

# One for All: Observed Disrespect in Political Debates Decreases Trust in Politicians

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**Theory**

Trust in politicians is extremely low all over the world. (Kirchner, 2014)

Politicians' use of disrespectful (=personal, trait-based) attacks toward political opponents is supposed to contribute to this. (Lau, Sigelman, & Rovner, 2007)

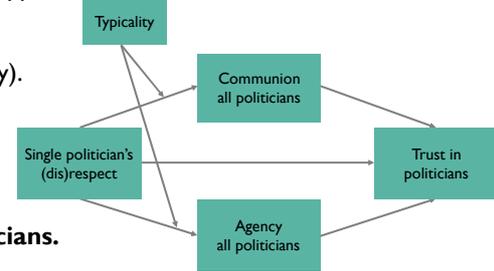
There are, however, intervening variables that should be considered:

1) Trustworthiness is based on social judgments of communion (character) and agency (ability). (Abele, Cuddy, Judd, & Yzerbyt, 2008; Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007; Judd, James-Hawkins, & Yzerbyt, 2005)

⇒ Disrespect might affect communion and agency in different ways.

2) Generalization depends on **typicality**. (Hewstone, 1994; Richards & Hewstone, 2001)

⇒ Perceptions of all politicians' trustworthiness should only be affected by a single politician's disrespectful attacks if he/she is perceived as typical of politicians.



## Study 1: Online-experiment

**Sample (German panel)**

N = 395; 44% female; mean age: 44.9 years (SD=15.02)

**Manipulation: Vignette-design**

Description of a politician (male vs. female; 55 vs. 28 years old; member of CDU vs. SPD) who was said to have used 8 disrespectful vs. respectful statements in a political debate, e.g., "You haven't the faintest idea of what you're doing" vs. "I can see your point, but I still disagree."

**Mediators: Generalized communion and agency**

e.g., "All politicians are... very kind to not at all kind";

"...very passive to very active" (adapted from Ward et al., 2006)

**Moderator: Perceived typicality**

e.g., "... is very similar to most politicians" (Platow & van Knippenberg, 2001);

affected by politician's gender ( $\beta = -.17^{***}$ ) and age ( $\beta = .37^{***}$ )

**DV: Trust in politicians**

e.g., "Politicians generally have good intentions." (Mutz & Reeves, 2005)

## Results

- Trust in politicians is predicted by both generalized communion ( $\beta = .59^{***}$ ) and agency ( $\beta = .09^*$ ).
- (Dis-)Respect affects generalized communion ( $\beta = .12^*$ ) but not generalized agency.
- (Dis-)Respect has no direct effect on trust in politicians.

## Study 2: Online-survey

**Sample (German panel)**

N = 278; 47% female; mean age: 44.5 (SD=14.17)

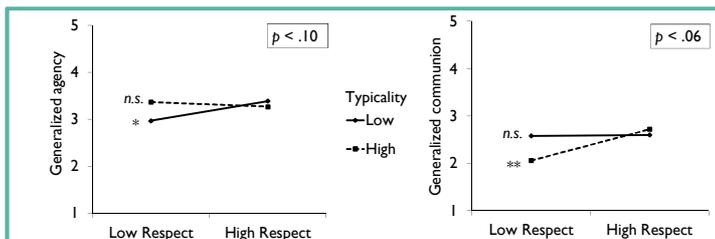
**Procedure**

Ratings of one of the two top-candidates for German chancellorship (**Merkel vs. Steinbrück**) before 2013 elections

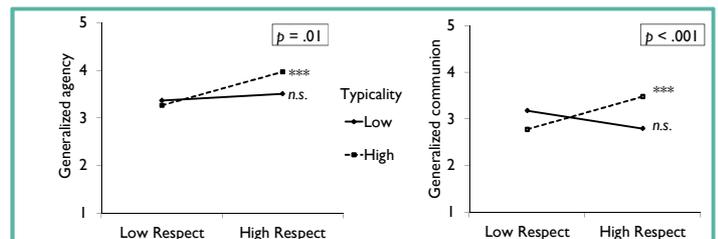
**Variables**

- IV: **Respect** towards the political opponent, e.g., "recognizes his/her political opponent as equal"
- Moderator, mediators and DV same as in experiment
- Results were controlled for candidate

**Methods & Results**



Conditional indirect effects on trust in politicians	Mediator: Generalized agency			Mediator: Generalized communion		
	Ind. effect	Boot SE	BootCI	Ind. effect	Boot SE	BootCI
Experiment						
Low prototypicality (-1 SD)	.02	.01	[.006, .06]	.02	.06	[-.10, .14]
High prototypicality (+1 SD)	-.003	.01	[-.03, .02]	.19	.07	[.05, .33]



Conditional indirect effects on trust in politicians	Mediator: Generalized agency			Mediator: Generalized communion		
	Ind. Effect	Boot SE	BootCI	Ind. effect	Boot SE	BootCI
Survey						
Low prototypicality (-1 SD)	.02	.01	[-.003, .05]	-.06	.04	[-.13, .01]
High prototypicality (+1 SD)	.05	.02	[.02, .11]	.14	.05	[.05, .24]

**Discussion**

- Disrespectful attacks decrease trust in politicians via decreased generalized communion if the politician is perceived as **typical**.
- If the politician is perceived as **atypical**, generalized communion and thus **trust** are **not affected by disrespect**.
- If the politician is perceived as **atypical**, generalized agency and thus **trust** are **decreased** or **not affected by disrespect**.
- Respectful behaviour increases/ does not affect trust** via generalized communion and agency if the politician is perceived as **typical**.
- Generalized communion ratings better predict trust in politicians** than generalized agency ratings.
- Disrespect in political debates has the potential to damage trust in politicians if "typical" politicians are involved.
- Atypical politicians (e.g., young, female, nameless) have more of a "jester's licence" with regard to their effect on trust in politicians.

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