Comic Agonism in the 2016 Campaign: A Study of Iowa Caucus Rallies

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Abstract

In this study, we assess the extent to which attending a candidate rally was associated with distrust of democratic institutions, epistemic rigidity, attribution of malevolent intentions to the political outgroup, and acceptance of political violence. Surveys (N = 251) were distributed at rallies the night before and day of the 2016 Iowa Caucuses. Results suggest that attendees of rallies for Bernie Sanders or Donald Trump were more likely to distrust democracy relative to attendees of a Hillary Clinton or Ted Cruz rally. Findings also suggest that mistrust of democracy was associated with greater attribution of malevolence and acceptance of political violence. Attending a Sanders or Trump rally was indirectly associated with attribution of malevolence and acceptance of political violence through democratic mistrust.

Keywords

2016 presidential primary campaign, political rallies, antiestablishment discontent, comic agonism, democratic culture

The 2016 presidential primary campaign highlighted a common tension within modern parties in the United States—namely a conflict between traditional party favorites (e.g., Secretary Hillary Clinton and Governors Jeb Bush, Chris Christie, and John Kasich) and party outsiders (e.g., Senator Bernie Sanders and real estate mogul Donald Trump) who sought to ride a wave of antiestablishment discontent to wrest the nomination from the traditional party favorites. This competition between insiders and insurgents presents an opportunity to illustrate and evaluate a theory of political

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polarization that we name here as *comic agonism*. In this study, we develop our theory of comic agonism and contrast it with what we call *tragic antagonism*, a form of political polarization that is especially corrosive to democratic culture. We then test the core premises of this theory in survey responses collected from attendees of rallies that occurred prior to the Iowa Caucus. Our results lend credence to our theory of comic agonism and leverage the insider/insurgent dynamic to illustrate that the line between an insurgent candidacy and a revolutionary antagonism can be quite thin.

Political Rallies and Violence in 2016

During the 2016 presidential primaries, candidate rallies became the sites of numerous violent incidents. The controversial candidacy of real estate mogul Donald Trump generated demonstrations that often resulted in verbal and physical clashes between protesters and supporters. Confrontations between Trump supporters and protesters occasionally escalated from shouting and jeering to spitting, kicking, punching, and pepper spraying. Episodes of protesters attacked by Trump supporters, local police, or the candidate's security occurred at least 11 times from October 2015 until April 2016, according to a log of violent incidents at Trump rallies published by *Slate* (Mathis-Lilley, 2016). For example, in March 2016, Kashiya Nwanguma, 21 years old, was pushed out of a Trump event in Kentucky. She claimed that in addition to being shoved, rally attendees shouted racial slurs at her (Parker, 2016). On March 10th in North Carolina, Rakeem Jones was punched as he was being ejected from a Trump rally. After the episode, the assailant declared in an interview that he liked "knocking the hell out of that 'big mouth'" and that next time they might have to kill Jones because "he might be with a terrorist organization" (Mathis-Lilley & Hannon, 2016).

The violent climate escalated even further in Chicago, where a Trump event was cancelled in March of 2016, "amid scenes of violence and chaos unparalleled in the recent history of American political campaigning" (Jacobs, McCarthy, & Stafford, 2016, para. 1). Following this episode, confrontations intensified in states such as New Mexico and California, where demonstrators burned Trump t-shirts, damaged police cars, and threw plastic bottles and other items at police officers (Holland, 2016). In San Francisco, Trump was forced to crawl under a fence to avoid demonstrators swarming outside of a hotel where he held a meeting (Berman & DelReal, 2016). Trump's events were thus "suffused with the kind of hostility and even violence that are unknown to modern presidential campaigns" (DelReal, 2016, para. 5).

Though the events surrounding Trump's candidacy were exceptional, protests and violence also occurred at some Democratic events. In August 2015, Bernie Sanders' speech was disrupted when Black Lives Matter demonstrators took over the microphone in Seattle. In May 2016, animal rights activists attempted to rush the stage while Sanders was addressing an audience in California (Cummings, 2016). The Nevada Democratic convention was full of tense moments and scuffles, as Sanders supporters objected to various procedures (Bump, 2016). In response to the situation, Sanders released a statement condemning violence, but still accusing the state party leadership of preventing a transparent process (Alcindor, 2016). After that episode, Democratic leadership expressed

concern about the penchant for violence from some of Sanders' supporters that could lead to disruptions during the party convention in Philadelphia (Linthicum, 2016).

The events of the 2016 primary do not stand in isolation. Instead, they exist alongside mass shootings accompanied with claims to political revolution (Wyler, 2014); increased participation in neo-Confederate secessionist groups; occupations of federal land in Nevada and Oregon; and increased citizen participation in "patriot" and armed militia groups with violent tendencies (Potok, 2017). In sum, a surprising number of citizens accept political violence (Kalmoe, 2014), and examples of political violence in the United States are easy to identify. The acceptance of political violence, defined as the belief that violence is an appropriate strategy to address social problems, is thus indicative of a coarse and highly uncivil political culture. As Sunstein (2009) argues, "terrorism is not abstract violence but an extreme form of political protest" (p. 108). In what follows, we outline a theoretical perspective that contrasts comic agonism with tragic antagonism. The core premises of this theory are that (a) people who attribute malevolent intentions to the political opposition will be more accepting of political violence, (b) people who distrust the democratic political regime will be more likely to attribute malevolent intentions to political opponents, and (c) people who express greater epistemic rigidity will be more likely to attribute malevolent intentions to political opponents. We find support for each of these premises in our study of attendees of rallies for the Iowa Caucuses.

