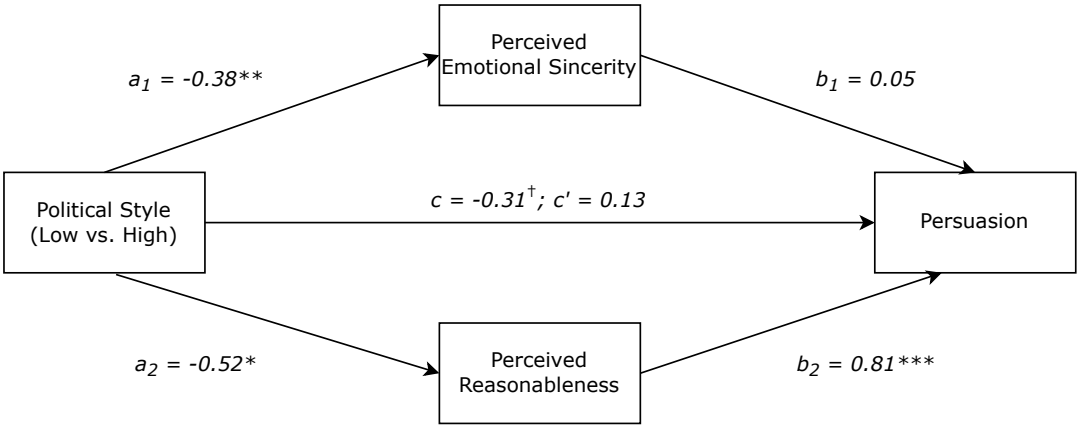

Figure 4. Parallel mediation analysis; path coefficients.

Notes. ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05, †p < .1.

Table 5. Summary of Total, Direct, and Indirect Effects of Political Style via PES and PR (N = 380).

Total effect of Political Style on Persuasion (c)		Direct effect of Political Style on Persuasion (c')		Indirect Effects of Political Style on Persuasion via PES and PR (c' + ab)				
							Percentile Bootstrap[a] 95% Confidence Interval	
Coeff.	se	Coeff.	se		Coeff.	se	Lower	Higher
−0.31†	0.16	0.13	0.15	Total: $a_1b_1 + a_2b_2$	−0.44*	0.09	−0.63	−0.28
				M1: a_1b_1[b]	−0.02	0.02	−0.07	0.03
				M2: a_2b_2[c]	−0.42*	0.09	−0.61	−0.27

Notes. ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05, †p < .1.
[a]5,000 bootstrap samples
[b]a_1b_1 = Political Style → PES → Persuasion.
[c]a_2b_2 = Political Style → PR → Persuasion.

The Effect of Political Ideology

To further investigate the role of PR in our mediation model, we conducted a regression-based analysis to test for the moderating effect of political ideology on the relationship between political style, PR, and persuasion. The results of a simple moderation model showed that both political style (a1-path: b = −0.85, se = 0.14, p < .001, 95% CI [−1.13, −0.56]), and political ideology (a2-path: b = −0.04, se = 0.02, p = .046, 95% CI [−0.07, −0.01]) were significantly involved in predicting PR. Additionally, their interactions yielded small but statistically significant effects, a3-path: b = 0.07, se = 0.03, p = .012, 95% CI [0.01, 0.12]. The model significantly explained 13% of the variance in PR (see Table 6).

Table 6. Simple Moderation Model Predicting PR From Political Style and Its Interaction With Political Ideology (N = 375[a]).

	PR***		
	Coeff.	se	*p*
Political Style	−0.85	0.14	***
Political Ideology	−0.04	0.02	*
Political Style × *Political Ideology*	0.07	0.03	*
Constant	2.87	0.10	
R^2	.13		
F	17.92		

Notes. ***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$, †$p < .1$.
[a]Some missing values

Examination of the interaction plot (examined at 1 *SD* below/above the mean of the moderator, see Figure 5) shows that political style matters, especially for liberals. Although, on average, both liberals and conservatives found a counterargument with a low political style more reasonable, the difference in PR between respondents in the high political style condition and those in the low political style condition was much more extensive for liberals than it was for conservatives. Conditional effects of political style on PR at different levels of political ideology are summarized in Table 7.

