

I Trust You to Disagree: Caring May Signal Integrity Across Political Lines

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Divisive political issues can often lead us to disparage or dismiss the opposition, but research in *Psychological Science* suggests that we may still [perceive those we can trust to disagree with us as having greater integrity](#) than “fence-sitters” who have no strong feelings either way.

“The signal inherent in caring about a social issue might transcend specific disagreements, acting as an indicator of the target’s moral character,” writes Julian J. Zlatev, a professor of business administration who studies moral judgment and negotiation at Harvard University.

This integrity-based trust reflects our perception of how likely a person is to stick to their principles when faced with outside pressure, Zlatev notes, and is not necessarily linked to the level of benevolence-based trust we feel for a person, which reflects perceived kindness and positive intentions. For example, people often view politicians who “flip-flop” on an issue to be hypocritical, and thus untrustworthy, even when they agree with the politicians’ new stance.

“This suggests that it is holding a belief in and of itself, rather than the specific content of that belief, that

engenders trust,” Zlatev writes.

Zlatev investigated the dynamics of integrity-based trust through a series of five experiments involving a total of 3,817 participants. In the first study, 1,007 online participants read about a fictional co-participant’s stance on a particular issue (capital punishment, abortion, gun control, animal testing, or physician-assisted suicide) and rated how much integrity they thought their hypothetical partner had. Participants then reported their own opinion on the legality of the issue and noted how strongly they felt about it.

The results showed that when participants thought their co-participant cared deeply about an issue, they rated them as having more integrity, regardless of whether they agreed or disagreed with the person’s actual stance. In fact, participants gave high-caring targets who disagreed with them similar integrity ratings as they did low-caring targets who agreed with them.

In a follow-up study of 996 participants, Zlatev once again found that individuals’ reported level of caring about an issue was tied to their perceived integrity. This time, participants were introduced to a hypothetical individual named Jamie who either supported or opposed capital punishment, and were shown a randomly generated number ranging from 1 (indicating “Jamie cares very little about this issue”) to 100 (indicating “Jamie cares very much about this issue”).

Plotting participants’ ratings of Jamie’s integrity alongside how much he supposedly cared about the issue of capital punishment revealed evidence of a monotonic relationship – that is, as caring increased from 1 to 58, it was accompanied by an increase in perceived integrity, which plateaued at higher levels.

This suggests that high-caring targets who disagree with participants and low-caring individuals who agree with participants may receive similar integrity ratings because low-caring people are viewed as particularly untrustworthy, Zlatev explains.

Zlatev further explored these findings by having 842 participants play a rely-or-verify game with a fictional participant after reading about their view on capital punishment. In the game, the fake player provided information to the participant about whether there was an even or odd amount of money in a digital jar of coins. The participants earned the most points by choosing to “rely” on information that turned out to be accurate and choosing to “verify” information that turned out to be inaccurate.

Mirroring the results of the first study, Zlatev found that participants chose to rely on information from high-caring individuals who agreed with them about 40% of the time and from low-caring targets who disagreed with them approximately 20% of the time. Notably, they trusted low-caring individuals who agreed with them and high-caring individuals who disagreed with them only about 30% of the time.

Not all apathetic individuals may be considered equally untrustworthy, however. In one study, participants did not perceive individuals who disagreed with them as having more integrity than apathetic individuals — possibly because there was still a chance that the apathetic individual, for whom no political stance was specified, secretly agreed with them. Individuals who agreed with the participant were also rated as more benevolent and likeable, regardless of their perceived integrity.

Taken together, these findings suggest that a person’s level of caring about an issue and whether or not

they agree with us may serve as distinct considerations that factor into in our assessment of others' trustworthiness, further distinguishing between benevolence and integrity-based trust, Zlatev writes.

“People trust others who demonstrate strong feelings about social issues, even when they disagree with or dislike them,” he concludes.

Political polarization has increased substantially in the United States and other countries over the past several decades, Zlatev notes, and future research could explore whether emphasizing mutual caring about divisive social issues could help bridge those divides.

Reference

Zlatev, J. J. (2019). I may not agree with you, but I trust you: Caring about social issues signals integrity. *Psychological Science*, 30(6), 880–892. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797619837948>