

Politician Incivility and Apologies

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Introduction

When passionate politicians cross the line of civility, some apologize for their uncivil statements but others do not. How do voters evaluate such politicians? Despite the prevalence of uncivil statements by politicians and their apologies (or lack thereof), systematic inquiry into these political phenomena has been limited. Drawing on the literature of political misinformation and corrections (e.g., Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Thorson 2016; Berinsky 2017), we fielded survey experiments in the U.S. and Japan.

Research Questions

- How do people evaluate politicians after apologizing for an uncivil statement?
- Is this evaluation moderated by politician gender?
- Do women evaluate female politicians more harshly than male politicians?

Survey and Methodology

To examine these hypotheses, we conducted two online survey experiments through Qualtrics Panels. One experiment recruited United States voters who were 18 years or older and reside within the 50 U.S. states. It ran from February 28 to March 5, 2019 with 1,0001 valid responses. The other survey experiment recruited Japanese adult citizens in Japan; it ran from April 19 to 29, 2019 with 1,028 valid responses.

These experiments are both a 3 (civil / uncivil comment / uncivil comment and apology) by 2 (man / woman politician) by 2 (gendered topic / ungendered topic). We showed each respondent both topics, randomizing which topic they saw first, so there were 6 main treatment groups. The gendered topic was sexual harassment for the U.S. and diversity in the workforce for Japan. The ungendered topic was immigration for the U.S. and nuclear power in Japan.