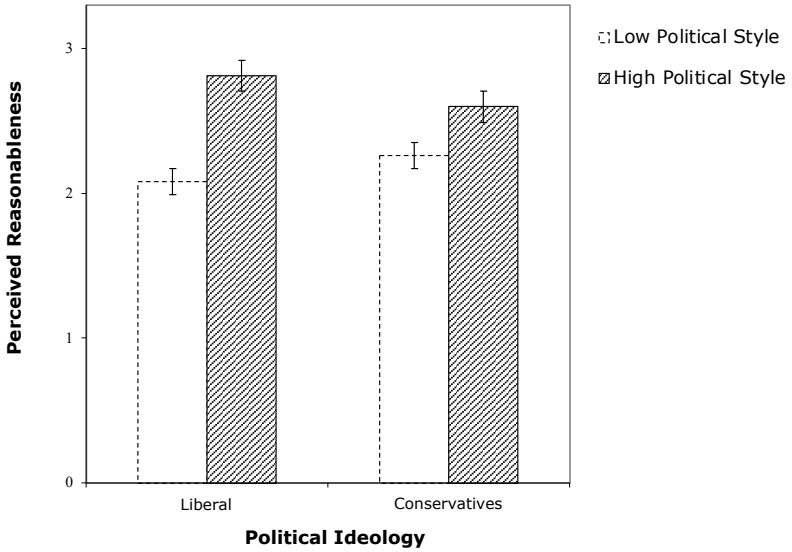

Figure 5. Moderation of the effect of political style on PR at values of the moderator political ideology.

Table 7. Conditional Effects of Political Style on PR at Different Levels of Political Ideology (N = 375[a]).

	PR			
Political Ideology[b]	Coeff.	se	Percentile bootstrap [c] 95% confidence interval	
			Lower	Higher
Left (–2.89)	–0.73***	0.11	–0.95	–0.51
Center (0.000)	–0.53***	0.08	–0.69	–0.38
Right (2.89)	–0.34**	0.11	–0.55	–0.12

Notes. ***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$, †$p < .1$.
[a]Some missing values.
[b]Different levels of political ideology are examined at 1 *SD* below/above its mean.
[c]5,000 bootstrap samples.

About the full moderated mediation path, the results of a regression-based moderated mediation analysis yielded a small but significant index of moderated mediation, $b = 0.06$, se = 0.03, 95% CI [0.01, 0.11] (see Table 8). This means that political ideology significantly moderated the indirect effect of political style on persuasion via PR. The indirect effect of political style was increasingly strongly positive (i.e., toward successful persuasion—for respondents on the right of the political spectrum and more strongly negative; i.e., toward unsuccessful persuasion—for respondents on the left; see Figure 6).

Table 8. Conditional Indirect Effects of Political Style on Persuasion via PR at Different Levels of Political Ideology (N = 375[a]).

	Persuasion			
Political Ideology[b]	Coeff.	se	Percentile Bootstrap[c] 95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower	Higher
Left (–2.89)	–0.61	0.12	–0.88	–0.39
Center (.000)	–0.45	0.09	–0.65	–0.29
Right (2.89)	–0.28	0.11	–0.52	–0.07
Index of Moderated Mediation	0.06	0.03	0.01	0.11

Notes. ***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$, †$p < .1$.
[a]Some missing values.
[b]Different levels of political ideology are examined at 1 *SD* below/above its mean.
[c]5,000 bootstrap samples.