Comic Agonism and Tragic Antagonism

At its core, our theoretical framework is rooted in a distinction between passionate but legitimate political competition and hostile political conflict. In making this distinction, we primarily draw from political philosopher Chantal Mouffe (2005, 2013) and literary critic Kenneth Burke (1937). From Mouffe, we take the critical distinction between agonism and antagonism. Mouffe (2005) argues that politics need not be polite—political competition can be contentious and passionate so long as opponents regard one another as legitimate adversaries. However, the adversarial relationship becomes antagonistic if the legitimacy of the opponent is brought into question and "in place of a struggle between 'right and left' we are faced with a struggle between 'right and wrong'" (Mouffe, 2005, p. 5). Agonism is thus a political conflict in which adversaries compete, perhaps passionately, while recognizing the legitimacy of their opponents. Conversely, antagonism is a we/they relation in which political opponents are viewed in terms of good and evil. The central task of democracy, per Mouffe (2013), is "to provide the institutions which will permit conflicts to take an agonistic form, where the opponents are not enemies but adversaries" (p. xii).

The line separating agonism and antagonism can be usefully clarified through the Burkean distinction between tragedy and comedy. The comic/tragic dialectic pivots on the decision to label an opponent as either mistaken or vile. "Call a man a villain," Burke (1937) writes, "and you have the choice of either attacking or cringing. Call him mistaken, and you invite yourself to attempt setting him right" (pp. 4-5). The critical distinction between comic agonism and tragic antagonism is thus the attribution of

malevolence—the assumption that political opponents are acting with sinister motivations. Attribution of malevolence can be understood as one of what Souders and Dillard (2014) call macro-sociological frames, or "symbolic-interpretative categories [that] stress their own peculiar way of building the mental equipment (meanings, attitudes, character) by which one handles the significant factors of [her or] his time" (Burke, 1937, as quoted in Souders & Dillard, 2014, p. 1010). In other words, attribution of malevolence is a symbolic posture that filters how people interpret the behavior of out-group political actors. Attribution of malevolence should be connected to political violence because it entails, "the belief that the other is bad in nature (i.e., is essentially evil), it leads to an inclination not to change the other but to separate from and destroy the other" (Waytz, Young, & Ginges, 2014, p. 15688). Hence, we propose the following hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 1:** Attribution of malevolence to the political outgroup will be associated with greater acceptance of political violence.

Democratic Trust

Attribution of malevolence is the linchpin of our theory of comic agonism. The question now becomes: Who is most likely to attribute malevolent intentions to the political outgroup? Underlying attribution of malevolence, we argue, is fundamental support for democracy. Democracy is premised on the belief that problems can be solved peacefully through open, sometimes contentious, competition among adversaries. When one side loses the competition, they can accept temporary defeat and attempt to improve their strategy for future contests or they can reject the legitimacy of the outcome. Those who reject democratic outcomes signal that they do not believe existing institutions can respond to the will of the people. As Mouffe (2013) writes, "When institutional channels do not exist for antagonisms to be expressed in an agonistic way, they are likely to explode into violence" (p. 122). This insight echoes some of the earliest work on trust in government. Reflecting on the consequences of the Watergate scandal and the contentious politics surrounding civil rights and Vietnam war protests, Arthur Miller (1974) wrote,

> A democratic political system cannot survive for long without the support of a majority of its citizens. When such support wanes, underlying discontent is the necessary result, and the potential for revolutionary alteration of the political and social system is enhanced. (p. 951)

Miller (1974) argues that, when people do not feel that the political system is working for them, they will likely experience feelings of powerlessness that results in hostility toward political actors. However, this hostility is not equally distributed among political actors. As Citrin (1974) demonstrated, when people express distrust in the political regime, they are often reacting to the political opposition and are frustrated that their preferred candidates are not in control of government. Distrust, then, is transferred onto the

political outgroup. Conversely, those who are more trusting in the political regime should be more charitable to members of the political outgroup. As Easton (1975) argued, trust acts as "a reservoir of favorable attitudes or good will that helps members to accept or tolerate outputs to which they are opposed" (p. 444). Those with greater trust should therefore adopt a more agonistic perspective toward political adversaries, whereas those with less trust should be more prone to see political opponents as enemies and thus be more accepting of political violence. Therefore, we offer the following hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 2:** Lack of democratic trust will be associated with greater attribution of malevolence toward the political outgroup and, through this association, greater acceptance of political violence.

Epistemic Rigidity

In addition to political trust, comic agonism should require a certain amount of reflexivity and intellectual flexibility. In adopting the comic frame, individuals acknowledge fallibility in the self and others. In doing so, they abandon the illusion of certainty and adopt a charitable reading of political disagreement. Burke (1937) writes,

> The progress of humane enlightenment can go no further than in picturing people not as *vicious*, but as *mistaken*. When you add that people are *necessarily* mistaken, that *all* people are exposed to situations in which they must act as fools, that *every* insight contains its own special kind of blindness, you complete the comic circle. (p. 41)

Reflexivity thus undermines tragic antagonism because people acknowledge that disagreement results not from animus, but from misunderstanding. Furthermore, because people acknowledge that they themselves may be mistaken, vilification loses its appeal. It is difficult to justify violence if one is not certain that they are on the correct side of the issues. Furthermore, if one admits that the opponents may not be vile, but simply mistaken, the animus loses its warrant.

