

Psychological research offers strategies for healthy political discussions among people with opposing views

May 13 2024



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Civilized political debates may seem increasingly out of reach as democracies across the world face rising polarization, but people still

want to discuss issues with people they disagree with—especially those who present themselves as balanced and willing to seek solutions that work for everyone or open to learning new information, according to two studies published by the American Psychological Association.

One study, published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, examines how U.S. politicians and ordinary Americans with opposing [political beliefs](#) could share their ideas on divisive issues in a way that improved respect regardless of political party.

While reviewing a [video series](#) featuring real-world politicians solving political dilemmas designed to help voters evaluate the thoughtfulness of political candidates, researchers realized that the videos made viewers from the opposing party more open to learning about the politicians' platform. They found this was because the videos made the politicians look balanced and pragmatic, two key characteristics of wise decision-makers.

"It's easy for us to think about members of both parties as being completely biased in favor of their side. But what happens so much of the time is that people talk past each other or show more interest in pointing out the ridiculous things the other side is doing rather than actually finding solutions," said co-author Curtis Puryear, Ph.D., a post-doctoral researcher in the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University.

"Our findings suggest that if you show you care about understanding the other side's concerns, it goes a long way towards fostering respect."

Puryear and co-author Kurt Gray, Ph.D., of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, conducted eight experiments with more than 3,500 participants to test the effectiveness of political messages that relied on balanced pragmatism, an approach to conflict that focuses on

showing concern for both sides' interests while prioritizing practical solutions.

In one experiment, 505 Americans from different political parties evaluated a series of posts on the social media platform X by members of the U.S. House of Representatives. From a sample of more than 50,000 posts made by the representatives' official accounts, the researchers selected 120 posts that discussed political issues without criticizing the opposing party and varied in how balanced and pragmatic each post was.

Each participant evaluated 30 posts, rating them based on how balanced and pragmatic each post seemed, the post's overall tone, how divisive the post seemed, how much they respected the politician and how interested they would be in hearing more about the politician's point of view.

The researchers found that posts that combined balance with pragmatism were the most likely to increase participants' respect for a politician and their willingness to engage with them. Posts in which a politician mainly expressed a desire to find effective solutions improved participants' respect regardless of party, but this was not as effective at garnering respect compared with politicians who also presented a balanced view of an issue.

The benefits of balanced pragmatism for fostering respect were even more pronounced for posts discussing highly divisive issues, like immigration and abortion.

"Logical analyses and strong arguments can make us see someone as competent, which is a trait we value in leaders and friends," said Puryear. "But people also want leaders who understand their constituents, who care about their concerns, and have the practical knowledge to find solutions. These are the qualities of balanced and

pragmatic leaders."

In another experiment, researchers focused on whether ordinary Americans could also use balanced pragmatism to improve their political conversations. They recruited 211 Democrats in favor of decreasing deportations of undocumented immigrants and 85 Republicans in favor of increasing deportations. The participants were shown four comments written by participants in a previous experiment who argued their position on deportation using either balanced pragmatism or logical reasoning.

Overall, people were just as likely to say they wanted to have a conversation with someone who disagreed with their views on immigration when that person appeared balanced and pragmatic as they were to say they wanted to talk with someone from their own political party.

While it can be difficult for people to present their views on a divisive issue in a way that respects an opposing viewpoint and looks for a common solution, it could help solve the rising political animosity that we are facing, Puryear said.

"Being balanced and pragmatic takes effort," he said. "But it is like building any other habit: Changing how we approach politics takes commitment and practice. We can each take it upon ourselves to do that."

Another study, published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, found that people could be willing to discuss controversial topics, such as gender-neutral language, with people who had opposing views when both express intellectual humility.

Intellectual humility is the recognition that your knowledge has limits

and your beliefs could be wrong. It does not mean that someone who is intellectually humble is insecure or that they don't have informed opinions, only that they are willing to acknowledge that they do not know everything.

"Intellectual humility could be an important aspect when trying to understand how to help people engage in these discussions on divisive issues," said the study's lead author, Larissa Knöchelmann, MSc, a research fellow and advanced Ph.D. student at Philipps-Universität Marburg. "Political discussions are important for a democratic society. When people have conversations, they can learn about new perspectives, reduce misunderstandings and work together."

The researchers conducted four experiments with more than 1,600 participants. In one experiment, they asked 451 Germans about their beliefs regarding the COVID-19 vaccine and whether it should be mandatory, a highly polarized debate in Germany when the experiment was conducted.

They were then asked to imagine an online meeting with a new neighbor whose views on vaccination were either the same as or contrary to theirs. They also saw a statement from their neighbor that indicated whether controversial discussions were "boring" because the neighbor felt they knew enough about the topic already or "exciting" because it was an opportunity to learn more.

The researchers found that intellectually humble participants had warmer feelings and more positive evaluations toward groups of people with different political opinions.

Additionally, intellectual humility shaped whether participants were willing to interact with others or not. While non-humble participants would rather talk with someone who shared their opinion, intellectually

humble participants did not discriminate between those having the same or a contrary opinion.

Overall, intellectually humble conversation partners were approached more and avoided less because participants perceived them as more likable and the respective conversation as more calm, comfortable and open.

"Many German citizens have the impression that open political debates and an exchange of opinions are not possible anymore. This is especially the case when it comes to emotionally charged political topics," said Knöchelmann. "Our research now shows that intellectual humility can help to make people more willing to engage with others."

More information: Effects of Intellectual Humility in the Context of Affective Polarization: Approaching and Avoiding Others in Controversial Political Discussions, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1037/pspi0000462](https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000462)

Curtis Puryear et al, Using "Balanced Pragmatism" in Political Discussions Increases Cross-Partisan Respect, *PsyArXiv* (2021). [DOI: 10.31234/osf.io/yhpdt](https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/yhpdt)

Provided by American Psychological Association

Citation: Psychological research offers strategies for healthy political discussions among people with opposing views (2024, May 13) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-05-psychological-strategies-healthy-political-discussions.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.