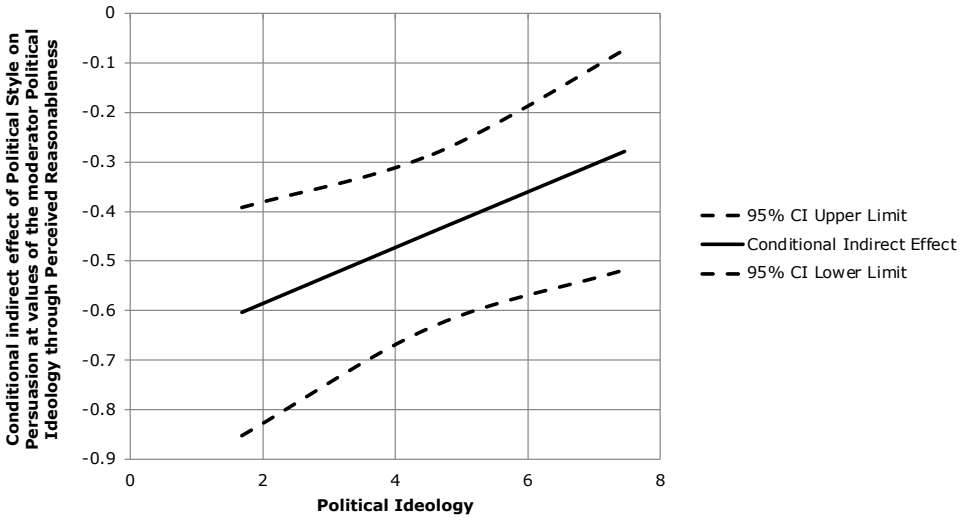

Figure 6. Conditional indirect effect of political style on persuasion at values of the moderator political ideology through PR.

Discussion

Despite increasing concerns about the quality of elite political discourse, modern democracies have been experiencing the rise of politicians who rely on a more crude and unrefined language, reflecting voters' growing appreciation for "straight-talkers." Recent work suggested that a low political style can convey a sense of authenticity, fostering political success. This has been argued with particular reference to populist candidates, whose success is often credited to their "reliance on provocation to create the impression of authenticity" (Fieschi, 2019, p. 53). Nevertheless, it remains to debate whether this type of communication increases authenticity perceptions and whether these translate into successful persuasive outcomes. The present study entered this debate by empirically testing whether uncivil and simplified political messages are persuasive and whether the speaker's PES mediates this effect.

Our findings demonstrated that although the persuasiveness of a political message was a function of its style and, marginally, of the PES of its sponsor, the relationship between these variables was reversed compared with the expected one. A low political style reduced persuasion by decreasing perceptions of a candidate's emotional sincerity. Results also disproved our expectations about the moderating role of epistemic preferences. We expected individuals who appreciate sincerity (i.e., the honest presentations of one's beliefs) over accuracy (i.e., the presentation of correct and verifiable information) to be more likely to perceive messages with a low political style as more emotionally sincere, thus be persuaded by them. However, epistemic preferences were not significant predictors in our models.

To better understand these unexpected findings, we discuss them, considering alternative explanations and paths for future research. First, the characteristics of our experimental design may have

reduced the empirical relevance of perceptions of emotional sincerity. By not providing information about the speaker of an uncivil and simplified message, we might have marginalized the role of sponsor perceptions in favor of argument perceptions—as confirmed by the results of our additional non-preregistered exploratory analyses. Sponsors' characteristics, especially partisanship, might be highly consequential concerning the processing of political style. In line with the literature on motivated reasoning (Taber & Lodge, 2006), it is possible that only when the source of a rude and uncouth political message is liked then individuals appreciate its sponsor's sincerity while disregarding its accuracy to reduce cognitive dissonance. This is especially relevant if we consider scholarly work on political incivility, suggesting that partisans tend to judge their in-party as more uncivil than their out-party (Liang & Zhang, 2021).