People who reject this reflexivity do so with certainty that they are correct—they do not consider the possibility that their side is in the wrong. In their certainty, they cannot imagine legitimate reasons for political disagreement. They exhibit an orientation we call epistemic rigidity. Those with great epistemic rigidity will be unable to fathom the legitimacy of political disagreement and should thus be more willing to impute sinister motives in their political opposition. Because they do not think the opposition is acting in good faith, they should have little incentive to persuade them to change their minds or to accept a comprise. Epistemic rigidity should enhance the attribution of malevolence and make political violence a more acceptable strategy. Hence, the following hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 3:** Epistemic rigidity will be associated with greater attribution of malevolence and, through this association, greater acceptance of political violence.

Agonism and Antagonism at Political Rallies

We argue that political rallies provide the ideal conditions to test the theory of comic agonism outlined above. Those who attend rallies should be the most engaged political actors and thus should find themselves close to the line between agonism and antagonism. The decision to attend a political rally represents a form of political engagement that signals support for a cause or candidate in opposition to either the status quo or potential political alternatives (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001). Only the most engaged are likely to attend a rally; and according to the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, approximately 10% of those surveyed indicated they had attended a political rally or speech, and 6% had attended an organized protest (A. Smith, 2013). Because rally attendance requires a level of commitment in terms of time, resources, and interest that many individuals do not possess, highly partisan individuals are the most likely to attend a rally (Dimock, Doherty, Kiley, & Oates, 2015).

Rallies thus represent a crucial site of partisan identity formation. Sunstein (2009) suggests that when people with a shared worldview gather in enthusiastic groups, the salience of group identity increases and group pressure generates greater attitude extremity. Rallies provide people the opportunity to advocate ideals they hold strongly (Inman & Andrews, 2009; Klandermans, 2002), air grievances with the political system (Keen, 1998), and solidify group identity (McClendon, 2014; Sunstein, 2009). As such, rallies can be understood as complicated collective actions executed by impassioned partisans to various material, political, and communicative ends. We argue that rallies were especially salient venues of participation and identity crystallization in the 2016 election. In fact, rallies were often sites of political agonism and, occasionally, even violent political antagonism.

Insiders and Insurgents

Both the Republican and Democratic 2016 presidential primaries featured an insider/insurgent dynamic that made rallies critical sites for political identity formation. David Smith (2016) of *The Guardian* described what the parties were facing as "simultaneous revolts from their own rank and file that threaten to reshape the American political landscape" (para. 5). Similarly, Alexander Slater (2016) linked the two campaigns by their "decidedly anti-establishment message . . . Trump and Sanders have played on this anger, both in term of rhetoric and proposed policy" (para. 1). Trump and Sanders thus join a long history of political outsiders seeking to challenge the system. However, in contrast to much of history, Trump succeeded and Sanders came closer than many expected. This is, in part, because reforms to the nominating process, the rise of new political media, and conflicts among party blocs have collaborated to make insurgent candidates more likely to succeed (Cohen, Karol, Noel, & Zaller, 2016).

On the Republican side, party leaders were unable to get behind a single traditional candidate such as Jeb Bush or an ideologue like Ted Cruz, a situation that redounded

to the advantage of Donald Trump who earned the nomination as a true outsider (Noel, 2016). Trump came to the presidential competition from a completely different world than his opponents, as a television celebrity and a business mogul (Elovitz, 2016), who in the past had supported Democrat and Republican politicians. Moreover, unlike other outsiders in the Republican race (e.g., Carly Fiorina or Ben Carson), he utilized an unconventional political style to caricaturize his opponents and critique the political system, a style which was off limits to traditional politicians (Hall, Goldstein, & Ingram, 2016). He further differentiated himself from other Republicans by making controversial statements about Mexican and Muslim immigrants that went beyond the rhetoric with which most Republican candidates were comfortable (Cohen et al., 2016). Trump promoted a message of economic grievance and political change, criticizing political insiders as corrupt and positioning himself as the only antidote (Page & Heath, 2016).

In contrast to the Republican nomination process, Democratic party leaders overwhelmingly supported Hillary Clinton over Bernie Sanders (Noel, 2016), who like Trump, forged an antiestablishment message and called for a political revolution (E. Klein, 2016). Despite being the longest serving independent in Congress, Sanders, a Democrat only since 2015, was perceived as an outsider, a title that he even gave to himself in his 2015 autobiography "Outsider in the White House." He openly embraced the label of democratic socialism and called for universal health care, free higher education, more protectionism in trade policies, strong regulations on the power of Wall Street, and a redistributive tax system, all of which dramatically departed from Washington consensus (Roberts, 2015). Sanders' political stances and his rejection of large monetary contributions to his campaign forged his image as an outsider challenging the candidate considered "the ultimate insider" (Elovitz, 2016) and "guardian of the status quo" (Rucker, Balz, & Kane, 2016). Indeed, Clinton's closeness to two presidents, Barack Obama and Bill Clinton, ensured that Sanders could occupy the position of political outsider in the Democratic primary contest (Page & Heath, 2016).