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Politician Evaluation

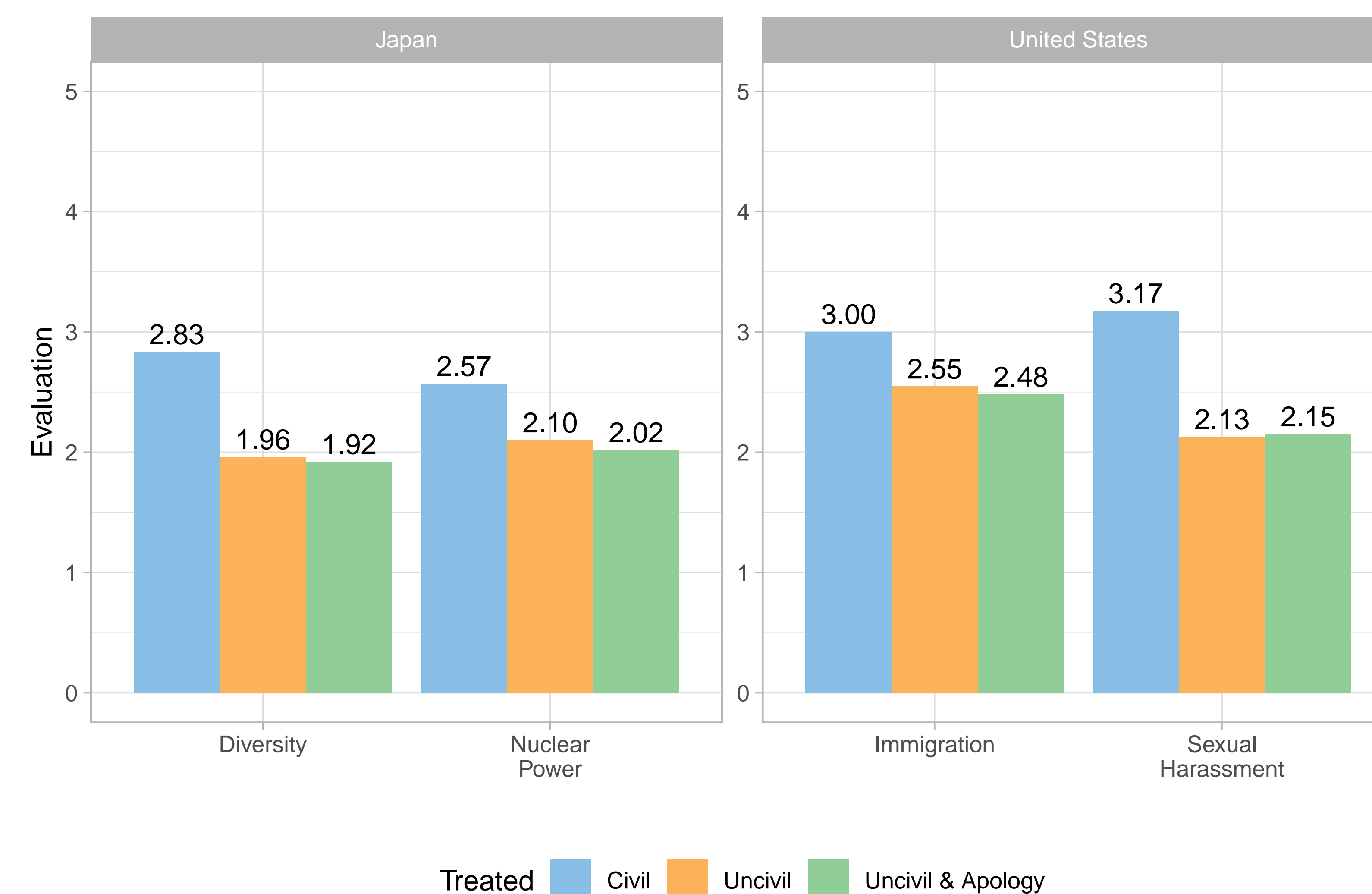


Fig. 1: Mean Evaluation and Treatment Group by Topic and Country. Blue is civil, orange is uncivil, and green is uncivil & apology. Numbers above indicate averages of the combined politician evaluation on a 5-point Likert scale. Faceted by country.

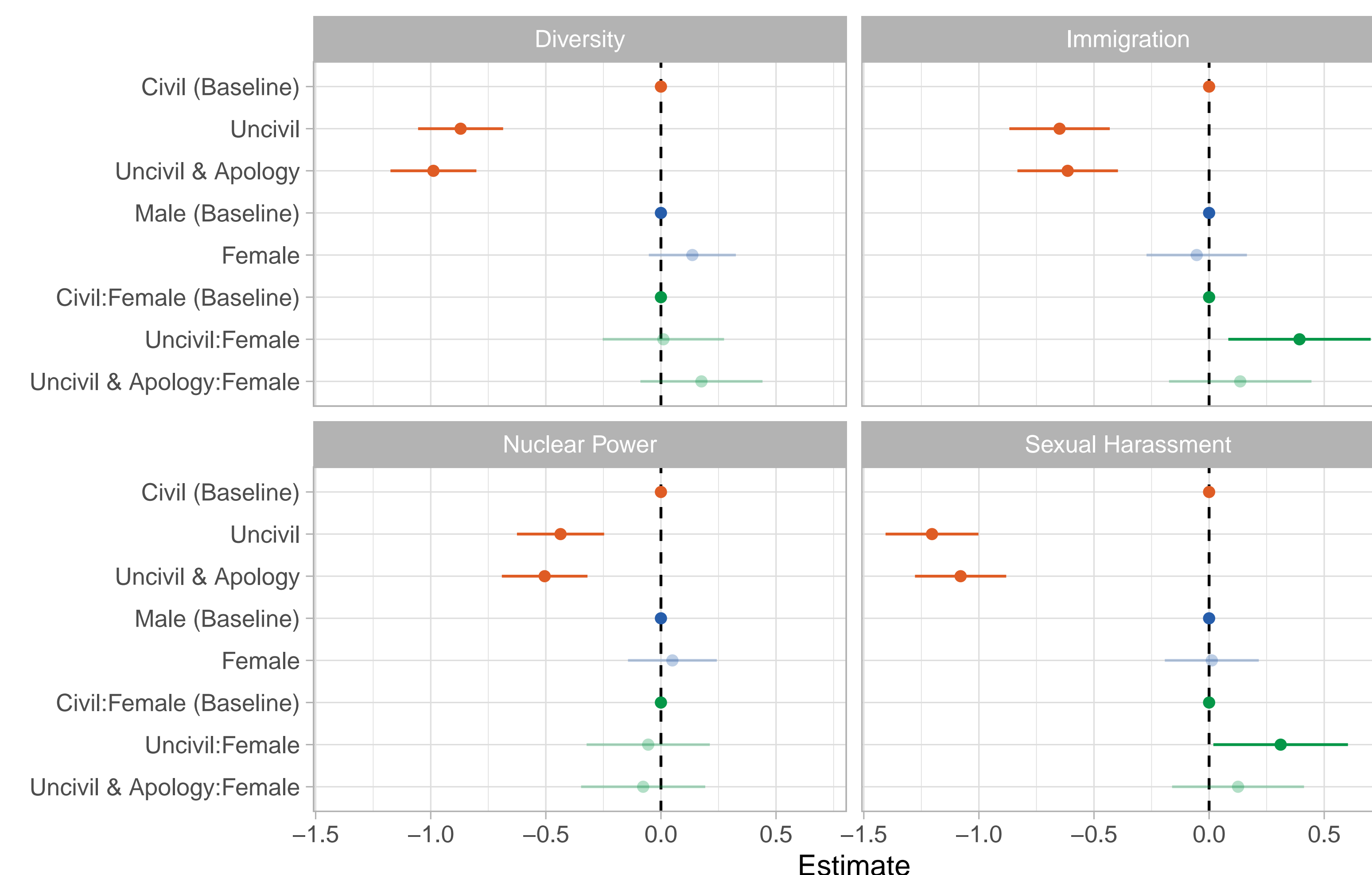


Fig. 2: Effect of Treatment and Gender of Politician on Politician Evaluation. Error bars are 95% CI. For combined measurements on a 5-point Likert scale with block controls.