Dynamics of group identity could furthermore partially explain the results found for ideology as moderator—especially given that the political issue on which the persuasive protocol was designed (the setting up of SIS) is likely to see more support among liberal respondents. It may be argued that differences between conservatives and liberals in the persuasive impact of an uncivil and simplified message stemmed from their different levels of support for the ideology associated with it, rather than from differences in the appreciation for a low political style. This follows from the literature on epistemic tribalism and expressive responding (Huddy, Mason, & Aarøe, 2015; Rini, 2017), highlighting dynamics beyond our hypothesized model. Further research should account for this issue-ideology interplay, ideally by replicating the persuasive protocols across different issues on the ideological spectrum to ensure that the results found are externally valid.

Furthermore, prior research has already demonstrated that specific circumstances need to occur for the flouting of the sociopolitical norms to signal that a politician is an "authentic champion" of the people (Lewandowsky, 2019). Notably, only when people feel disenfranchised, then they regard candidates' who defy deliberative norms as "authentically appealing" (Hahl, Kim, & Zuckerman Sivan, 2018). Bearing this in mind, future research could investigate the role of populist attitudes. Considering that populist voters share the belief that politicians and institutions are unresponsive to their demands (Norris & Inglehart, 2018), they may be more likely to be persuaded by uncivil and simplified political messages by the emotional sincerity it conveys.

For the unconfirmed moderating effect of epistemic preferences, we claim that context matters. Research on epistemic cognition suggested that the same epistemic virtue can be evaluated positively or negatively based on the circumstances under which it is exemplified (Zagzebski, 1996). For example, although a health activist's perseverance to persuade the public against conventional thinking that a food is harmful will be considered intellectual courage, a flat-earther's perseverance in convincing the public about their beliefs will be regarded as close-mindedness (Chinn et al., 2011). Consequently, it might be the case that such predispositions behave like conjunctural cognitive strategies rather than stable attitudinal dispositions, hence need to be "activated" by a particular source and in a specific context to affect persuasion.

Limitations

The present study has some limitations. First, the operationalization of low political style as the combination of incivility and simplification could have led to confounding effects. These are elements of political style with distinct effects on political attitudes. For instance, Goovaerts and Marien (2020) found that incivility lowers political trust, whereas simplicity does not. Even though simplicity and incivility can

have different attitudinal effects, this study focused on information processing and persuasive outcomes. From a theoretical standpoint, both incivility and simplicity could increase persuasion by increasing message comprehension and retention. Nevertheless, future research should disentangle their effects to ensure that our unexpected findings are unrelated to confoundation.

Furthermore, the decision to set the stage of the experiment within the British electoral context could raise concerns about its external validity. Although there are similarities between the U.S. and British contexts, there are substantial differences in electoral systems and political culture. In this sense, the saliency of the issue and general involvement with the candidate was likely lower for respondents because of the experiment being set in another country than theirs. Nevertheless, we believe that a good case can be made that the issues at stake are general enough—and the political dynamics discussed familiar enough—that respondents were likely not swayed excessively by the different setup.

A further assumption is that the American public can understand political dynamics in countries other than theirs (the United Kingdom, in this case) or, more precisely, that they can reflect on issues in other countries considering their own national experience. Although this cannot be generalized, especially in light of research pinpointing relatively low levels of political sophistication and awareness in the American public (Kleinberg & Lau, 2019), we believe that the issues we presented were general and intelligible enough even for a public of political nonexperts. More importantly, any biases in this sense would likely result in more conservative (i.e., weaker) estimates, a bias we are happy to live with.

Conclusion

The present study speaks to the larger debate on changing styles of political leadership, offering an assessment of the intuition that the persuasive power of a low political style works as a function of individual preferences for the epistemic value of sincerity vis-à-vis that of accuracy. We maintain that our nuanced results should not be interpreted as supporting the idea that style does not matter, and they should not discourage researchers from placing issues of authenticity and epistemic preferences at the center of studies on the cognitive processes regulating the persuasive effect of political style. On the contrary, we urge further research to build on this design by incorporating a more comprehensive operationalization of political style and accounting for the potential role played by partisanship, source attribution, and populist attitudes.

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