The conflict between political insiders such as Clinton and insurgent candidates like Sanders and Trump exposes a tension between two cardinal virtues of democratic parties: stability and openness. Parties seek to accommodate political change promoted by forces outside the dominant party structure, but also wish to retain their status and resist demagogues or extreme political swings (Busch, 1997). Political outsiders can leverage this tension by exploiting social atomization and stoking cynicism in the political establishment. Sanders and Trump achieved this leverage by decrying the political establishment and arguing that the system was fundamentally corrupt (Slater, 2016). This antiestablishmentarianism fostered democratic mistrust by attacking political institutions at their foundations. Hence, we expect the following hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 4:** Those attending insurgent candidate rallies will express less democratic trust and, through the association between trust and attribution of malevolence, be more accepting of political violence.

The case can also be made that—in general—rally attendees will be more certain in their beliefs, less prone to doubt their positions, and less reflexive about their potential biases and blind spots. Rally-goers tend to be highly ideologically consistent (Dimock et al., 2015). Furthermore, the dynamics of a rally mimic those outlined by Sunstein (2009) as likely to result in greater polarization. Namely, people will encounter numerous corroborating perspectives that give them more confidence in the accuracy of their initial views. People will also take increasingly extreme positions to receive social esteem from the group. Thus, rally-goers should be less prone to doubt their positions and should express greater epistemic rigidity. However, this may apply to all rally-goers equally. In light of our expectations regarding the nature of insurgent candidates and tragic antagonism, we argue that those attending the rally of an insurgent candidate will express greater epistemic rigidity. Indeed, the group dynamics surrounding an insurgent candidate should enhance the group polarization described by Sunstein (2009). As Hart (1971) argues, political movements—and insurgent candidates do frame themselves as antiestablishment movements—often take on a doctrinal quality that invites blind adherence to the precepts of the group and leaves little room for doubt. Given this, we predict the following hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 5:** Those attending insurgent candidate rallies will express greater epistemic rigidity and, through the association between rigidity and attribution of malevolence, be more accepting of political violence.

All hypothesized relationships are depicted in the top panel of Figure 1.

Method

Procedure

To test the above hypotheses, surveys were distributed at official campaign rallies in the immediate run-up to the 2016 Iowa Caucuses. Four rallies were selected: Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, Ted Cruz, and Donald Trump. A team of 18 researchers traveled to the Iowa Caucuses and attended the Clinton and Sanders rallies in Des Moines the night before the Caucuses as well as the Cruz rally in Jefferson and the Trump rally in Waterloo the day of the Caucuses. Researchers divided into two teams of nine to attend concurrent rallies. Researchers approached rally attendees individually with statements of informed consent and paper surveys. The data collection procedure was approved by the institutional review board at the host university.

Participants

In total, 251 people agreed to fill out the survey. Of those, 85 (33%) were attendees of the Clinton rally, 66 (26%) were attendees of the Sanders rally, 50 (20%) were attendees of the Cruz rally, and 50 (20%) were attendees of the Trump rally. Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 87 ($M = 45.2$, $SD = 18.43$). The slight majority of the
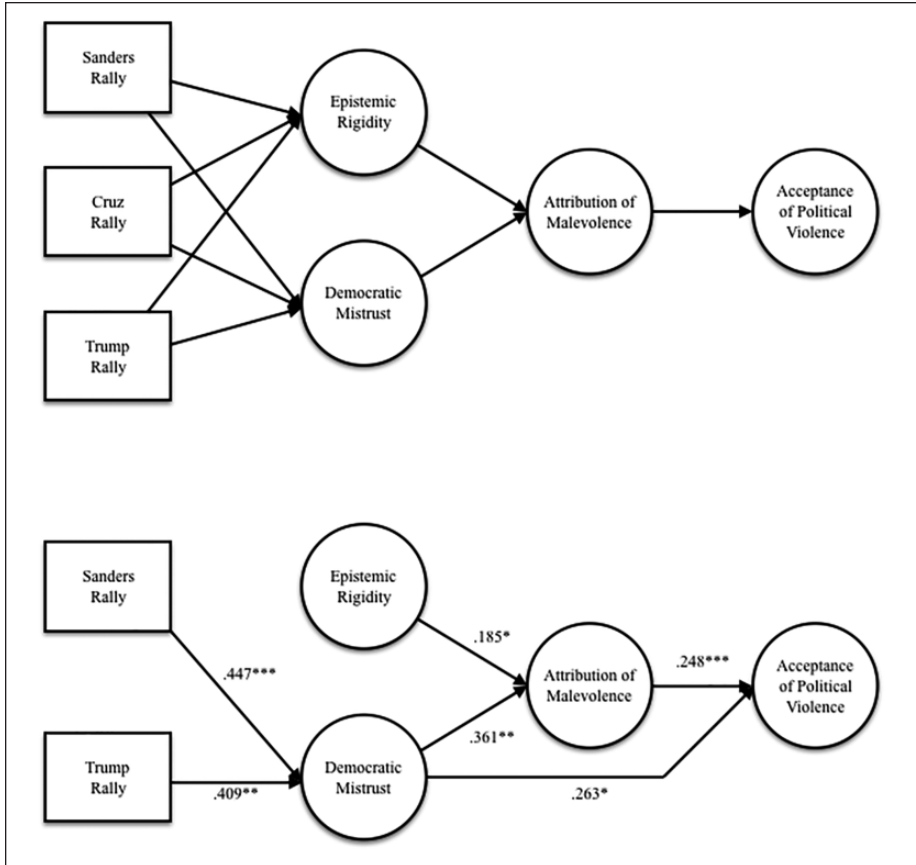
Figure 1. Hypothesized (top) and final (bottom) model of comic agonism at Iowa Caucus rallies.