Politician Evaluation by Women

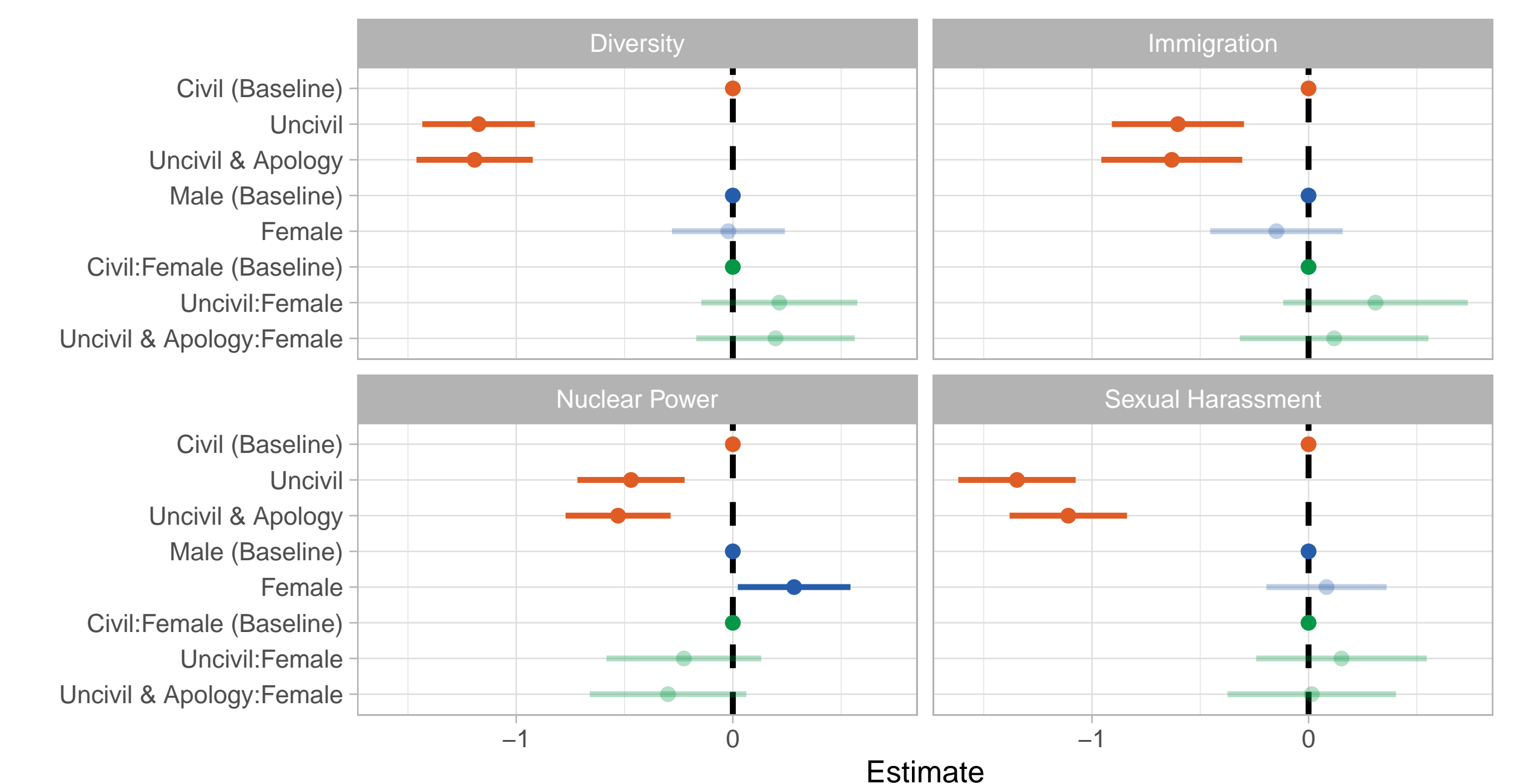


Fig. 3: Effect of Treatment and Gender of Politician on Politician Evaluation for Subgroup of Respondents who are Women. Error bars are 95% CI. For combined measurements on a 5-point Likert scale with block controls.

Main Results

Incivility and Apology (Fig. 1, Fig. 2)

- People evaluate politicians worse when they make an uncivil statement than when they do not make an uncivil statement.
- People do not evaluate politicians differently when they make an uncivil statement and apologize compared to if they do not make an uncivil statement and apologize.

Politician and Respondent Gender (Fig. 2, Fig. 3)

- In the Japan study, the politician's gender does not seem to influence how people evaluate them.
- In the U.S. study, people tend to evaluate male politicians making uncivil comments worse than female ones.
- Women do not evaluate female politicians more harshly than male politicians.

Implications

- Respondents did not accept the politician's apology → "belief echoes" spurred by uncivil comments persist.
- In the U.S., male politicians may be punished more for uncivil statements more than female ones.