respondents were male (*n* = 127, 51%) and the overwhelming majority were White (*n* = 197, 79%). The respondents were well educated, with 76 (30%) reporting having completed a bachelor's degree and 85 (34%) having completed a postgraduate degree. Respondents were more likely to identify as Democratic (*n* = 131, 52%) than Republican (*n* = 95, 38%) or independent (*n* = 24, 10%).

Measures

Acceptance of political violence was measured on a 1 to 5 agreement scale with five items: "The day is approaching when violent measures may need to be taken to protect the United States from itself;" "The tree of liberty needs to be nourished with the blood of revolution;" "If we can't find a peaceful solution to the problems facing America,

we may need to take matters into our own hands;" "When politics fail, violence is sometimes necessary;" and "I can see why some people support violent revolution" ($M = 2.24$, $SD = 1.07$, $\alpha = .867$).

Attribution of malevolence was measured on a 1 to 5 agreement scale with two items adapted from Warner and Banwart's (2016) measure of candidate benevolence: "I worry that the [Democratic/Republican] Party is deliberately trying to hurt America" and "The [Democratic/Republican] Party is knowingly sabotaging the country" ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.41$, $r = .89$). Respondents were asked about the Democratic Party if they were at a Cruz or Trump rally and about the Republican Party if they were at a Clinton or Sanders rally.

Democratic trust was measured negatively, as the absence of trust. We focused on regime-based trust, a subdimension of political efficacy first identified by Craig, Niemi, and Silver (1990), to operationalize Easton's (1975) notion of diffuse support. Distrust in the political regime was measured on a 1 to 5 agreement scale with three items adapted from Craig et al.'s (1990) pilot study of the American National Election Studies' political efficacy variables: "I feel very critical of our political system," "There is not much about our form of government to be proud of," and "It may be necessary to make some major changes in our form of government in order to solve the problems facing our country" ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 0.88$, $\alpha = .552$).

Epistemic rigidity was measured with two items on a 5-point agreement scale: "When it comes to politics, I am fairly certain my ideas are the correct ones" and "In political disagreements I am usually very confident that I am right" ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.41$, $r = .596$).

Insurgent candidates were selected a priori based on the rhetorical strategies of the campaigns and the availability of rallies to attend. The four rallies were selected with an aim to identify prominent campaigns that were actively competing to win the Iowa Caucuses and featured an insider or insurgent candidate. The Democratic contest created an easy dichotomy between insider and insurgent. The selection of Republican rallies to sample was more difficult. Polling suggested that Ted Cruz and Donald Trump were prohibitive favorites to win the Republican Iowa Caucuses with only Marco Rubio also polling in double digits and in a distant third place. Ted Cruz occupied an interesting position in the 2016 nominating campaign. He had clearly intended to run as an insurgent but, when faced with the candidacy of Trump, found himself in the unlikely position as the most viable alternative for establishment Republicans seeking to block Trump's nomination (B. Klein, 2016). Cruz's rhetoric matched that of an insurgent candidate but he drew support from those seeking an alternative to Trump. Hence, he was forced to play the role of insider insurgent. We thus view Cruz rally-goers as proxies for this unique third space between insurgents and institutionalists. Ultimately, we categorized Cruz as an insurgent candidate based on his antiestablishment message—though we acknowledge that the case for this is weaker than for Sanders and Trump.

Results

The hypotheses were tested in structural equation modeling using Maximum Likelihood estimation in Lavaan (Rosseel, 2012) for the R ecosystem. Following the two-step

procedure recommended by Kline (2016), a measurement model was fit to confirm the factor structure of the variables. The measurement model achieved adequate fit, $\chi^2(31)$ = 65.84, $p < .001$, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .067 (.044-.089), comparative fit index (CFI) = .964, nonnormed fit index/Tucker–Lewis index (NNFI/TLI) = .948, standardized root mean residual (SRMR) = .047. A structural model was then fit to evaluate the hypothesized paths. In addition to the theoretical variables, dummy variables were included to indicate which rally the participant had attended. Each theoretical variable was also regressed on control variables for age, gender, race, partisanship, and educational attainment. The model fit for the structural model was adequate, $\chi^2(79) = 171.5$, $p < .001$, RMSEA = .068 (.054-.082), CFI = .917, NNFI/TLI = .869, SRMR = .044.[1] Path coefficients are presented in Figure 1.

To test the theoretical model, a series of nested model comparisons were conducted in which each hypothesized path was constrained to equal zero (i.e., the null hypothesis) and the resulting change in chi-square was evaluated to assess whether the constraint was tenable (e.g., whether enforcing the null hypothesis reduced model fit by a statistically significant margin, see Kline, 2016). All mediated hypotheses were tested by examining the confidence interval of the product of the direct paths to determine whether it crossed zero (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). All indirect effects are presented in Table 2. Though mediation assumes causal associations between variables, our cross-sectional survey design prevents us from establishing the direction of causality. Thus, a significant indirect effect is evidence consistent with mediation but not proof of the direction of causality. It is always possible that the causal influence runs in the opposite direction or that the cross-sectional associations resulted from a third unobserved cause.

The first hypothesis predicted that attribution of malevolence would be associated with greater acceptance of political violence. As illustrated in the bottom panel of Figure 1 and recorded in Table 1, the results are consistent with this hypothesis. For every one-unit increase in attribution of malevolence, acceptance of political violence increased almost a quarter of a point.

The second hypothesis predicted that lower political trust would be associated with greater attribution of malevolence and, as a result, more acceptance of political violence. The results presented in Table 1 are consistent with this hypothesis. Every one-unit increase in distrust of the political regime was associated with a corresponding 0.373 point increase in attribution of malevolence. As illustrated in Table 2, the influence of distrust on attribution of malevolence was indirectly associated with greater acceptance of political violence. Furthermore, inspection of the model revealed a significant direct effect of distrust on acceptance of political violence such that, for each one-unit increase in distrust, acceptance of political violence increased by 0.294 points.

The third hypothesis predicted that epistemic rigidity would be directly associated with greater attribution of malevolence and, through this relationship, indirectly associated with greater acceptance of political violence. The results were generally consistent with this hypothesis. For every one-unit increase in certainty about political beliefs, attribution of malevolence increased by a corresponding 0.205 points. As

Table 1. Latent Regression Paths for Final SEM Model.

Path	Regime distrust B (SE)	Epistemic rigidity B (SE)	Attribution of malevolence B (SE)	Acceptance of political violence B (SE)
Covariates				
Age	0.005 (0.006)	0.005 (0.005)	0.015 (0.005)**	−0.009 (0.005)
Male	0.135 (0.189)	0.561 (0.156)***	−0.130 (0.156)	−0.017 (0.154)
White/ Caucasian	−0.196 (0.251)	0.157 (0.198)	−0.203 (0.204)	−0.046 (0.196)
Education	−0.087 (0.097)	−0.036 (0.077)	−0.212 (0.075)**	−0.094 (0.079)
Party	0.063 (0.069)	0.052 (0.056)	−0.078 (0.054)	−0.139 (0.055)*
Independent variables				
Sanders rally	1.14 (0.274)***	0.028 (0.198)	−0.311 (0.232)	0.083 (0.234)
Trump rally	1.15 (0.375)**	0.021 (0.286)	−0.583 (0.311)	0.364 (0.309)
Cruz rally	0.464 (0.382)	0.095 (0.303)	−0.125 (0.295)	0.300 (0.291)
Regime distrust			0.373 (0.111)***	0.294 (0.125)*
Epistemic rigidity			0.205 (0.086)*	0.150 (0.090)
Attribution of malevolence				0.244 (0.084)**

Note. SEM = structural equation modeling; SE = standard error; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; CFI = comparative fit index; NNFI/TLI = nonnormed fit index/Tucker–Lewis index; SRMR = standardized root mean residual. Results were generated using maximum likelihood estimation in Lavaan for R. Party was measured on a 1 to 7 scale from *Strong Republican* (1) to *Strong Democrat* (7). Final model fit: $\chi^2(79) = 171.5$, $p < .001$, RMSEA = .068 (.054-.082), CFI = .917, NNFI/TLI = .869, SRMR = .044.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

displayed in Table 2, the 95% 5,000 bootstrapped confidence interval of the indirect association between epistemic rigidity and acceptance of political violence contained zero. However, the confidence interval was almost identical to that of the indirect association between trust and acceptance of political violence—the lower level of the confidence interval was merely a few hundredths of a point lower and thus ticked below zero. The data are generally consistent with the hypothesized relationship.

The fourth hypothesis predicted that attendees of insurgent candidate rallies would express less regime-based trust when compared with attendees of the Clinton rally and, as a result, express greater attribution of malevolence and acceptance of political violence. As is illustrated in Figure 1 and recorded in Table 1, this hypothesis was generally supported. Those who attended Sanders or Trump rallies expressed significantly less trust in the political regime relative to Clinton rally-goers. As documented in Table 2, there was a significant indirect association between attending a Sanders or Trump rally and attributing malevolence toward an outgroup through regime-based trust, and an indirect association between attending a Trump or Sanders rally and acceptance of political violence through this process. Though Cruz positioned himself as an insurgent, and though we expected those who attended his rally to express

Table 2. Indirect Effects of Imagined Political Intergroup Contact.

	5,000 Bootstrap resamples		
Path	B (*SE*)	LLCI	ULCI
Theoretical model			
Distrust > Attribution of malevolence > Acceptance of political violence	0.094 (0.28)	0.002	0.186[a]
Rigidity > Attribution of malevolence > Acceptance of political violence	0.050 (0.09)	−0.003	0.116
Sanders			
Rally > Rigidity > Attribution of malevolence	−0.008 (0.04)	−0.077	0.061
Rally > Distrust > Attribution of malevolence	0.279 (0.10)	0.075	0.483[a]
Rally > Rigidity > Attribution of malevolence > Acceptance of political violence	−0.002 (0.01)	−0.022	0.017
Rally > Distrust > Attribution of malevolence > Acceptance of political violence	0.079 (0.03)	0.014	0.143[a]
Trump			
Rally > Rigidity > Attribution of malevolence	−0.025 (0.04)	−0.103	0.054
Rally > Distrust > Attribution of malevolence	0.258 (0.10)	0.059	0.457[a]
Rally > Rigidity > Attribution of malevolence > Acceptance of political violence	−0.007 (0.01)	−0.029	0.015
Rally > Distrust > Attribution of malevolence > Acceptance of political violence	0.073 (0.03)	0.010	0.135[a]

Note. LLCI = lower limit confidence interval; ULCI = upper limit confidence interval; *SE* = standard error. All estimates generated from 5,000 bootstrapped resamples. Unstandardized coefficients, standard errors, and 95% confidence intervals are presented.
[a]Indicates that the confidence interval does not contain zero.

similar attitudes as those at Sanders and Trump rallies, there was no association between attending a Cruz rally and distrust of democratic regimes when compared with those who attended a Clinton rally, nor was there any direct or indirect association between attending a Cruz rally and attribution of malevolence or acceptance of political violence.

The fifth hypothesis predicted that attendees of insurgent candidate rallies would express greater epistemic rigidity when compared with the Clinton group. There was no support for this hypothesis. Individuals at Sanders, Trump, and Cruz rallies did not express greater rigidity.

Discussion

This study sought to test a theory of comic agonism by surveying the most committed partisans—rally-goers—and contrasting those attending a traditional candidate's rally with those supporting an insurgent candidate. Our theory proposed the following premises: (a) those who attribute malevolent motivations to political opponents will be

more accepting of political violence, (b) those who distrust the political regime will be more likely to attribute malevolent intentions to political opponents and thus be more accepting of political violence, and (c) those who express the greatest epistemic rigidity will be more likely to attribute malevolent intentions to political opponents and thus be more accepting of political violence. Our results were consistent with all of these expectations and illustrated an unexpected direct (unmediated) link between distrust and acceptance of political violence. We also hypothesized that attendees of insurgent candidate rallies would be most likely to express distrust of the political regime and epistemic rigidity, and therefore attribute more malevolence toward the political outgroup and express greater acceptance of political violence when compared with those attending a traditional candidate's rally. This expectation was partially supported—Trump and Sanders rally attendees expressed greater distrust of the political regime—but there was no association between insurgent rallies and epistemic rigidity, nor did Cruz rally attendees express greater distrust. Each of these findings are discussed below, as are limitations and directions for future research.

Attribution of malevolence is the pivotal distinction between comic agonism and tragic antagonism. Political disagreements can be impassioned, even nasty, but these disputes will not threaten the democratic order so long as people accept the legitimacy of their opponents (Mouffe, 2005). However, when partisans attribute malevolent intentions to members of the political outgroup, they deny the legitimacy of the opposition. They view outgroup actors as not just mistaken but vile (Burke, 1937). This facilitates the slide from agonism toward antagonism and creates the conditions in which political violence becomes thinkable. Our results support this thesis—rally attendees who attributed greater malevolence to the political outgroup were most likely to accept political violence. It is important not to overread these results. Acceptance of political violence was still low in our highly partisan sample: The mean was 2.24 on a 5-point agreement scale, indicative that the average response was to not accept (or "disagree" with) political violence. Though attribution of malevolence drove this number higher, even the predicted distance between someone who attributed no malevolence and someone who attributed full malevolence to the outgroup only projects to be a single point on the agreement scale. In light of the overall low level of acceptance of political violence we observed, the full effect of attribution of malevolence found here is not enough to move a respondent into a range where political violence was viewed as acceptable behavior. Nevertheless, these results suggest that attribution of malevolence is a component of a dangerous form of polarization, what we have labeled tragic antagonism, and that this type of polarization is at odds with the fundamental democratic project: the peaceful resolution of political disputes.

Our results also confirm that trust in the democratic regime is vital to a healthy democratic culture. Those who distrusted the political system were more likely to attribute malevolence and more accepting of political violence. As Miller (1974) wrote,

> Discontent can be functional for a political system if it acts as a catalyst for orderly change, but when normal channels are perceived as ineffective, the probability that the conflict may burst forth in the form of extra-legal behavior increases. (p. 970)

The 2016 election demonstrated the power of antiestablishment messages. We found that attendees of Iowa Caucus rallies were somewhat more distrustful of the political regime (the mean was above the midpoint). If trust in democracy cannot be restored, our theory predicts, and our results suggest, that people will be increasingly willing to consider violent strategies to confront social grievances.

We further hypothesized that epistemic rigidity would be associated with greater attribution of malevolence and acceptance of political violence. People who are certain that they are correct approach politics as "true believers" (Hart, 1971) and see no need to question or doubt the righteousness of their own side. A comic perspective would invite greater reflexivity. We would acknowledge that our opponents genuinely want to improve the nation and the world, but that they simply have a mistaken set of solutions. We would also be willing to consider the possibility that our opponents have some correct ideas and that, on some of the issues we are passionate about, we may be in the wrong. This comic discount (Burke, 1937) disrupts agonism because it incentivizes persuasion and cooperation above violent confrontation. Our results affirm this belief—those who were most rigid in their worldview were also most willing to attribute malevolence to the opposition and were more accepting of political violence.

Finally, we expected the insurgent candidacies of Trump, Sanders, and possibly Cruz to generate a contrast between comic agonism and tragic antagonism. Because insurgent candidacies are often framed in the rhetoric of the true believer and premised on a fundamental critique of the existing political regime, we expected distrust and rigidity to be greatest among those attending insurgent rallies. We found mixed support for these expectations. Trump and Sanders rally-goers were more distrustful of the political regime and therefore more willing to doubt the benevolence of political opponents and more open to violent political action when compared with Clinton rally-goers. However, respondents from the Trump and Sanders rallies were no more likely to express epistemic rigidity—a finding that we interpret to mean that a lack of reflexivity is common among all rally-goers, not just those who support insurgent candidates. After all, the average epistemic rigidity score was also above the midpoint. We suspect that, had we compared rally-goers with another population (say, university students or a more representative cross-section of the population), we would have found that our sample was generally more confident in their political views. Future studies should consider adopting this comparison.

As with any study, important limitations should qualify our findings. First, our theoretical model implies causal effects. However, our cross-sectional survey data does not permit causal inference. In fact, it is possible and—in some cases—even plausible that the causal direction of effects deviates from the model. The most obvious instance is with rally attendance. The model implies that attending a rally causes greater distrust and rigidity. However, it is more likely that these attitudes led individuals to support insurgent candidates. Our objective was merely to demonstrate that these rally attendees were in fact different so the cause and effect between possessing the attitudes and supporting a candidate do not change our interpretations. Nevertheless, our findings should not be read to suggest that attending a rally caused people to become less distrustful of the political regime. Similarly, we hypothesized that trust

and rigidity would precede attribution of malevolence but it is possible that all three variables work on the same level or that attribution of malevolence precedes trust and rigidity. Without longitudinal data that captures the evolution of these attitudes, we cannot be certain which one causes the other or even if there is a causal relationship between them. Future research should observe how these variables shift together over time to attempt to disentangle any potential causal process.

The unique circumstances of the 2016 election were, in many ways, a benefit to our study but in at least one important way also a limitation. We had hoped to identify two insurgent-candidate rallies and two insider-candidate rallies to survey. This would have allowed a clean contrast within each party. However, the Republican electorate did not cooperate. None of the traditional candidates were ever truly viable to win Iowa, very few were actively campaigning in Iowa, and few were hosting rallies of any size the day before or day of the caucuses. Marco Rubio was the closest possible establishment Republican but his activity in Iowa was limited in the final days and he was a distant third in Iowa polling. The truly establishment candidates, the various governors, never gained enough momentum or support to be viable. In Iowa, there was scarcely a trace of the governors, as they all seemed to focus their time and energy on the pivotal New Hampshire primary. The result was that our second Republican rally was the antiestablishment but outflanked Ted Cruz. His candidacy provided an interesting opportunity to test a would-be insurgent who was saddled with the hopes of the establishment, but it also precluded an apples-to-apples comparison with Clinton. Previous Republican primaries would have provided a clearer contrast—as candidates like former nominees Mitt Romney and John McCain would have been ideal foils to the insurgents of 2011 and 2007. Future research should seek opportunities to test more establishment Republican candidates against insurgents.

Finally, our sample is restricted to one caucus. Iowa is the first in the nation and, in many ways, exceptional. In fact, Iowa was the swing state that saw the largest shift in two-party vote from 2012. Furthermore, much of the violence observed at Trump rallies occurred after the Iowa Caucuses. Future studies should expand beyond Iowa to determine if the observed relationships persist in states with different characteristics.

Conclusion

In this study, we proposed and tested a theory of comic agonism. Our objective was to help explain the dynamics that underlie the extreme political hostility that has given rise to political violence before, during, and after the 2016 presidential campaign. We found that political violence was most accepted if people attributed malevolent motives to the political opposition, distrusted the democratic regime, and embraced their political worldview with ironclad certainty. We call this set of attitudes tragic antagonism. To combat this dangerous form of polarization, we encourage people to adopt a reflexive posture about their own beliefs, to accept that, in a democracy, sometimes our side loses (and it is okay to lose from time to time), and to grant political opponents good faith and legitimacy. We call this perspective comic agonism and forward it as a potential antidote to the hostility that was persistent in the 2016 campaign.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Note

1. Hu and Bentler (1999) recommend that model fit be assessed relative to the alternative fit criteria SRMR < .09, RMSEA < .06, and CFI/TLI each > .95, though they argue for room for practitioners to deviate. Marsh, Hau, and Wen (2004) found that these standards penalize large models with multiple indicators for each latent variable and thus "strongly encourage researchers, textbook authors, reviewers, and journal editors not to overgeneralize the Hu and Bentler results" (p. 340). Similarly, Little (2013) criticized the Hu and Bentler (1999) study for failing to include parsimony error in their simulations, an omission that resulted in guidelines based on the implausible assumption that a model would fit perfectly in the population. Little (2013) thus argued, "many models don't have levels of fit that are in the very good range, and yet most of these models have great utility and value" (p. 118) and identified RMSEA < .08 and CFI/TLI > .90 as appropriate thresholds of acceptable fit.

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